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The Post-Wall East German Melodrama

Damaged Masculinities in Andreas Kleinert's *Wege in die Nacht* and Peter Timm's *Der Zimmerspringbrunnen*

German reunification was for many an unexpected and sudden event. Former East Germany was quickly transformed, enabling the former GDR to be incorporated into the established culture and structures of the FRG. For many East Germans, this event was often marked by personal upheaval, as East German culture disappeared swiftly under the capitalist and democratic reforms of the early 1990s. As an accessible form of mass media, film became an important avenue for East Germans to make sense of a post-reunification world. Cinema's ability to visually represent the personal impact of the reforms in former East Germany made it an ideal vehicle for reflecting the particular East German experience of reunification. By telling stories based on individual experiences, post-wall reunification films seek to understand the disappearing East German history, culture, and political system. These films highlight a diverse variety of perspectives, ranging from gender, to employment status, to age. This study engages with a popular theme in German reunification film, exploring the perspectives and experiences of East German men.

As highlighted by popular post-1989 films dealing with life in GDR, like *Good Bye, Lenin!*, *Sonnenallee*, and *Go Trabi, Go!*¹ films on German reunification focus heavily on male-driven stories. These films present the experiences and struggles of various young, East German male protagonists and comedically tackle a variety of issues affecting their post-reunification transitions, from romance to family matters. Not all post-1989 films dealing with German reunification have been produced by East German directors, however. And while West German director Wolfgang Becker researched heavily for *Good Bye, Lenin!* in order to maintain authenticity, his arguably nostalgic take on German reunification was criticized by some scholars.² This work examines two examples of male driven narratives on reunification produced by East German

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¹ Nick Hodgkin, *Screening the East: Heimat, Memory and Nostalgia in German Film since 1989* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 27 -37.

² Mattias Frey, "Ostalgie, 'Historical Ownership, and Material Authenticity: *Good Bye, Lenin!* and *Das Leben der Anderen*," in *Postwall German Cinema: History, Film History, and Cinephilia* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 107.

directors, *Wege in die Nacht* (1999), directed by Andreas Kleinert, and *Der Zimmerspringbrunnen* (2001), directed by Peter Timm.

This article examines how these two post-1989 German films present the reunification process. Both films seek to understand how the rapidly changing environment affects the security of East German masculinity. German reunification thus acts as a trigger for the emasculation of the protagonists, and both films present their damaged masculine figures through the traditional East German medium of melodrama. By analyzing these films, a clearer picture emerges of the way in which the ruptures of German reunification caused damage to male identity in the former East Germany. This study traces the source of these crises and considers the alternatives available to these damaged masculine figures, as portrayed in both films.

The East German Male in Post-1989 Cinema

Post-unification cinema illuminates the intricacies of gender politics after reunification, especially the impact of the process on East German male experience. In many post-reunification films, the East German male makes sense of the fall of the Berlin Wall and attempts to adjust to the imposition of capitalism and Western culture.³ Both *Wege in die Nacht* and *Der Zimmerspringbrunnen* depict this experience by focusing on the personal lives of their male protagonists. These men fit within the cinematic archetype of a damaged man but they take opposite paths to overcome their damaged status in society.

Wege in die Nacht (1999) deals with the inner struggles of an unemployed East German man named Walter. In a style reminiscent of *film noir*, a genre typically depicting tough or even criminal masculine figures, the film highlights Walter's stark and violent reactions to the invading West.⁴ The blunt black-and-white visuals, in keeping with the *film noir* tradition, emphasize the violence, death, and sexual aggression present throughout the film.⁵ The film also seeks to show Walter's increasingly unstable emotional state and his crumbling relationships in the wake of his emasculation.

³ The most famous example being *Good Bye, Lenin!*

⁴ Frank Krutnik. *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*. London: Routledge, 1991. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), 75. Krutnik highlights the variety of masculine figures depicted in *film noir* in greater detail.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18. Krutnik outlines further the various commonalities in *film noir* but also recognizes the difficulties in fully describing the genre and the difficulties of placing these films securely within one genre. In this way, *Wege in die Nacht* can be analyzed as in part conforming to *film noir* as a genre while also containing elements of a male melodrama.

