In this essay, I argue cinematic comedy has the potential to convey complex, difficult narratives that may be beyond the reach of self-serious tragedies and melodramas. Our case study will be Good Bye Lenin! (Becker, 2004), a film about the late East Germany (GDR) which narrates the end of the socialist state in a tragicomic mode. In particular, I want to pause over the way the film deploys fetishism and melancholia to switch between temporalities of the too early and the too late. We will come to this in the essay’s second half—but to summarise: what links these two operations is a desire that at once denies and affirms its object, entering into relation with something it otherwise would not have been able to appropriate or enjoy. The “object” in question is the declining GDR state as it moves towards erasure in the German re-unification of 1990. In the essay’s first half, we will note how this film was entangled in a set of debates about the East German past, largely to do with the “truth” of comedic and sentimental representations of that past. These debates concerned affect and what the proper affective orientation should be towards the GDR past—positive or negative, happy or sad, joy or desolation, hope or fear. We will first discuss, briefly, film and affect to orient the final discussion of comedy. I will also provide a quick contextual overview of German cinema at the time of Good Bye Lenin! and the other two films already mentioned. The Lives of Others (Donnersmarck, 2006) will be discussed here because its (director’s) relation to Good Bye Lenin! clarifies the distinction between tragedy and comedy.

As an internationally successful film, *Good Bye Lenin!* brought representations of the former East Germany to new audiences. Within Germany, a revived awareness of the GDR was visible in the cinema five years earlier with the domestic success of *Sonnenallee* (Haußmann, 1999), a comedic teen romance set in 1970s East Berlin. *The Lives of Others* came two years after *Good Bye Lenin!* registering the effect of *Lenin* and *Sonnenallee* on German culture. The popularity of all three films stands as evidence for the moment’s concern with the GDR—and as a reminder of cinema’s effect on memorial processes. *Lives*, however, was an attempt—an Oscar-winning attempt—to correct the apparently charmed image of the GDR propagated by *Lenin* and *Sonnenallee*. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, the director and screenwriter of *The Lives of Others*, positioned himself as a critic of a false, dangerous remembrance. In the publicity materials, Donnersmarck addresses himself to *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye Lenin!* calling them “dangerous” and revisionist, “portraying the GDR as a place of humour and humanity.”3 His film would set memories and history right. Donnersmarck, in other words, promoted his film as a corrective to the popular but apparently troubling revisionist view of fun in the former East: *Lives* was to be the antithesis of these two comedies. Donnersmarck stressed in the marketing and promotional paraphernalia that his was a “truer than facts”4 story, unlike, by implication, the fanciful comedic fabulations of *Lenin* and *Sonnenallee*. Donnersmarck conceived of—or, at least, promoted—his film as a historiographical intervention to correct the popular affective portrait of the GDR.5 This fiction was positioned with the aims of a documentary, but historians questioned Donnersmarck’s strong statements about verisimilitude, authenticity and the historical reality of the GDR in *Lives*: he failed to meet the standards he had set for himself.6 Nevertheless, his comments proposed true/good representations in opposition to the false/bad representations of *Good Bye Lenin!* and *Sonnenallee*.7 In *Lives* we get an abject GDR—one of privation, prying and melancholy—positioned as a return to “truth” via a simplistic understanding of historical representation in the two earlier films. This rhetorical move and ideological gesture keys us into the fact that, given Donnersmarck’s promotional stress on his film’s righteous truth, *Lives* is a film of “stultifying teaching,” as Rancière would put it; a film which approaches its spectator not as an equal but a passive subordinate, lectured to by Herr von

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7. Although I do not discuss *Sonnenallee* directly in the present essay, I raise it here given its explicit relation in Donnersmarck’s discourse.
Donnersmarck. This teaching took place in a still freighted atmosphere. As Jones observes,

understandings of the East German dictatorship remain highly contested in the German public sphere, with memories of social and financial security and nostalgia for the East (Ostalgie) competing with memories of repression and total control. Thus the struggle to present an image of this part of German history that is received as 'authentic', 'true' and therefore authoritative is central to efforts to promote acceptance of one version of the past over the others.

We have seen that Donnersmarck, for example, insists that cinema-goers have seen misleading images of the GDR until now. This argument considers "memory" and "nostalgia" as dangerous things—whatever "they" precisely are does not matter except for their rhetorical help in clearing a space for historical authenticity and truth. Memory (soft-headed, warm-hearted) interferes with the transmission of history (hard, cold, shocking).

The Lives of Others recirculates the lessons of the normative history of re-unified Germany, distrustful of other filmmakers and its own spectators. By contrast, Good Bye Lenin!, which features at its narrative heart a character dedicated to mocking up fake news and historical reports, differs distinctly from The Lives of Others and its director's approach to film and history. Lenin's foregrounding of how "realism" is itself constructed thus foregoes self-serving readings of history as transparent and accessible—an access apparently untied to the ideological demands of the present. Furthermore, comedy can offer spectators less rigid, less stable and more ambiguous approaches to the lives and existence of the GDR. Here we ask what resources films make available to their audiences. Film is not a mere representation but a productive object. Films instigate thinking, prompt knowledge and memory and feeling. They are texts that exceed context.

In thinking about these texts and their contexts, we should not be surprised that German cinema so readily put its recent history on the screen. Confino broadly characterises German national culture as a "culture of remembrance." Like other art forms in Germany, but perhaps more so, the national cinema has a long history of conjunctural political interventions, especially around memory and history. Nevertheless, films about the GDR are not those that get most Germans to the

cinema, but they do play well to international markets with only history on their mind when it comes to Germany. The decade after 1989 saw many mundane, diverting comedies and bourgeois dramas dominate the German domestic box office. The disavowal of antagonism in newly re-unified Germany is the most intriguing feature of these popular films—they were about the present and the future, not the past. Most of these films were the work of western German directors and producers. Industrial conditions were unfavourable for producing eastern cinema after re-unification. The marginalisation of state-contracted GDR filmmakers and the fire-sale of the GDR's film production studios at Babelsberg in Potsdam reduced the viability of non-commercial fare after 1991. Meanwhile, critical and public distaste for films made during the GDR period was total, with just a few recognised exceptions: the entire cultural tradition of the GDR was either neglected or erased, depending on perspective (Naughton, 72). In the early 2000s, however, this began to change. Besides critical reappraisal of GDR-era film, the GDR and east of the country featured in film more and more over these years. Nick Hodgin has described how East Germany now figures in the cinema of re-unified Germany as a comforting place of Heimat and homeliness for western and eastern Germans.

