

GFL

German as a foreign language

Sonnenallee – ‘Ostalgie’ as a Comical Conspiracy

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ISSN 1470 – 9570

***Sonnenallee* – ‘Ostalgie’ as a Comical Conspiracy**

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This paper attempts to answer questions around the reception of *Sonnenallee*. Why was it the first (and to date last) film made by East Germans about the GDR that performed remarkably well at the box office and, exceptionally, appealed to both West German and East German viewers? Does this first ever *Mauerkomödie* represent a ‘trivialization’ of an oppressive regime as some critics claimed? Or is it merely an example of light entertainment that capitalizes on the current *Ostalgiewelle* amongst East Germans (who made up two thirds of the film’s audience)? This paper discusses these questions, arguing that the humour used in *Sonnenallee* is of such a complex and ambiguous nature that it can be read on a ‘surface level’ – resulting in belly-laughs or, conversely, offence – whilst simultaneously offering different points of entry to East German viewers with a deeper level of knowledge – resulting in a ‘comical conspiracy’.

1. Look back in anger or look back with laughter?

Das Versprechen (1995, directed by Margarete von Trotta, co-scripted by Peter Schneider) and *Sonnenallee* (1999, directed by Leander Haußmann, co-scripted with Thomas Brussig) are amongst the very few post-unification films to date with the GDR as their diegetic focus.¹ Both *Das Versprechen* and *Sonnenallee* have contributed to an ongoing debate in unified Germany about the legacy of the now extinct state and about its role in the construction of a new national identity. However, this is where the similarities end. In fact, the two films, whilst both look back at the East German past, occupy positions at the opposite ends of the spectrum.

Das Versprechen, von Trotta’s earlier West German perspective, could be called a ‘look back in anger’. The film emphasizes the absence of civil liberties in the GDR, focusing on divided families, interrupted relationships, government transgressions, and a Stasi environment. It takes a perspective on GDR history which considers East German society

¹ *Good Bye Lenin!* does not strictly fall into the same category as *Das Versprechen* and *Sonnenallee*, as it only briefly touches on the hero’s childhood in the GDR with the main focus on the eight months following unification. *Das Versprechen* spans 28 years of GDR history, from the erection of the Berlin wall in 1961 to its fall in 1989, and *Sonnenallee* is set in the mid-1970s in the GDR.

thoroughly politicized and controlled by the representatives of the ruling party so as to leave no space for a normal private life. Stuart Taberner has argued that von Trotta's rendering of life in the GDR, of lost opportunities and broken promises, was prompted by the disappointment felt by many West German leftist intellectuals like von Trotta at the collapse of the utopian dream of a better (non-capitalist) Germany. Implicitly looking to attribute responsibility for this loss, the makers of *Das Versprechen*, Taberner maintains, blame it mostly on the GDR regime but also on the East German people (Taberner 2000: 158). In this version of the past, East Germans such as the male protagonist Konrad in *Das Versprechen* had let themselves be bullied into submission, ended up morally compromised and, in resigned bitterness, withdrew into their private niches. Von Trotta's film is symptomatic of the Western German post-unification discourse about the 'second dictatorship' on German soil, re-creating the GDR as an Orwellian terror regime. Mostly shot at night or in confined spaces with low key lighting, *Das Versprechen* paints a dark and joyless picture of life in East Germany, a life in which the sun literally did not shine at all.

By contrast, *Sonnenallee* insists that there was also a sunny side to life on the 'other' side of the wall – as suggested by the film's location and title.² The film performed exceptionally well at domestic box offices; in fact it was the most successful German feature of 1999. This is all the more remarkable as most previous eastern-made unification films had performed poorly or even flopped.³

² A street with this name does exist in Berlin. It used to be split by the wall with its shorter end in the GDR. Hence, the title of Thomas Brussig's novel *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* (2001).

³ *Das Versprechen*, which had had a respectable budget and was marketed as an international art house film by a well-known director, also did not turn out to be a major box office hit. See Leonie Naughton for a detailed account of marketing, distribution and reception of post-unification films about East Germany (2002: 237). *Sonnenallee* was produced by the West German company Boje Buck and Sat 1 in co-production with the eastern-oriented Ö-Film Produktion and distributed by the West German Delphi Film.

