Fractured Families – United Countries?
Family, Nostalgia and Nationbuilding in Das Wunder von Bern and Goodbye Lenin!
Matthias Uecker

Abstract:
The article compares the role and construction of nostalgia in two of the most successful German films released in 2003, Das Wunder von Bern and Goodbye Lenin!. While both films portray a close connection between male adolescence, incomplete families, and nostalgia for a simpler past, Goodbye Lenin! exposes this view of the GDR as an artificial and largely fictional construction, whereas Das Wunder von Bern attempts to create a sense of authenticity for its nostalgic recreation of 1950s West Germany. Despite this significant difference, both films are shown to pursue a common ideological project: their narratives are focused on a nostalgic farewell to the past in order to develop a positive attitude to the future of a re-unified Germany. To this purpose, both films’ central characters and their families are presented as representative, allegorical embodiments of German culture whose development in the course of the narrative functions as a model for the audience.

German cinema has once again discovered the appeal of the past, and while the Nazi period continues to fascinate producers and audiences alike, some of the most successful films of recent years have dealt with Germany’s fractured post-war history and the memories of partition, reconstruction and reunification that are associated with the two separate states which preceded the ‘new’, contemporary Germany. As both of these states and the specific cultures associated with them pass into a memory reserved for finished episodes, such memories are simultaneously transformed into stories concerning – and even impacting on – the new Germany that has arisen since unification. Implicitly or explicitly, the past is compared and contrasted with the present and utilised to make sense of the changes that have taken place. And while not all popular films are part of a conscious project to reflect and shape contemporary ideology, their success does perhaps indicate a mutual recognition, binding the stories on the screen to the memories and fantasies of appreciative audiences.

1 An earlier version of this article was presented at the conference A Melancholy Search for Heimat? History, Generation, and Gender in German Discourse, organised by Anne Fuchs and Mary Cosgrove at University College Dublin; 28-30 September 2006. I am grateful to Elizabheth Boa for stylistic advice. Translations of German dialogue are based on the subtitled English versions of both films. 2 This the contentious assumption of Siegfried Kracauer’s history of the cinema of the Weimar Republic (Kracauer 1947).
Continuing differences of identity and stories of failed integration have certainly attracted a lot of attention recently, but the popular imagination has been equally drawn to success stories which suggest a less fractured future and a healing of old scars. Two of the most successful German films of 2003, *Goodbye Lenin!* (2003), directed by Wolfgang Becker, and *Das Wunder von Bern/The Miracle of Bern* (2003), directed by Sönke Wortmann, can be read as contributions to a discourse that is concerned with the integration of separate memories into a new story which is designed to construct and sustain a common national identity. Both films are set at significant historical turning points and use the interplay between well-known public events and the experiences of fictional characters to illuminate the significance of historical developments for these individuals, and – by implication – for the rest of the nation. In Wortmann’s film, Germany’s World Cup victory of 1954 provides the organizing focus for a portrayal of various strands of West German society. In a manner highly reminiscent of popular 1950s movies, *Das Wunder von Bern* combines the portrayal of the German football team’s victorious campaign under the leadership of its coach, Sepp Herberger, with two stories: the humourous account of a young reporter and his wife who watch the development of the German team at close quarters, and the moving and at times melodramatic story of a struggling family from Essen, who are torn apart by the return of the father after ten years in a Russian labour camp. The relationship between Richard Lubanski, the returned prisoner of war, and his family, especially his youngest son, Matthes, provides the emotional core of the film. *Goodbye Lenin!*, by contrast, is set in the eleven months between the collapse of the East German regime in November 1989 and the unification of Germany on 3 October 1990, and follows the changes in the life of the East German Kerner family during these momentous events. What could have been a realistic description of political upheaval and changing life-styles is refashioned into a sometimes frenetic, sometimes sentimental comedy through the central plot device which fuels the narrative: on the eve of the GDR’s collapse, Christine Kerner suffers a massive heart attack and falls into a coma from which she does not recover for several months. When she awakes in the summer of 1990, her son, Alex, decides – on medical advice – to keep his mother in the dark about the ongoing political changes. Focusing on this mother-son-relationship, the film develops a series of often hilarious scenes revolving around Alex’s attempts to create an imaginary, stable GDR environment for his
mother against the backdrop of the ultimate demise of East German society and culture. The film ends with the death of Christine Kerner three days after unification.

