

# **GERMAN DIFFERENCE. *OSTALGIE* AS A FORM OF CULTURAL IDENTITY IN UNIFIED GERMANY**

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The “German difference” consists in the fact that after the fall of Berlin Wall, while many states resulting from the collapse of Communism split, the two German states were unified. No wonder, then, if the political and cultural development of the last 30 years in a united Germany is a little different than in other areas of central and east Europe. *Ostalgie* becomes a different meaning in Germany than in Russia, Poland or Hungary. The new identity process in Germany signifies rethinking and re-telling the cultural common/divided past. It signifies not just put a demarcation against real communism, but to identify the common elements of the German past. New German works of art produced at first a “new semantization” of the past: The authors wanted to re-tell the events of division and reunification to give them a “sense”. The personal and cultural history of the citizens of the East and those of the West in Germany are substantially different as well as the artistic languages used in the narrative. The narratives of defining identity follow a complex route and are expressed in literary and filmic media. Then, 10 years after the

unification, spread the so-called Ostalgie, or nostalgia for the GDR without any political connotation, but with a retrospective appreciation for the few and modest advantages of socialism (especially solidarity as opposed to competition). But the real meaning of this Ostalgie was the affirmation of an original identity that recovered a different image space consisting of the old East-German imaginary mixed with the hopes and disappointments of the western affluent society. In fact, the best Ostalgie-movies were written and shot by directors born and living in West-Germany.

### 1. The resemantization of the past

Hans Mayer, in a book dedicated to “times of change”, taking up a passage from Marx, claims that German culture is characterized by reaction to revolutions occurring elsewhere and is therefore always “once removed”: the nineteenth-century culture, that Romantic culture which generated concepts such as “homeland” and “nation”, was a reaction to the French revolution first of all, and then to the Napoleonic empire.<sup>1</sup> Twentieth-century culture, including the division of Germany, was a reaction (or nevertheless a consequence) to the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 that took place in Russia. Even the unification of Germany was a consequence of the implosion of real communism. Germany has never been a true protagonist, it has always chased behind, often antithetically, something that happened elsewhere. In the *Introduction* (1844) to *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, with his typical figurative language drawn in part from the Bible, Karl Marx labels the history of Germany as a continual and vain search for freedom, as a continual defeat of progressive forces, and in this he recalls the “conquest of the unhappy consciousness” of Hegel.<sup>2</sup> And this points to a method that we can also use in analysing the artistic products of unified Germany: the best of them contain a paradox, they are the result of a “disorientation”, an estrangement, an “eccentric”, unusual approach, able to express the complexity of reality, using a language that upsets the constituted way of things.

Besides, Marx himself often used the concept of “German misery” to define the difference between German political history and culture in relation to the most advanced areas of France and Great Britain. This

time, however, the “German difference” was going in a totally different direction. The collapse of real communism, that “turn” that recurs so often in political and cultural writings from the end of the last and the first decades of this century, gave rise to a series of nationalisms and localisms that brought the concept of “homeland”, new identity processes and, in part, an obsessive attention to the linguistic and cultural homogeneity of single places, back into fashion. In short, the peoples’ self-determination prompted a process of splitting and secession that, however, generated conflicts and often out-and-out war. The “German difference” resides in the fact that, while the other states and agglomerates deriving from the collapse of real communism split, the two Germanys reunited, that is, they went in the opposite direction. Therefore, it should come as no surprise if the political and cultural path of the last 30 years is a bit different in the German-speaking area compared to the other areas under the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence in the last century. So, the term *Ostalgie*, nostalgia for the East, takes on a completely different meaning and value in the German area compared, for example, to the Polish, Czech or even Russian zones.

Of course, the fact must also be considered that Germany found itself in a very specific situation, even before the “turn”: it was the only country split between the two blocs, and, what is more, divided by an “insuperable border”, a wall, half a kilometre of “no-man’s land” full of mines and photoelectric cells. But the inhabitants on both sides spoke the same language, shared the same cultural tradition, and could read the books, watch the films and follow the radio and television programmes that came “from the other side”. This “German difference” which existed after the end of WW2 and which made the Germanys a particular case among the border countries and the countries of real socialism, played an equally as important role in the unification process and in the new political and cultural consciousness of unified Germany.

According to Reinhart Koselleck events are often unexpected and “surprising”.<sup>3</sup> The construction of the wall did indeed “surprise” millions of German citizens and aroused reactions and protests all round the world. In the same way, the fall of the wall, despite happening at the end of a long process of economic and political agony for the GDR, was an “almost random” event,<sup>4</sup> “surprising” because of the time and the manner

in which it took place. But it has “produced more” significance than merely making political news, it has become an icon. A series of political, economic, artistic-cultural and social processes were put into motion in which the old mental categories are no longer valid.

