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Ideological Prolongation of Space in *Good Bye Lenin!*

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Abstract

Wolfgang Becker's film *Goodbye Lenin* (2003) is set at the centre of big changes after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. At the fulcrum there is an East Berlin mother Christiane, a devout communist, who has a heart attack just before the big changes take place in East Germany. She remains in a coma for eight months. When she wakes up, doctors warn that she needs to have a peaceful life, and she should not get excited about anything, otherwise she would have another heart attack. Then, her children pretend that the GDR still exists, the wall has never come down in order to protect their mother from any kinds of excitement. they restore an isolated inner space, in order not only to maintain the socialist past within the present, but also to lengthen their mother's life. The shift is not only in ideological space, but also in private and public spaces. This paper analyses *Goodbye Lenin* in terms of private and public space, and argue how individualised body space empowers both ideology and personal life to prolong ideology.

Keywords: *Good Bye Lenin, ideology, space, socialism, capitalism*

Introduction

In the late 1980s, glasnost and perestroika marked the beginning of a historical process that led to the Soviet Union's collapse, which gradually caused the disintegration of what was then called the Eastern Bloc in Europe. DDR, also commonly known as East Germany, was not an exception. The Berlin Wall, built to divide Berlin into two after the secession of Soviet-controlled northeastern regions of Germany which was to be included among the socialist regimes remotely controlled by the Soviet Union after WWII, stood out, in Michael Meyer's words, as the "concrete symbol of communism" and its largely loathed rule in Europe for three decades between 1961 and 1989 (Meyer, 2009, p. 21). When the wall, as an iconic image of "misery, oppression, struggle and hope", came down; history came to an epic turning point that ended not only the five-decade-long division between east and west, but also the Cold War, uniting the East Germans with their western fellow countrymen (Meyer, 2009, p. 31, 61).

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Fall of the Iron Curtain

It is important to remember the causes of those changes which, at the time, seemed to be sudden but had had a long process of economic and cultural background. Brian McNair argues that Soviet Union was also facing, as the Brezhnev administration was nearing its end, "the potentially dislocating affects" of the global information age during which the "western leaders" were effectively using globalized networks of information to carry out "propaganda warfare" towards the demise of Soviet policies (McNair, 1991, p. 43). Yet, the destructive effects on Soviet regime did not only originate from the West. Those who studied the Soviet Union's collapse and its half-century long influence in the western capitalist world identified several reasons for that disintegration. Vladislav M. Zubok points out, among these causes, "the superiority" of US and its Cold War policies as the first; "Gorbachev's glasnost" that had degraded communism as the second; the implosion of Soviet economy as the third; "national independence" movements within the Soviet republics as the fourth; and finally, opposition to Gorbachev's reforms by the Soviet elites (Zubok, 2021, p. 33). McNair claims that, as opposed to criticisms by Soviet elites against Gorbachev's reforms, the primary purpose of glasnost had been "to restore the balance between the 'positive' and 'critical' dimensions" proposed by Lenin (McNair, 1991, p. 44).

In a sense, Gorbachev's glasnost could be said to have been suggested as the restoration of Lenin's ideological targets. Zubok refers to Gorbachev's historic policy of transparency and openness, which suggested a relaxation in the country's harshly oppressive and closed-circuit communist rule, as one of the major causes that invited media attacks "on the communist past and ideology" contributing to "the rise of anti-communist and nationalist movements" (Zubok, 2021, p. 34). This process led to, in Zubok's words, an "explosive spread of ideological anti-communism and American-style liberalism" (2021, p. 45)

On the other hand, Gorbachev also aimed to "revise the ideological orthodoxy" by seeking about radical reforms named as "perestroika" (Zubok, 2021, p. 68), which raised doubts about the future of communism rather than reforming the regime. Gorbachev's vision was intensely supported by the Western European and American leaders in order to justify western criticisms against communist regimes. These reforms, intended by Gorbachev for the betterment and welfare of the Soviet nation, caused the triumph of the West over the Soviet Union paving the way to the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The "domino-effect of communist regimes in Eastern Europe" caused by the wall's fall changed the geopolitical conditions in Europe (Zubok, 2021, p. 210). Certainly, it was not only the reforms introduced by Gorbachev that brought the end of an era labelled as the Cold War, but also, as McNair proposes, "foreign intervention" and "internal subversion" together with the "economic collapse" (1991, p. 75) reinforced by global liberal economy that had influenced the world since the early 1980s.