The historical Gemütlichkeit of Heimat suggests discussions of memory, while asking also that we consider the relationship of film and affect. Following Sinnerbrink, I explore in this essay “how our affective and emotional engagement with film is linked with the ideological treatment of certain themes, values, or ideas in a given narrative or genre.” We should pause over the link between ideological treatment and affective engagement. Affect can mean feelings, passions but also a modification. It often names the gap between emotion and feelings, where one is general and the other specific. Affect also names the distinction between feelings themselves, the “fuzzy” edges of what we feel. Just as we can never quite say what we mean—even the master orator is a master of only the social codes of speech, not of language, which she can never master—we can never quite feel what we feel, or at least we cannot be sure we feel what we feel. Subjects often find it im-

possible to know why, how, or what they feel when they feel something.¹⁸ For the subject, this affective fluidity and inelegant language can make for a disorienting, intrapsychic discordance (Johnston, 41). “I don’t know whether to laugh or cry,” as the familiar phrase has it. The changeability of affects is thus crucial—they are only readable against a constant variation, lest they become indistinct against a droning, single-note background.¹⁹ These distinctions can be reified into named emotions, with language articulating previously unexpressed feeling and opening into new channels (Jameson, 29). Freud noted we become conscious of affects only if they are linked to a meaningful conception or representation.²⁰ Yet psychoanalysis insists on a troubled relationship between ego and world, between a feeling and its (re)presentation. Affect may resist language. The experience of being “lost for words” to describe how we feel should make us aware of the gap between affect and its mental or symbolic representation (Johnston, 22). Affect is, for the mature subject, often parsed by language and its attendant categorisations, meanings or significations. Linguistic codification of affective states will make them available to consciousness; those that have not been named are unavailable to consciousness or may be absorbed into subjectivity, rendered indistinguishable and inconspicuous (Jameson, 31-4). Naming some particular set of features becomes a construction, a bringing into being of what did not exist beforehand. “Nostalgia” is an excellent example here, moving swiftly into circulation to name a feeling that was—so to speak—on everyone’s mind.²¹

Aesthetic treatment of affect cannot be read off simply. Artists face the representational task of seizing affect’s fleeting essence to thereby force its recognition (Jameson, 31). Shaviro characterises cinematic works as “machines for generating affect,” for modifying their viewers and extracting value from affect.²² It may be difficult to say with a solid guarantee that an aesthetic work makes us feel “sad” or “elated” or “confused.” And, indeed, definitive affect-spotting is not what I wish to do here, not least because demanding that affects mean something in themselves misunderstands affect’s evocative nature and its often undefinable content. This may also overlook the ways that films may work to provoke affective or emotional responses through means other than narrative or audio-visual representation—a film such as Hitchcock’s Psycho, for example, is not about terrorised people in the narrative (or audience) space, but about conveying, across its running time, the abstract idea of terror.²³ Affect is thus strangely disembodied, separated from supports or bearers,

transmitted from place to place, given to contagion.\textsuperscript{24} It is properly imaginary, floating at a distance from the support that represents and generates it (Žižek, \textit{Event}, 97). The affect here can be on each side of the screen: film may extract affective value via its images and sounds of its participants, as in scenes of jubilation or sadness; film may also extract affective value from its audience, as expressed in the notion of the “weepy” genre. Film is thus especially well-equipped to make available mimetic and suggestive bodily sensations or intensities which may recall or indeed trigger affective states, the lived experience of body and consciousness. If we consider films to be affective maps, then, they “do not just passively trace or represent, but actively construct and perform, the social relations, flows and feelings that they are ostensibly ‘about’” (Shaviro, 6).

Affect is instituted in social-historical imaginaries, so it can be mapped and historically located. A repertoire of proper affects is made available in social formations, in the varieties of social significations—there is no zero degree of sensation or perception, all apparently pure data is haunted by some meaning and hence ideological connotation. Ideology masters affect through bodily training, manners, practice and stances (Jameson, 58). Williams would designate this “structures of feeling,” and he noted that works of art in particular may make available to us senses of the present—and past.\textsuperscript{25} At the same time, as Castoriadis explicates, social significations “establish the types of affects that are characteristic of a society.”\textsuperscript{26} For example, Marx describes the characteristic affects of capitalist society in his famous “all that is solid melts into air” passage: restlessness, constant change, anxious thirst for novelty, defensive wishes for stability and so on (Castoriadis, 88). Particular affects aid whole societies and individuals in the identification process, in the feeling of belonging, in fellow feeling. So with affect—instituted via representations and finalities (i.e., what is to be done and not done, what is acceptable and not acceptable, what to feel and what not to feel)—a particular type of subject is considered desirable in different eras and places.\textsuperscript{27} Hence, East Germans and West Germans were seen as different, not just as a function of trivial differences but as a function of all they were, thought, wanted, loved, hated, felt and desired (Castoriadis, 88).

Distinct East/West German filmmaking traditions made people aware of such differences. Leonie Naughton (62) relates a post-unification anecdote about the meeting of a bureaucratic decision-making committee for subsidy and film qual-

ity ratings. They were uncertain how to evaluate films from the East. An eastern German reported in a trade magazine that committees of western Germans had “obvious difficulties understanding and interpreting the images, metaphors, emotions, meanings and montage sequences [of eastern films.] Emotional states and relations are recorded differently over here and there [in the west].”28 This difference at the level of symbolic registration contributed to problems of “translating” eastern and western affective states in re-unified Germany. Taking this anecdote with the preceding theoretical characterisation—and without a further excursus on the discrepancies between affect theorists29—we can settle on two linked notions: although a proposition about the body, affect is not (only) individual but deeply sociohistorical; cinema is be understood in this essay as an affect-producing and affect-reproducing machine.