2. *Sonnenallee* as a postmodern pastiche

Sonnenallee remains to date the only post-*Wende* film made by East Germans about East Germany that has appealed to audiences in both East and West.⁴ This is partly due to the fact that *Sonnenallee* works as a postmodern pastiche which plays with a number of universally popular genres: from the coming-of-age drama and teenage romantic comedy to cabaret, musical revue, television sitcom and burlesque. The plot of the film, orchestrated in a series of anecdotal vignettes tied together by a pop/rock soundtrack, follows Micha and his friends during a decisive time in their lives, the period between school and army conscription or university. In its main theme the film draws on a number of 1970s Western coming-of-age comedies (the male variety), in which the hero's main goal is to make love to the girl of his dreams, like for example Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show* (1971) and George Lukas's *American Graffiti* (1973).

Moreover, the portrayal of women in Micha's life owes more to Western comedy conventions than to the traditions of East German cinema which depicted female characters as 'ordinary' women in everyday, often work-related contexts (see Rinke 1999). Miriam, the object of Micha's desire, is highly glamorized in her first appearance on screen (filmed in slow motion while the soundtrack switches to an Elvis-like voice crooning 'Stay!' and with back lighting that gives her long blond hair a halo-like glow).⁵ The way in which she manages to bring the local traffic (men) to a halt recalls Federico Fellini's 1970s nostalgic comedy *Amarcord* (1973) which also evokes adolescence (during Mussolini's 1930s Italy) in an often grotesque yet affectionate fashion. Equally, the over-the-top portrait of Micha's mother, a fussing and perpetually worried *Hausfrau*, is in crass contrast to the depiction of (working) mothers in GDR cinema.⁶ Micha's chaotic, close-knit, interfering but loving

⁴ However, whilst it did very well at film festivals abroad it was not taken up by UK distributors who felt that non-German viewers would not be able to relate to the film's specific references to GDR culture and history.

⁵ The song captures the mood of the period but was actually specially composed for *Sonnenallee* by Steven Keusch (lyrics by Ihrens, 1999)

⁶ The majority of women on DEFA screens were working mothers with children, more often single than married. In 46 years of East German feature film production, only a handful of full-time housewives were ever portrayed, suggesting that this way of life was socially unacceptable (Rinke 1999: 183).

family has more in common with Western-style television sitcoms or Woody Allan's comedies. In fact, according to Brussig, Woody Allan's nostalgic recollection of episodes from his childhood in *Radio Days* (1987) served as the initial inspiration for *Sonnenallee* (Maischberger). However, in marked difference to Brussig's concept and his post-production novel (which is set in the 1980s and ends with the opening of the wall), Haußmann decided to set the film in the 1970s (complete with a soundtrack of 70s oldies and 70s retro fashion). This period, especially its fashion and music, is currently enjoying a revival in both East and West.⁷

The unusual success with West German audiences of a film by East Germans about East Germans can partly be explained by these generic and aesthetic choices: the film tells a universal story, dealing with the memory of growing up, of family life, of intense romantic yearnings and writing diaries. The fact that this childhood took place in the GDR past is thus 'normalized' through the currently fashionable nostalgic retro-appeal of the 1970s.

Haußmann has described the 1970s as the decade that somehow typified the GDR (Maischberger) and this was in fact the decade during which the director was an adolescent himself. Hence, on one level, *Sonnenallee* can be read as Haußmann's declaration of love to his own youth in the GDR. The film concludes with Micha's voice-over summing up: "Das war die schönste Zeit meines Lebens, weil ich war jung und verliebt", the message being that life for East German teenage boys whose main preoccupations were girls, music, looking cool, having fun and rebelling against authority was not that much different from that of adolescents in the West.

