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The portrayal of the GDR in post 1990 German feature films

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After the political unification of Germany in 1990, image-makers and creative minds in Germany set to work to come to terms with the past. In the first months after unification, former GDR directors attempted to capture the attention of a new German audience but failed due to their use of GDR imagery and language. Following this early phase, the feature films of the next ten years revealed a predominantly negative retrospective portrayal of the GDR; image-makers focused almost entirely on the oppressive SED dictatorship and all its abuses of human rights. At the turn of the century, a new development occurred in the retrospective image of the GDR when Leander Haußmann's film *Sonnenallee* (1999) introduced a sense of normality to the portrayal of life in the GDR; people are finally shown to have lead average lives that were not dominated by an overwhelming fear of the regime. Along with Wolfgang Becker's award winning film *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003), the films made ten years after unification mark a definite turning point in the discourse relating to the GDR in that the films not only include, but also actively propagate a sense of nostalgia about the GDR.

1. Introduction

According to German journalist Matthias Dell (Dell, 2003), the history of the GDR and the problems of unification were processed in three very different phases by post unification German filmmakers. Dell's three phases provide a useful framework from which to examine feature films made in Germany after 1990.

During the first phase demarcated by Dell, former DEFA directors like Frank Beyer, Egon Günther, Heiner Carow and Roland Gräf continued making DEFA-like films that did not appeal to a public that expected an open confrontation with the past, freed from the language and imagery of the GDR. Dell mentions the films *Der Verdacht* (Frank Beyer, 1991), *Stein* (Egon Günther 1990), *Die Verfehlung* (Heiner Carow 1992) and *Der Tangospieler* (Roland Gräf 1991) as examples of this initial phase of post-unification filmmaking that lasted until about 1992.

In the next five or six years, when a greater distance from the date of political unification had been gained, more attention was paid to style and narrative in the portrayal of historical events. According to Dell, this second phase of post-unification German film commences with Margarethe von Trotta's *Das Versprechen* (1994). This phase is characterised by a self-conscious participation in the writing of the history of the GDR and its passing. A large number of films were made in this second phase and even though Dell does not mention them, films such as Oskar Roehler's *Die*

Unberührbare (2000), Andreas Kleinert's *Wege in die Nacht* (1999) and *Verlorene Landschaft* (1992) and Andreas Dresen's *Die Polizistin* (2000) and *Nachtgestalten* (1999) can be included in this category. Even though these films do not address the topic of unification directly, they all form part of the hegemonic Western discourse coming out of unified Germany, portraying the GDR system and those who supported it in an unpleasant light. While a handful of directors include or highlight positive aspects of life in the GDR as well in their films, most directors focus purely on the oppressive political apparatus and ideology driving the state of the GDR.

The third and current phase of what Dell calls 'the GDR Renaissance' commenced with Leander Haußmann's *Sonnenallee* (1999). Germans in the East and in the West could line up together to see a film – even though different kinds of enjoyment were taken from the same product. GDR objects like the 'Mu-Fu-Ti' table amused Westerners while Easterners recognized GDR references such as the one to Heiner Carow's *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (1974). While films of the second phase at worst disparaged the country and all its achievements, the films of the third phase began to focus on the social aspects of GDR life in a mood of 'Ostalgie'.

The films of the third phase mark a definite turning point in the discourse relating to the GDR in that the films not only include, but also actively propagate a sense of nostalgia about the GDR and specifically some of the country's brand names and products. A look at the official web page¹ of Wolfgang Becker's film *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003) illustrates this point – even the GDR's Spreewald gherkins can be ordered online. Ines Geisler summarizes the trend of the current German films to portray the GDR with 'cuteness' and 'nostalgia':

The old 'enemy' has been domesticated, and those who remember or are defined by it turn it into a fetish. It is the privilege of a victor to make a victim cute, and the opportunity of a victim to collaborate in this process. Only at a safe distance from the original events is it possible to laugh about a dictatorship whose cruelty seems forgotten and even forgiven because it was so conveniently defeated (Geisler 2003).

It should be noted that the portrayal of the GDR as 'cute' is only one of the aspects of unified German discourse, but it is nonetheless well worth exploring.

