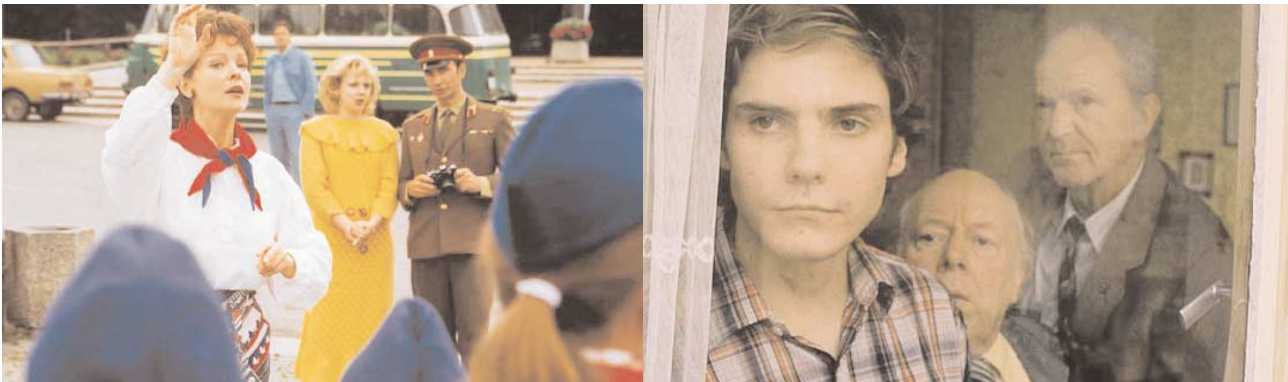


NSFW Resources 03

Goodbye Lenin

Hailed as the Best European Film at the 2003 Berlin Film Festival, *Goodbye Lenin* is set in East Germany around the time of the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The film provides a fleeting glimpse into one of the major events in modern European history, touching many important political and social issues. This heart-warming film took more money at the German box office in its first month than the Harry Potter films.



Film Synopsis

Wolfgang Becker's *Goodbye Lenin* is a Rip Van Winkle-style satire about one man's attempt to make history and time stand still, so he can protect his ill mother from the times political upheaval.

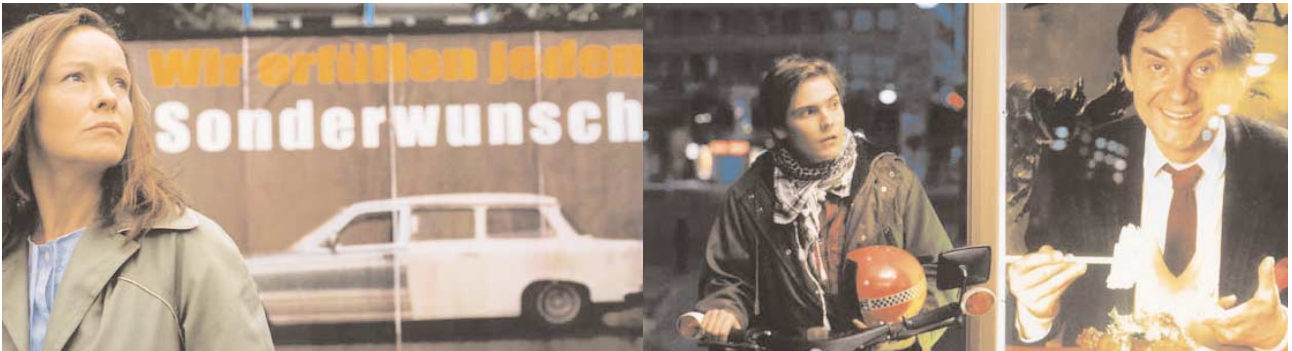
We first meet the Kerner family in 1989 on the eve of the German Democratic Republic's 40th anniversary; Twenty-year-old Alex lives with his mother Christiana and his sister Ariane. His father defected to the west ten years earlier. Christiana is a celebrated member of the Socialist party and a strong political activist, so when she sees her son taking part in an anti-government demonstration, she suffers a heart attack and falls into a coma. During the eight months she is unconscious, political events gather speed, the Berlin Wall is knocked down, the East German government is dismantled and capitalism invades from the west.

Because of her fragile condition Alex and Ariane decide that when their mother awakens they will keep all knowledge and reference to the changing world from her, to protect her from the shock, as advised by the doctors.

And, so begins their ridiculous plight to keep the German Democratic Republic (GDR) alive within the four walls of their apartment. Using farcical stunts, mixed with emotional scenes, the characters manage to explain away every glimpse of the western world that Christiana catches. Leaving her in ignorant bliss right up until the very end.

Key Developments in Berlin's History

Retracing the steps of the Kerners, *Goodbye Lenin* takes wry pot-shots at the ideologies of communism and capitalism, and turns this family crisis into a symbol of Germany's own attempt to heal old wounds and rebuild itself.



The historical context of the film is the dominant part of the plot and offers viewers with little or no knowledge of this political era an insight into how life was and how life changed so dramatically. For those with past experience of the time, it allows a chance to look back nostalgically and remember the good and the bad, of Germany's history and transformation.

Few capital cities have endured such a turbulent history as Berlin. At the end of the Second World War, the allied countries, the Soviet Union, Britain, America and France, signed 'the Potsdam Treaty', which defined the new borders for Germany and Berlin. During the decades that followed, Berlin became increasingly divided between the Soviet influenced east, and the British, USA and France influenced west. In 1961, the already separated city was finally split into two by the Berlin Wall. The Wall separated East Germany (the German Democratic Republic – GDR) from West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany – FRG).