“Cultural memory” – according to the studies begun by Jan Assmann<sup>5</sup> at the end of the 1980s – is that procedure that “saves” from oblivion events that are represented as significant and handed down for the history and identity of social groups linked by a common past and language, and serve as a base for a common cultural identity. In the meantime, this definition has become established and widespread in cultural studies, with a series of connections to other concepts and disciplines: the terms used are *lieux de mémoire*,<sup>6</sup> *heritage industry*, *memory-boom*, or *Topographie des Kultur-Gedächtnisses*. The topic of cultural memory is linked to that of oblivion and repression. Cultural memory is in fact selective, it “chooses” the events that it considers significant and the “forms” in which to hand them down. Hence, it implies a cultural project. One of the artistic-cultural forms that memory has assumed is the autobiography, meant not so much as a subjective recollection, but as a memory of events “experienced” personally which however take on an epoch-making meaning and a value of group (or national) identity.

The multitude of concepts linked to “cultural memory” is particularly interesting because the attention is focused precisely on the “forms” (on the writings, images, body language and gestures) and therefore on the cultural codification of the events considered significant. The study of these “texts” – in which there is often a strong link between word and image, sign and gesture, and a strong tendency to use icons, symbolic objects – paves the way both to understanding the definition of the cultural identity of the relative social and linguistic areas and the definition of a typology and topography of the “forms of remembrance” that serve to verify whether there are any common and “unifying” elements between the various linguistic-cultural areas that enable us to speak of a “German cultural identity”.

Today, also from the iconographic point of view, it is usual to indicate the fall of the Berlin wall as a “turning point”, the start of a new period in history, the end of a political-social set-up and international balance that

had formed after WW2. The collapse of the Soviet bloc triggered a series of economic and social processes that produced a brand new, different political and economic set-up in both Europe and Asia. Furthermore, over the decades, the political and economic balances had changed radically, hence the organization of the two blocs, which stemmed from WW2, appeared a situation determined historically, belonging to the last century. Not always have historians and politicians (not just in Germany) taken these new issues into account, but have often interpreted the phenomena according to the last century's mindset. The very concept of *Ostalgie* – a term which, as we know, originated in 1992 in a cabaret in Dresden and has become a cultural trend proper – has often been dismissively interpreted as political nostalgia for real communism. The fact is that the phenomenon is specifically German. The “German difference” consists of the fact that to “deal with the past” is to deal with that part of East German citizens – and therefore their culture, their “lives”, their ambitions and their disillusion – whose existence was influenced by communism. Unlike other geo-political areas, where it is easy to mark a clear line between “before” and “after” the wall (to use the symbol once again), in the “resemantization of the past” in Germany it is necessary to deal with the “brothers from the East”, whose past lives and culture cannot be simply cancelled out. It is necessary to “give a sense” not just to the oppressions of the “communist dictatorship”, but also to the actions, ambitions and frustrations of those millions of East Germans who had dreamt of the wall falling down and had had to adapt to the situation of division for decades.

## 2. No man's land

The border that divided the two Germanys consisted of an area of around half a kilometre which was fortified and scattered with mines. This “no man's land” perhaps forms the strongest allegory of the place where the hopes and expectations of the GDR's inhabitants ended up. This *Niemandsland* also corresponded to a “suspended time”: from the fall of the wall to the unification of the two Germanys (or the process to annex the “eastern provinces” as some historians say) almost a year had passed, in which the economic situation of the GDR precipitated. For almost a year the GDR survived in a climate of uncertainty and political

negotiations, in which the GDR itself had become a “no man’s land”. The state and what remained of the GDR government was just a simulacrum, a phantom. Indeed, *Germania 3. Gespenster am toten Mann*, the drama by Heiner Müller which “rewrites” the history of Germany comes to mind: in the last year of its life, the political panorama of the GDR seemed to be populated by ghosts. In this period of transition, not only did the dreams, expectations and fears of the population intensify, but also the stereotyped images of the East and West. In their minds, the “*Ossis*”, the inhabitants of the GDR, had developed a legend of the West.

The first two decades of unified Germany were characterized by the desire to deal with the past, to re-tell the events in subjective and historic terms, to give a new sense to the division and the fall of the wall. Perhaps there has not been enough reflection on the diversity of the imaginary, the imaginary space – the *Bildraum* to use Benjamin’s words – between the two Germanys. This diversity emerged – sometimes starkly – after unification. And what is even more interesting was the representation of the other, the “*drüber*”, of what was on the other side of the wall, revealing a large gap between the representation of the “other Germany” and the actual reality. And this worked both ways. In the collective imaginary of the GDR, the difference between East and West was felt symbolically as the difference between the “duty” (to “build” socialism) and the “pleasure” of being able to enjoy the goods of an affluent society. And, instead, in the West’s imaginary, the symbolic representation of the Other was based on a mixture of political propaganda (the evil child-eating communists) and the good will to “free” their oppressed brothers. In that year of transition, in that “no man’s land” between the fall of the wall and unification, the collective imaginary of the two countries was populated with symbolic figures of the Other. And when the unification actually took place, the citizens were able to touch the “imaginary” character of the symbolic representation first hand. It could be said that they went brutally from the pleasure principle to reality. The project to bring the economic and production facilities of the “new Eastern provinces” up to Western standards within five years proved to be a utopia – today we know that 25 years have not been enough.