Amid the Changes: Becker's *Good Bye Lenin!*

Amid these political changes, there were certainly cultural reflections of these historical transformations of social conditions. Novels, films and plays were produced in order to reflect the influence of this period on individual lives. Wolfgang Becker's film *Good Bye Lenin!* (2003) is one of these films set at the centre of these global changes after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The film deals with the fact that the turn from state socialism to capitalism led to significant reformations not only in the lives of East German population but in the Westerners as well. At the fulcrum, there is an East Berlin mother Christiane, a devout communist, who has a heart attack just before the big changes take place in East

Germany. She remains in a coma for eight months. When she wakes up, doctors warn that she needs to have a peaceful life, and she should, under no circumstances, get excited about anything, otherwise she would have another heart attack, which she would probably not survive.

Among the scholars who studies the film, Roger Hillman considers *Good Bye Lenin!* as a contextual reference to cultural memory that not only survives but is also "transfigured by the difficulties of the unification process" within the history of GDR in which the myths and the truth "were so intertwined" (Hillman, 2006, p. 224). Hillman reads the film as the prolongation of the history of former GDR like many others including Timothy Barney who argues that the film is a nostalgic longing for the old GDR in Christiane's children's attempts to recreate the old days' "authenticity" within a "consensus" in the collective memory (2006, p. 132,133). On a deeper level, argues James McAdams, the story of the film is not about Christian, but about Alex who, like everybody else around him does, "has lost no time in shedding his East German identity" and during his mother's coma, dresses himself in Western clothes, imitates "the corrupting influences" of western music types and degenerate art (McAdams, 2020, p. 33). In the beginning of Alex's experience of new life introduced by the collapse of the Wall, one cannot talk about a nostalgic longing for the old socialist days until he realizes the defects of consumerist culture.

Good Bye Lenin!, while centring on the historical changes generated by the collapse of socialism in 1989, also follows the transformation of state socialism to capitalism that caused important changes in the lives of East German citizens. Christiane, a devout Communist and the mother of Alex and Ariane, brings up her children on her own as her husband left for the West 10 years ago. The actual story starts on the 40th birthday of GDR with depressed and unsatisfied Alex representing at large his generation, rushing into the streets to protest the status quo and marching for unification. Christiane finds herself in the middle of protesters, sees her son attacked and arrested by the police, and collapses immediately. The collapse results in a heart attack following eight months of coma during which everything changes with the collapse of the Berlin wall, East and West unite, capitalism enters the former GDR, and East Germans try to adapt themselves to the new culture. In this respect, Christiane's collapse foreshadows the collapse of the Berlin wall and her sleep during the decay of communism. When she wakes up eight months later, her children are ready to keep her away from any shock. Despite collapse of East Germany and its decay day by day, Christiane keeps her health because she does not realise what is going on.

In the meantime, Berlin Wall falls down and Christiane misses the changes while Alex ventures for the new tastes of a new culture, and travel to west Berlin to visit night clubs and watch erotic shows. Leaving the school of economics, Ariane finds a West German boyfriend, starts working for Burger King and becomes a member of the capitalist system. In a sense, "goodbye Lenin" may be interpreted as "welcome Ronald McDonald" (quotation marks added by the authors of the article). Capitalist life style intrudes in their lives in the form of class enemy and all the members of the family, except Christiane, are enclosed within the new form of living, by throwing all their previous furniture out and buying in new westernized ones.