While both films share a number of structural features, there are also crucial differences. In fact, at first sight, these differences appear so overwhelming as to prohibit any attempt at drawing parallels between the implicit ideological projects in the two films. *Goodbye Lenin!* seems to embody the spirit of ‘Ostalgie’, the nostalgia for the disappeared East German past that has arisen from the traumatic loss of stability and self-confidence in the aftermath of the collapse of the GDR; *Das Wunder von Bern*, on the other hand, appears as an affirmation of a specifically west German success story which has no place for the east. While one film ultimately tells of death and loss, the other celebrates the successful struggle to overcome all adversity on which – according to popular myth – the old Federal Republic was built. As the beginning of one national project is contrasted with the collapse of its ‘other’, both films seem to exclude each other, constructing fundamentally different stories of individual and collective identity.

These differences may also account for the different status which both films have acquired. Although both achieved significant commercial success in Germany, *Das Wunder von Bern* failed to emulate the international success of *Goodbye Lenin!* and has been largely ignored by academic critics. As the history of the Nazi regime and the GDR continue to define Germany’s perception abroad, the history of West German democracy and pre-1989 ‘normalization’ has been marginalised.

But beneath these differences, one can also detect crucial similarities which can not only be traced back to the common problem of creating a new, appropriate identity for a united Germany, but which also suggest that both films participate in and are based on a common discourse that combines two key elements: the assumption that changing circumstances require changing identities is articulated through an at least initially nostalgic exploration of the past, and it is represented and embodied by fractured and incomplete families. These commonalities, and the films’ very different strategies of working through them, will be explored in this article.

From the start, *Goodbye Lenin!* was perceived as yet another example of a then fashionable form of ‘Ostalgie’, that fond, melancholy and somewhat patronising nostalgia for certain aspects of everyday life in the GDR which – quite appropriately for the post-1990 consumer culture – focused on GDR products and brands as symbols of a trusted and stable identity that had disappeared after monetary union in
the summer of 1990. (Cooke 2005: 128-136; Allan 2006: 117-123, Böhn 2005: 258; Boa 2006: 78; on material culture cf. also Blum 2000; Betts 2000) Opening with clips from an old home movie which show a happy family and trigger idyllic childhood memories, Goodbye Lenin! does indeed seem to participate in a discourse which since the mid-1990s has produced a series of ‘feel-good movies’ and ‘reconciliatory retro-comedies’ about the GDR. (Berghahn 2006: 96) On one level at least, life in the GDR is portrayed as simple, harmonious and orderly – if a bit boring, whereas the rapid transition of 1990 is frequently associated with a sense of bewilderment and chaos. In the central scene of the film which literally stages a farewell to Lenin, Christine Kerner’s mother’s first impressions of the newly emerging society include obscene graffiti and a swastika in the elevator of her previously pristine apartment block. As old money and familiar brands become worthless overnight, people turn to alcoholism, and the narrator suggests that the rapid acceleration of life has left everyone feeling like ‘tiny atoms in a huge particle accelerator’ (Becker 2003).

Such images and metaphors can be identified as parts of a fundamental discourse of nostalgia which ascribes simplicity and a sense of identity to a lost past that is contrasted with a disorientating, perhaps even threatening present. For Alex, the narrator-protagonist of Goodbye Lenin!, this threat is embodied in the risk that his seriously ill mother could die from shock if she realises what is happening. For him, ‘Ostalgie’ therefore turns into the practical, but increasingly grotesque project of creating the impression that nothing has changed. The symbols and insignia of life in the GDR are used not so much as part of a nostalgic cult for the past, but rather as props in a stage production that is played out for the benefit of Alex’s mother. The undoubtedly comical effect created by the frantic attempt at salvaging, restoring or faking the material presentations of the GDR is thus undercut by more serious concerns about the past and the present – and vice versa.