While his wife struggles to support them both with a meager waitressing job, Walter does not attempt to seek employment. Instead he visits the ruins of the East German electricity combine that he used to operate.⁶ At night Walter expresses his feelings of helplessness through vigilante justice, leading two West German youths through Berlin in search of crime. Walter eventually begins to take his frustrations out on his relationships and society, shooting one of his young accomplices, abusing his wife, and robbing a jewelry store at gunpoint. Walter seeks to repair his damaged masculinity by presenting himself as tough and controlling,⁷ but his character struggles constantly under the forces of capitalism and he eventually succumbs to this pressure by committing suicide.

In stark juxtaposition, Peter Timm depicts the comical triumphs of Hinrich, a struggling East German who embraces capitalism in reunified Berlin in *Der Zimmerspringbrunnen* (2001). This film is part of an emerging post-1989 trend which grapples with German reunification through humor. These *Mauerkomödien*, or Berlin Wall comedies, utilize nostalgia and humor in order to depict GDR experiences in a light-hearted manner.⁸ These comedies saw great commercial success in the immediate years after the fall of the Berlin Wall.⁹

In *Der Zimmerspringbrunnen*, the viewer meets Hinrich after he has reached a state of personal and professional impotency. He has clearly struggled for some time to find gainful employment and is supported by his successful wife, a Berlin architect named Julia. Hinrich soon finds

⁶ Daniela Berghahn, "East German Cinema After Unification," in *German Cinema Since Unification*, ed. by David Clarke. (London: Continuum, 2006), 93. This is never explicitly stated in film but is implied through Walter's interactions with the ruins and with his former GDR colleagues.

⁷ Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street*, 100 – 101. Walter's behavior conforms to the traditional issues of masculinity presented in *film noir*, which often present male figures whose masculinity is judged based on how "tough" they are.

⁸ Helen Cafferty, "Sonnenallee: Taking Comedy Seriously in Unified Germany," in *Textual Responses to German Unification: Processing Historical and Social Change in Literature and Film*, ed. by Carol Anne Costabile-Heming, Rachel J. Halverson, Kristie A. Foell, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 254-6. These films are not without their critics. Many viewed this comedic and *Ostalgie* treatment of the GDR to be reductive and dismissive of the trauma felt by many due to the coercive actions of the East German state.

⁹ Hodgin, *Screening the East*, 102-3. *Der Zimmerspringbrunnen* in some ways harkens back to this early use of droll comedy to express the immediate experience of reunification. Comedy became an increasingly more difficult genre with which to treat the experience of unification after the difficult economic and political realities of German reunification materialized.

work as a traveling salesman selling tacky water fountain displays. Despite his newfound employment, Julia remains disappointed with Hinrich's lack of professional success and confidence, and she eventually leaves him. Hinrich then only overcomes his status as a loser by commercially exploiting the *Ostalgie* movement. He modifies the fountain display with a *Fernsehturm* and a cutout of the GDR, and his product becomes widely successful in former East Germany. This success instills Hinrich with the confidence and qualifications necessary to win back the love of his wife.

The Role of the Melodrama

With their interest in family issues and emotionally charged experience, both films illustrate the use of male melodrama. While definitions of the melodrama vary and the genre is often very broadly defined,¹⁰ it is perhaps best described as a “form of expression that disrupts the reality of a text to allow for subversion and alternate meanings to surface,” often done through tactical use of “...emotion, music, and gesture”¹¹ Melodramas may also utilize “strong emotionalism, moral polarization, and overt schematization.” These cinematic tools enable the audience to experience the intended emotional response and allow them to understand the underlying message or critique.¹²

Many DEFA filmmakers used melodrama to subversively express their messages.¹³ Officially, GDR melodramas were used to reinforce the socialist state's anti-fascist ideals.¹⁴ The tradition stemmed from the use of melodrama in Weimar cinema but was utilized in the GDR in order to understand the trauma of postwar Germany.¹⁵ *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (1946), for instance, used melodramatic elements to enhance the anti-fascist message conveyed by the experiences of a doctor in the immediate postwar period. The emotionally driven narrative style common to the melodramatic genre enabled a focus on interpersonal and domestic

¹⁰ Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 71. Doane speaks in depth about the difficulties of defining melodrama, a form that strives to make its subtext obvious and understandable to all.