¹ See <http://www.good-bye-lenin.de>.

The most difficult task in preparing this paper lies in the selection of films to be analysed in more detail. Time constraints limit this number to two films: *Wie Feuer und Flamme* (Connie Walther 2000) and *Sonnenallee* (Leander Haußmann 1999). Even though *Wie Feuer und Flamme* was released shortly after *Sonnenallee*, the film belongs to Dell's second phase of post-unification films since it adheres to the very negative portrayal of the GDR that was typical of this period. *Sonnenallee* falls under Dell's third phase of films in what can be described as its more 'cute and nostalgic' (Geisler) portrayal of the GDR.

2. *Wie Feuer und Flamme*

Wie Feuer und Flamme was produced in 2000 by a Western team, and no use was made of the creative talents of former GDR citizens.² The film portrays life in the GDR in a very negative and stereotypical way, since no one in the country is shown to enjoy life or any luxuries. When the female protagonist Nele first visits the GDR to attend her grandmother's funeral, she says off camera: 'Ich hatte mir den Osten nicht so groß vorgestellt. Für mich war das nur ein grauer Fleck auf der Landkarte, blass wie die Weihnachtspostkarten, die meine Tante jedes Jahr schickte.' These words belong to the hegemonic discourse in German films of the 1990s that portray the GDR as 'grey' or 'pale'. Nele only sees her aunt Helena twice in the film; first when they walk past each other in the street after her grandmother's funeral and later when Nele is under arrest at the Stasi headquarters. Both times, her aunt looks unhappy, stressed and pale, conforming to the stereotype of an oppressed GDR citizen. Ingeborg Havran

² The film was made by X Filme Creative Pool (Berlin) in co-production with Germany's second public broadcaster Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (Mainz). The film had the backing of the Filmförerungsanstalt (FFA), the Bundesministerium des Innern, the Filmboard Berlin-Brandenburg, the FilmFernsehFonds Bayern and the Filmstiftung NRW. It is distributed by X Verleih AG (Berlin), Bavaria Media GmbH and Warner Bros. The producers are listed as Stefan Arndt and Maria Köpf; Arndt was born in 1961 in Munich and is a founding member and member of the board of X Filme Creative Pool; Köpf was born in 1962 in Munich and is the co-manager of the same company. Arndt is also the producer of a number of films that include GDR references, for example *Absolute Giganten* (Schipper 1999), *Heidi M.* (Klier 2001), *Lola Rennt* (Tykwer 1998) and *Good Bye, Lenin!* (Becker 2003). *Wie Feuer und Flamme* received several awards and is available in English under two titles: first it was called *Pissed and Proud*² (2000) and later *Never Mind the Wall* (2001). The main author of *Wie Feuer und Flamme* is Natja Brunckhorst (born 1966 in West Berlin) – and it was her screenplay debut. Brunckhorst is mostly remembered for her acting role in the drama *Christiane F – Wir Kinder vom Bahnhof Zoo* (1981). *Wie Feuer und Flamme* is also director Connie Walther's film debut, and Walther is listed as co-author for the screenplay.

confirms that the selection of colours in the film was deliberate and carefully chosen: 'Die Farbgestaltung verweist auf eine komplexe Symbolik: Uniformität der Gesellschaft, Rückständigkeit, Mangel und Ödheit des Lebens in der DDR' (Havran 2001: 36). It should be noted though that the images of West Berlin are also clichéd and caricatured in this film, highlighting the colourful affluence of the West in contrast to the grey misery of the GDR.