On another level, the film presents a very specific memory, recreating the feel, the urban setting and the sounds of an East Berlin neighbourhood, a period and a milieu that has been irretrievably lost. In the years prior to the release of *Sonnenallee*, virtually all aspects of specific GDR experiences, ranging from schooling to culture and mass communication, had been denounced as contaminated by the ideology of a corrupt dictatorship and replaced by Western practices. The East Germans saw their shops taken over, their streets renamed and their welfare system disappear. As a result the majority of East Germans felt – and many

⁷ Significantly *Das Versprechen* excludes this period.

still feel – treated as second-class citizens.⁸ Many have responded to this tendency to erase their past – and by implication their sense of identity – with *Ostalgie*. As a result of radical social change, they have looked for a means of establishing some continuity in their lives by remembering positively aspects of their personal biography, their lived experiences, their past traditions and values. This so-called *Ostalgiewelle* is expressed in a preference for East German over West German products, rediscovering *Ostsymbole* (such as the flag and the *Ampelmännchen*) and a new *Erinnerungskultur* as manifested most notably in the literature by young East German authors looking back at their childhood in the GDR.⁹ The East German journalist and song-writer ‘Marion’ in Kuczinsky’s collection of interviews claims: “Bei uns in der DDR war es einfach herzlicher. Da war nicht jeder des anderen Konkurrent. Wir haben uns nicht gegenseitig in den Dreck getreten. Das gab es hier und da auch mal, aber es war einfach wärmer, selbst wenn es Spitzel gab. Es gab eben beides” (2002: 142).

3. Celebrating East German cultural heritage

The film not only defends East Germans’ own recollections of their past in the GDR against obliteration by the dominant Western culture, *Sonnenalle* also celebrates a distinct part of the East German heritage through its homage to DEFA (Deutsche Film AG), the national film production company of the GDR. This defies the prejudice held by many West Germans that virtually nothing of the legacy of the ‘second dictatorship’ is worth remembering or preserving. The celebration of this specifically East German visual cultural heritage is all the more poignant, as the closure of the DEFA studios by the West in 1992,

⁸ Only 32% of all East Germans regard themselves as ‘Germans’, 71% feel treated as second-class citizens in the new Federal Republic, 68% emphasize their identity not as Germans but as *Ostdeutsche* or prioritize their belonging to one of the new *Bundesländer* (Emnid 1999). See also Szejnmann (2004).

⁹ See for example the anthology edited by Koch (2002).

deprived German filmmakers from the East of a wider forum in which to express their own feelings about the past in the GDR and the present in unified Germany.¹⁰

The allusions to DEFA range from visual in-jokes such as the image of the area warden being a closet film buff, as he is shown at night in the privacy of his office engrossed in the *Filmspiegel*, a popular DEFA film fan magazine, to staged revivals of the DEFA *Indianerfilme*. As Gerd Gemünden (2001) shows, these films offered a strong potential for identification for East Germans at the time, with similarities being constructed between the native Indians fighting the white American invaders and the small socialist GDR struggling against Western capitalist imperialism. The victorious native Indian hero who was played by the most popular actor in the GDR, Gojko Mitic, is alluded to twice in *Sonnenallee*: once during the opening sequence on a poster in Micha's room and later in a look-alike impersonation as Micha's drug-induced hallucination at a party. As Micha stumbles into the set of a black and white *Indianerfilm*, its hero, in full native costume and holding his horse by the reins, encourages Micha in his pursuit of Miriam: "Mach sie dir zur Squaw!". This moment of attempted macho bonding is comically deflated by the Indian's voice being distorted in Micha's hallucinating mind and Micha collapsing in a gross-grotesque fashion smearing chocolate all over Miriam's clothes. For East German viewers, this comical allusion to one of their most beloved DEFA heroes, parodying his role as the he-man noble savage, would have produced a moment of *jouissance* of recognition, bringing back memories of many DEFA *Indianerfilme* watched in the 1960s and 70s. On the surface level, this scene functions in a potentially amusing fashion for Western audiences, deriving its comedy from the incongruity of time and space, i.e. a native Indian turning up at a teenage party in East Berlin.