¹¹ Philippa Gates, “The Man's Film: Woo and the Pleasures of Male Melodrama,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 35, no. 1 (2001): 61.

¹² Anke Pinkert, *Film and Memory in East Germany*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 23.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Barton Byg, “DEFA and the Traditions of International Cinema,” in *DEFA: East German Cinema 1946-1992*, ed. by Sean Allan and John Sandford, (Oxford, NY: Berghahn Books, 1999), 29.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

conflicts.¹⁶ East German melodramas continued to be a popular genre throughout the life of the GDR, one of the most famous being *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (1972) by Heiner Carow.¹⁷ Carow continued to employ melodrama as a vehicle for critiquing society after the *Wende*, directing films like *Die Verfehlung* (1991), which addresses the impact of reunification on former East German citizens.¹⁸

As part of the East German predilection for the genre, melodrama focusing on heterosexual love affairs was a common genre employed in East German DEFA cinema.¹⁹ While melodrama derives from a typically feminine film tradition that focuses on female protagonists and caters to a feminine audience, it was effectively developed to include masculine perspectives.²⁰ German melodramas as a whole depicted some male figures as “instantaneously salvable through a women’s affirmation or as hopelessly lost in a realm of mental debilitation or insanity.”²¹ The melodramatic genre therefore allowed a director to depict an inter-personal crisis while subtly critiquing the social structures or traumatic event throwing the individuals into said turmoil. Post-1989 male-centered melodrama similarly uses nostalgic and emotional narrative to highlight issues of trauma, adjustments to capitalism, and damaged masculinities. In some cases, including Hinrich’s redemption in *Der Zimmerspringbrunnen*, the melodrama creates an escape from social strife by

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Joshua Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary: Depictions of Daily Life in East German Cinema, 1949-1989*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 231. and Berghahn, “East German Cinema After Unification,” in Clarke, *German Cinema Since Unification*, 91.

¹⁸ Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary*, 237. Feinstein also highlights how melodrama was a traditional cinematic genre in DEFA cinema not only used by Carow but by other East German directors.

¹⁹ Byg, “DEFA and the Traditions of International Cinema,” 30.

²⁰ Phil Powrie, Bruce Babington, and Ann Davis, “Turning the Male Inside Out,” in *The Trouble With Men: Masculinities in European and Hollywood Cinema*, ed. by Phil Powrie, Bruce Babington, and Ann Davis, (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 4. Powrie et al. argue that the association of the melodrama with women’s films allows scholars, such as in the anthology by Kirkham and Thurmin, access to the problematic aspects of masculinity, specifically damaged masculinity.

²¹ Pinkert, *Film and Memory in East Germany*, 24. Pinkert argues that this form of dealing with post-war masculinity representations of “narrative fetishism,” which postpones the resolution of mourning through “undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness.” By expunging the trauma within the narrative, the act of mourning can be skipped over and the posttraumatic period is indefinitely postponed. Pinkert draws upon these ideas from the work of Eric Santner.

offering up a “happy ending”, such as marriage.²² In this way, both Walter’s self-destructiveness and Hinrich’s successes embody the two extremes of melodramatic film.