The GDR held a tight reign over people's lives and the city, preaching the rule of communism; most East Germans lived a restricted existence. Families and friends were cut off from their loved ones, with many having little or no contact with them for over two decades.

The director, scriptwriter and lead actor in the film have strong personal links to East Berlin and have used their knowledge and personal experience to enhance the film's authenticity. Having worked hard to recreate East Berlin in 1989, Becker and his film crew sourced cars, clothes and other artefacts from the period, Wolfgang Becker states in an interview, that the cost of re-creating East Berlin in the 1980s, was completely underestimated, so they spent all the allocated budget in just two weeks.



● From watching the film what do you think life would have been like living in East Berlin? How does it differ to your life in the twenty-first century? Or life in the UK in the late 1980s?

● How would you feel if you lived in East Berlin? How would you feel about the wall getting progressively bigger and more impassable? Would you feel safer? Or would you feel more trapped?

● Has Becker recreated a believable East Berlin in the late 1980s?

● What is the connection between the film's title and the fall of the Berlin Wall?

Reflections of a Utopian City

Both Alex and director Wolfgang Becker create an almost utopian German Democratic Republic, which some film critics have complained is just too far away from the reality. The film makes no mention of the negative side of the political party. Of how they spied on their supporters, of Bautzen, the GDR's notorious torture prison for political rebels or the treatment of refugees attempting to leave the party.



- Why do you think Becker only chose to show mainly a positive side?
- How might the film's tone have changed if Becker had included more about the darker side of the government?

The Collapse of the Berlin Wall

Soon after Christiana sinks into a coma, the Berlin Wall falls to the ground. And with every piece of brick and spec of dust that falls, comes with it a new way of life.

The dismantling of the famous divide in 1989 was as significant as its construction. The wave of change brought with it a new economic social and political landscape. East Berlin residents suddenly had rights, freedom of speech, the right to vote in a range of political parties in democratic elections and freedom of movement. They could join free trade unions and negotiate with their employers for better pay and working conditions. Their newspapers, radio and TV were free and no longer censored or controlled by the state for propaganda purposes. Secret police forces no longer existed and there were no more political prisoners.



But such a dramatic transformation is not going to be without problems. Although the people of East Berlin were now 'free', this did not automatically mean that everyone was better off. The establishment of capitalism and lack of Soviet aid meant that many people lost jobs and became unemployed. Welfare schemes and social security payments were often reduced. Specialists (such as academics, scientists, artists and sportsmen and women) who were once paid by the communist state lost their funding. Governments could no longer afford large armies or police forces, which lead to another problem - an increase in crime and political violence.

While Christiana's generation relished the eastern lifestyle, the younger generation of East Berliners could not be less interested. Politics bored them rigid, and they were ready to welcome capitalism with open arms.

Alex's struggle to keep the reign of GDR alive was made worse by his mother's craving for her favourite East German delicacies like; Spreewald Pickles and Globus Peas, which proved almost impossible for Alex to find, in the now westernised supermarket aisles. The GDR products, devalued by the onslaught of western commodities and hated by Alex and Ariane, gained emotional value, as symbols of the old life to which their mother clings. Ariane on the other hand, is fuelled with desire to move on with the new lifestyle, which included her new western boyfriend and her new job at Burger King.



● Alex and Ariane make changes to the family apartment, while their mother is in hospital. What are these changes, and what do they symbolise about how life has altered?

● What other differences does the film highlight about the life under a communist and capitalist government?

The New East Berlin

Now free from the restrictions of communism and the reign of Erich Honecker, Alex and Ariane were able to enjoy the new rich pickings of the west. With their mother confined to bed, they were able to dress and live their lives as they wished. Alex and girlfriend Lara find an empty apartment, complete with furniture and GDR food, left behind when the owners fled to the west, after the collapse of the wall. Lara takes Alex to a party, where young people are drinking and dancing happily, while others take drugs. Such occasions would have been almost unheard of during Honecker's period in office.



● After the collapse of the wall, what obvious signs of capitalism does the film show?

The Use of Comedy

Alex's quest to save his mother's precious East Berlin provides several humorous moments throughout the course of the film. Using elements of slapstick and farce to portray some ludicrous parts of his plan, Becker's use of comedy against the backdrop of a city in turmoil, is extremely effective.

Evidence of Becker's playfulness continues with Alex's attempts to reproduce GDR style news bulletins, to broadcast to his bedridden mother. He uses the new reports to explain the glimpses of capitalism that his mother sees. Completely twisting reality, the manufactured recordings show westerners rushing to East Berlin realising the potential of a socialist system.



- What is the definition of slapstick/farce?
- Identify the scenes in the film where farce/slapstick is used.
- Discuss in a group what is the effect of Becker using comedy to address certain issues in the film.

● Should the Director have used more examples of comedy to illustrate the characters plights?

● The film has been criticised for dragging the story out longer than necessary. Did you think the story could have been shorter? Is there anything that you could leave out to make the film shorter, without losing the effect?



EXTENSION WORK

● As the film finishes, Alex and his family face a new and exciting life. But what might the future hold for them? Where will they live and work? Write a synopsis for a follow up to Goodbye Lenin. Include information on how the characters adapt to the new political reign and the western way of life.

● Why might the film get a better reception from a German audience, than in the UK?

F I L M
EDUCATION

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