

The Research on the Presentation of Ostalgie in Post-Berlin Wall German Film: Case Study of Goodbye, Lenin!

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Abstract: This paper mainly focus on the presentation of Ostalgie in the film *Goodbye, Lenin!*. *Goodbye, Lenin!* is a German tragicomedy directed by Wolfgang Becker, and is popular for its strong historical imprint of German reunification. The representational identities and material nostalgia presented by the film will be analyse though observation of plot design, character setting and visual icons appeared in the film. The main findings of this essay indicates the semiotic portrait of characters of the film enables further evaluation towards the future rather than the past. The role that characteristic of the mother Christine and the space enthusiasm of protagonist Alex play in the film will be reevaluated. The aim of the research is to investigate the way how '*Goodbye, Lenin!*' engages with the audience and history as a compromise product of the western-led narrative framework and the celebration of East German identity. Further social impact of this film is also discussed though the positive side of promoting the justification of East-German identity and also the negative side of ignoring the undermined causes that lead to the depreciation of such identity after the German reunification.

Keywords: Nostalgia, Ostalgie, *Goodbye, Lenin!*, Historical film, Post-berlin wall german identity

1. Introduction

Wolfgang Becker's *Goodbye, Lenin!* is a German tragicomedy film with a strong historical imprint of German reunification, reaching \$79.38 million at the box office [1]. The reunification Germany, which marks the re-merger of the two divided and opposing countries in the Cold War into a unified republic, is an important mark in modern German history. However, as the transition from socialism to capitalism took place almost overnight, citizens of socialist side, or the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), found their collective identities and marks of their past times quickly fading away and being denied by their new state. With social anxiety and concern towards their identity and representation started rising in the mid-1990s, the term 'Ostage' was invented to symbolize the nostalgia of the former East Germans for their living experience under socialism. Despite director Becker's insistence that the core of the film's narrative is family tragicomedy rather than history and politics [2], *Goodbye, Lenin!* is still considered by many scholars as a representative work of 'Ostage' films in post-communist Germany due to its informative historical details and symbolic portrayal of characters.

The film is set in East Berlin during the 1989 German reunification, while the East Germany (GDR) regime was on the edge of crumbling. Alex's mother, Christine, a loyal social activist who "married to the socialist fatherland," suffered a heart attack while witnessing her son being arrested during a protest and was in a coma. During her eight months of coma, a series of political changes in East Germany almost erased the existence of the socialist regime: the fall of the Berlin Wall, the influx of goods and immigrants from the West, and the transformation towards capitalism. Fearing Christine's fragile condition might be affected by the dramatic social change when she awakes from coma, Alex decides to recuperate the GDR in his apartment to protect her and convince her that nothing has changed. However, as time goes on and his mother's health briefly improves, it becomes increasingly difficult for Alex to fabricate his white lie: from decorating his room with old furniture, to trying to find East German consumer goods which were replaced by Western products overnight, he even starts making fake news programs to convince his mother. Though Alex's girlfriend Lara eventually told Christine the truth when her death becomes inevitable, Christine still let her son's white lie to be carried on and passed away peacefully three days after the unification.

In terms of plot setting, two white lies told by mother and son to each other runs throughout the film. Christine hid from her son and daughter the reason for her husband's defection: he was not seduced by a female "class enemy", but was overwhelmed by internal pressure and persecution for not joining the ruling Socialist Unity party (SED); While Alex tries to hide the fact that East Germany is collapsing from his mother, so as not to provoke a recurrence of her heart attack. In addition, represented by the heroic figure of East German Cosmonaut Sigmund Jähn and his 1978 space program, the East German socialist utopian ideal has also been accompanied by Alex the protagonist throughout the film, making narrative of the film become more romantic and personal. Such plot design not only emphasized the warmth of family relations, but also attaches representational identities to the characters. The semiotics interspersed in the film triggered the audience's reflection on the symbol of the identity of the former East Germany in the post-Berlin Wall era, and also reflected the role of film in inspiring collective memory in historical narrative.