*Good Bye Lenin!*

*Good Bye Lenin!* begins by invoking and evoking an atmosphere of fear, confusion and elation, as the state-socialist crisis of late 1989 spills into the Berlin streets. As the film unfolds from this scene, an East German brother (Alex) and sister (Ariane) are shaken when their mother (Christiane) collapses into a coma at the moment the GDR itself heads for collapse. Christiane is comatose during the Wall’s fall, emerging from hospital into an unfamiliar GDR. Christiane’s doctor warns Alex that she rests precariously on the edge of good health. Alex knows his mother has a critical yet significant attachment to the GDR and goes to ever-greater lengths to keep her from realising the country has crumbled. As part of his ploy, Alex fabricates episodes of the GDR nightly TV news programme for Christiane to watch, invites former Young Pioneers to sing GDR songs in their apartment, asks visitors to shed new western outfits for familiar GDR tracksuits—and so on. Alex “manages” reality by extending the GDR’s life in staged events. In instances beyond his control, Alex uses the TV news to stitch contingent events back into the totality of GDR ideology: the unfurling of an enormous Coca-Cola advertisement outside the family apartment becomes a salute to the East German who, Alex’s unique interpretation reveals, had invented the successful formula for Coke. Alex also explains that the many westerners walking the streets of East Berlin are there because of a crisis in capitalism that has helped breach the Wall and make the capitalists curious about really-existing socialism. Those who aid Alex in these fabrications—such as the family’s elderly neighbours—do it out of care for Christiane, but also out of their need to mourn the GDR in their lives (Hodgin, 170). I argue that the truth of *Lenin* is the film’s display of both the joyous excess of the revolution for the children and

the disorienting trauma for the mother. The film shows that each must confront the other: the mother faints at the sight of her son protesting; the children, when not enjoying their new freedoms, protect their mother by guiding her through the re-unification. The familial drama and comedy, then, stages a set of conflicts resonant across re-unified Germany but emerging from the catastrophic collapse of the Eastern Bloc.

*Lenin* is one of Germany’s biggest film exports since re-unification, along with *Run Lola Run* (Tykwer, 1998). Lenin is a pivotal work not only because of this popularity, but also for the role it played in propagating a history of the GDR: the film is on the German curriculum to teach schoolchildren about the GDR; the German Bundestag convened a screening for members of parliament; it inspired GDR-themed television series (Cooke, 128, 131, 144–177; Hodgin, 171). Understanding that film produces more than it represents, we can notice the film’s success had an impact in shifting the ways the GDR was thought about in Germany and beyond, including spurring another iteration of Ostalgie. GDR memorabilia—SED party medallions, consumer goods and old newspapers—adorned movie theatres. Producers encouraged cinema employees to bring souvenirs and wear Young Pioneer scarves, NVA uniforms or Free German Youth shirts. Some theatres even modelled an apartment living area with 10m² of GDR. One Berlin theatre accepted GDR currency during the first week of the film’s season. People throwing GDR parties could hire out the film’s set. And entrepreneurs countrywide sold books, games, mementos and music after the film’s release. Others suggested constructing a GDR theme park in eastern Berlin, with grumpy guards, Trabis and socialist songs piped through the PA. Ostalgie, then, returned to visibility after *Lenin*, becoming a notable presence in the “actually existing postsocialist landscape.”

To understand the film’s social life in Germany, I want to explore the ways *Lenin* maintains, largely through comedy, a distance from the various commitments it depicts. The film is not celebratory or dismissive of the GDR, nor of re-unified Germany, nor of the West. The film neither mocks nor praises its characters for their attachment to the regime. The film drops hints about the dictatorial operation of the late GDR in a family narrative, neither wholly about oppression nor resistance. Everyday life plays out in what appear to contemporary audiences as foreign, extraordinary conditions. This ordinariness and ambiguity makes the film an enigmatic text for those wishing to find in it resounding conclusions about politics, culture and society in (re-unified) Germany. This film captures, then, the ambivalence of some East Germans: it, at once, satirises Ostalgie while also indulging it; the

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film figures the embarrassed self-reflection of much nostalgic thought. The work’s ambiguity makes it especially productive in considering the afterlife of the GDR.

Sadness and hope

Christiane’s collapse and ill-health are responses to the crumbling of the GDR. This hysteric is registering in her body the uncertainties of the symbolic order, the changing desire of the big Other.32 Christiane’s body registers an anxiety around the imminent withdrawal of the national consensus from the GDR as it existed. The withdrawal of consensus is the crisis point for any regime: “in spite of all its grounding power,” Žižek writes, “the big Other is fragile, insubstantial, properly virtual, in the sense that its status is that of a subjective presupposition. It exists only in so far as subjects act as if it exists.”33 So the big Other—the invisible order that structures our reality, inscribed in the symbolic through a network of rules and meanings—substantially exists only because people recognise themselves in it, draw on it as the point of reference that provides the ultimate horizon of meaning (Žižek, Lacan, 10; Event, 75). The collapse of that order—that Other—is troubling and confusing, especially for a subject as invested as Christiane. In her case, witnessing the arrest of her son, Alex, at a rally in Berlin causes her collapse. The family drama begins here, with the intimate and national withdrawal of consensus. This implausible event triggers Christiane’s coma—now without consciousness, Christiane will not register the passing of time.

Although the 1989 protests did not necessarily presage the GDR’s end, they hinted at it in ways inconceivable months earlier: everything was forever until it was no more, to cite the title of an important book of post-socialist research.34 Anti-SED rallies had few visible precedents after the quashed uprising of 1953. The 1989 protests represent a dangerous proximity to what Christiane finds unimaginable—the meeting of East and West Germany. As the film unfolds, we realise Christiane’s attachment to the GDR may be instrumental, that she has made the best of a bad situation: she and her husband had planned to flee the GDR, but she lost her nerve and stayed with their children, confecting a story for them about their father meeting a new woman in the west. (Which, as it turns out, belatedly does become true—the husband remarries and has another family.) During those years of unplanned separations, conversion symptoms,” as they are called in the clinical literature, are not always so neatly divided between hysterical/body and obsession/mind. See Bruce Fink, A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 115. There is an interesting connection to be explored with Christa Wolf’s In the Flesh, trans. John S. Barrett (Boston: David R. Godine, 2005), a short and feverish novel about a woman who suffers severe abdominal pain—with high temperature, deepening distress and a resistance to medicine—shortly before the Berlin Wall falls. I leave this discussion for another time.

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ration and surrogate attachment to the GDR regime, various negative affects would for Christiane be caught up in the East German system: shame, anguish, loss, melancholy, sadness, loss of trust; numbing, apathy, depression. Indeed, Christiane is institutionalised after her husband’s departure, shown mute and rocking back and forth in the film’s opening minutes. These affects would later have coexisted with positive feelings about the regime, about her family, about the future. Taken together in their ambivalent admixture, these affects indicate what was “at stake” for Christiane in her identification with the GDR. Her collapse suggests the subjective truth of her symptom: the GDR’s dissolution dissolves her identity.