A large part of the literature takes place within urban landscapes, primarily in Berlin, divided by the wall. Even the political terminology of

the GDR was characterized by the – failed – attempt to build a “new society” not only in political terms, but also in an architectural and urbanistic sense. Tellingly, one of the most common catchphrases was the *Aufbau des Sozialismus*, building socialism. Indeed, this architectural allegory expresses the whole process of the division and then the reunification of Germany. The wall was, in the end, a piece of architecture, a “fortification of the border”, as it was defined in the regime’s propagandistic language. And the “turn” was enshrined by the “opening” of the wall, its dismantling. The wall is therefore an allegory first of the building of a “closed” society which was “removed”, “crumbled” even, by myriad people who smashed it with picks and chisels. But this “removal” was not without its ambiguity: for a long time (and perhaps still today) a psychological wall took the place of the concrete barrier.

The urban landscape of unified Germany – at least in the first decade – was a landscape of rubble. The “new provinces” were full of closed-down factories, deserted and decaying warehouses, empty and abandoned buildings. Berlins was characterized by empty spaces, the no man’s land, which rapidly transformed into an enormous building site. And here, in the process of “reconstruction”, “modernization” and “standardization” (again all architectural-urbanistic metaphors), surfaced the anthropological-cultural differences between the “Wessis” and the “Ossis”. The liberation took on the hue of colonization. At least a generation of GDR citizens were not able to adapt to the Western lifestyle, could not stand the competition or the market: they collapsed psychologically and then also economically. However, in this very process of “reconstruction” and “modernization” in which not only the ruins of the symbols of the old regime, not just the wall and the *Palast der Republik*, but also old attitudes, old expectations and old, now unsuitable behavioural criteria were “removed”, a new German identity arose which appropriated itself of icons and symbols of the past, transforming them, giving them the “new function” of narrating new identities. Therefore, the search for a new identity, based on the ruins of the past, could only start from rewriting history, re-telling the events that had determined the division first and the soft revolution later, giving rise to what has been defined in the cultural history books as the “resemantization of the past”. On the basis of personal destinies, the troubled events of German post-

war history were narrated in the knowledge of the outcome of the events and therefore in an epic frame of radiant optimism which obviously did not exclude the tragic events, but “redeemed” them in the perspective of a “radiant” collective future in a wholly different way from what the communist propaganda had hoped for.

### 3. Icons of the collective memory

The fall of the wall paved the way to a series of artistic products that wanted to represent the experience of and in the GDR with the “wound” caused by the division as their theme.<sup>7</sup> The first phase was characterized by “dealing with” the Stasi and its “informers”. Then, from the secret police’s archives, it was noticed that almost everyone had made some kind of compromise to the party and that practically no one could say they had absolutely nothing to do with the regime: the criterion of consenter/dissenter could not be used to understand or to represent the GDR. So, different ways developed of dealing with the subject of the division of Germany and its unification. The first – obviously – was through historical documentaries. A series of biographies came out that documented and narrated the experience they had lived through, consisting of persecution and suffering, at times accompanied by dramatically failed escape attempts. The tone of these stories was evidently tragic and implied a request to “punish” the “guilty parties”. A second – mainly minor – trend deals with the topic in an ironic and paradoxical manner: it does not ignore the facts, but represented their absurd side too. The tone of language and the images used in this second narrative mode – linked to young authors – are very provocative. With time and the evident social and economic difficulties of “evening out” the standard of living in the “new federal regions”, people have realized that the division has not been overcome. In these last 30 years, there has been an anthropological division, based on reciprocal prejudices. What is more, “the Easterners”, or *Ossis* as they are called, have had difficulty in passing from a socialist society to a regime of cut-throat competition. The third form of representing the past is the minimalist trend: telling small stories of ordinary people against the background of an epochal disaster. Both the ironic-paradoxical approach and the minimalist slant concentrate on personal lives, love stories,

illusions and professional failures. But these two types of approach use the objects that were popular then above all with the young people, the jargon and the music that was in fashion then. In particular, the rock music, “American” music listened to on the Western radio or bought on LP or cassette on the black market, was a way of avoiding the grey reality of the wall, of feeling “modern” and “transgressive”.<sup>8</sup> For these reasons, the literary works and films by authors who were teenagers when the wall fell down use expressive languages linked to music, video clips, video games and recount daily life as the mirror of dreams and failures.