On a deeper satirical level, arguably only accessible to East Germans, the lot of the native Indian underdog can now be compared to the lot of the *Ossis* who have also, since unification, been struggling to defend their sense of dignity and cultural identity against the

¹⁰ The percentage of East Germans in leading positions in the media is a mere 6%: 'Es gibt in den neuen Bundesländern nur eine schwache innergesellschaftliche, öffentliche Kommunikation mit Ausstrahlung und Einfluss auf die gesamtdeutsche Bundesrepublik, insbesondere auf ihre westlichen Teil' (Reißig 1999). Reißig's figures are based on statistical data obtained by ALLBUS, Datenreport, 1997 and 1999; and Sozialreport, 1997 and 1999, Berlin.

superior power of the *Wessi* colonizers. And like the Indians living in reservations today, selling souvenirs of their extinct culture to whites, there is a growing demand for memorabilia of the extinct East German state, manifest in GDR theme parks and consumer goods – not just by nostalgic East Germans but also by West German entrepreneurs and consumers.¹¹

Moreover, homage is explicitly paid to DEFA in references to *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (Ulrich Plenzdorf and Heiner Carow 1973), the most popular DEFA film of all time. The suggestive lyrics of the theme song ‘Geh zu ihr und lass deinen Drachen steigen!’ are heard at a crucial moment – a tongue-in-cheek intertextual encouragement for Micha when he sets out to conquer Miriam’s heart. The musical reference is comically enforced by the surprise cameo appearance of Winfred Glazeder, *Paul und Paula*’s lead actor, now thirty years older, as Miriam’s neighbour. He quotes Paul’s/his famous line from the earlier film’s finale: “Na, vielleicht ‘n Beilchen gefällig?”. As Miriam’s door is not locked, his offer of an axe does not make sense here except as a comical reference to the passionate climax of the earlier DEFA film. Micha shows no surprise at this incongruous behaviour but declines with a knowing glance at the camera – sharing a moment of recognition with the East German spectator.

The escapist and breathtaking *amour fou* of Paul and Paula did not have a chance of survival within the real existing socialism of 1973, and Paula had to die in childbirth leaving Paul to raise their children on his own. However, the makers of *Sonnenallee* changed this melodramatic ending into a happy one: we can now see a sign with both names on the door behind Glazeder indicating that Paula is living happily ever after with Paul. The resurrection of Paula could be read as a comical reinvention of the past in the sense of ironical cinematic *Ostalgie*: if, with hindsight, life under socialism does not seem to have been all that bad, the misfit and rebel Paula did not have to be sacrificed. Arguably, it also sends out a conspiratorial message to the East German spectator in unified Germany: the fiercely independent, defiant spirit of the underdog lives on! *Die Legende von Paul und*

¹¹ A market has since emerged for GDR memorabilia on which entrepreneurs from both east and west have capitalized, see for example the website Goehler’s devOSSionalien (www.ostalgie-museum.de).

the GDR, crippled by decades of dictatorship, had become socially dysfunctional.¹³ Thomas Brussig set out to counter such representations of East Germans then and now: “Das ist eben nicht ein DDR-Film wie ‚Nikolaikirche‘, hier die Bürgerrechtler mit den Kerzen, dort die bösen Funktionäre. Und auch nicht wie ‚Das Versprechen‘, wo die Klischees so geballt auftreten” (Maischberger).

Sonnenallee paints a picture of socialist society at grass roots level as caring, intimate and community oriented, thus stressing a “dimension of remembered experience in the GDR that has been erased by discourses on the GDR-dictatorship” (Cafferty 2000: 258). As a result, the film was dismissed by some as part of the *Ostalgiewelle*, as a cheap pandering to East Germans’ misplaced sentimentality.¹⁴ Moreover, the film was attacked for its alleged trivialization of the oppressive GDR dictatorship – which was not perceived as a suitable subject for comedy. (Incidentally, there was even a law suit filed against the filmmakers by Help e.V., an organization representing the victims of the Wall on account of the fact that it made light of their sufferings.)

However, *Sonnenallee* does not just nostalgically evoke a bygone era, rather it stages the memory of it with self-conscious irony, addressing *Ostalgie* itself in an ambiguous fashion. In this ‘performance of *Ostalgie*’, as Paul Cook calls it, the feeling of nostalgia for aspects of the East German past is simultaneously celebrated and subverted through the ironic use of Micha’s voice-over narration, the musical soundtrack and visual excess (Cooke 2003). The careful recreation of the everyday look of the GDR down to the smallest detail might have added a touch of exoticism for the Western viewer, but resulted in nostalgic recognition – at once wistful and amused – for East Germans. As Katharina Thalbach, who

¹³ This view has been shared by other public figures such as the psychologist Joachim Maaz in his widely debated books *Der Gefühlsstau* (1990), *Einheit beginnt zu zweit* (1991), *Das gestürzte Volk* (1991), and *Die Enttäuschung* (1991) and Jutta Limbach, the head of the constitutional court, who claimed in her 1999 speech on the 50th anniversary of the German constitution that the East Germans were not yet ‘demokratiefähig’.