In hinting at such affects, Lenin had dual functions in re-unified Germany: to afford East Germans an identification point through Christiane’s conversion symptoms and West Germans an understanding of the traumatic end of the GDR for its subjects. Cultural works can offer “a wide range of affective responses to traumatic individual and historical experience” (Pinkert, 8). They do important work by presenting a spread of affective states; they are places “where these affective responses [are] not yet solidified into identifiable meanings” (Pinkert, 8). This is the case with a film like Lenin, which is ambiguous and ambivalent in its figuring of the “better” Germany. Its ambivalence affords space for sadness and hope. (I will discuss this again below.) In a sense, the film re-opens the affective moment of transition and allows a glimpse of the ambivalence many people endured during 1989-90. This fluidity of affective responses is made temporary as stability is sought: “public political and discursive practices [seek to] decisively shape notions of and responses to suffering and pain” (Pinkert, 8). Earlier in this essay, I suggested Donnersmarck and his The Lives of Others intentionally sought to do the normative work of shaping suffering by proscribing what is proper and improper. We can notice, in Donnersmarck’s criticisms, a dismissal of grieving for the end of the GDR. These criticisms reject some affects as irresponsible while also marking subjects as bearers of suspect emotional pathologies. As I have described it, social imaginaries help establish what affects and activities—what structures of feeling—are considered proper. For example, different social imaginaries value different modes of mourning and melancholia as Wolf Lepenies has shown. The question, which I will pursue here, is what work Lenin does with melancholia, mourning and fetishism.

Grieving Lenin

Freud’s century-old distinction between mourning (healthy, public) and melancholia (unhealthy, private) remains difficult to resist. Freud distinguishes the unspeakable loss of melancholia from the declared loss of mourning. Mourning occurs when an object is lost that one had loved for its intrinsic qualities, an object distinct from oneself. Mourning names that period when reality-testing reveals a loved

35. Anke Pinkert, Film and Memory in East Germany (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008) 8.
object no longer exists, even as the psyche prolongs its existence so as to withdraw bit by bit (Freud, SE, XIV, 243-4). The work of mourning (Trauerarbeit) brings with it an affective state; Trauer corresponds not only to mourning practices but also the state of mind (disposition, mood, Stimmung) typical of the mourning subject. Trauerarbeit ends when the ego is uninhibited and free again. On completion, the ego can cathex or attach to new (love) objects. Melancholy, by contrast, occurs when the loved object fulfilled a different role in the psyche. The melancholic’s lost other was a mirror of the self’s own sense of power. The melancholic is full of self-reproach, representing his ego to others as worthless and morally despicable: “in mourning, it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (Freud, SE, XIV, 245). The subject in mourning is conscious of loss, while the melancholic has an unconscious and unknown loss. If what has been lost is unknown, then the self-criticisms and reproaches are really about someone or something else. This happens because the melancholic exhibits an inability to tolerate or even comprehend the reality of separateness. The “you” and the “I” do not have edges for the melancholic psyche. The adult melancholic, then, is similar to the infant—the primary narcissist—who believes she can control and contain others via omnipotent thoughts. Like the infant, the adult melancholic must integrate knowledge of awareness of separateness; the melancholic has lost (not only) an object, but the narcissistic fantasy of omnipotence. “The paradox of this narcissism,” Santner (Stranded, 3) writes, “is that the narcissist loves an object only insofar and as long as he or she can repress the otherness of the object.” A continuum exists between the poles of infantile (melancholic) and mature (mourning) modes of feeling loss. A pure form of either mourning or melancholia is rare: for example, most relations to objects involve some narcissism, such as in love. Both modes share the shock of loss. The work after that shock is to re-establish the boundaries of the self-acknowledging definitive separateness.

The typology of “mourning” and “melancholia” remains valuable in recognising the distinctive position of the subject in each case. The melancholic is incapacitated by the enjoyment (jouissance) of symptomatic self-reproach, whereas the mourner feels grief with others who grieve likewise (Shepherdson, 89). Lacan, in his Hamlet lectures, describes mourning as a collective process. Lacan means that mourning leans on the social repertoire, on cultural objects. No words can match the (imagined) sight of a loved one dead or dying, so mourners call on music and art as symbolic rituals in the wake of this loss. These cultural mediations form a series of attempts to fill the gap left by the missing object (Lacan, 38). The symbolic offers a repertoire of ways of labouring in mourning; Darian Leader describes the unconscious transactions between mourners at this level, a dialogue of mournings in the

books and art dedicated to loss. Subjects may be able to access their idiosyncratic losses and attachments when grieving with others, not only through identification but also analogy and metaphor. Subjects do not grieve in the same way, but the dialogue—the set of identifications and disidentifications—may trigger significant moments in mourning work. So, taking the film as an example, rather than read Lenin only at the level of narrative, where (female) GDR subjects may identify with Christiane as a cipher for their experiences of loss in 1989, we could see the film’s cultural circulation as itself offering recognition of post-GDR mourning processes. Eastern audiences may relish the film as an objective route to their own subjective mourning work, another voice in the dialogue of mournings, another totem of the remembering community.

Critical disputes about the cultural value of mourning or melancholia turn on the significance of losses in the present. For progressives, the positions of “mourning” and “melancholia” represent approaches to the question of which affective state offers the best resistance to the dominant reality principle. Santner has described a deconstructionist ethical turn, in which melancholia is proposed as the affective posture that best maintains fidelity to losses the predominant ideological formation would prefer to disavow. For these partisans of melancholia, it offers a way of resisting adaptation to the status quo, to the dominant reality principle. It achieves this by suspending the verdict of reality (Mladek and Edmondson, 211). Yet as Lacan teaches, following Kant’s categorical imperative, the superego refuses to accept reality as an explanation for failure, hence the repetitive mania often shown by melancholics. This melancholy posture retards adaptation, attaching to loss, indifferent to other frameworks or reality principles (i.e., a different reality, a different ideological formation). Such a line would propose that, against the culture of affirmative positivity favoured by good-humoured contemporary regimes, melancholia can offer forms of negation. Implicitly, this line argues mourning is the weaker position as it reattaches to new objects of desire or idealisation, hence prov-}

41. The concept of the remembering community is pioneered in Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (München: Beck, 2006).
an impossible possession (structural lack) with a determinate loss (a contingent occurrence) (Santner, *Creaturely*, 83, 90). It reckons that a particular lost object could answer the general lack of the subject. Likewise, Comay criticised “the ideological versatility of melancholia: an uncompromising rejection of the existent (nothing short of total transformation is tolerable) coupled with an easy accommodation to whatever happens to be the case (everything is equally terrible, so why bother...).”

So the question here, inherited from Freud, remains the one about the desirability and efficacy of substitution for the lost object, a substitution that can be read via the melancholic position as a capitulation to the reality principle.

With this conceptual terrain arrayed before us, I want to draw in another valuable concept—fetishism—in thinking about *Lenin* and its cultural resonance. Fetishism and melancholia are inverted versions of one another. Both entail an attachment—to a belief, to an object—that one does not want to give up (Freud, SE, XXI, 152). In melancholy and fetishism “the epistemic split between the affirmation and the denial of lack inevitably reproduces the very antithesis it seeks to neutralize: the split ... functions simultaneously both as catastrophic fissure and as stabilizing partition.”