The turnaround in dealing with the problem of the division and the wall happened when some authors handled the topic with irony and sarcasm, deconstructing the sclerotic consent/dissent theme. The books by Thomas Brussig, *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* (1999), and, by Ingo Schulze, *Simple Storys* (1998, in English: *Simple Stories*, 2000), with the deliberate, provocative error in the original title, and *Neue Leben* (2005, *New Lives*, 2008), depicted the situation from another point of view, from the feeling of a new generation, with a new language, which no longer had anything in common with the ideological debate of the 1980s. At this time a young writer Thomas Brussig, became known for a very provocative novel *Helden wie wir* (1995),<sup>9</sup> in which the GDR is represented with the sex obsession and thus criticized in a paradoxical and ironical way: all interpersonal relationships are seen in this light and also the attitude of the protagonist is focused on a fixed idea. It is a provocatively experimental novel that uses, however, a real aspect of DDR, that sexual freedom in which individuals found refuge for their personal and professional frustrations. The paradoxical approach is maintained by Brussig also in *Sonnenallee*, born as a script and only after the film production published as a novel. Here the obsession consists in the rock music (and also in the love of the young protagonist for the beautiful Miriam). Identity narratives deal with the past, by retelling the story of the oppression and liberation, using the example of the stories of whole families, with the aim of giving a sense to the present. In Brussig the paradoxical aspect got such an upper hand that it overshadowed the plausibility of the narrated events, but at the same time it also completely dismantled the conceptual structure of real socialism. Among these novels – in which the nostalgia for the East is

totally subjective, namely linked to the memory of the writer – we must remember *In Zeiten des abnehmenden Lichts* (2011) by Eugen Ruge<sup>10</sup>, and *Der Turm* by Uwe Tellkamp (2008) – published in English by Penguin in 2014 with the title *The Tower*.

And these exemplary stories of some people's lives act as a subjective and objective liberation, almost like psychoanalysis to exit a trauma. There was a profound difference between the imaginary of the young people in East and West Germany, in their ways of seeing adventure and travels, of representing their desires.<sup>11</sup> The turning point in this new form of resemantization of the past was 1999. This new approach to the past was caused in part by the distance in time from the events, with the last phase of the GDR and the fall of the wall tending to correspond to the author's childhood or adolescence, and the appearance of a "dual identity":<sup>12</sup> at the beginning of the new millennium reflection started in the "eastern provinces" on the condition of the *Ossis*, with criticism of the forms in which the unification had taken place, making the people of the East second-class citizens. As well as producing political claims which then did not have much follow-up, this awareness of belonging to a social and cultural group produced an increase in pride, which became an attempt to cast a positive light on those negative clichés that had accompanied the portrayal of the "Easterners". Narrations of the past underlined solidarity and the art of getting by as forms of resistance against economic difficulties. From the point of view of cultural products, this new approach to the past was particularly significant when it put a stop to the inquisitional tones and took the shape of a farewell to lost times. In defining the new identity narratives, the resemantization of the past and *Ostalgie* as a shared icon of the new German identity achieved mass success when put across by such a widespread means of communication as the cinema. And besides, many of the most famous films of the last decades have been taken from novels, in a transposition which also saw the novel published after the film production. And again, with regard to transpositions, authors and directors from both East and West have contributed to the resemantization of the past and the phenomenon of *Ostalgie*.<sup>13</sup>

*Ostalgie* is a culturally singular phenomenon because it expresses a "nostalgia" for the past century, for the past millennium, for a world that

now seems distant, where other codes, and other values ruled. It is a fashion born in markets, consisting of obsolete objects, bottles of beer from the GDR costing 66 Pfennigs, the famous Spreewald gherkins,<sup>14</sup> all the badges and medals of the FDJ. This fashion has created cult objects that now immediately express the past era and have taken on the value of allegories, meaning that their mere presence in a novel or film is an immediate reference to the GDR. The most famous of all: Trabant, the ridiculous car in the impossible colours, with its coughing engine, always breaking down, has become the allegory of the GDR, as it can express the inefficiency of a product from the “people-owned” factory, but at the same time the citizens’ ability to adapt, to continually alter and adjust the engine, to evoke Sunday jaunts and the desire to travel abroad, etc. When considering German culture “after the wall”, it is necessary to reflect carefully on the radical change in the value of this object, first despised and ridiculed, to then become the allegory of a whole era, appreciated and judged with a benevolent smile, after the fall of the wall. Perhaps, not least, the Trabant’s allegorical value lies precisely in this metamorphosis, which clearly indicates the transfiguration from a disproportionately expensive, troublesome means of transport to a harmless and likeable symbol of an era and a society now completely surpassed. In terms of collective memory, events count less than their representations and the impact that they have on the individual memory.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the representation of the “turn” and unification has created a cultural memory in the collective imaginary, providing the basis for the current German identity. And it is a problematic identity. As problematic and complex as this process to reconstruct the image of the past.