What is made explicit in Goodbye Lenin! remains for the most part implicit in Das Wunder von Bern. The newly emerging prosperity of the 1950s economic ‘miracle’ with the spread of television and American popular music attains an aura of nostalgia not by direct contrast with the present, but by an implicit invitation to the audience to compare, for instance, the simplicity of a footballer’s lifestyle in 1954 with that of today’s mega-stars. By drawing his stories from different social classes, director Sönke Wortmann can simultaneously evoke the poverty and simplicity of life in the 1950s and show off some of the more spectacular fashion items of the time in order to
create an overall sense of nostalgia for what is portrayed in this film as the period in which the basis for the success of West German society was laid. Combining the evocation of long-gone fashions and manners, famous media moments and more intimate private memories, Wortmann achieves an effective mixture of comical and sentimental effects which allows his viewers to adopt the kind of safe nostalgic attitude that longs for a quaint past, but feels safe in the present.

While Wortmann’s film goes to great lengths to create a sense of authenticity through contemporary costumes and props as well as the recreation of famous moments, material objects are perhaps less crucial to its nostalgic project than actions and attitudes. At the centre of the film, all of its narrative strands converge on the occasion of Germany’s World Cup victory in 1954 in an almost didactic demonstration of how a sense of community is made possible by changing behaviour and attitudes. All personal and professional conflicts are eventually resolved through individual learning processes which go to the heart of what it means to be a (west) German man, suggesting that renewed West German nationhood was based not so much on the restoration of traditional German virtues, as on the emergence of a new, more relaxed attitude. Just as football coach Sepp Herberger is taught by a Swiss cleaning woman that it is okay to relax and bend the rules a little, Mattes’ father who has brought his family close to collapse with his insistence on discipline and paternal authority, learns to open up, display his emotions and respect his wife’s and son’s feelings and acknowledge their achievements.

Nostalgia in Das Wunder von Bern is thus not merely based on the construction of images of a simpler past, but just as importantly on the projection of certain current values and attitudes onto that past. For all its meticulous efforts in the reconstruction of a seemingly authentic atmosphere, its portrayal of 1950s Germany is curiously inauthentic and anachronistic when it comes to family life and gender relations. While the return of the father after ten years as a Russian PoW seems at first to result in one of those tragic stories of the restoration of patriarchal order that dominated the 1970’s perspective on this period, Das Wunder von Bern eventually turns into a sentimental celebration of family harmony as all the adult male characters are seduced, cajoled or convinced into accepting female equality. This is doubly crucial for the film’s nostalgic project, as it not only removes potentially offensive or controversial features

---

3 Cf. in particular Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s film Die Ehe der Maria Braun/The Marriage of Maria Braun (1978) with its distinctive use of the World Cup final as a symbol of West German restoration.
from its portrayal of the 1950s, but also helps to turn that period into a precursor of the attitudes the film wants to celebrate as a model for the present.  

In many respects, the GDR created by Alex for the benefit of his mother is just as inauthentic as Sönke Wortmann’s vision of the economic miracle. As he turns the collapse of the GDR into a fantasy of a reformed and successful socialism which is embodied not by Erich Honecker, but by the East German cosmonaut, Sigmund Jähn, Alex eventually acknowledges that he has created ‘a country that never existed in that form.’ (Becker 2003) Throughout, Wolfgang Becker’s film does not simply appeal to its audience’s nostalgia, but shows how nostalgic versions of the past are artificially created in response to present emotional needs. As Seán Allan has observed, Becker ‘strives for a more differentiated understanding of the concept of “Ostalgie”, whilst at the same time highlighting the importance of memory (both individual and collective) for the citizens of the former GDR.’ (Allan 2006: 117) Authenticity is located in the characters and their desires, rather than in the past which they re-imagine. In fact, certain memories are shown to be highly unreliable and ultimately incapable of distinguishing the authentic from the fake: as long as the packaging looks right, Alex’s mother gladly accepts Dutch gherkins as if they were the real East German ‘Spreewald’ gherkins. As Paul Cooke has noted, the film casts an ironic look on the ‘fetishization of consumer products’ (Cooke 2005: 134) that characterised ‘Ostalgie’ whithout completely rejecting it – the film’s official website celebrates the widespread nostalgia for east German brands and contains links to various sites which collect and celebrate east German consumer products and labels. (79qmddr)

This technique marks a crucial difference between the two films: While Das Wunder von Bern fakes authenticity in order to exploit the audience’s nostalgia for the past, Goodbye Lenin! explores the roots of such nostalgia and the means by which its illusions are sustained. Just as Alex, as the film’s narrator, constantly displays an ironic attitude of employing and simultaneously ridiculing the buzzwords of the dominant ideological discourses, the film attempts to participate in contemporary ‘Ostalgie’ and at the same time to analyze its function. In so far as it contributes to a myth about the GDR past, it does so by acknowledging that this myth is factually incorrect.