Fetishistic disavowal, analogous to melancholia, entails a conflict between perception of reality (which forces renouncing the object in melancholia and fantasy in fetishism) and desire (which leads to the denial of that reality-perception). The subject repudiates perceptual evidence and only recognises reality through assuming a perverse symptom. The fetish—the symptom—is simultaneously the presence of some nothingness and sign of its absence, a symbol and its negation (Agamben, 21, 31). So in both fetishism and melancholia, the result is a substitution and attachment to “things” as prosthetics—a relation neither countenanced nor repressed. Subjects retain, in Freud’s phrase, a “cathetic loyalty” to the lost object. Again, this loyalty does not preclude but requires the (secret) construction of a substitute. This substitute is “the remnant of the object incorporated within the empty interior of the subject.” This functions, then, as a screen memory with an opaque quality—a quality both refractory and teasing (Comay, *Sickness*, 94).

Memory itself may become the ultimate fetish-object, a veil that seduces as it covers what is behind or beneath. This suggests the paradoxes of recuperation: melancholia becomes a fetishistic proxy for a lost object, overshadowed by the clamorous grief it occasions. In this way, melancholia furtively stages substitution by insisting on substitution’s impossibility (Comay, *Sickness*, 94). With fetishism, synecdoche and metonymy are poetic models of the fetish as a mental process: the substitution of part for whole (at once negated and evoked by substitution) or the substitution of one thing for another (in metaphor), “not so much ... to reach the second, as to escape from the first,” an object that should not be named (Agamben, 32).


47. The title of Freud’s 1899 article (*Deckerinnerungen*) was translated into English as “Screen Memories,” but could be literally translated as “covered-up memories.”
The melancholic and the fetishist build substitutes through part-objects whose fragmentation at once prolongs and occludes the loss it commemorates. In the “sadomasochistic theatre of grief,” the subject flagellates the lost object, inflicting upon it a second death (Comay, “Sickness,” 94). Comay (“Sickness,” 95) writes in appropriately Gothic terms of the object’s second death: “reduced to a part-object within the hollow crypt of subjectivity, the object persists as living corpse, at once concealed remains and extruding surplus, whose death accretes like so much cellular efflorescence.” In melancholia, the death produces an enjoyable fixation on and commitment to the past. We might also read, dialectically, the melancholic’s struggle to shed some opaque object of ambivalence as a substantive practice of unmaking and making, de- and reattachment; this is the destruction of the drive as its repetitions clear away the old to make space for the new (Dean, 177). In melancholia, the ego is always engaged in a “pitched battle around the object,” as love and hate coexist and reconcile into an ambivalence. This battle at once separates the libido from the object and defends the libido from attack (Agamben, 21). The fetish’s temporal logic, however, is akin to ritualised suspense: the trauma is belated, perpetually siphoned into the next moment. The fetish forestalls disaster by deferring to some “beyond,” some receding horizon. “I turn back the clock so as to forever relive the very last flicker of an imaginary innocent anticipation.” Hence, the fantasy of abeyance—a permanent not-yet—reassures the fetishist (Comay, “Sickness,” 95). That fantasy comes to structure the psychic experience of the present. The fetish is a paradox: “an unattainable object that satisfies a human need precisely through its being unattainable” (Agamben, 33). In melancholia and fetishism, one lives in the present as if the worst has already happened, and as if the catastrophic insight had never occurred. In melancholia, “the object is neither appropriated nor lost, but both possessed and lost at the same time,” a revolt against the loss of an object; in fetishism, as we know, the fantasmatic object is sign of something and its absence. In sum, the object is simultaneously real and unreal, incorporated and lost, affirmed and denied (Agamben, 21). The object has an allusive quality, pointing beyond itself to something impossible; as presence and absence it is the sign of two contradictory realities (Agamben, 37). The fantasmatic dimensions of both melancholia and fetishism—attested to by the contradictions and paradoxes—are crucial here, for they outline why and how Alex must fabricate reality on his mother’s behalf. The medical request that Christiane be kept away from any shocks grants Alex license to create an imaginary, fantasy frame for the unfolding of life in the late GDR: this initiate’s Alex’s mock scenarios which make his imaginative fabulations impossible to differentiate from real perceptions.

A jar of gherkins for the GDR

Alex, with his ploy, moves into a position of valorising the regime in ways he never would have expected, while also ridiculing and mocking the failed state we

sense he has never truly respected." In the film’s narrative of loss and grief, Alex dramatises this set of ideas around melancholia, mourning and fetishism. This will become clear through two further theoretical expositions, concerned first with temporality, then, returning to some earlier points, with (commodity) fetishism. The claim here is that Alex embodies Christiane’s defences—or, we might say, that Alex performs an ego role for his ailing mother. Alex embodies melancholia and fetishism, whose psychic processes produce an illusory present, immune from past and future threats. Melancholia’s postponement of death coincides with fetishism’s pre-emptive fantasy of an already accomplished death. Alex, then, is a switching station between the too early and the too late, between the fetishistic “before” and melancholic “after,” both postponing and pre-empting the future.

Lenin is a film in which Alex cushions his mother from the loss of the GDR. Alex engages in evermore ridiculous attempts at “reality management,” to stave off shock and loss. Alex’s actions ensure Christiane’s ignorance, so processes of mourning and melancholia seem irrelevant for her—but this is only because Alex is objectively “working through” the loss in a manner illustrative of all melancholia: “melancholia offers the paradox of an intention to mourn that precedes and anticipates the loss of the object” (Agamben, 20). Alex holds his mother, I argue, in a state of penultimacy. Christiane, first in the coma and then cosseted in her apartment, exists in a state of incompleteness, holding off the mortifying conclusion. The film depicts Christiane finally touching the hard kernel of the Real: Christiane dies when the falsity of Alex’s “endless” GDR is no longer sustainable. In seeing behind the veil of Alex’s fabricated reality, Christiane is released from the reassuring stasis—yet this encounter will be the death of her, as Alex has surmised. Until that deadly conclusion, Alex’s various machinations have produced for Christiane an illusory intact present. As Agamben points out, in melancholia there is a “triumph of the object over the ego,” meaning that “the object has been, yes, suppressed, but it has shown itself stronger than the ego” (Agamben, 20). In other words, the GDR’s real absence must triumph over Alex’s ploys to veil reality.