#### 4. The filmic narratives

It is usual to indicate the paradigmatic example of the *Ostalgie* the movie of Leander Haußmann *Sonnenallee* (1999). It is a comedy, which sometimes becomes almost a musical, which tells the daily life of a group of teenagers who lived close to the wall. Sabine Hake defines the film “a perfect balance between sentimental memory and ironic reconstruction”.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the film is the result of a singular constellation: Leander Haußmann and Detlev Buck have managed to tackle the issue

of boundary and division with irony and paradoxical detachment that recalls the tones of Billy Wilder's *One, Two, Three!* (1961). "Now that the fear we had then no longer exists, we can also laugh at the ridiculous aspects of that period" – claims the director in an interview.<sup>17</sup> Even with an ironic smile, with the goodwill of memory and nostalgia, even with the narrative tone of brilliant comedy the film highlights the great contradictions and blackmail of socialist society. The plot consists in the love for rock music of the group of teenagers and the district policeman who haunts them to confiscate the "illegal music", of which, in the end, he remains a victim and is degraded. One of the protagonists, Wuschel, hunted by all means the Rolling Stones LP *Exile on Main Street* (and even here the title was not chosen by chance) in a grotesque story up to the incredible: he clandestinely crosses the wall and goes to West Berlin to buy it and, on his way back to the east, is discovered by the border police who shoots him. The bullet breaks the record that Wuschel held more [important] than his own life.

The film aroused a discussion because of its ironic-paradoxical approach. It was often criticized of having given a playful and sweetened representation of the wall. The authors of this film pinpoint on the difference of imaginary in West and East Germany. They tend to highlight the rediscovery of the myths of a generation that lived "on the shorter side of the Sonnenallee", and therefore the filmic quotes refer to the imaginary of "those of the East".

"I wanted to shoot a film about the DDR" – claims Haussmann – "because I read the script and found it worthwhile to tell this story. It is a story of failure". The director, who knows the history of cinema very well and has Billy Wilder as model, refers to the vague connection Sonnenallee/Sunset boulevard. The story is namely told as a nostalgic memory of the past, in which the tragic difficulties of everyday life are softened by the rock music and teenage love. The cultural identity of the little community of the "sun street" is reconstructed by a fictional memory, in which the teenager solidarity is stronger than the political conditions and even than the wall.

The paradoxical and provocative approach allows the film to represent a cross-section of DDR society and history, looking for individual memories, for that little personal happiness that seek all the characters

(trading in western goods, trying to seduce a beautiful girl, trying to escape to the west, buying the last record of the Rolling Stones). It is not a sweetened representation of East Germany reality, because, despite all the smiles and sentimentality of the history of "first love", the film has bitter and melancholic aspects: the seemingly more transgressive couple, Bruno and Sabrina, finally marries wearing a white suit and Bruno is enlisted in the secret police to support the family. The Director and screenwriter are not interested in sociological analysis. They want to recover the memory of an atmosphere, of a series of feelings and emotions, typical of adolescence.

"In this film, not only the GDR is described, but the past is told", says the director in an interview. "This includes the comic aspect of the imperfections of the technique too, for example, one who loves a record and who has to obtain it clandestinely. It was another era, in which you had to commit energy to invite a girl to dance. These are things that must be told. It is a nostalgic film that can also be warm. It shows things that today seem exotic, but that in the end are comical, emotional and even sentimental". "It is a story in which everyone can identify", continues Haußmann. "The first love, the insecurity about what will happen after the high school diploma, the love for rock music, are things that all teenagers have experienced". But the director also insists on the construction of a collective memory, on the imaginary, on those figures of memory of which Assmann<sup>28</sup> speaks: "It's not just a film about DDR, but about what we remember. Much is also a product of imagination". The importance of this film lies in this conscious production of a memory that becomes an approach to the past, very subjective if we want, but typical of a whole generation. The *Ostalgie* is not based on a historical-sociological reconstruction of the facts, but on the recovery of the time gone, of the past youth, of the obsolete objects and of the emotions that were felt when protagonists were not yet 20 years old. "I wanted to shoot a movie", continues Haußmann, "that anyone can understand without having first read a history book. They are all episodes that come from lived experience, not just mine, they were told to me and I put them together. It is a conglomerate of memories. Then comes the imaginary. This road is a reconstruction. Fiction and reality are closely related". The meaning of this work, which is also the meaning of this reconstruction of the past,

lies in the words with which the film ends: "Once upon a time there was a country where I lived. When they ask me how it was, I can only say: it was the most beautiful time of my life because I was young and always in love".

The resemantization of the past as a sign an epochal passage towards the definition of a new German identity is represented, perhaps better than in other works of art, in the famous film *Good Bye Lenin!* (2003). The movie, which had an extraordinary success,<sup>19</sup> managed to narrate the collapse of the wall and the new reality in a paradoxical way that allows him to avoid the emphatic tones of political rhetoric or the rabid revenge. The plot is constructed in such a way as to contain metafilmic elements and also to clearly indicate in the "dealing with the past" the key to understanding the present and building the future. The whole film is played on the reconstruction of images of the past and on the construction of the image of oneself in the present. Here the tones are neither ironic-paradoxical nor idyllic. The film is a perfect mixture between tragedy and melodrama.