¹⁴ However, as recent surveys have shown, the longing by some East Germans for aspects of their past lives is not so much based on any real desire to ‘have the Wall back’, but is rather an expression of their increasing disillusionment with the present in a unified Germany and the fear of the loss of their own identity. 75-80% of East Germans have consistently responded positively to German unity in representative surveys since 1990 (Reißig 1999, findings based on data obtained by ALLBUS, Datenreport, 1997 and 1999; and Sozialreport, 1997 and 1999, Berlin).

plays Micha's mother, says in an interview: "Es ist eine Begegnung mit zu Hause ... Von der Cremebüchse angefangen bis zur Straße, die dann extra gebaut wurde für Sonnenallee, weht mich einfach meine Kindheit, meine Jugend, mein zu Hause an".¹⁵

At the same time, the presentation of history in *Sonnenallee* is framed by scenes which draw attention to its anachronism and its artificiality. The film's opening is set in post-unification Germany with an unemployed man dressing up as a GDR officer and going 'back in time' into a game-like virtual reality show; and it concludes with a choreographed dance number moving forward as if to challenge the barrier of the Wall (which in reality did not come down until 1989) after which the film's hero, Micha, leaves the diegetic world and walks towards the camera. These sequences deliberately foreground the stage-like nature of the set and the play-acting of the characters, who don 'authentic' costumes for a role, jump unharmed from a second floor balcony, and dance to off-screen music. The emphasis on the artificiality of *Sonnenallee* suggests that the makers deliberately offer their account of the GDR as an embellished nostalgic fantasy, 'coloured' by the sunny disposition of youth and by the rose-tinted spectacles of being in love.

Sonnenallee was shot almost entirely at the Babelsberg studios in East Berlin and no effort is made to conceal its studio look: "Wenn man genauer hinguckt, wird man sehen, daß der Film vollkommen unrealistisch ist. Das Dekor, die Straße – das sieht alles gebaut aus. So soll es sein" (Haußmann 1999b: 12). The well-chosen placement of GDR products – which are currently traded as memorabilia – invites East German viewers to indulge in genuine reminiscing but at the same time mocks this feeling of *Ostalgie*. The film paints an affectionate picture of Micha's eccentric family and their enthusiastic involvement in each others' affairs. However, it also exaggerates their 'living in each others' pockets' by using predominantly tight framing to depict the busy family members together, contained in a cramped space and constantly talking over each other. One of the film's hilarious highlights, for example, is a bathroom sequence, in which Micha practises his speech for the meeting of the FDJ ('Freie Deutsche Jugend') in front of the mirror while his sister, inspired by her current actor boyfriend, recites dramatic lines from *Dantons Tod* in the bathtub (crying 'Sterben! Sterben!'), upon which Micha's parents and uncle barge into the

¹⁵ In a clip on the *Sonnenallee* homepage.

small room offering their own comments all at once. Both this sequence and the scenes in which Micha’s father struggles to unfold a space-saving multi-functional table in the cramped living room, or when the whole family in a grotesque close-up admire the newly acquired telephone, are enjoyable moments of farcical humour and slap-stick entertainment. However, for East German viewers, these images will also result in amused recognition of the lack of space, the social control and the more basic living conditions they had to bear under socialism.