During the young couple's first meeting, another stereotype is confirmed; Captain says: 'Typisch West: satt und zufrieden und keine Ahnung von politischen Verhältnissen.' Even though Captain is portrayed as a proud rebel in the GDR context, who does not aspire to a 'satt' and 'zufrieden' life in the West, years of Western media exposure may have led to the incorrect assumption among the majority of GDR citizens that all Westerners were indeed 'satt' and 'zufrieden'. It should be noted that this is the only 'Ossi-Wessi' stereotype in the film; the dialogue of the rest of the film does not differentiate between GDR and FRG citizens, thus underlining the discourse that all Germans share the same collective identity. Nele responds: 'Ich war noch nie hier, wie soll ich'n wissen was...' and Captain interrupts her: 'Ich war auch noch nie im Westen und trotzdem weiß ich was bei euch abgeht.' Here, yet another example of Western prejudice about the GDR is repeated when Nele responds: 'Vielleicht geht ja auch mehr ab und deswegen weißt du's.' The West is portrayed as an exciting place where there is always something going on, while the GDR is seen as a dull and boring place that nobody ever heard of. The fact that the GDR also had a popular culture – as can finally be seen for example in *Die DDR Show* (RTL 2003) – is totally ignored in the unified German discourse of the 1990s. The suggestion that all GDR citizens always had their eyes on the West for inspiration and entertainment is thus underlined. Captain admits this and even seems to have a premonition of unification: 'Genau, aber das wird sich schon noch ändern.' Neither Nele nor Captain mentions the names of the states in which they live, opting rather to use the general terms 'East and West' or 'you and us'. By implication, this supports the discourse that the two characters regard themselves as 'German' and therefore do not need to dwell on the different political systems that rule the two countries.

Eventually, Nele protests against the fact that citizens of the FRG never bothered to concern themselves with life in the GDR when she says to the Western reporter: 'Hier weiß doch keiner was da drüben wirklich los ist. Wir, die Jugend, wir hier, wir gehen

doch nicht mal rüber. Wir sehen die Mauer doch gar nicht! Für uns gibt es die doch gar nicht. So ist es doch! [...] Für uns alle! Bitte!' She wants the reporter to create a documentary film about the Punk movement in the GDR, and the phrase 'für uns alle' suggests that he should do this for 'all Germans' in East and West. This discourse denies the existence of the GDR State along with a separate collective identity for the people of the GDR; the GDR was either seen as a part of 'Germany' or as an irrelevant non-entity. The fact that the Punk movement was chosen as a subject for this film underlines this supposed similarity: both the FRG and the GDR had Punk movements in the 1980s on the fringes of society, thus it is implied that the essence of the societies themselves must have been similar.

The GDR regime is however demonised by its treatment of the Punk movement. In one of the first scenes of the film, Captain and his band are shown singing in a church. The lyrics are:

'Überall wohin dich's führt / Wird dein Ausweis kontrolliert / Und sagst du einen falschen Ton / Was dann geschieht, du weißt es schon. / Ganz egal wohin man schaut / Sind Kameras aufgebaut / Begleiten dich auf Schritt und Tritt / Die Sicherheit geht mit dir mit. / Irgendwann, da muss was geschehen / Denn wer will länger tatenlos stehen? / Bist du denn geboren worden / Um dich allem unterzuordnen? / Ist das nicht ein großer Staat / Wo jeder seine Freiheit hat?'

The criticism of GDR society in the song is clear, but, of course, Punk movements in other countries had similarly strong critical sentiments towards injustices in their respective societies. The Stasi, however, implemented harsh measures to crush the Punk movement; the film includes a slightly edited version of a 1983 decree by Erich Mielke, Minister for State Security, which includes the words: '[...] sachlich angehen, bei festgestellter Renitenz Samthandschuhe ausziehen – wir haben keinen Anlass mit diesen Figuren zart umzugehen.'

Captain's parents are portrayed as passive supporters of the SED regime and during the dinner scene, they listen to Karl-Eduard von Schnitzler's anti-Western propaganda *Der Schwarze Kanal* (1960-1989). Neither parent ever smiles, and just like Nele's aunt Helena, they have sad, tense, pale faces, thus reflecting the unhappiness of people who conformed to GDR society. The entire apartment features only grey and some faint colours; director Connie Walther went to a great length to portray bleakness in the scenes featuring Captain's parents. Captain explains his parents'

problems: 'Punk als Sohn, 'ne Vorladung von den Bullen im Briefkasten, jetzt ein Mädchen aus dem Westen', and Nele responds: 'Hey, ich kann mir doch nicht aussuchen, dass ich im Westen geboren bin!' Through her answer and the dialogue about geographic locations that follows in the film, Nele adheres, by implication, to the discourse that they are all Germans, and that merely geography – and not nationality – had been responsible for the fact that they are living apart. Captain's problems with his parents reach their climax when his father eventually tells Nele that his son is dead, thus indicating that supporters of the SED regime would deny their own children in order to secure their miserable existence in the GDR.