Beyond the very strong emotional and sentimental tones (it is the story of a son who tries to "protect" his sick mother from the historical events that have changed her existence and caused an epochal "turning"), the core of the film consists in trying to give sense to the past in a double direction: reconstructing what happened in the Kerner family in this day, where the father escaped to West-Berlin, and fictitiously reconstructing events characterizing Germany from the fall of Berlin wall to the unification. The imagines of the past (the family's 8mm films, the mother as "educator of the socialist youth", the enterprises of the cosmonaut Jähn, the clock of Alexanderplatz), become a "field of meaning" in which occurs a "semantic struggle"<sup>20</sup> between nostalgia and acceptance of reality, between truth and fiction, between past and future, between hope and disappointment. Perhaps the characteristic of this film – which makes it an exception both within the production of Wolfgang Becker and the German filmmaking of the last decades – is that of being able to thematise the "inversion of meaning" of the "formulas of pathos" mentioned by Aby Warburg, precisely because the action was placed in a historical period of social upheavals, which has accelerated this process of "slipping meaning" of icons and figures of memory. Beyond

the pleasant tragicomic tone of the film, its strength consists in the metalanguages that it sets in motion on historiography, on telling the story of great events, but also on personal events. This film's force also lies in the series of quotations from the literary and cinematographic tradition. The principal sequence – the bust of Lenin that is carried away by helicopter among the skyscrapers of East Berlin under the astonished gaze of the protagonist – is nothing but a quote from the *Dolce Vita* (1960) by Fellini, which begins with the statue of Christ carried out by a helicopter throughout the city of Rome.

The protagonist of the film, Alex, to avoid his mother experiencing too strong a shock, makes believe that the DDR still exists, furnishes the room with the old furniture of the era of real socialism, dresses and forces all those who enter the apartment to dress like “Those of the East” and above all that he produces with his friend some false videotapes with fake news in which the story is told in reverse: hordes of refugees take refuge in East Germany to escape capitalism and its economic crisis. For once – for a joke and paradox – the history is told by the vanquished. But the film makes us reflect on the possibility of manipulating the media to tell shameless lies for the sole purpose of reassuring the public. *Good Bye, Lenin!* is a film about lies and the late and useless discovery of the truth. When the two brothers discover that their father, who had fled to the west, had written scores of letters to his two sons (especially to his daughter) and that their mother had concealed everything from them, their actions are exposed as useless: the father has, in the west, another family, the mother is in a coma at the hospital, childhood has nevertheless passed away with a sense of abandonment. Just as when the false communications of the fake TV news try to connect the virtual reality with that of the true chronicle, and the German unification is represented by the protagonist with a mixture of good intentions, utopia and childhood memories, the mother dies, making all those lies in videotapes useless. The film is a farewell to a system, an era, a society, but also a series of lies about recent history and current events. In the narrative structure of this film the memory of the DDR is represented as a memory of the mother. The equivalence of GDR collapse and mother's death allows the director to farewell to personal and common destiny with the soft tones of a family story.

Even *The lives of Others* (2006) by Florian Henckel von Donnerschmarck, that, unlike the two films just mentioned, uses very dramatic tones and focuses on the persecution of two DDR intellectuals by the secret police, is ultimately the story of a “redemption”, the story of a “good man” and recovers the experience of that part of Germany beyond the wall, trying to focus on those positive traces, that also exist, with a reconciling tone. In this sense the film can be considered an aspect of the *Ostalgie*. The director’s high school education shows the origin of the complexity of the film’s plot, in which we can find a series of literary cross-references and an intense psychological analysis of the characters. The life of the artist couple is destroyed because the new culture minister wants to assert his power in the Central Committee and wants to have sex with the beautiful actress. The worst aspect of the GDR was this ability to exacerbate people, to enter into their lives and to change it radically on a whim, to make a career or simply to spite a political opponent. The film is shot with a good characterization of the protagonists and an interesting psychological plot in which good and evil, courage and fear, love and betrayal, are never separated in a Manichean manner, but are intertwined in their complexity. The main theme is the persecution of the secret police that exacerbates the victims and pushes them to suicide.