5. East Germans in exile

Many East Germans today not only feel treated as second-class citizens but also like immigrants or exiled people in the new unified Germany (see Staudt 2003). *Sonnenallee* alludes to their nostalgic mourning for a lost (now extinct) homeland, which is part of the *Ostalgiewelle*, by subverting potential sentimentality with self-irony, for example, in a sequence in which Micha’s friend Mario takes his girlfriend on a motorbike ride through the beautiful Mecklenburg countryside.¹⁶ It invites feelings of pride in these regions of unspoilt East German *Heimat*, underscored by the soundtrack playing Woody Guthrie’s famous 1944 folk song ‘This land is your land, this land is my land...’. Yet, the images of natural beauty and their allusions to the road movie genre with its celebration of boundless freedom are then deflated by Micha’s cynical voice-over comment: “Das Land kam ihnen so groß vor. Das kann aber auch daran gelegen haben, daß ihr Moped so langsam war”. The East German viewers’ potential nostalgia for an unspoilt and idyllic pre-unification ‘Heimat’ is subverted by an implicit reminder of the country’s provinciality and its travel restrictions.

In a similarly ambiguous fashion, *Sonnenallee* plays with the nostalgia for a lost homeland by referring to the concept of ‘unsere sozialistische Heimat’. The GDR *Kulturpolitisches Wörterbuch* of 1978 states:

¹⁶ This is a visual reference to a well-known DEFA film *Unser kurzes Leben* (Lothar Warneke 1981) based on Brigitte Reimann’s bestselling novel *Franziska Linkerhand*.

Obermeister, Soli Beitrag). Whilst the film comedy works for Western viewers perhaps primarily on the level of the sitcom and slapstick humour, the film offers an extra dimension to the East Germans with ‘special competence’ to pick up nuances which only they are able to appreciate fully. As in good cabaret, the satire in *Sonnenallee* thus plays to a specific and privileged sense of an East German group identity, with in-jokes as signifiers of group belonging and differentiation from those who do not share their superior knowledge.

Moreover, the self-reflective tongue-in-cheek trip down memory lane is constantly related to post-*Wende* East-West relations, including well-known stereotypes of *Wessis* and *Ossis*. The *Wessis*, represented by uncle Heinz and by Micha’s adolescent rival, fit the stereotypes of the ignorant, patronizing *Besserwessi* (uncle Heinz) and the arrogant, pushy con-artist (Micha’s rival).¹⁸ Notably however, the most common and persistent post-*Wende* stereotype of the East German, the *Jammerossi*, is missing completely in *Sonnenallee*.¹⁹ Rather than complain, the East Germans depicted in the film show initiative and resourcefulness in the face of adversity, i.e. the restrictions imposed by the state. For example, Micha’s father cheats the authorities by claiming disability in order to get a telephone.²⁰ Micha’s mother proves herself perfectly capable of outwitting the border guard by posing as the West German pensioner whose passport she has found.²¹ The East Germans depicted in *Sonnenallee* are not shown to be timid and oppressed but cunning and irreverent towards the authorities, outwitting these at their own game, displaying as Gunnar Decker calls it “ein Stück Spielkultur mit der Macht” (Decker 2000: 276).

¹⁸ At the time of the film’s release the antagonistic stereotypes East Germans had of *Wessis* were as strong as if not even more pronounced than they had been during GDR times. See Reißig (1999).

¹⁹ As Hodgin (2004) points out, *Good Bye Lenin!* does confirm this stereotype of the winging *Ossi* through the portrayal of Alex’s neighbours, even though the discourse about the *Jammerossi* did not emerge until a few years after this film is set.

²⁰ Private telephones were hard to obtain in the GDR.

²¹ She would have outwitted the border guard, who ushers her on, but decides to stay in the East out of love for her husband and family – perhaps refuting the West German assumption that all GDR citizens were desperate to escape from their deprived lives by fleeing to the West.

Moreover, they positively re-appropriate some of the negative post-*Wende* stereotypes of the East Germans.²² In *Sonnenallee* one of these West German stereotypes, that of the *Ossi* as naive and *unmündig*, is addressed and comically subverted in a number of sequences.²³ East German characters are shown to play on their alleged naivety turning it to their advantage: the youngest gang member, Wuschel, avoids a penalty for playing a banned pop song by claiming he cannot understand the English lyrics as they only learn Russian at school. Or Micha, when about to be punished at school, ‘naively’ suggests that he could redeem himself with a *selbstkritischer Beitrag* at the next FDJ meeting, choosing his own form of ‘punishment’ in order to turn it to his advantage by impressing Miriam at the meeting. This take on GDR citizens at grass roots level, according to Decker (2000), counters the current discourse of the repressed insecure East German. Implicitly referring to the claims of the psychoanalyst Joachim Maaz, he suggests: “Die im Osten seien eben nie richtig erwachsen geworden und seelisch alle irgendwie krank. *Sonnenallee* schlägt das Klischee souverän aus der Hand. Vielleicht ist Selbstironie ja die höchste Form des Selbstbewußtseins?” (Decker 2000: 278).²⁴

