

*Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003)

Directed and co-written by Wolfgang Becker, co-written by Bernd Lichtenberg

'[W]hat difference does it make once the lies have started?'

Is it better to tell the truth or to lie for apparently good reasons? The film poses this question on both a political and personal level. The plot revolves around Alex, who goes to absurd lengths to recreate the experience of living in the GDR for his bed-ridden, chauvinistically socialist mother after the Berlin Wall has fallen and on the eve of German reunification. In her condition, Alex rationalizes, any sudden shock would trigger a second, fatal heart attack.

What Alex knew of his family history was that his father had defected from East Germany with a Western woman and his mother had collapsed from the shock. She rallied only by identifying with the ideals of the East German State, becoming a conduit for people's complaints about the regime. She brought officials to task when the reality of people's lives did not live up to the socialist image the regime projected. Officials may be held to partial account at the level of the personal, but the regime survives—what doesn't kill it makes it stronger.

Alex's efforts to recreate what is increasingly an imaginary country—'A country that never existed in that form'—parody the Orwellian manipulation of reality that, the film implies, was standard fare in the actual GDR. His mother sees a giant poster advertising Coca Cola outside her flat, so Alex tells her that it is not a symbol of creeping westernization because scientists in East Germany had invented the formula for Coca-Cola in the 1950s. She sees scenes of the Berlin Wall being torn down and is told the GDR is now home to thousands of West German refugees who broke down the Wall *from the West*. They were fleeing the 'careerism and spiraling consumption' of West Germany—because 'the rat race isn't for everyone'.

In *Good Bye, Lenin!*, however, lies are still everywhere in the post-Wall GDR. Former cosmonaut, Sigmund Jähn, a hero of the GDR, is now driving a taxi. But he conceals his identity so people won't recognize how far he had fallen along with the Wall. The film is sensitive to what was lost in reunification, and who the losers were. We are given bitter glimpses of life in the new East, seen from the point of view of older workers, now unemployed in the competitive capitalist economy. Alex's sister drops out of university where she was studying economics and finds work at the take-out window at Burger King. Alex has to work as a door-to-door salesman, trying to sell satellite TV dishes to people who can't afford them.

The film's middle-of-the-road political summation on the GDR is pronounced by Sigmund Jähn, in an elaborate set-up posing as East Germany's new political leader: 'We know our country isn't perfect, but the ideals we believe in continue to inspire people all over the world. We might have lost sight of our goals at times, but we managed to regain our focus. Socialism isn't about walling yourself in; it's about reaching out to others and living with them. It means not only dreaming about a better world, but making it happen.'

The film's focus on the seamier side of reunification is not a matter of politics; rather, it's a pragmatic question. If people in Alex's social class had benefitted from the fall of the Wall, then maintaining the parody would be cruel. Only unpleasant truths must be hidden.

Nevertheless, revealing some of the negative consequences of the fall of East Germany compensates for the film's use of a conventionally banal plot device. It is commonplace in situation comedies that one character is being lied to and the rest of the cast have to maintain the fiction under increasingly compromised circumstances for no reason that can stand any critical scrutiny. The whole plot would unravel instantly if the truth would simply be outed, which, of course, is why it cannot be. So other characters, including Alex's sister, Lara, agree more or less uncomfortably to go along with the deception.

Also true to the convention, the big lie in the film inevitably becomes unraveled. In *Good Bye Lenin!* the lies and the truth-telling are both complex. Alex's mother confesses first: she had lied when she told Alex and Lara that their father had defected to the West to be with another woman. He had planned instead for his family to follow, but she had 'been terribly scared. You don't know what it's like'—a comment pregnant with the difficulties of daily life in the GDR. She would have waited years for an exit visa, and 'they' might have taken away her children. So she didn't leave. For three years, his father had written letters, but Alex's mother hid them behind the cupboards. 'It was the biggest mistake of my life. I know that now,' she confesses. Telling the truth after the lie is the hardest choice of all.

Alex helps his mother realize her dying wish: to see her husband once again. He finds his father in the West, living successfully in upper middle-class opulence. Alex enlists him in the fantasy, although at first his father says the ploy is absurd and he can't do it. Alex knows—and so does his father—what it takes to live a lie: 'It's hard at first, but it's easy once you start.'

But before they arrive in his mother fantasy world, Lara has spilled the beans to her dying mother: 'The border doesn't exist anymore. It doesn't exist anymore.... It's OK, it's just one country now.'

Alex thinks his mother has 'died happy', believing the lie he concocted. In fact, she died knowing the lie but not revealing her knowledge to Alex, turning the truth tables on him. Lara had wondered what difference another lie would make once the lies have started.

In the end, *Good Bye Lenin!* is not about telling political truths, which potentially make an important difference. What was the nature of the East German regime? What was lost with absorption by the capitalist West? Rather, the difference between truth and lies is simply personal: Alex's mother believed his deception was out of love, and she hid her newly revealed knowledge for the same reason. But wouldn't revealing this truth to Alex also be out of love? This lie is really for us—so we don't look back over the last two hours as wasted time. The film is like an over-cooked marshmallow: crusty on the outside; gooey and sickeningly sweet on the inside.