The film had as a subtitle *Sonate vom guten Menschen* (The Sonata for the Good Man).<sup>21</sup> The title of this piece of music, which plays a central role in the film, recalls the work of Brecht *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* (The Good Person of Szechwan), in which a prostitute to help others goes to great personal trouble. So not only the film’s story vaguely recalls Brecht’s drama, but the sonata is in the film an element that provides the interpretative key to the artistic operation. The Stasi official Gerd Wiesler, while he is spying on the writer Georg Dreyman and his wife, listens to the execution of the sonata piano that anticipates the unfolding of the story. In fact, Dreyman, in executing it, tells his wife that for the sonata one could repeat the words of Lenin said about Beethoven’s *Appassionata*: “I can no longer listen to it, otherwise I do not complete the revolution”. And in fact the captain of the secret police, approaching the art through “the life of others”, undergoes a metamorphosis and does not complete his mission because, after all, he is “a good man”. Here the

contrast between art and life becomes a contrast between beauty and revolution. This film is very bitter because its leitmotif is the impossibility that art (and beauty) can change reality. Art is powerless against the political order (or disorder) of the world, but it can change the man. The international success of the film can also be explained through the poetic principle on which the plot is founded: art is able to change the individual, to improve the man. This is the oldest of artistic theories: the “classical” theory of educational role of art. Perhaps it has not yet been stressed that the echo of a certain Russian literature is heard in this film’s structure. It is at last the story of a “redemption”.

Even with all the limits of the art that are represented here (drama, poetry, music) Donnersmarck composes a “sonata” to the beauty of art and the cathartic effects that it has even under the most difficult political and social conditions. The captain of the Stasi seems to undergo a metamorphosis thanks to art: he steals from the Dreyman’s apartment a book of poems by Bertolt Brecht and reads it with passion, listens to the sonata that the writer performs at the piano and decides to “save” the actress (and later to protect the writer) from the mechanism that would like to crush them.

The German press heavily criticized Haußmann’s film *Sonnenallee* because the policeman was represented as a nice guy, while the Stasi agents were in fact of a rare hardness. But this film by Donnersmarck shows all the cruelty of the secret police (including its internal struggles). The memory of the past is also realized through the narration of wounds, of suffering, of grief, but this recounting of the common history serves to redeem even those few citizens of the East who have tried to counter the dictatorship of the communist party. This telling once again the past serves as a basis for building a common German identity, it becomes an identity narrative.

##### 5. ‘Futures Past’

Hans Meyer and Uwe Johnson were convinced that the central theme of German culture in the second half of the twentieth century was (and had to be) the division of Germany. Today, after almost 30 years of “rewriting the past”, the central topic of German culture has shifted in the laborious search for a new identity that accounts for past differences, other

characters and other problems, starting from the encounter with the “alien”. And here problems, tensions and contradictions re-emerge that characterized the history of German culture in the past. The “German difference” lies within this dual identity, owing to which the “new Germans” identify with unified Germany, they feel full citizens of a new state which has become the “locomotive” of united Europe, but at the same time they also feel members of a particular community (of the East, or the West) which makes them anthropologically different.

The presence of “new German citizens” of Turkish or Russian origin (but also Italian, Greek, Japanese, etc.) and the multicultural character of the new unified Germany have given rise to the paradox that the new German identity consists precisely of this German-German comparison over the representation of the past. And so *Ostalgie*, meant in the broad sense as the search for common roots, as a shared narration of the experiences and historical events to pass down to the future generations, has become an icon of contemporary German identity.

The “German difference” consists of resemanticizing the past, rewriting recent history in search of a common, all-German identity that deals with the past, but serves once again to distinguish one's own from the alien, here and now. And, paradoxically, the German-German division of the past century has become the element of cultural and linguistic unity and identification of this new millennium. Only Germans (from the East and West) can create a cultural fashion based on “nostalgia for the East”, can rewrite and reinterpret their own past. It is not a political nostalgia. No one, not even the members of the extreme left-wing party, *Linke*, want to rebuild the GDR. Beyond the trend which, like all fashions, is bound to disappear after a certain period, what “the Easterners” and a tiny minority of “the Westerners” miss is that atmosphere of solidarity and interpersonal relationships that had grown up between the citizens of the GDR, almost like a form of self-defence against the oppressions of the regime, which then crumbled in the face of the principle of competition. *Ostalgie* concerns that generation, or perhaps those two generations, who lived their childhood in the GDR and who now yearn for their youth, in their middle age, on that “landing” evoked by the title of the film *Halbe Treppe* (2002, English title *Grill Point*) by Andreas Dresen, which won the Silver Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival. *Ostalgie* is a cultural

trend, but it is above all the flight from globalization and competition, yearning for the laidback pace of a country where nothing happened, a *stilles Land*, like the title of another famous film by Andreas Dresen from 1992. The difference from other real socialist states is that when they look towards the past it is always and above all to deal with communism and the Soviet occupation. Indeed, in the other ex-communist countries, nationalism sets down a clear line between the new independent state and Russia, which is considered immediately equivalent to the Soviet Union and communism. In Germany this does not happen because here dealing with the past means dealing with their own dual German-German identity.