While there is some evidence in the film that consumerism contributed to the re-shaping of ‘German’ values of conformity and discipline to liberal, ‘western’ norms, Stuart Taberner (Taberner 2005: 369) underestimates the more crucial – and problematic – aspect of changing gender roles in Wortmann’s narrative.
That the GDR was no idyll is amply demonstrated by the two dangerous breakdowns which Alex’s mother suffers as a result of the repressive actions of the state. First, after her husband’s escape from the GDR she descends into clinical depression, and then, witnessing the police battering and arresting her son, she falls into the coma which causes her to miss the collapse of the GDR. These episodes suggest that Alex’s childhood and adolescence can hardly form the basis of any ‘nostalgic idealization of the GDR’ (Berghahn 2006: 96) – even if Alex himself continues to admire the achievements of East Germany’s first cosmonaut, Sigmund Jähn, as a symbol of national pride. However, the exposure of the brutal way in which the East German regime disrupted the life of Alex’s family does not merely serve to refute any idealised vision of the GDR’s achievements. Rather, the film suggests that both aspects need to be acknowledged simultaneously. Neither the fondly remembered idyll nor the images of state repression represent the whole truth about life in the GDR. Although the lies and deception to which Alex succumbs in his efforts to protect his mother from the truth can at times be grotesque and creepy, the sincerity of his motives and the underlying need for an emotional re-engagement with the vanished GDR are never questioned. ‘Ostalgie’, while creating a factually misleading version of the past, serves as a ‘work of mourning’ (Boa 2006: 78; Cooke 2005: 135-6) which prepares for the final farewell as ‘a dignified send-off’ (Becker 2003) rather than a closing-down sale. Through the construction of its narrative, Becker’s film subverts the discourse of ‘Ostalgie’ and any truth claims that might come with it without demolishing its essential legitimacy.

Sönke Wortmann’s film, on the other hand, is squarely in the business of myth-making in its creation of a foundation-myth of West Germany. Its ideological project and the function it aspires to are boldly stated in the film’s promotional material: ‘Every child needs a father. Every person needs a dream. Every country needs a legend.’ (Wortmann 2003) Insofar as we have all come to perceive legends as fictional stories – though perhaps with a true core –, Wortmann could be said to be admitting his role in the manufacturing of just such a legend or myth. But the film’s construction is geared towards hiding and displacing any awareness of such an activity. Emulating the standard features of the mainstream Hollywood movie, it eschews all explicit reflection of its internal mechanisms in favour of sustaining the

---

5 Berghahn’s remark refers to Leander Haußmann’s Sonnenallee, but she explicitly includes Goodbye Lenin in her list of ‘Ostalgie’ films.
audience’s illusory identification with the characters. While Goodbye Lenin! has been described as an act of musealization of the GDR (Böhn 2005: 253), it is in fact Das Wunder von Bern which fetishises the past as an object of the viewers’ gaze rather than showing it as a product of the director’s activities.

Although the films have ostensibly a very different approach to memory and the purpose of reconstructing the past, they do share a common narrative focus on the family unit as the locus of personal and collective identity, of memories and value. More importantly, the crises around which both narratives develop seem to be directly caused by problems arising from the incomplete and fractured families at the centre of both films which in turn are the result of historical circumstances.