2. Literature Review

As a film reflecting the unification period of Germany, the concept of Ostalgie runs through the whole film. Drawing on the linguistic findings of Ulbrich and Khper, Blum points out that 'Ostalgie' is a compound of two German nouns 'Ost' (east) and 'nostalgie', and is used to describe the East German nostalgia towards their life experience before and during the reunification of Germany. The citizens of the former German Democratic Republic face the sense of loss, dislocation and identity crisis after accepting the "unification" from the opposite ideological camp [3]. Andrews' interview shows that the identity crisis after the reunification of Germany originated from East Germans' response to the erosion of Western behavioral norms and rules and the depreciation of Eastern culture and identity, as their old discourse system and identity from the GDR were completely destroyed in the process of rapid political and economic transformation [4]. According to Berdahl's research on the re-emergence of GDR goods after unification, the reproduction and consumption of such material culture is a typical Ostalgie cultural practice. This practice represents an attempt to recover, confirm and consolidate collective memories of a shared past. With the decontextualization and depoliticization of these material culture, people are detached from the historical background of economic deprivation and dictatorship, and end up fuzzifying and romanticizing the past they miss [5]. Blum's theory also proves this point by stating that such re-emergence of materialist expression triggered by Ostalgie could constitute a symbolic system based on past life experience, which not only helps the former East Germans resisted a "Western-dominated" discourse system and increasingly homogeneous consumerism, but also enable East Germans to construct their unique identity in the "New Germany" through the exclusivity of collective memory [3, 5]. However, Boyer put forward the opposite view,

stating that Ostalgie was a utopian fantasy based on Western-dominated Cold War identity narrative, aiming to make East Germans tangled in the past history, so as to claim a Western future “free from the burden of history” [6].

According to Enns, the main narrative modes used by German films in the post-unification era on themes of German unification can be summarized as Horror, Nostalgia and Redemption. Among them, the "Nostalgia" narrative mainly reflects a certain degree of nostalgia for the GDR era, and the loss of the positive elements in it, while "Redemption" depicts the demise of the GDR regime and the unification of Germany as the moment of salvation, and expresses a more positive view of the future of the unified country through the characters' repentance for the past [7]. Though Becker emphasizes that *Goodbye, Lenin!* is a tragicomedy that depoliticizes and emphasizes family relations, the large number of historical scenes presented in the film still made it a "Period piece" [8]. According to Landsberg's theory, the historical production of contemporary mass media often emphasizes the mobilization of emotion to promote the simple and easy identification of the characters on the screen, but also makes the depiction of historical figures symbolized, thus becoming an obstacle to emphasize the objective historical thinking [9].

In terms of the film narrative of *Goodbye Lenin*, Kapczynski pointed out that Becker established an intuitive visual connection between destinies of individuals and the nations[8]. Enns considers *Goodbye, Lenin!* as "nostalgia" rather than "redemption" according to his narrative classification system, which points out that the depoliticization of the film narrative blurs the disturbing elements of the East German regime [7]. Most scholars have noticed that in *Goodbye, Lenin!*, Ostalgie is visualized as a means for Alex to hide the truth from his mother (such as collecting outdated GDR goods and producing fake TV programs), while the Ostalgie metonymy presented by Alex's enthusiasm for the 1978 space program is ignored [7,8]. In addition, most of the communism-phobia critiques of the film consider the identity of Christine as a "loyal communist" and see the romanticized depiction of the socialist regime as the longing for the return of the East German state, without paying attention to the overall image of Christine and the negative parts of GDR reflected in the film [7,8,10].

This article will mainly focus on the two narrative lines and characters of the film, combined with the theories of emotional interaction between the historical film and the audience, and the film narrative trend after the reunification of Germany, to show how *Goodbye, Lenin!* interacts with the audience and history. In addition, the study explores the role of the film as a West German film depicting East Germany in the West-led discourse system, so as to raise further awareness to re-examine Ostalgie itself and other social problems after German reunification.

3. Methodology

This paper uses the qualitative research method, mainly observes the plot design, characterization and the use of East German material cultural symbols in the film *Goodbye, Lenin!* In terms of plot design, it will mainly observe the change of Alex's father image and the role played by Alex's space project enthusiasm, which will lead to the discussion on the narrative and character image of the film. The observation of the material culture of East Germany will focus on the buildings with the characteristics of the time, the visual presentation of historical events, and the reproduction of daily consumer goods in East Germany. In addition, the Ostalgie plot and the identity of East Germans in the post-Berlin Wall era will be further discussed through the study of the symbolic meaning of characters and the presentation of material culture.