Damaged Men

A common theme in male-centered melodrama is the struggle of a damaged man seeking to transcend an overbearing, external force. The typical damaged man is not internally flawed but instead experiences a trauma that changes his circumstances and emasculates him.²³ The polarizing and sudden nature of German reunification plays precisely this role in post-wall melodrama.²⁴ This force or focusing event damages the masculinity of the central male figure driving the melodrama.²⁵ The damaged East German man as a character has its origins in postwar DEFA films, such as *Wozzeck* (1947), which depicted the life of a soldier reacting violently to the instability of his environment and his wife’s infidelity.²⁶

For the East German male after 1989, the instability of reunified Germany and the imposition of capitalism threatens his masculinity and throws him into a state of crisis. In both *Wege in die Nacht* and *Der Zimmerspringbrunnen*, personal crises affect both Walter and Hinrich. They struggle primarily with adapting to capitalism and its westernized version of masculinity. This new masculinity, defined by West German culture, pressures them to become indispensable breadwinners, a largely capitalistic notion of the male gender role.²⁷ At least initially unable to

²² Thomas Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama” in *Film Genre Reader, III* ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 4.

²³ Powrie, “Turning the Male Inside Out,” 12.

²⁴ Kristie A. Foel, “History of Melodrama: German Division and Unification in Two Recent Films,” in *Textual Responses to German Unification: Processing Historical and Social Change in Literature and Film*, ed. by Carol Anne Costabile-Heming, Rachel J. Halverson, Kristie A. Foell (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 233.

²⁵ Nicola Rehling, *Extra-ordinary Men: White Heterosexual Masculinity in Contemporary Popular Culture*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 3. Rehling argues that when studying masculinity in crisis, “it is more productive to pay attention to which particular forms of male insecurities are made manifest at specific historical junctures.”

²⁶ Pinkert, *Film and Memory in East Germany*, 70. Pinkert uses the film *Wozzeck* (1947) to exemplify its physically damaged male protagonist, who represents the larger dialogue on instable masculinity, sexuality, and familial relationships in the postwar environment.

²⁷ David Clarke, “Representations of East German Masculinity in Hannes Stohr’s *Berlin is in Germany* and Andreas Kleinert’s *Wege in die Nacht*,” in *German Life and*

coope with this sudden redefinition of masculinity, Walter and Hinrich both typify the damaged male or male in crisis trope during their attempts to navigate the newly unified German culture.²⁸

For both protagonists, their masculinity collapses along with the Berlin Wall. The unified German state and the imposition of capitalism subvert their free agency. In *Wege in die Nacht*, Walter eventually comes to view his masculinity as irreparably damaged. He becomes increasingly unable to embrace capitalism and remains loyal to the disappearing GDR. Walter befriends two West German youths named Gina and Rene, whom he instructs to disrupt minor crimes as part of a vigilante campaign, often encouraging them to intervene in aggressive ways. They eventually confront Walter's remaining allegiances to the GDR, which he responds to by violently shooting Gina in the leg. Walter's expressions of discontent increase in severity. He begins to commit more violent acts, ranging from physical abuse to armed robbery, eventually culminating in his suicide.

Contrasting with Walter's struggles, *Der Zimmerspringbrunnen's* Hinrich recognizes that he can overcome his emasculation by embracing capitalism. He becomes a thriving entrepreneur profiting off of his fellow East Germans who are reluctant to let go of the GDR. This attitude allows Hinrich to succeed in both his professional and personal life in a way that Walter cannot. These opposing melodramatic endings of violence and triumphalism highlight the varied responses to damaged masculinity.

Melodramatic Damaged Men

While Walter and Hinrich react differently to their emasculations, both men seek to reassert themselves as strong masculine figures, leading to tensions between them and their female partners. Hinrich and Walter link their marital conflicts to their crumbling masculinities. The struggle between the male protagonists and their wives plays a pivotal role in their crumbling masculinities. Ultimately, these issues of emasculation and love

Letters 55, no. 4 (2002): 457. Clarke delves further into this idea of a distinctly East German masculinity, one that was threatened by the cultural colonialism of capitalism. Clarke argues that because East German women were mostly employed, though in no way always equally to men, East German men were not pressured to be the sole breadwinners like their West German counterparts.