‘Every child needs a father’: Sönke Wortmann’s first motto for Das Wunder von Bern suggests that the contentious relationship between the young boy Mattes and his authoritarian and confused father should be seen as the film’s central theme around which the other stories are grouped. In connection with the general setting and wider themes of the film, this relationship can be easily identified as a didactic story about the resolution of conflicts through communication and emotional bonding. The film shows an incomplete family which has redefined its internal structures and division of roles in response to the father’s long-term absence and which struggles to accommodate and integrate this father after his return from a Russian labour camp. While Mattes, for much of the film, must be inclined to question the claim that every child needs a father, the film eventually convinces the audience to empathise with the father’s emotional difficulties and to cheer him on in the difficult process of adapting to his new life. The film briefly alludes to the trauma of the former soldier and prisoner of war, but the narrative focus is on his definition of his role as a man, husband and father which is shown to be in urgent need of modernisation. When he finally bonds with his son during the German football team’s triumph in Bern, the new family harmony corresponds with a euphoric moment of national harmony and joy and comes to represent a new beginning for everyone.

Although Goodbye Lenin! is primarily concerned with the vulnerable position of Alex’s mother who in the course of the film turns into a symbolic representation of a better, utopian GDR, Alex’s family is also – curiously – a family without a father. Alex’s father escaped to the West a long time ago and is believed to have abandoned his family. Just like the Lubanski, the Kerners have learned to cope without paternal authority as they have been separated from a father through historical forces beyond
their control. The collapse of the GDR should offer an opportunity for a re-unification of the family and a return to ‘normality’. But Becker prefers to tell a different story: as the mother – under pressure from the state and out of fear of losing her children – decided to excise her husband from the family’s memory and prevent all contact, the exiled father has started a new life with a new family in the West, and neither side initially makes any attempt to renew the relationship after the fall of the wall. It is only the dying mother’s confession of her ‘biggest mistake’ (Becker 2003) and her desire to see her husband once more which prompts Alex to seek out his father and bring him back to East Berlin.

This episode dramatically alters the tone of the film from tongue-in-cheek to understated melodrama: while Alex may have succeeded in organising a slow and dignified farewell from the GDR and his mother, the film’s final section also opens old scars which point towards a deep trauma. Alex’s sense of loss and betrayal at finding out the truth about his father’s disappearance and his mother’s true feelings about the GDR ultimately explode any sense of nostalgia that may have lingered on. Instead of restoring an old family, the film demonstrates that this family can never be the same again, and encourages its protagonists to move on to new relationships. The celebration which is shown in the film’s final frames is thus much more muted and emotionally ambivalent than the triumphant festivities to celebrate the German football team’s victory which finish Das Wunder von Bern. Crucially, though, it inserts a similar element of optimism for the future.

Both films’ nostalgic projects are carried not only by narratives of fractured families, but more specifically by the emotional response of adolescent boys to their fathers’ absence and unexpected return. Nostalgia, it seems, is not so much a universal response to changing circumstances, but rather a specific articulation of problems in the development of male identity. The transition that is at the heart of both films’ narratives centres on a parent acknowledging responsibility for a significant loss and the adolescent protagonist taking on the role of comforting their parent: In Goodbye Lenin!, Alex contacts his father and convinces him to visit Christine one last time after she has admitted her ‘mistake’, while in Das Wunder von Bern Mattes comforts his despondent father who has finally realised how badly he has treated his family, telling his father that it is okay for a German man to cry occasionally.

While Das Wunder von Bern obscures its attempts at creating an illusionary version of the past, Wortmann’s film foregrounds the problem of male identity and
articulates the need for changing role models. *Goodbye Lenin!*, on the other hand, seems largely oblivious to the gendered construction of its story, although a few hints are dropped which suggest that women perhaps do not share the more obsessive aspects of the nostalgic project. Neither Alex’s sister nor his girlfriend is entirely happy with his efforts to reverse time and recruit everybody for his nostalgic re-enactment of GDR life, and towards the end, even his mother seems to have learned the truth, but elects to humour her son in an acknowledgement of his emotional needs.6

But perhaps the crucial aspect – and the most surprising similarity between both films – is the function which such nostalgia takes on at the end of both narratives: rather than chaining the protagonists and their families to an imagined past, both films culminate in the prospect of a future which will offer new opportunities that were denied the characters in the past. *Goodbye Lenin!* explicitly portrays Alex’s nostalgic recreation of an idealised GDR as a transition process which has the function of preparing Alex emotionally for this different future. *Das Wunder von Bern* equally promises a better future as a result of the characters’ ability to work through past experiences and then let go. Rather than merely presenting a longing for the past, both films tell stories of a transition which integrates the past into a vision of a more satisfying future, linking the healing of emotional scars within fractured families to the idea of a united Germany.