4. Results

The film's presentation of the life experience and historical events in East Germany consolidated the collective memory related to Ostalgie and celebrated the of East German identity. The historical

events took place before and during the 1989 reunification have carried on the detailed introduction, such as the east commodities was replaced by West Germany commodities overnight, people line up to exchange western currency with their GDR mark, and the outbreak of protests at the 40th anniversary of East German National Day. It shows the 1989 east German political turmoil and social transformation from the perspective of an ordinary East German citizen (Alex).

Alex's childhood enthusiasm of the space program provides a more concrete symbol for the Ostalgie plot in the film, as well as linking the figures of "mother" and "father". When childhood Alex and his sister watch the live broadcast of East German cosmonaut Sigmund Jähn preparing to fly into space in a rocket, the secret police Stasi find their mother Christine and interrogate her about her husband's defection. When the timeline shifts to Alex's adulthood, and by the time he learns that his sister has accidentally seen her father ordering food, the little rocket he launched in his childhood appears in the background again. And after his mother confesses the truth, Alex runs into a taxi driver who resembles his childhood hero Jähn on the way to his father's house. And at the end of the film, the scene that Alex uses the rocket to send the ashes of his mother to the sky not only marks the death of Christine, but also marks the political end of the GDR regime, and thus symbolize the end of Alex's Ostalgie.

Goodbye, Lenin! is still a film that serves the western discourse system in essence. The film depicts the political institutions and national image of East Germany in a "Western" stereotyped way. In terms of the plot set, the source of Christine's tragedy is directly caused by the brutal rule of the East German regime.

The film connects the destiny of the character with that of a country through the symbolic narration. There are many metaphors of "two Germanys" shown in the film, which extended to the figures of "father" (West Germany) and "mother" (East Germany). The image of the characters signifies the purpose of the film narrative, showing Christine's own redemption, Alex's release of Ostalgie, and the final acceptance of the new Germany.

5. Discussion

The film's presentation of life experiences and historical events in the former East Germany solidifies the collective memory associated with Ostalgie and celebrates East German identity. As a tragicomedy about family relationships, *Goodbye, Lenin!* was also popular for its accurate portrayal of life in East Germany during the unification era. Landsberg pointed out that the emotional engagement in the presentation of the film, in this case is the "Ostalgie", enables the audience to establish their personal and sensory connection with the past [9]. From the famous East German landmark Fernsehturm TV tower to "Moca-fix" coffee, "Spreewaldgurken" pickles and even the bad-quality plastic baby diapers, fragmented everyday life in East Germany is faithfully recreated by Alex's effort while hiding the truth from his mother. In addition, the depiction of the political movement that erupted in the fall of 1989 and the turmoil of the rapid transition to capitalism emphasized the celebration and consolidation of East Germany's collective memory. Political upheavals provided the conditions for the reconstruction of the collective narrative of East Germans, and in turn strengthened and renewed the collective identity [11]. This kind of visual reproduction of the life experience of East Germany connects the personal biography of the audience with the passing time and the East German era, and encourages the identification of various forms of solidarity and collective memory [5].

Secondly, Alex's childhood enthusiasm towards the 1978 space program provides a more tangible symbol of Ostalgie. As Boyer pointed out, the core of Ostalgie nostalgia is the yearning for youth and the loss of the destruction of the socialist utopian fantasy, therefore the narrative of the space program can be understood as a more heroic and personal Ostalgie practice taken by Alex [6]. When Alex travels to West Germany in search of his father, he dramatically encounters a taxi driver who looks

like his space hero, Jähn, and therefore started setting off his space program's metonymy for the status of the "two Germanys": "It's like we're traveling through an infinite universe... It's flanked by unknown galaxies with different ways of life". After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Alex asked the taxi driver to play Jähn as the new head of state of the GDR to speak in a fake documentary, claiming that the fall of the Berlin Wall declared the final victory of socialism (which his mother believed in) over capitalism, and sent her ashes into the sky with his rocket model after her death. Space hero Sigmund Jähn and his 1978 space program accompany Alex like a shadow from childhood, and serve as a "romanticized and ambiguous glory" to witness his growth, and marks the end of Alex's childish attachment to the past [12]. In the film, like the "better but never existed" East Germany that Alex contrived for his mother in his own apartment, the real Jähn never appears: Alex creates a meaning framework for his nostalgia, dramatizing his "increasingly fluid and unnamed social life" [13].