Alex’s chief method of veiling reality is to pretend that various GDR goods still exist. Alex pulls from cupboards otherwise cast-off everyday items to resume life in the banality of commodity culture. Alex re-bottles Dutch gherkins in the “Spreewald” jars of German-grown GDR gherkins. His mother savours this “taste of home” with no awareness of the sleight of hand. Here, the film presents the commodity at its most starkly fetishistic. Recall that Marx described the commodity as a “mysti-
cal” object with “theological niceties,” substituting its use-value for exchange value (i.e., social relations of value). Commodities have social meanings, not only private uses—even in nominally socialist nations like the GDR, which did not manage to escape the commodity form.50 “The products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social,” Marx writes.51 The relationship between people and things becomes complex. Otherwise, the Dutch gherkins could have appeared in their original guise—but the commodity fetish exists in a social structure, in this case that of the apparent GDR. The superimposition of the fetish occludes the reality of the western labour and materials—and this sequence of the film makes overt how they take on nationalist niceties.

Alex and Christiane embody the split in fetishism: Christiane believes in the object; Alex knows about the substitution. Together, Alex and Christiane can sustain the mechanism. Substitution defines the “fetish” quality of commodities, for Marx as much as Freud. The commodity reifies social relations, thereby taking on the role of reflecting those relations as a substitute, a partial stand-in: “it is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (Marx, 164-165). The commodity substitutes for the totality of relations, including those nominally outside the market and exchange. A jar of gherkins becomes the GDR, just as the GDR becomes the jar of gherkins. In Alex’s ploy, the commodity is, taking Marx with Freud, freezing time at the moment before the catastrophic insight: castration in fetishism; loss in melancholia/mourning; the withdrawal of consensus from the GDR for Christiane. “The animation of things both reflects and veils the mortification of persons and thereby provides the compensatory phantasm of unity in the face of an irredeemably fractured social world” (Comay, “Sickness,” 97). As in the sexual fetish, these parts of the GDR (gherkins, track suits) stand in for the whole of the GDR. Conveniently for Alex, he can signify a world through its things. But Christiane’s dawning consciousness of the shift in the totality, in the changed social and cultural reality of her country, finally results in death. Christiane escapes Alex’s postponements and pre-emptive holding patterns, confronting the trauma of loss, traversing the fantasy of an intact present.

The best GDR, ever

We should notice too that Alex gains enjoyment through his wilful fantasy of the present. Melancholia has long been associated with artistic activity, a commonality that clusters around an intensified fantasmatic practice that furnishes love, dreams and cultural creation (Agamben, 25). Alex may also master through artistic means what would otherwise be impossible to seize: “the lesson of melancholy is

50. On the question of commodities in the GDR and so on, see the excellent essays in Katherine Pence and Paul Betts, Socialism Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).
that only what is ungraspable can truly be grasped” (Agamben, 26), thus affording a last chance to know the GDR as it slips into history. If Alex’s ploy is apparently for his mother’s benefit, it also allows him and his accomplices to occupy themselves at this moment of change. They slow time for Christiane—but Alex and accomplices also live under the shadow of a radical change, thus perceiving Alex’s choreographed present under the aegis of a catastrophe to come. To cloak shared devastation and disruption, they jointly sort through heaps of quickly amassed GDR rubbish and rubble (as Benjamin would endorse). Alex’s “loyalty to the scattered ‘things’ only prolongs a commitment to imaginary unities—the phantasm of the revolutionary collective, of the golden age[—]whose persistence inevitably assumes a consoling or ideological cast” (Comay, “Sickness,” 98). Alex lingers on the GDR’s end, fetishistically postponing its fall, dwelling in the moment before the catastrophe he knows is coming. Alex, an everyday Benjaminian, constructs “a retroactive ‘before’ of missed opportunities, the moment before the final concealing of capitalist social relations, the flickering of possibilities rendered legible only from the perspective of an irredeemably damaged present day” (Comay, “Sickness,” 101). Alex authors a GDR better than the really-existing one. This instils a “hope in the past,” a counterfactual construction fabricating an anterior future, a hope retrospectively awakening a blocked possibility of a better GDR (Comay, “Sickness”).

Through this plot, Lenin foregrounds processes of political ideology and belief. Alex falls for the ideals of the GDR: he authors a GDR more harmonious and positive than it was, more in line with the on-paper ideals of socialism than their repressive reality. Alex says in his voice-over narration that he creates the GDR he would have wished for—the GDR described in its banners and slogans. Alex valourises what Lefort would call the GDR’s “ideological enunciation” over its “ideological rule.” Director Wolfgang Becker can retrieve this, as Thompson explains:

because the GDR itself, as both concept and reality, was not what it claimed to be, indeed was not, even, one might argue, what it was.... The SED’s description of the GDR in the 1970s as a system of real-existierender Sozialismus (really-existing socialism) is actually a very clear admission of the non-existence of what they thought of as concrete and pragmatic socialism (a sort of reverse-vampire syndrome in which there is a reflection but no reality), beneath which a generally intact desire for a real real-existing socialism, in the form of a not-yet-existing socialism, played its utopian role.  

52. Žižek, Event: Philosophy in Transit 17. I paraphrase this section of Žižek, where he is talking about The Age of Innocence. This may equally be said of the film’s production and audience reception in 2004 and beyond.
53. Comay is writing about Walter Benjamin and his disaggregated surrealist method of history, as critiqued by Adorno.
Thompson means utopia in the sense theorised by Ernst Bloch: the not-yet-conscious and the not-yet-become. In Bloch’s understanding, Lenin might present a retrospective “wishful image” of the GDR. (And it is not tangential to note that anti-Stalinist Bloch decided not to return to his adopted GDR on the day the Berlin Wall was built—Germany’s chief theorist of utopia left the GDR behind while holidaying in Munich.) Thompson has called this the unheimliche Heimat of the GDR: a homeland “uncanny, unknown and essentially unknowable, because it both is and isn’t, was and wasn’t the GDR” (Thompson, 284). The film makes clear that Ostalgie is “not simply a sense of a lack of something missing which one once had, but the lack of a lack, the sense of missing something which one never had but looked forward to” (Thompson, 284). The GDR was lived as utopia deferred, while Ostalgie retrieves those utopian impulses.