This instrumental function of the past as a tool for the preparation for the future is further underlined by both films’ disdainful portrayal of characters who are so fixated on the past that they cannot move on. In *Goodbye Lenin!*, a grumpy neighbour, Herr Ganzke, comes to represent the ideologically motivated blindness of those people who cannot let go of the past and interpret every little problem in the present as a proof of the superiority of their past. When Alex searches the bins for original GDR packaging, Herr Ganzke automatically activates his anticapitalist stereotypes and assumes that he must be looking for food, and while most participants in Alex’s retro-production of his mother’s birthday party display obvious signs of discomfort, he genuinely revels in the feeling of bringing back the past one more time, wishing ‘that someday things will be like they used to be’. (Becker 2003) This character finds his

---

6 Seán Allan (Allan 2006: 120) rightly highlights the fact that Alex’s sister enacts a ‘complete rejection of everything associated with the east’ and promotes rapid ‘Westernization’, but he misses the similarities between the three main female characters in the film.
counterparts in two grumpy men in Das Wunder von Bern who continuously question the skills and ability of the German football team. Eventually, their critical attitude is revealed to be rooted in a deep-seated feeling of national humiliation which they cannot overcome: ‘We lost the war, we’ll also lose this final’ (Wortmann 2003), they argue after Hungary has taken the lead. They leave the pub before the game turns around, thus excluding themselves from the united, celebrating nation which witnesses the triumph of its team. As they cling to the past and simultaneously to their own humiliation that has resulted from the demise of that past, these characters ignore the opportunities of the present and miss out on the happiness which other characters can achieve.

Wortmann, however, takes an additional and highly contentious step in his confrontation of different attitudes towards the past: Mattes’ older brother is the only character in Das Wunder von Bern who demands that the Nazi’s crimes should not be forgotten and that individual responsibility for these crimes must be exposed. His attitude is not one of nostalgia, but of complete rejection of the past. In a rather anachronistic move, Wortmann uses him to represent not the mood of the early 1950s, but the authority conflicts of the 1960s. Bruno explicitly accuses his father of a fascistic mentality when he suggests that his sense of discipline and order is nothing but a reflection of his army training and his inability to liberate himself from that ideology. But while he despairs of his father and flees to East Germany, because he wants to do ‘something meaningful’ (Wortmann 2003), he misses his father’s transformation into a new, open and liberal-minded German man who learns to confront his emotions and to show weakness. For the film’s at once sentimental and triumphant ending to be convincing, Bruno’s uncomfortable questions about the past have to be removed from the story and thus from the fictional West Germany that Wortmann imagines.

In the context of post-unification debates about the re-evaluation of West Germany’s history and identity, it is plausible to view this move as part of a concerted effort to de-legitimise the anti-authoritarian revolt of 1968: by focusing on a father who is shown to be capable of overcoming a traumatising past and accepting liberal values, Wortmann portrays his elder son’s accusatory stance as thoughtless and counterproductive. (Taberner 2005: 368) But against the backdrop of ongoing tensions between east and west Germans, Wortmann’s concoction may also take on additional meaning. As the film celebrates ostensibly west German values and
successes, it suggests that the East is not entirely cut off from these values. Rather than highlighting the authoritarian nature of the GDR, Bruno makes it look like a misguided, but idealistic project that might even deserve sympathy. And most importantly of all: East Germans are part of the German family rather than alien ‘others’.

The position of an accusatory rejection of the past and any nostalgia associated with this past remains unfilled in Goodbye Lenin!, supplying at least some evidence to the claim that the film portrays the East German past through rose-tinted spectacles. Although the brutal activities of the police and the Stasi are shown, Becker avoids any reference to post-Wende attempts at revealing the full extent of their activities or identifying individual perpetrators. Nor is Christine Kerner’s outward commitment to the ideology and institutions of the GDR ever questioned in a manner which would mirror Bruno Lubanski’s aggressive critique of his father. While Alex’ conversion from disillusioned youth to utopian socialist in the service of his mother’s assumed ideals does not result in a retrospective endorsement of real existing socialism, it appears symptomatic of the film’s attempt to recuperate ‘the utopian impulse behind the GDR’s socialist project’ for the future (Cooke 2005: 132). But in order to make such a position credible, Becker is forced to sidestep the Stasi debates of the 1990s entirely, leaving a gap at the centre of his narrative.