Alex's attempts to recreate the dying out East German culture are presented as not only a wish to prolong his mother's life in good health, but also to recreate a safer, utopian past. Therefore, he connects the present with the past. Lu Pan argues that "Ostalgie", combining "Ost/east" and "nostalgia" in German, is the best term that describes "the sensitive characteristics of the culture of memory after reunification" (2013, p. 144). The fall of the

wall, the speedy renovation of East Berlin by the removal of Lenin's statue, the advertisements of Western products influenced and accelerated the transformation of private space as well as the public space which welcomed not only new furniture but also new neighbours and even new family members. Lu Pan rightly points out that, although former residential and public buildings of the former socialist rule still stand, they could be covered "with a huge banner of Coca-Cola advertisements" while satellite dishes for TVs are installed in many balconies (2013, p. 145).

Although the premise of the film is based on her children's attempts to prolong Christiane's life, the subtext reveals their struggle to lengthen and idealize socialism for the sake of their mother's health. Prolongation of Christiane's life turns, in the hindsight, into attempts to prolong socialism in their attempts, as Roger Hillman states, by installing ongoing versions of her former life "as if the Wall had not fallen" (2006, p. 222). Alex's struggle to collect empty jars and etiquettes of his mother's favourite pickles brand, which is no longer available in the newly introduced supermarket chains, lead him to fill old empty jars with the new western pickles that his mother finds even more tasty. Roger Hillman parallels Alex's picking attempts to "the 'pickling' of a whole State"; and his "fantastic inventions" create a "life of their own" (2006, p. 222).

With the help of his inquisitive friend Denis who has technical talents in film making, Alex pretends that the GDR still exists, the wall has never come down, and everything is going on as it has always been. In order to protect Christiane from any kind of excitement, they produce videos of fake news about how socialism survives and prevails the world; restore an isolated inner space, detached from all the machinations of capitalism in order not only to lengthen their mother's life, but also to maintain the socialist past within the present. The shift is not only in ideological space, but also in private and public spaces. While the former "socialist" public space becomes more individualised as the people began to reflect their individual choices in their colourful clothes and their choices of lifestyles that invade and cover the former socialist public life; the former private spaces become much more of a public space as a result of the abandoned homes whose interiors are now open to public invasion as new comers from the west begin to settle in the houses abandoned or destroyed by their former owners.

It is useful here to refer to Gerald J. Gruman's hypothesis of "apologism" in longevity of life as an antonym of "meliorism" that suggests an over-optimistic belief in making the world a better place (2003, p. 9). Apologist approaches to the world fashions symbolic attempts to turn the world into a better place through superficial protections of older values in an attempt to believe that the world is not changing and it is still a good place to live in. On the other hand, meliorism is an optimistic suggestion that the world is going to be better than it has ever been. Alex and Denis are in both apologism and meliorism. They are apologetic for the demise of socialism while, on the other hand, they are highly optimistic in their attempts to recreate the socialist past to an extent that they begin to believe in their utopian socialism in their dreams. At the same time, they gradually lose their hopes in bringing back a good life neither to Alex's mother nor to former East Germany.

The individual body, which was once a unit of production in Marxist terms, is now under individualised protection in the form of personal solarium panels and western fashion products introduced into homes by the West Germans. When Christiane's daughter Ariane's West German boyfriend Rainer moves in to live with them before Christiane wakes up, Rainer installs solarium panels inside the flat to sunbathe. This radical individualization stands out as a form of extreme interest in caring one's own body; and

this becomes a symbolic representation of assiduous care in a welfare community in protection of individual body. Naturally, this cannot be observed in socialist household before the fall of the wall, but Christiane's home carefully ordered in socialist humbleness and simplicity is now under western impertinence that lifts personal welfare and comfort over necessities of socialist commonality.