Captain and Nele spend only one night together, and the love scene is paralleled by cuts from the abovementioned Stasi meeting with quotes from Erich Mielke's harsh measures taken against the Punk movement. The contrast between happy, good-looking, young lovers on the one hand and grim, unattractive, old Stasi officials on the other hand adds to the very negative portrayal of the GDR regime. Instead of allowing the relationship to take its course, the 'evil' regime has to keep interfering with them. Nele blames the regime for the course that their relationship is taking: the GDR has done more than build physical walls and borders – it has invaded the minds of the people who lived in this state. By using the expression 'Scheißstaat' for the GDR, Nele reveals her ideological orientation and bias against the country. The implication is that if the Wall and the regime could be removed, Captain and his friends would be free to go anywhere and the 'Scheißstaat' would be removed from their minds as well. Towards the end of the film, Nele reaffirms this by saying: 'Die Vögel, die haben es gut – die fliegen einfach rüber, über die Mauer.' Birds are commonly seen as a symbol for freedom, and the birds that Nele watches are capable of flying all over Eastern and Western Germany as they are unaffected by the oppressive GDR regime.

When the Stasi searches Captain's basement, Nele confronts the officers and demands to see a search warrant. The fact that they simply ignore her and continue with their search adds to the film's focus on the GDR as a police state in which the Stasi could do as it pleased. Nele is furious when the Dead Kennedys album is confiscated, and her anger results in her violent arrest and deportation. Her degrading treatment at the hands of the Stasi underlines the criticism of the regime. She is forced to sign a statement explaining her injuries: 'Sie sind auf der Treppe gestürzt.' The regime even

resorts to psychological cruelty when an officer sadistically cries repeatedly: 'Sie werden Ihren Captain nie wieder sehen!'

When Captain hits himself on the hand with a hammer in order to show his opposition to the system, the GDR regime responds with vigour. The implication is that no Western state would have reacted in such a way to a citizen inflicting an injury upon himself, and this adds to the negative portrayal of the GDR in the film; the individual worker is regarded as property of the state, and any self-inflicted injury is treated like damage to state-owned property.

When Nele later smuggles herself into the GDR on a barge containing rubbish, the Stasi use Nele's presence to try and force Captain to sign the document labelling her – and the West – as an aggressor. The Stasi is shown to resort to anything from deception to emotional blackmail to uphold the ideology of the regime. Even though it is known that such behaviour was indeed not beyond the Stasi, the film's focus on these oppressive measures slants the image of life in the GDR in the minds of a Western audience.

Even though this paper analyses the portrayal of only the GDR in *Wie Feuer und Flamme*, it should be noted that the film does contain some relatively mild criticism of the West as well; this however does not counteract the unbalanced negative portrayal of life in the GDR. *Wie Feuer und Flamme* is a clear example of the mainstream hegemonic discourse coming out of Germany in the 1990s: Nele and Captain are both Germans, and they had been separated by nothing but the Berlin Wall and the 'evil' SED Regime; as soon as the Wall is removed, Nele and Captain can resume their relationship without any further ado, even though eight years have passed since their forceful separation. The film contains a very simple and naïve message, suggesting that citizens of the FRG and the former GDR will have no difficulties whatsoever in forming one nation, resuming the cultural and social ties that were cut 40 years earlier.

3. *Sonnenallee*

The second film to be analysed in more detail is *Sonnenallee*, released in 1999. While both *Wie Feuer und Flamme* and *Sonnenallee* are funded by former Western

producers, *Sonnenallee* was created by a former GDR writer and a former GDR director.³

As in the case of many films released in the 1990s, Western funding seeks legitimation through the creative presence of former GDR citizens; by allowing creative minds formerly of the GDR tell their story, the discourse can be seen to come from an informed and accurate source. The fact that the film is not only co-produced by a German government department, but also received a prize from the government indicates a degree of hegemonic influence in the creation of this discourse; it could be interpreted as a propagandistic effort to talk unity into existence.