Although Becker himself repeatedly emphasizes that *Goodbye, Lenin!* mainly focuses on family relations rather than political and political issues, but the narrative mode of Lenin still serves the western discourse system and thus strengthens the Western hegemony [2]. Although the film celebrates the collective memory of East Germans about their collective experience, it still depicts the East German regime as a police state which "infected with the Stasi virus" in accordance with Western stereotypes [14]. Many scholars and film critics evaluate Christine's image as a "loyal believer of the GDR regime", but from the perspective of the plot design, Christine's suffering and tragedy is actually from the brutal rule of the East German regime: Her husband Robert was excluded and oppressed by the state system because he did not want to join the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED), so he was left no choice but to fled to West Berlin. Fearing that the Stasi would harm the children, Christine desperately chose to stay in GDR and divert her grief by devoting herself to society. In addition, Christine's fatal heart attack was triggered when she witnessed the East German police beating and arresting Alex while he was taking part in the 1989 protest. Therefore, the depiction of Christine is more like a victim of the East German regime rather than a "true communist", and she just happens to be a good old lady who is willing to serve the society.

In addition, the film connects the fate of individuals with the fate of the country through its semiotic depiction of the characters: Alex's mother Christine is closely connected with the East Germany romanticized by his son's white lies, while Alex's father, who is absent in his growth, becomes the symbol of the Westernized new Germany [8]. Christine's confession also helped her to redeem herself from the past, and eventually rehabilitated the "father figure" from the negative impression caused by the long-term absence and misunderstanding: In Alex's image, the defector father is a lecherous, fat and depraved old man, but after his mother confesses and reunites with his father, Alex finally accepts and forgives him. With memories and nostalgia for the GDR, Alex accepted and welcomed the federal Germany from the other side of the Berlin Wall. Although the symbols "father" and "mother" are linked and romanticized in the plot by Alex's infatuation with the space program, Alex's choice to make Jähn the new leader of the GDR in his fantasy becomes the expression of breaking away from the Ostalgie attachment and embracing the reality of the "new Germany". The narrative *Goodbye, Lenin!* goes beyond simple nostalgia, and becomes the mixture of both "Nostalgia" and "Redemption" in the Western discourse system as described by Enns: while demonstrating Ostalgie, it also expresses political criticism towards the East German regime, as well as showing acceptance and hope for the future of the reunified Germany [7].

6. Conclusion

This paper investigates the plot design and characterization of German film *Goodbye, Lenin!*, and also explores its presentation of Ostalgie and the history of German reunification as a tragicomedy. Through the precise portrayal of iconic historical events and memories of life in East Germany, the film inspires emotional resonance among audiences from the former East Germany and consolidates

their collective identity. As the representation of Ostalgie, the protagonist Alex not only materially constructed a space filled with nostalgia for his beloved mother, but also demonstrated the spiritual influence of Ostalgie through a series of "space mania" practices including shooting fake news program. However, the narrative mode of the film is still based on the "Western" discourse system, depicting Ostalgie as a temporary and naive attachment to past life experiences and memories. Therefore, the film's presentation of Ostalgie only stays on its material causes while stop exploring the deeper social reasons: for example, large-scale unemployment and social problems caused by economic transformation and politic-led currency exchange, or the rejection of East German identity by mass culture along with the residual Cold War mentality. While the film's Alex and Lara embrace the promise of a unified Germany, the problems faced by the older generation of East Germans, represented by Mr. Ganske and the school principal, are obscured by the fireworks that celebrate reunification. In general, 'Goodbye, Lenin!' not only present Ostalgie for the East German audiences and held a decent funeral for the German Democratic Republic, but also successfully use the family narrative to arise the emotion of the audiences, spreading the stories of East Germany and Ostalgie to West Germany and even the world, and thus awaken people's awareness of the East German Identity. However, the film is also limited by its western narrative framework and makes it a compromised product. Although it celebrates the identity of East Germany, it does not further develop the exclusivity and social significance of such identity represented by Ostalgie. Instead, it vaguely calls on people to accept the future represented by "unified Germany".

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