A sensitive portrayal of East Germany's collapse

Good Bye Lenin—a film by Wolfgang Becker

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Good Bye Lenin successfully mixes comedy and tragedy, disappointment and joy, despair and hope. Set against the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the film extracts much humour from the language and ways of the (rapidly disappearing) German Democratic Republic (GDR—East Germany). It is, however, essentially a story about the strong bonds of love that bind parents and their children—and in this case, particularly, the love of a son for his dying mother.

The story unfolds in the year following the collapse of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. Twenty-year-old Alexander Kerner (re)constructs the GDR in one room of his family's modest apartment in East Berlin.

His mother had suffered a heart attack eight months earlier and, lying in a coma in her hospital bed, experienced nothing of the tumultuous events of 1989-1990. While she lies oblivious, the country she had known all her life is being swallowed up by West Germany.

When she regains consciousness, the prognosis is grim. The doctor does not put her chances of survival beyond a few weeks. Alex is told that he must avoid subjecting his mother to even the slightest excitement, as this could prove fatal. He decides it would be kinder for her to remain ignorant of the realities of a vanishing GDR. But like all deceits, the longer it continues the more difficult it is to maintain.

The central characters are drawn with delicate strokes. In several reviews, the mother is depicted as a "hard-line communist," or more correctly an unswerving supporter of the Stalinist regime in East Berlin. Nothing could be farther from the truth and the film would not be so funny, nor elicit such a sympathetic response from audiences, if that were the case.

In an interview on the *Good Bye Lenin* web site [http://www.good-bye-lenin.de], Katrin Sass, who plays Christiane Kerner, the mother, says her character "is certainly not a staunch comrade. Rather, you can definitely understand her demeanour, on the one hand believing in socialism, on the other hand criticising the system in her own way."

In a later scene, Christiane's former boss describes her as "too idealistic," which in the GDR usually connoted someone who was not prepared to swallow the twists and turns of the official party line.

In the 1970s Christiane goes into a deep depression when it appears her husband has "run away" to the West. In a scene that is then echoed later in the film, Alex visits her in hospital. "Come back, mama, we miss you," the boy pleads with his unspeaking mother.

When she emerges from her depression and comes home, Alex (in a voiceover) recalls that they no longer talk about their father. With discernible irony, he adds, mother was now "married to our socialist fatherland. Which meant she had more time for us"—Alex and his older sister Ariane. As well as devoting herself to her children and the "Pioneers" (a children's organisation), Christiane composes acerbic letters of complaint about shoddy East German goods for her friends and colleagues.

The action cuts to October 1989 and the festivities being held in East Berlin to mark the 40th anniversary of the founding of the GDR. Christiane has been invited to the official celebrations and says she wouldn't mind going, "to have a look at Gorby" (Gorbachev). Alex is dismissive, saying it will only be the same old faces. His mother angrily retorts, "Well, what are you going to do, just run away?"—the implication being to the West.

Somewhat accidentally, Alex ends up on a demonstration against the regime. The protesters are shouting "Gorby," "Press Freedom" and "No violence." On her way to the ceremony, Christiane witnesses the Stasi (secret police) beating up some of the demonstrators. With a look of utter perplexity she shouts, "Stop it!" When she sees Alex being led away by a police officer she collapses.

What emerges from the charade that Alex decides to play on his mother—for the best of intentions—is by turns full of humour and pathos.

Lying on her old bed, Christiane is surrounded by the utilitarian East German furniture that has been recovered from the dump. One of the first things Alex and his sister had done, like many East Germans, was to throw out their old "gear," replacing it all with previously unavailable—and in their eyes, more glamorous—West German products. Along with the furniture, also goes the unfashionable East German clothing. But now they have to dress up in their old clothes again whenever they go into their mother's bedroom.

One day, Christiane asks Alex for some Spreewald pickles, her favourite. Unfortunately, the shops have also got rid of their East German products. As he walks round the supermarket all Alex can

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see are jars and jars of pickles from Holland. In order to satisfy his mother's request, he goes rummaging in the dump outside their apartment block, looking for empty Spreewald pickle jars he can refill and pass off as the East German product. His neighbour, Herr Ganske, seeing him rooting through the dump comments, "They have reduced us to this!"

One of the particularly humorous elements in the film is the construction of fake East German TV broadcasts that Alex and his new friend and colleague Denis fashion in order to explain away the unsettling events Christiane keeps witnessing. As, for example, when she spots a massive Coca-Cola banner being unfurled on a neighbouring apartment block. The fake TV broadcasts well mimic the style and language of the official state newscasts of *Aktuelle Kamera*.