In another study on longevity, John C. Barefoot et al. focuses on the concept of trust as "a characteristic belief that the sincerity, good will, or truthfulness of others can generally be relied upon" in maintaining good health and prolongation of life (1998, p. 518). Alex and Dennis struggle to recreate an environment as trustable as possible for Christiane. Her hopes are revived by the trustfulness of an illusion. However, longevity of re-created socialist space, both public and private, emerges as a means of optimistically lengthening Christiane's life. In terms of private and public sphere, individualised body and space empower both ideology and personal life. It is an endless debate whether or not we should struggle to lengthen our lifespan as long as possible, as Christine Overall claims (2003, p. 1). Overall argues that desires to prolong our lives do not stem from the fear of death, but from the fact that people "value the state of being alive" (2003, p. 24). Christiane also certainly does. Yet, she is known as a woman who values the longevity of her ideals more than she values her own life.

The film opens by foregrounding the symbols of the former German Democratic Republic with the GDR flags all over the walls and the powerful figure of still-standing Lenin statues as yet untouched. Wolfgang Becker significantly puts forward the physical socialist territory of the GDR, which is to be deterritorialized during the film. All iconic figures of socialist ideology such as the statues and portraits of early communist leaders including Lenin and Marx, and the flags carrying the renowned hammer and sickle are removed. It turns into a process of not only the deterritorialization of cultural identities but also the trivialization of ideologies that had been followed by millions. Jennifer Creech states that Becker uses Lenin in order to engage with a "more dialectical understanding of everyday experience in the GDR", especially the conflict between the topic suggestions of socialism and state violence, which, in the beginning of the film, becomes very obvious: "Lenin is associated both with the utopian kernel of the socialist project, and also with the institutions of real existing socialism" (Creech, 2009, p. 112).

On the other hand, national identity, which forcefully used to resist the hegemony of capitalism, begins to disappear and turn into a new identity that brings new habits into their limited interior, such as using home solariums, more colourful furniture instead of the seriously pastel colours of socialist identity. After invading inner space, capitalist system in the form of Americanized products conquers the outer space, therefore the German space is overturned by the American one. Becker parallels unification with capitalism and consumerism. In other terms, unification invites Americanisation and German space is conquered by American consumerism in this image of invasion. Esra Öztürk, who studies the film within the Gramscian concept of hegemony and Marxist concept of alienation, points out that Arianne, Alex's sister becomes alienated by adapting a uniform identity that takes her away from her own self when she starts working for the Burger King, which is an iconic symbol of western consumerism (2020, p. 183).

Harsh capitalism changes the lives of the workers and the labour force in the country has to find new jobs in the new marketing system for the first time. Alex is employed by a Cable company that markets satellite dishes to middle class Germans who have recently turned into consumers. Alex gets used to the new life style still East German but Westernized in a completely different setting, where the outer space is occupied by the

satellite dishes. The walls that once used to bear the GDR flags are now covered by satellite aerials.

In the meantime, East German interiors were left as they were, and deserted by their former socialist inhabitants. They are about to decay and collapse just like the Berlin wall by the powerful dominance of outside Westernization. As Thomas Elsaesser suggests, "the physical territory of the GDR" is occupied by the West Germans in an arrogant manner, but "as a moral territory it is also still occupied by the feelings, memories, faded dreams and dashed hopes of socialist inhabitants" (2007, p. 128).

On the contrary, Christiane's bedroom will be an antithesis of what has been observed. Alex will recreate a new room, yet bearing the remnants of the past. What Alex creates becomes a resistance to the Americanization. He uses the past to keep his mother's health and, thus, past becomes a part of his present life. In a sense, physical Americanisation is still occupied by socialist nostalgia. Their attempts to protect their mother from any kinds of excitement help them restore an isolated inner space, detached from all the machinations of Capitalism in order to maintain the socialist past within the present. Unification, once a utopia, revives utopian dreams of socialism. Alex thinks that his mother's arrival is approaching relentlessly like a Russian tank. This simile brings back home the Soviet socialism which has already collapsed in the exterior space. However, Alex's struggle is not only to keep her mother healthy, but also to come to terms with the problematic condition of the socialist past and recreate utopian present. Joseph F. Jozwiak and Elizabeth Mermann reads Alex's idealist attitude as nostalgic "that functions as a mode of resistance to the Western take-over of power" (2006, p. 790). Although Stuart Hall argues that "the return of the local is often a response to globalization" (1997, p. 33), the illusionary space in this instance becomes a means of resistance to the capitalist power, something more powerful than a response.