Michael Ehrenreich is the main protagonist in the film. He is portrayed as a happy, average teenager, going through the late stages of adolescence in the 1970s. He dreams of becoming a pop star and is only marginally interested in politics. Michael lives in the Sonnenallee in East Berlin – a street that was cut in two by the Berlin Wall. The long end of the Sonnenallee was in West Berlin, while the short end was in the GDR. The obvious allusion to the fact that the GDR received the ‘shorter end of the stick’ when the border was created after the War could have influenced Brussig’s decision to choose this street for his screenplay. This is borne out by the fact that Brussig said in an interview: ‘Aber dieser Ort ist faszinierend, schon allein, weil die Straße auch noch Sonnenallee heißt. Das kurze Ende der Sonnenallee, das hat auch etwas Poetisches’ (Haußmann 1999: 12).

Michael’s parents are critical of the GDR regime, but they go about their daily lives; they are portrayed as average GDR citizens who were neither regime supporters nor

³ The script was co-written by Thomas Brussig (born 1965 in East Berlin) and Leander Haußmann (born 1959 in Quedlinburg in the GDR) – Haußmann is also director of the film and editor of the book *Sonnenallee – Das Buch zum Farbfilm* (1999). References will be made to the book in this analysis, but the film will be the primary source since it deviates substantially from the published screenplay (see Haußmann 1999: 7). Brussig co-wrote the screenplay for the successful film *Helden Wie Wir* (Peterson 1999), which like *Sonnenallee* focuses on the life of a young man growing up in the GDR. The producers of *Sonnenallee* are Claus Boje and Detlev W. Buck of the Berlin-based production company Boje Buck Film. Detlev Buck, who wrote, directed and produced other films relating to the former GDR (*Wir können auch anders* 1993 and *Liebe Deine Nächste* 1994) also appears as an actor in *Sonnenallee* – he is the ‘Abschnittsbevollmächtigte’ (block warden) Horkefeld. The co-producers of the film are Ö-Filmproduktion Löprich & Schlösser GmbH (Berlin), SAT 1 (Berlin), the Filmförderungsanstalt (FFA), the government’s Beauftragte für Kultur und Medien and the Filmboard of Berlin-Brandenburg. The film was made in the Babelsberg Studios in Berlin on a film set of over 7000 square meters – which included a partial

seriously considering leaving the country. Michael's mother keeps repeating the words 'mach bloß vorsichtig' and Michael's voiceover comments: 'Vorsichtig ist ihr Lieblingswort.' This serves as an explanation for her complacency in GDR society: even though she does not support the regime, her tendency to be careful forces her – and the great majority of the population – to conform. Michael's father openly criticises inadequacies in the GDR and has no qualms about watching Western television; when he finds the television tuned into a GDR station, he exclaims: 'Wer hat denn den Ostsender eingestellt? Mach doch mal die Hetze aus!' By including these comments, Brussig and Haußmann emphasize the fact that ordinary citizens were aware that television was used as a propaganda tool by the SED regime, and that people generally did not appreciate this form of 'entertainment'. He calls the GDR's Mufuti-table 'Scheiß-Ostding' even in front of his daughter's SED party member boyfriend. When Michael's sister points out that her boyfriend does not like the way he talks about the GDR, her father says angrily: 'Dann soll er doch mit seinen Parteigenossen Muckefuck trinken!' – 'Muckefuck' being the GDR's chicory-based alternative to real coffee in the years after the War. The makers of the film are showing that ordinary people were not habitually living in fear of the Stasi or the SED, and that they wanted to have a Western lifestyle.