In the bogus broadcast Alex and Denis concoct, Coca-Cola—unavailable in East Germany—admits it has stolen the formula for the drink from the GDR! But Alex has to change the subject rapidly when his mother spots the fatal flaw, and asks, "Wasn't Coca-Cola invented before the war?"

Instead of simply stringing together a series of "Ossi" (slang term for East German) jokes and going for an easy belly laugh, the film plays it straight, allowing the humour to develop out of the dilemmas in which Alex and the other characters finds themselves, in trying to maintain their fictional GDR. It is also a strength of the movie that the humour is not all directed against the "Ossis." The "Wessis" (West Germans) and their society also come in for a dose of comedic criticism.

Alex's sister, Ariane, drops out of college to go to work for a fast-food chain in West Berlin. Now instead of studying for a degree she is trained to deliver the company farewell while smiling warmly, "Thank you for choosing Burger King!" This line she repeats parrot-fashion, even when she suddenly realises that the customer who has just picked up an order is her long lost father.

As the pretence continues Alex finds that "the GDR I was creating for my mother, was more like the GDR I would have wished." In order to explain the sudden appearance of so many West Germans outside their apartment block, Alex and Denis fashion another TV broadcast in which the newcomers—repelled by the rise of neo-Nazi parties in the West—are seeking refuge in the East.

Finally, Alex decides to put an end to the charade and celebrate the end of his version of the GDR "with dignity."

Alex's boyhood hero was the cosmonaut Sigmund Jähn, the first East German to go into space, in a joint mission with the Soviet Union. Alex imagines the experience of being in space, looking down upon the earth, as being transformative—showing up the futility of national divisions, and particularly that of trying to preserve "our small country."

This provides for one of the most touching scenes. Christiane lies dying and Alex, hoping to ease her passing, stages his final pretence—a fake broadcast in which Jähn, now installed as the president of the GDR, addresses his fellow East German citizens: "Socialism isn't walling yourself in, but going outward to others. For this reason I am opening up the borders of the GDR. Those coming may want to stay if they are looking for an alternative to capitalism, consumerism and the dog-eat-dog society in the West."

The film has been a smash hit in Germany. It won nine prizes at this year's German Film Awards, including best film, best director and best actor, for Daniel Brühl, who plays Alex. The movie also received two prizes awarded by the public—best German film and best actor of 2003, again for Brühl. It has found a massive cinema audience in both eastern and western Germany, playing to over 6 million moviegoers.

What can explain the popularity of the film?

Although the action is set against the most tumultuous events in recent German history—and this provides the vehicle for much of the comedy—the story is essentially a very human one.

The filmgoer can empathise with the dilemma that Alex faces—his mother is dangerously ill, and will die if she is subject to the slightest shock. In this situation, what child would not do everything to try to look after his or her mother? The comedy that arises from the pretence Alex develops, trying to protect his mother, is continually punctured by the tragedy of her plight.

In my opinion, what makes the film even more enjoyable is the portrayal of East German society the characters provide. This is not completely "black and white"—West good, East bad.

The film certainly pokes fun at the GDR, but those who lived under the Stalinist regime in East Berlin are shown, to some extent, as multifaceted personalities. Christiane believes in socialism—which for her means defending the little person, improving the lot of ordinary people, especially children—but she is far from being a mindless follower of the bureaucracy. Her former boss, who has become an alcoholic after losing his job as headmaster at the school where Christiane worked, tells Alex, "We were all valuable people."

Alex displays some of the traits of a "typical" 20-year-old. He is unsure of what life is going to bring him, the uncertainties of becoming an adult, looking for his first real romance. He is initially somewhat dismissive of his mother's ideals, but comes to appreciate them, in fashioning his own version of the country he grew up in, and which he now realises has disappeared.

The characters who do not share as much screen time as the main protagonists also enrich the film by the shades they bring to the story. For example, Alex and Ariane's father, Robert, whom they believed had "run away" to the West. When Alex goes to find him, to tell him Christiane is dying, we see his affluent house in West Berlin. Alex finds his stepbrother and stepsister watching "The Sandman," an East German children's TV show that Alex had also loved as a child.

The director, Wolfgang Becker, and writer Bernd Lichtenberg were both born in West Germany. It is to their credit that they have been able to fashion a story set in East Germany that is both funny and moving, without resorting to simplistic caricatures, or sickly melodrama.

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