At this point, Christiane's reflection is ironic to the extent that she does not realize how isolated and illusionary her interior environment is as opposed to the exterior Americanized space that she is unaware of. Alex re-writes the East German history and blends past, present and future, because this recreated illusion also bears utopian dreams for his future. This coincidence of past and present in the same setting brings a palimpsest into being. Different time periods bearing different cultural codes are built upon each other irreversibly. Thus, the expression of this cultural difference creates problems in perceiving the divisions of past and present. As a result, political differences between past and present also create differences in cultural identity. This is not only a palimpsest of different histories, but also of cultural differences.

To overcome the huge contradictions of quick cultural changes, Alex buys old papers, clothing from the flea market and tries to find pickle jars bearing East German brands. His actions contribute to the resurrecting of GDR in a limited small, interior space. Yet, it is useful here to refer to Jennifer Creech who argues that the narrative strategy of the film is biased heavily on a male perspective. Although it is the mother who is in the centre of the frame story, the narration focuses more on the male protagonists by "positioning the viewer from the very beginning of the film to identify equally" with Alex (Creech, 2009, p. 104). All these attempts appear to be the justification of a son's attachment to his mother, while, on the other hand, Ariane's struggle to establish a new life with her western boyfriend is underrated in the film. Yet, the film does more than that in attracting the audience's attention to the fact that it is not only an Oedipal attachment of Alex to his mother, but it is also an endeavour to unite the family, in parallelism to the unity of the East and the West.

This is the reason why Alex recreates not only his mother's bedroom, "but the entire perceptual field of her former pre-fall-of-the-Wall life" (Elsaesser, 2005, p. 128) by finding pickle jars with the former GDR brand labels on them in the garbage cans and refilling them with imported western products. This fictional life allows a utopian reality "to coexist with the new" as Elsaesser suggests (2005, p. 128). During her birthday party that Alex organised for her by bringing together the former socialist comrades and prearranging school children to sing nationalist GDR songs, Christiane notices that a huge Coca-Cola banner is being hanged on the wall across her bedroom window, on which a gigantic GDR flag celebrating the 40th anniversary was hanged formerly. In this critical scene private space is overwhelmed by the public space. Although Alex controls the inner space from the invasions of outer space, it is continually invaded by the capitalist interventions. The peaceful dreamlike reality of her room is attacked by the outside vulgarity of consumerism.

Upon this, Alex still continues the illusion for her and immediately prepares simulated TV broadcasts with his friend Dennis, and keeps maintaining the disappeared GDR. In these artificial TV news hours which they record on video tapes, Alex finds an explanation for every change in her environment that might be shocking for her. In this film in the film, he uses an illusionary presentation of the facts instead of direct presentation of them. Coca-Cola becomes an East German drink, the formulas of which have been stolen by the gaudy Americans; new arrogant West German inhabitants in the East become refugees fleeing from the merciless reality of the West. Yet, Alex, while wishing her mother to believe in his simulated facts, begins to believe his own version of history.

Yet, the fictional GDR, enclosed in Christiane's small, isolated room yields to the power and domination of the outer space. When Christiane ventures outside one day, she finds the streets full of Western ads and shocked by the flying Lenin statue carried away by a helicopter, symbolising the death of communism. Upon the incident, Alex and his friend Dennis produce a new broadcast reporting that the West is in collapse and Westerners are fleeing to the East. For plausibility they even hire an East German taxi driver who looks like the first East German astronaut.