The filmmakers deconstruct the myth of life under socialism as dominated by an omnipotent and all-pervasive state control, oppressing all East Germans on all levels most of the time. Instead they propose an alternative ‘counter’ memory in which the East Germans were not only ingenious and resourceful but also superior to the authorities. Haußmann even goes as far as to claim:

Das Heldenhafte bestand vor allem in der Bewältigung des oft absurden Alltags. Die kleinen Tricks und Eulenspiegelereien, die diese Zeit erträglich und in der Erinnerung vielleicht für viele als schönste in ihrem Leben erscheinen lassen. Fünfundvierzig Jahre hat sich das ganze

²² Hogwood (2000) compares this process with the Jewish sense of humour which can be equally self-deprecating. It is interesting to note in this context that Woody Allan’s *Radio Days* which both celebrates and satirises Jewish family life served as an inspiration for Brussig’s *Sonnenallee* (Maischberger).

²³ For example, an article in *Die Zeit* claims: ‘Schließlich geht es um ein Land, in dem recht eigentlich niemand mündig werden durfte. Was blieb dem Bürger da anderes übrig als die ewige Jugend’ (Peitz, 1999).

²⁴ The title of Kerstin and Gunnar Decker’s book *Gefühlsausbrüche. Und ewig pubertiert der Ostdeutsche* (2000) is a polemical response to Joachim Maaz’s *Gefühlsstau* (1990) which ‘diagnosed’ the East Germans as ‘unmündig’ and pubescent.

aber das muß ich *denen* ja nicht auf die Nase binden". The use of the pronoun 'denen' (them) is again ambiguous here as it refers to both the offending teenagers and ignorant, condescending *Wessis* in general, thus establishing a conspiratorial understanding between the hero and East German viewers.²⁶

7. Welcome to the 'wild East'

Similar to the East German cabaret sketch using the animal metaphor for the *Ossi*, *Sonnenallee* addresses and appropriates Western misconceptions about the GDR as an uncivilized 'wild East'. The film does so by referencing the western genre, starting with its ironic subtitle: 'Once upon a time in the East', a reference to Sergio Leone's 1968 spaghetti western *Once upon the Time in the West*. The film's opening concludes with tumbleweed being blown across the screen while the soundtrack changes from Micha's polka leitmotif to a guitar twang. These visual and musical signifiers connote the desert wilderness in the opening of Wim Wenders's *Paris Texas*, or showdown scenes in spaghetti westerns but are comically incongruous in the urban context of an East Berlin street. Again, this can be read on two levels: as celebrating the teenage boys' sense of life as an adventure at the country's frontier, i.e. the Wall, or as an allusion to the *Wessis'* notion of East Germany as a backwards and primitive 'wild east'.²⁷

The film also plays to the Western prejudice of the materially deprived socialist East. After the fall of the Wall, the western media and some leftist intellectuals, including Otto Schily, suggested that East Germans had not really been angry about their lack of democratic liberties but about their lack of freedom to consume.²⁸ This Western perception of East

²⁶ Reißig (1999) shows that there is an emerging *Wir-Gefühl* and *Wir-Bewusstsein* among East Germans who are focusing on their own achievements as they distance themselves from the public discourses dominated by West German elites in the media and institutions.

²⁷ In this context it is interesting to note that, after unification, the extra money (5000 Euro) received by West German managers who were sent to posts in East Germany after unification was nick-named *Buschgeld*.

²⁸ In March 1990, Otto Schily, when asked why he thought that the majority of East Germans had voted for the CDU, famously pointed a banana at the camera to express his disdain for East German consumerist desires. For an account of the banana and its connotations in the post-unification discourse see Rosenlöcher (1992).