Instead, Goodbye Lenin! emulates Sönke Wortmann’s claim, that family ties have the potential to bridge the divide between east and west. After all, Alex’s father whose new lifestyle looks completely westernised is originally from the East. If, as Elizabeth Boa has suggested, family relations in films like Goodbye Lenin! function as allegories of different stages in a complex historical development, such allegories should be read not only with a view towards the ‘binary of old and young’ that characterises intergenerational relationships, but should also take into account the suggestion embedded in both films’ narratives that family ties transcend the binary of East and West. (Boa 2006: 68) Both Becker and Wortmann take the cold war phrase referring to ‘our brothers and sisters’ beyond the Iron Curtain literally, suggesting that any political and cultural divide can ultimately be bridged if more fundamental blood relationships are acknowledged.

Such allegorical constructions which present the family as the prime location for the resolution of historical conflicts simplify the narrative integration of diverse problems, appeal to large audiences and are therefore popular with scriptwriters,
directors and producers alike. But they come at a price. With reference to recent trends in the representation of the Nazi past in German cinema, John E. Davidson has pinpointed a problematic ‘tension between the psychologized version of coming to terms on the one hand, and the process of individualized rediscovery of the past on the other’ that seems to result from the reduction of ‘complex situations to individual conflicts’. (Davidson 2006: 46-7) Such reductionism is perhaps a prerequisite for the wishful thinking that powers both Das Wunder von Bern and Goodbye Lenin!, as the intimate relationships between parents and their children seem more easily malleable towards stable communal identities than the public spaces of a fractured society.

But Davidson’s conclusion that the individualisation which underlies this narrative construct necessarily weakens ‘the memory of the collective’ (Davidson 2006: 74) is debatable: by turning their characters’ private lives into representations of the nation’s problems, both films enact yet another simplifying reduction which conveniently constructs the family as the immediate reflection and product of historical and social circumstances rather than an embattled interface of conflicting energies and influences. To individualise stories of national mourning and reconstruction does not, therefore, result in a weakening of collective memories, but rather functions as a way of investing national myths with a degree of reality and credibility that only individual characters can supply. To present the Lubanskis and the Kerners as German allegories invites the audience to internalise the national myths which are enacted by these families. Rather than claiming that ‘personal relations prevail over relations to a nation or a state’ (Böhn 2005: 255), both films attempt to make these personal relations representative of the individuals’ relation to the nation.

At the core of these myths shared by both films lies a problematic, but powerful belief in the future: while in the past both families may have been the victims of historical circumstances, the films’ narratives point towards the prospect of a society in which these families – and anyone else – are no longer restrained by forces beyond their control, but in fact themselves represent the major force which shapes both private and public life. Of course, the utopian harmony of the celebrations with which both films conclude, cannot last, and closer inspection of their narratives reveals that conflicts have only been suspended temporarily rather than resolved. But the power of allegorical representation which underlies these celebrations invests both films not only with an audience-boosting feel-good factor – it also reveals their ideological nature. It is thus apt to describe not only Goodbye Lenin!, but also Das Wunder von
*Bern* as a ‘breakthrough in the establishment of a unified German film culture’
(Berghahn 2005: 229), as both films attempt to ‘revalidate’ specific East and West German experiences with a view towards their integration into a unified national culture.

Works cited


Cooke, Paul (2005), *Representing East Germany since Unification. From Colonization to Nostalgia*, Oxford/New York: Berg

*Good Bye, Lenin! Ein Film von Wolfgang Becker*, http://www.79qmddr.de/index2.php


Taberner, Stuart (2005), ‘Philo-semitism in recent German film: *Aimée und Jaguar, Rosenstraße* and *Das Wunder von Bern*, *German Life and Letters* 58 (2005), 357-372