Koselleck's statement that historical events are "surprising" and "produce more" than their pre-given elements, that there exists a contemporaneity of the non-contemporary, a co-presence of past and present, and that past events are transfigured and brought up to date by the memory, offers us the key to understanding *Ostalgie* as a way of building the German identity. As dual, or plural as you like, this identity is always the upshot of an identity narrative that strives to go beyond the dividing lines of the past. And the paradox, so often evoked in German history, lies in the fact that "Easterners" are almost always the object of this *Ostalgie*, whose best cultural products, as we have seen, have been devised by "Westerners". And so, they have come together, no longer in no man's land, but in the memory of the most recent past, bringing it up-to-date in a sort of future past resolved in writings of the present.

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<sup>1</sup> See Hans Mayer, *Wendezeiten*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1995, pp. 15-37.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843). Oxford University Press, 1970, trans. Joseph O'Malley, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Representation, Event, and Structure*, in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 110.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, we must not forget that the “turn” happened during the press conference – transmitted live by radio – of a GDR government spokesperson who announced that the borders would soon be opening and who, to the question by an Italian journalist: ‘When will it be possible to cross the border without a visa?’, answered: ‘As far as I’m concerned, straight away’. It was not quite like that though: the government had not made any decisions, it had only made a vague promise. But that sentence, broadcast on the radio and television in every corner of the GDR, caused an immediate reaction from the population of East Berlin, who rushed to the border. The border police had not received any orders, except not to shoot, and they did not know what to do. After hours of telephone calls from the checkpoints and the centres of political and military power, it was decided to open the border “straight away”. See Enzo Collotti, *Dalle due Germanie alla Germania unita*, Turin: Einaudi, 1992, p. 243.

<sup>5</sup> See Jan Assmann, *Cultural memory and early civilization: writing, remembrance, and political imagination*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> See Pierre Nora, *Rethinking France = Les lieux de mémoire*, trans. Mary Trouille, Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> In an article from 2005, Ralf Schenk listed thirty films that explicitly dealt with the past of the GDR. See: Ralf Schenk, *Die DDR im deutschen Film nach 1989*, in *Aus Politik und Geschichte*, no. 44 (2005), p. 31. <http://www.bpb.de/apuz/28734/die-ddr-im-deutschen-film-nach-1989?p=all>.

<sup>8</sup> See Dorothee Wierling, “Die Jugend als innerer Feind”, in *Sozialgeschichte der DDR*, edited by Hartmut Kaelble [et alii], Stuttgart, 1994, pp. 404-425.

<sup>9</sup> *Heroes Like us*, Farrar Straus & Giroux, New York 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Published in English in 2013 by Faber and Faber with the title *In Times of Fading Light*.

<sup>11</sup> This difference emerges explicitly in the scene in *Good Bye Lenin!* in which Alex meets his two step-brothers in front of the television. The two children have a different imaginary to him. The “cosmonaut” and Sandman, who have a decisive role in the film’s symbolism, have a very different meaning for Alex and the two little brothers, so much so that Alex’s answer to the question ‘Where do you come from?’ is ‘Aus einer anderen Welt’ – from another world. The children’s imaginaries were split, even the *Bildraum* of the East and West referred to two different worlds.

<sup>12</sup> See Mauro Ponzi, *Identità multipla: Heimat e identità culturale nella Germania unita*, Rome: Lithos, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> The best cultural products of *Ostalgie* are the films produced and made by authors born and brought up in the West, an evident sign that this phenomenon has become an identity narrative valid for the whole of Germany. *Sonnenallee* (Sun Alley 1999) was filmed by Leander Hausmann, born in the East and son of a famous actor from the Berliner Ensemble, produced by Detlev Buck, who was born and lived in Hamburg. *Good Bye Lenin!* (2003) was directed by Wolfgang Becker, who was born in the Bundesrepublik and went to school in West Berlin. *Der rote Kakadu* (*The Red Cockatoo*, 2006) was directed by Dominique Graf, who was born and went to school in Munich. *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*, 2006), which won the Oscar for Best

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Foreign Film, was directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, who was born in Cologne and grew up between New York, West Berlin and Frankfurt.

<sup>14</sup> On the transposition between reality and imaginary, it must be underlined that the Spreewald gherkins, considered a typical object of the GDR in *Good Bye Lenin*, which the protagonist could not find any more because they had gone out of production, can once again be found in Berlin's supermarkets.

<sup>15</sup> See Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik*, Munich: Beck, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Sabine Hake, *Film in Deutschland*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 2004, p. 327.

<sup>17</sup> *Sonnenallee*, DVD, Extras, Interview, BojeBuck Produktion, Highlight Communications AG, Berlin 2001.

<sup>18</sup> Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> With six million spectators it is one of the most successful films in the history of contemporary German cinema.

<sup>20</sup> See Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Columbia University Press, New York 2004, p. 75-92.

<sup>21</sup> The English synchronisation is wrong: "Sonata for good people" does not express exactly the original German text.

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