Productions like Lenin “allow people to move closer toward a model of the GDR as it wasn’t but rather as those who founded, fought for, believed in, opposed, resisted and ultimately destroyed it, wished it had been. Ostalgie thus becomes nostalgia for somewhere we have never yet been” (Thompson, 285). Lenin ostensibly enacts an individual and cultural send-off for the past—for an object to which they were always ambivalently attached. The film mourns the absence of a true GDR before the nation’s total disappearance—this is why Alex can fall in love with it for the first time. The GDR-object in the film is ungrievable because it was never an empirical object. For its audiences, I would argue, one of the film’s attractions is its relatively sympathetic portrayal of the GDR as an alternative political system. Alex’s actions mimic those of GDR leaders at their most wilfully misleading and obtuse. Nevertheless, Alex finds optimism in this system, a hope he had not seen there before its end: we may idealise lost objects in ways that we never idealised them while they were alive or existed. We may feel compelled to defend the object on its own terms, nullifying our previous ambivalence. So Alex renders the GDR as the alternative which—in its empirical reality as clapped-out socialism—it had not been for many years. This may be an idealisation fuelled by guilt, “remorse for a past of not loving the object well enough and self-reproach for ever having wished for its death or replacement” (Brown, 55). Freud identifies this surrender of identity upon the death of an ambivalent object as the suicidal wish of the melancholic (Brown, 55). In the film’s second half, Alex seems dubious about his protest actions, given the effect this seems to have had upon his mother; he questions his identity as GDR antagonist. Perhaps the loathed object was not so bad? Nevertheless, Alex’s narcissistic and omnipotent attempts to control reality ultimately fail; he cannot hold his mother—or the GDR—away from their traumatic and mortifying ends. His melancholia shades into mourning as he sends her ashes afield on a toy GDR rocket, one last idealised childhood token of a nation that no longer exists—and may never

have existed in the form it believed itself to embody. The paradox of the film is that Alex’s protest against his mother’s “GDR” puts Alex in a position to take care of her and learn about the state’s virtues via her identifications.

Family ties

The family narrative in the film is easy to diminish when we look to the “bigger picture” of the GDR’s collapse. But the family is important for both the artistic and commercial success of the film. If the ideological exoticism of the party slogans and polyester tracksuits provide the comedy in the film, its central drama concerns family relations. Why does “the family” work in a narrative about political, social and cultural change? The family in the film is split between the mother whose day-to-day actions support the GDR and the son protesting against it. This allows the film to open onto a democratic polyphony of voices—a multiplicity often reduced to univocality in standard historical accounts of the late GDR (i.e. a uniformly passive population came together to demand capitalism and force re-unification). This polyphony thankfully does not take the form of melodramatic distribution of characters into good and bad types (cf. The Lives of Others) but into forms of ambivalence. Christiane sometimes challenges the state too—but via the approved means of writing letters noting inconsistencies and unfair actions, maintaining the idea that some Other is accounting for and remedying injustices.

Family relations can capture history’s movement. “As a structure persisting yet changing through time,” Elizabeth Boa argues, “the family serves as a controlled but quite complex prism, bringing together the more remote, parental past history as communicated to the younger generation and the more immediate remembered history of the child/parent relations.” In the stories and shared experiences of families, “cultural and social memory, mediated in many ways, feeds into and modifies the familial and personal memory stores, so that remembering is a constantly evolving process subject to revaluation under the impact of current events” (Boa, 68). This insight is like the Nachträglichkeit present with all memory and history—but here applied to a domain often held apart from socially-motivated historical revision. Families are often thought of as external to social and political change—as if the ahistorical family unit were over here and the crumbling of the GDR were over there, as if the historical process did not place families and “the family” under stress.


As an institution predicated on future reproduction, the family can be a site for competing visions of the future. Becker’s film shows a clear understanding of the family under pressure. *Lenin* captures the GDR “family unit” dispersing as opportunities drew young East Germans to jobs, careers, relationships and education in the west. The generational distinction in the film, between Christiane’s ostensible support for the regime, and Alex and Ariane’s displays of excitement for its end, are different ways of figuring a belief in the future. Christiane had put trust in the party slogans (“the country my mother left behind was a country she believed in,” Alex narrates shortly after his mother’s death, “a country that never existed in that form”). Alex and Ariane put trust in the rhetoric of re-unification as a “growing together,” and the immediate pleasures of sex, drugs and western fashion (Hodgin, 170).

Alex suffers the loss of two fathers (biological and ideological) and a mother during the film’s running time. The film is truly a tragicomedy. All his amusing strivings to get his mother back to health, which often escape his control, come to naught when she dies in the final stretch of the film—a death fated by history’s movement. If Christiane had substituted the patriarchal state for the absent father of her children, the title of the film gives us a sense of the way the events of 1989 drain the efficacy of this substitute father figure. One of the poster images for the film takes the crucial scene in which Christiane stumbles across the removal of an enormous Lenin statue from her Berlin neighbourhood. Hoisted by a helicopter and hovering in a blue sky, the frozen Lenin moves away and gestures to her with an outstretched hand. The father figure leaves the historical stage—marking an end of an era.60 (Societies have bidden Lenin adieu before, only for him to return; it may be an *Auf Wiedersehen*, a “see you soon,” rather than a final goodbye.61) This send-off is one of several in the film, but it is a defining moment in all postsocialist societies. The removal of old symbols and icons is one of the foundational acts of new states. With Lenin disappeared, the biological father can now re-enter the family frame. Alex visits his father and his new family in western Berlin. The father attends the small ceremony to mark Christiane’s death, where the rocket heads into the sky carrying her ashes. If Alex’s love for his mother at times threatens to entangle him in the past, her passing enables him to mourn the loss and negotiate historical change.

*Good Bye Lenin!* sympathises with Christiane, idealising her socialist perspective by placing her at the film’s narrative and affective heart. She personifies a genuine socialism (Hodgin, 171), even in her ambivalence. Christiane is, like GDR intellectual and writer Christa Wolf, “a reform socialist, who, although critical of the

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60. German authority in the GDR was largely overseen by Soviet authority: hence, after de-Stalinisation, Lenin was returned to the “head of the family.”

[party], has not lost faith in its original ideological project” (Cooke, 132). Nevertheless, to enter re-unified Germany, Alex must abandon old loyalties and detach from his mother; he must find new substitutes, adapt to the new reality. As he mourns her and moves into the future, the maternal will be associated with the homely, the familiar, the comforting, the past—\textit{Heimat} (Boa). Alex journeys with others in this regard—another dialogue of mournings. Concern with \textit{Heimat} has seen a revival in the period since the Wende. Hodggin (7-8) argues that the \textit{Heimat} film returns to prominence after 1989 because it aids sorting identities and attachments:

In a period in which the Germans’ notion of home has (once again) been destabilized by political and historical events, \textit{Heimat} surfaces as one of the key themes in postunification film, frequently providing a context for the conflict between east and west, a clash of cultures in which the \textit{Heimat} that is defended represents “something more elementary, more contingent, and thus more real than life seen in a larger scale perspective.”