Germans as mindless consumers is ridiculed in a skit in which two of Micha’s family’s guests are shown watching the commercial quiz show *Am laufenden Band* on West German television – we see them sitting on the sofa in hypnotic awe of the parade of goods, continuing to stare even at the blank post-midnight screen. Many Western viewers would perhaps read this gag simply as a comically exaggerated take on a couple of typically backward *Ossis*, ultimately confirming the stereotype.²⁹ The specific resonance of this comic sequence for East Germans would be derived from their recognition of the guests’ strong Saxonian accents which locate them as being from Dresden. These would by no means have been regarded as representative GDR citizens, but rather as the exceptional few who were unable to receive West German television, mocked by the rest of the GDR population as coming from the ‘Tal der der Ahnungslosen’.³⁰

In an even more grotesque spectacle, which sends up the Western misconception of the GDR as an uncivilized country, Micha and Mario perform a double act as third-world beggars for a tourist bus with Western visitors. These actually take their charade seriously: we can see that Micha’s and Mario’s performance is being filmed in black and white from inside the bus and hear a British old lady commenting: “Oh look just like those poor boys we saw in Africa!”. Placed within the post-*Wende* context, the reference to Africa alludes to the colonialism debate and can be read as a side-swipe against the condescending attitude of the ‘*Wessi* colonizers’ in general, and of the West German managerial elite in particular.³¹

²⁹ This stereotype is at the core of many post- *Wende Ossi-Witze* published in books such as Stein (2002). Haußmann recalls: ‘Als wir diesen Film einigen Leuten vorgeführt haben, gab es natürlich einen Unterschied zwischen West- und Ost-Zuschauern: sie lachten an unterschiedlichen Stellen’ (Maischberger).

³⁰ West German television was a daily source of information for virtually all GDR citizens as it was deemed more truthful than the GDR national channels or the ‘Scheiss Ostsender’ as Micha’s father calls them.

³¹ Reißig (1999) points out that the percentage of East Germans in leading positions in the administration, the military and the economy in unified Germany was a shocking 0% nearly ten years after unification.

8. Conclusion

In the concluding sequence of *Sonnenallee*, the viewers hear Micha's voice off commenting: "Glückliche Menschen haben ein schlechtes Gedächtnis und viele gute Erinnerungen". Again here voice-over narration is used as an ironical distancing device. This self-referential remark stresses the subjectivity of the film's sunny representation of the East German past. But, at the same time, it also invites us to accept what we have seen as just as valid a recollection of lived experience as any other – including those dwelling on the darker aspects of life under socialism. While the tumbleweed reappears, the street literally turns into a waste land and the screen, drained of colour, gradually turns to black and white. Only Micha and Wuschel remain, walking out of the set towards the viewer, while the soundtrack switches from Micha's polka leitmotif to the song: "Du hast den Farbfilm vergessen, mein Michael!". This 1974 breakthrough hit for Nina Hagen, a GDR-born rock singer, became a cult classic in the GDR and would be instantly recognizable to East German viewers.

Again, the use of these lyrics at this point in *Sonnenallee* is ambiguous and, I would argue, can work on different levels for East Germans and viewers from the West. The latter might read the reference as meaning that only the prettification of history through the colourful medium of film can transfigure the drabness of life under socialism. Whereas East German viewers might be able to appreciate the lyrics' implied message: memories of bright, happy experiences in the GDR will not be believed by anyone (implicitly referring to West Germans) to be true recollections unless these are reproduced on colour film. This reading seems to be invited especially by the rest of the song's lyrics: "Nun glaubt uns kein Mensch, wie schön's hier war (ha-ha-ha-ha) ... Alles blau und weiß und grün und später nicht mehr wahr!....".³²

Colour and music, so the film's final sequence seems to suggest, not only stand for an embellished fictional reality, for a bright version of the past, but also for 'true' memories of experiences that have little in common with the depressing greyness typically foregrounded in the dominant discourse about life under socialism. Moreover, *Sonnenallee* offers specific

³²The colours refer to the beach in Hiddensee where the song's story is set.

references as points of privileged entry for East Germans inviting a laughter of complicity (Bergson 1956: 64). It is perhaps no surprise then that it has since become a cult film in Eastern parts of Germany not unlike its predecessor *Die Legende von Paul und Paula*.

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Biodata

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