Michael is in love with Miriam, and like many teenagers, he is too shy to approach her at first and merely gazes at her in amazement every time she walks by. Michael's voiceover says about her: 'Ja, und das ist sie. Miriam. Die sagenhafte, wunderbare, anbetungswürdige, unerreichbare Miriam. Und ich liebe sie!' His words are the naïve exaggerations that could come from any 17-year-old boy to describe a girl he admires, underlining the fact that the film is above all a love story, set against the background of the GDR in the 1970s, and not a documentary film about the GDR. This is echoed in the final words of the film when Michael's voiceover states: 'Es war einmal ein Land. Und ich hab' dort gelebt. Wenn man mich fragt, wie es war – es war die schönste Zeit meines Lebens, denn ich war jung und verliebt.' In retrospect, now that more than a decade has passed since unification, filmmakers can focus on the 'normality' of life in the GDR; the distance in time allows authentic Eastern

rebuilding of the Berlin Wall. Over 2.4 million people watched the film in the year of its release, making it the biggest box-office success of 1999.

expression without the risk of the GDR reawakening in any way other than in a haze of nostalgia.

It is important to note that the problems Michael faces are not limited to the GDR. Michael and his friend Mario seem to be content to live in the GDR, and only through their 'radical' girlfriends Miriam and Sabrina do they finally start to criticize and question the status quo in the country. Michael gradually becomes more 'radical' and finally decides to refuse to do his military service. In order to win her love, Michael tells Miriam that he had always been as 'radical' as she is, and that he has written all of this 'protest' down in several diaries from childhood onwards. Miriam demands to see these protest diaries, and Michael quickly has to write the diaries of several years overnight. Effectively, Michael then rewrites his own history, which in the end coincides with the typical hegemonic discourse coming out of unified Germany.

As former GDR citizens, Haußmann and Brussig included Michael's rewriting of his history to criticise and ridicule the hegemonic Western discourse; the events and feelings that Michael invents in his rewritten diaries are exactly what a Western audience would have expected to find in the diaries of someone who had lived under the 'never ending oppression' of the GDR – as life in the GDR was referred to in several documentary films.⁴

Furthermore Haußmann and Brussig have chosen the location of the film – the Sonnenallee right next to the Berlin Wall – to emphasize the point that not all people were deeply dissatisfied with their lives in the GDR: not even those who lived 'a stone's throw' – as Michael points out in the first scene – from the splendour of West Berlin. Yet still, he says in the beginning of the film: 'Ich lebe in der DDR. Ansonsten habe ich keine Probleme.' Even though this statement implies that life in the GDR is itself a problem, Michael is not complaining about specific GDR-related things; the makers of the film are making fun of Western assumptions. The neon signs of West Berlin can be seen from the flat of Mario's parents, but they don't seem to attract the main protagonists towards the West.

Contrary to the cruder type of Western hegemonic discourse that serves to demonise the entire GDR and suggests that daily life was unbearable and marked by fear, Brussig and Haußmann go to great length to show that daily life in the GDR was in

⁴ See for example the series *Das war die DDR* (MDR Fernsehen 1993).

fact quite 'normal'. In response to an FRG citizen's mocking question from a platform in West Berlin – 'Hey, uns geht's gut, und dir?' – Michael's voiceover responds: 'Mir gehts nicht *so* schlecht. Aber das muss ich *denen* ja nicht auf die Nase binden. Ausserdem ist Kontaktaufnahme schwerst verboten. Obdachlose gibt es bei uns jedenfalls nicht und verhungern muss auch keiner. Und Nahrungsmittel sind günstig, Preise stabil.' The positive aspects of the GDR that Michael mentions here are well known even in Western circles. The fact that he does not rub the Westerners' noses into the fact that life in the GDR was after all not *that* bad contrasts with the hegemonic discourse coming out of films from unified Germany where former GDR citizens are encouraged to focus only on their negative memories of the GDR.

Therefore, in a subtle way – without rubbing the West's nose in it – *Sonnenallee* portrays a level of unpoliticised normality which should be recognizable even to a Western audience; not only through the 'normal' adolescent problems that Michael and Mario have to face, but also through the décor and furniture, the music and the characters. All the actors in the film are dressed in colourful clothes – even denim jeans – and the teenagers dance in a disco not only to GDR music but also to Western songs. The young people smuggle alcohol into the disco and get up to mischief and have sex just as in the so-called free world, and homosexuals and other minority groups are shown to have existed freely in the GDR without any fear of retribution by the State. In fact, nobody in the film seems to live in fear of the Stasi – as is habitually suggested in many sources of Western discourse. Even the Honecker-like neighbour, whom the Ehrenreichs suspect of being a Stasi agent, in the end turns out to be a harmless funeral undertaker. The 'Überwachungs- und Verfolgerstaat' – words often used to describe the GDR – is portrayed in *Sonnenallee* as almost harmless; average citizens led average lives.