This is how \textit{Heimat} has historically functioned. “The discourse of \textit{Heimat},” Boa notes, “dates back to the decades following the first unification of Germany, when it mediated between older local loyalties and a unified Germany” (Boa, 79). Historically, \textit{Heimat} has been useful for subjects in maintaining a local identity against the onrush of change; some in the former GDR have taken up the term for this reason.\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Lenin}, then, may be read as a \textit{Heimat} film—or perhaps a post-\textit{Heimat} film—in which Alex must relinquish what he knows while re-unification and market forces remake his familiar region of Germany.

\textbf{Reconstructing \textit{Lenin} in a comedy of identity}

As I have described it, \textit{Lenin} came into a world where Ostalgie was an established and discussed phenomenon. If, during the first stage of re-unification, the former citizens of the GDR were denied agency as historical actors and were marginalised by the crude public disavowal of their previous lives (to which the teen comedy \textit{Sonnenallee} responded), then in the second stage, material culture purportedly came to normalise them (as in \textit{Lenin}).\textsuperscript{63} The Ostalgie of this second stage is registered in forms of irony, parody and cynicism: a \textit{Lenin} bust used widely in the film’s advertising, for example, was not controversial, even if all the statues had been removed from German cityscapes. The second stage of Ostalgie entails a “naturalisation” of capitalism—although Ossis (Ostdeutscher, eastern Germans) accept this with resignation and outcrops of symbolic resistance (Berdahl, 131). With this normalisation came some measure of retrospective humility from the former West,

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{62} Jason James, "Retrieving a Redemptive Past: Protecting Heritage and \textit{Heimat} in East German Cities," \textit{German Politics and Society} 27.3 (2009): 1-27.
\item \textsuperscript{63} Dominic Boyer, "Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future in Eastern Germany," \textit{Public Culture} 18.2 (2006): 361-381.
\end{footnotes}
but also a raft of (continuing) assumptions and power relations arranged around the East/West divide.

In this mutually suspicious atmosphere, some eastern Germans were willing to view Wolfgang Becker, the film's western German director, as an “honorary Ossi” (Berdahl, 129). This was a significant gift of identification in a mediascape full of easy ridicule and given to stereotypes of the backward Ossi. Nevertheless, Lenin is a western production, a fact which in part generates its ambivalence and ambiguity. Becker pursues a few cheap pot shots about consumerism while also seeming to register that Ostalgie is not so much about the past as about the present and its foreclosures, about the future and its possibilities. Lenin demonstrates the ways nostalgia may work as a form of political engagement in the present, by expressing utopian desires to imagine new possibilities via old materials. Less speculatively, we could say with Berdahl that as "one instantiation of socialism’s social life, Good Bye Lenin! as a mass-mediated history of the present has contributed to the construction of cultural realities that themselves are a function of the political landscape they inhabit and reproduce” (Berdahl, 133). As a cultural work, the film does more than represent the GDR, it also produces a shift in the idea of the GDR, while allowing subjects access to forms of mourning for its loss, in part by modelling within the text modalities of how to negotiate loss.

Even so, in focusing on its tragic and grieving dimension, we should not marginalise the comedic aspects of the film. Eastern Germans are typically seen in the mournful mode, so there’s something novel in the tragicomic pairing; it does not discount either humour or mourning, rightly holding them together, against a culture which prefers the simplified affect (positive or negative, preferably positive) over ambivalent affects (positive and negative). In other words, we should not miss the link here to jocular complaints about “whiny Ossis.” Contemporary ideology incorporates varieties of “the comic” and comedy as a sign of its fundamental rhetoric of happiness and being positive.64 The stress on positivity casts as improper those affects, emotions and feelings which we might consider other than happy: lack, negativity, dissatisfaction, unhappiness. These are perceived as moral faults—or, worse, corrupted being. “There is a spectacular rise of what we might call a bio-morality (as well as morality of feelings and emotions),” Zupančič argues, “which promotes the following fundamental axiom: a person who feels good (and is happy) is a good person; a person who feels bad is a bad person.”65 Criticisms of Ossis in re-unified Germany claimed they are never satisfied, they are always negative. We should further extend this bio-morality to the role of affect and communication in the post-Fordist economy.66 In their over-represented numbers as workers in the low-paid service industry under German neoliberalism, Ossis must present

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65. See also Barbara Ehrenreich, Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World (London: Granta Books, 2010).
a friendly face, service with a smile and so on: we see this in Lenin when Ariane gets a job at a western Berlin Burger King, a recognisable symbol of globalising American capital and its customer service ethos. Ariane knows that to not present a friendly face would be to fail to grasp the subject she is supposed to become in today’s “emotional capitalism.” German cinematic comedy—as in the broad, slapstick Go Trabi Go series—has traded on the inability or unwillingness of Ossis to acknowledge and act upon the imperatives of emotional capitalism. Dissatisfaction is pathologised. The emergent bio-morality, attached to an imperative of happiness, has led to an effective racialisation of the Ossi. “The problem,” Zupančič writes, is “that success is becoming almost a biological notion, and thus the foundation of a genuine racism of successfulness. The poorest and the most miserable are no longer perceived as a socioeconomic class, but almost as a race of their own, as a special form of life” (6). As anyone acquainted with sociological studies or ideology critique could conclude, this “symbolic” racialisation, stigmatisation and denigration then has the material effect of increasing marginalisation, poverty, dissatisfaction, angst. (Which “objectively” confirms the label’s correctness and so on.) In Ossi/Wessi relations, certain features of West German and East German approaches to life are reified into inalienable differences. This set of hard distinctions presents an emerging form of racism that codes social traits as racial: “If traditional racism tended to socialise biological features—that is, directly translate them into cultural and symbolic points of a given social order—contemporary racism works in the opposite direction. It tends to ‘naturalize’ the differences and features produced by the sociosymbolic order” (Zupančič, 6). This suggests why Ostalgie is viewed through habits, customs and lifestyle, of consumer choice—idiosyncratic differences in private life are raised to the point of natural features at the core of being. Comedy of all stripes can have subversive effects only when it escapes this logic of “positive feelings,” of positive psychology, of having a laugh, mandated cheerfulness.

In its generic deployment of comedy and tragedy, Lenin displays an awareness of its critical intervention into constructing a national past, its status as a site of memory and remembrance, of creating a GDR en miniature. This film is “already informed by the subsequent failure of re-unification to meet people’s hopes and expectations, a failure that points to a deeper void in the present.” Re-unification delivered yesterday’s promised “tomorrow”; it turned out to be less than expected, so yesterday

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is reconfigured by the “tomorrow” it produced. Even so, in the film we see eastern Germans prolonging the life of the GDR in the present by extending it into an imaginary GDR of tomorrow.