Conclusion

In *Good Bye Lenin!*, the transition from socialism to capitalism is depicted not just through political and economic changes but also through the transformation of space. The influx of American products and consumer culture into post-reunification Germany signals the dominance of Western capitalism, effectively reshaping public spaces. Director Wolfgang Becker suggests that space is not merely a physical or geographical construct but a fluid and ideological entity that can serve as a site of resistance.

Despite the visible Americanization of public spaces—through advertisements, fast-food chains, and Western commodities—an alternative, imaginary socialist space emerges within the private sphere. This space, however, is not a continuation of actual socialism but rather a nostalgic reconstruction, highlighting the tension between memory and reality. While the characters attempt to preserve a sense of the past within their personal environments, the larger reality is that socialist space is in decline, giving way to the forces of global capitalism.

Irony plays a crucial role in the film's portrayal of this transition. The characters, especially Alex, maintain a deliberate distance from both the socialist past and the capitalist present. By fabricating an illusion of the GDR for his mother, Alex constructs a temporary

resistance against the encroachment of Western consumerism. However, this resistance is ultimately unsustainable, emphasizing the question of whether space is truly dictated by ideological structures, personal beliefs, or the overwhelming force of globalization. The film invites the audience to reflect on the limits of private space as a sanctuary from dominant cultural influences and whether such spaces can ever remain independent in a world shaped by powerful external forces.

In *Good Bye Lenin!*, longevity operates on both a personal and ideological level. On one hand, Alex's elaborate efforts to restore and maintain the familiar socialist environment of his mother's past are intended to protect her fragile health and extend her life. On the other hand, his actions transcend personal concern, evolving into a broader attempt to preserve the ideals of the former East Germany. By reconstructing an imaginary socialist world within the confines of their apartment, Alex not only shelters Christiane from the jarring realities of reunification but also resists the rapid disappearance of the socialist past. His carefully curated version of the GDR is not merely a nostalgic refuge—it becomes a utopian reimagination of what socialism could have been, untainted by its historical failures.

This recreation of space serves as a direct reaction to the encroaching forces of Western capitalism. In transforming their private home into a microcosm of a lost world, Alex resists the imposed consumerist culture that is reshaping public life outside their walls. His actions symbolize a counter-narrative to the dominant ideology, questioning whether the past can be sustained in memory even as it disappears in reality.

The concept of longevity in the film thus extends beyond Christiane's survival. It reflects a deeper struggle to uphold the socialist dream in the face of its collapse, revealing an irony in Alex's efforts: while he fights to keep his mother alive, he simultaneously attempts to breathe life back into an ideology that is already fading. His fabricated version of the GDR becomes a paradox—both a resistance to capitalist transformation and an illusion that cannot endure indefinitely. Ultimately, *Good Bye Lenin!* presents longevity as both a personal and ideological endeavor, showing how memory, resistance, and nostalgia interact in the face of irreversible historical change.

Good Bye Lenin!, that begins as a tragic-comic film about the survival of a mother, is not only a film on the longevity of human life, but also on the longevity of utopian socialism. Familial dreams of unity and welfare are prompted by the unity and welfare of the country which turns into a symbolic representation of the disintegration of a family. The film, therefore, follows the story of the young members of a family that is stuck in the overwhelming atmosphere of the Soviet controlled socialist rule due to their mother's devotion to communism. These young people, who wish to prolong their mother's health, would like a betterment in their life conditions. *Good Bye Lenin!* portrays yet another depression brought by capitalism. This turns the young members of the family towards their utopian dreams of socialism. As a result, survival of the mother becomes a metaphor for surviving in the new system. In a sense, the prolongation of life depends on the prolongation of social welfare. Thus, the prolongation of the mother's health relies on the prolongation of country's past in an allusive reference to the concept of motherland.

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