Michael's mother gets the chance to flee to West Berlin when she finds the FRG passport of an old woman, but after dressing up to look like the pensioner in the passport photograph, she decides to stay with her family. Thus, even people who did have the chance to 'flee' to the 'free' West are shown to have stayed in the GDR by their own choice; in direct opposition to Western expectations, the makers of this film clearly show that not all people wanted to leave the country.

Up to this point, the film has been shown to give a very different representation of life in the GDR than most of the other films made after 1990 in Germany. However,

Sonnenallee does completely fall in line with the hegemonic Western discourse when Mario's girlfriend Sabrina says the following words: 'Sieh dir das doch mal an, das ist ja alles grau hier' and Mario adds: 'Grau wie die Asche!' This point is driven home when Nina Hagen's song 'Du hast den Farbfilm vergessen, mein Michael' is played at the end of the film while the visuals turn to black and white.

As mouthpiece for hegemonic discourse, Sabrina is also shown saying: 'Kein Wunder, daß sie alle abhauen hier. Und wer noch nicht abgehauen ist, der will abhauen. Und wer noch nicht abhauen will, der wird auch noch dahinter kommen.' The makers of the film may have felt constrained to include typical statements like the ones Sabrina makes in order to secure the funding for the film and to appease the minds of a Western audience that has by now been accustomed to expect this discourse in post-unification German film. There are only two characters in the film who are used as a mouthpiece for what Western audiences have been told; while Sabrina suggests that 'absolutely everyone' wanted to leave the GDR, thus alluding to the dissolution of the GDR state and the inevitability of unification, Uncle Heinz goes even further. When the character Georg, who is a proud SED party-member asks: 'Und Sie sind also aus dem imperialistischen Ausland', he responds angrily: 'Wie bitte? Ausland? Ausland? Aus Deutschland! [...] Es gibt solche und solche, aber nur Deutsche!' Uncle Heinz's words suggest that one did not go 'abroad' when one travelled from the FRG to the GDR, and that all Germans had always been Germans, even while the Wall separated the two states. It is significant to note that this interchange was not included in the original screenplay and therefore must have been added later perhaps to bring the film more in line with the producers' ideological preferences.

To summarize, Brussig and Haußmann managed to create a film that is different from the hegemonic Western discourse that was found in many other post-unification German films. Indeed, the image left in the mind of the viewer is one of a more pleasant and more tolerable – but also quite amusing – GDR than most Westerners would have expected. Many film critics object to the portrayal of especially the border guards and the block warden as harmless buffoons, and according to American academic Helen Cafferty, a lawsuit was even filed against the makers of *Sonnenallee* for ridiculing the victims of the SED regime and trivializing the oppression (Cafferty 2001: 254f.).

While it may have been Brussig and Haußmann's intention to – using Cafferty's expression – 'undemonize' the GDR (Cafferty 2001: 254) and to show the 'normal' side of life in that country, they nevertheless initiated the third phase of films that look back at the GDR with a sense of rose-tinted, warm nostalgia in former GDR citizens and a feeling of condescending amusement in Westerners.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion it can thus be stated that the retrospective portrayal of the GDR in German film has indeed undergone a transformation since unification; the so-called evil regime of never-ending oppression was replaced for Western, or would-be Western audiences by a more 'cute' caricature of a failed and almost unbelievably ridiculous social experiment. It will be interesting to observe whether post-unification German image-makers will continue this less dismissive, but nevertheless patronising trend of portraying the GDR as 'silly but nevertheless lovable' in addition to the so far subtle depiction of GDR 'normality', or whether filmmakers who did indeed experience life in the GDR will be able to produce more serious reflections on their past that focus on an authentic portrayal of life in the GDR while steering clear of 'cute' trademarks and 'Ostalgie'.

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