²⁸ Powrie, "Turning the Male Inside Out," 12-13. This trope has appeared in Hollywood films in the 1980s and 90s as a reaction to both the feminist movement and to illustrate the pressures of masculinity on men who fail to live up to these norms. The key aspect of this trope is the ability of these men to overcome the forces emasculating them and to restore themselves as pristine masculine figures.

drive both men's attempts to overcome the social circumstances restricting their agency. They both are sent out into the capitalist system to attempt to resolve their status as damaged masculine figures, yet they arrive at opposing conclusions.

Walter expresses his internal crisis and discontents through abusive and eventually violent acts against society, his friends, and his wife. Throughout the film, Walter takes advantages of his wife's dotting kindness and concern. She provides for them both with her job, even handing him money to buy something when he visits her at work. He in turn stays out late at the local casino to flirt with the female bartender and drink heavily. After these late nights out, he comes home and passes out, leaving his wife to care for him.

Walter also becomes obsessed with a loud, jarring jazz album he acquires from Gina, which he blasts throughout the house at a deafening level. The jazz music seems to tonally express Walter's brewing internal conflict. In one particularly poignant scene, Walter snaps into a fit of jealous rage when his wife turns off his loud music. He then accosts her for bringing home a friend and asks her why she will be working late that day. Walter accuses her of being intentionally deceptive, forces her to call her boss, and eventually hits her. As in the shooting of Gina, Walter transitions in this moment from internal or vicarious violence to physical expressions of it.

Unemployed and reliant upon his wife for income, Walter becomes emasculated through the obvious role reversals between him and his wife.²⁹ Throughout the film, he revisits the dismantled remnants of his former East German workplace, staring silently at the crumbled ruins. While the film does not employ flashbacks, Walter's behavior and words clearly illustrate how he longs for the structure of the GDR, a society in which he flourished. He makes no attempts to find a job in the new capitalist world. He only seeks to gain a sense of belonging through his late night vigilante rides through Berlin. Walter's refusal to adapt leads to his eventual downfall.

Walter resorts to violence to express his discontent and to reassert his masculine power. His reliance on violence as expressed in his interactions with Gina and Rene escalates over the course of the film. He initially only encourages Gina and Rene's policing, using them as proxies for his need to control the changing society. Under Walter's gaze, Gina and Rene commit harsh interventions against minor criminals. Eventually Walter becomes unsatisfied with vicarious violence. He begins utilizing direct violence by coercing a man to jump off a moving train, shooting Gina, and forcing Rene to assist him in robbing a jewelry store at

²⁹ Hodgin, *Screening the East*, 144.

gunpoint.³⁰

His suicide becomes the ultimate expression of his inability to overcome his damaged masculinity. This act of self-harm also contradicts the tradition of East German cinema, which forbid portrayals of violent death and suicide, since these deviated from the normal trope of loyal and heroic deaths at the hands of enemies of the state.³¹ Walter's death therefore defies the cinematic tradition of East German melodrama and its history of censorship, but it also highlights the parallels between his own self-destruction and that of the GDR state crumbling before his eyes.³² Just before committing suicide, Walter watches the demolition of an East German building, signifying the link between his disappearing life and the vanishing East German culture and state.

Opposing this defeatist narrative, *Der Zimmerspringbrunnen's* Hinrich exemplifies the stereotypical "loser" who overcomes his powerlessness.³³ For Hinrich, his loser status impacts his relationships and forces him to seek change. At the outset of the film, Hinrich inverts the conventional vision of the western nuclear family by staying at home and preparing meals for his wife, Julia. While she has a successful career as an architect, Hinrich seems unmotivated to find a job of equal prestige. Julia directly ties Walter's inability to gain professional success with his worth as both a husband and a lover. After Hinrich fails to live up to the ideal of a male breadwinner, Julia leaves him for her charming, West German boss. Their separation becomes the catalyst for Hinrich's change and his embracement of capitalism. For Hinrich, financial independence and success is the key to overcoming all of his personal roadblocks.³⁴

Hinrich's success originates in his complete adaptation to capitalism and his manipulation of *Ostalgie*. Like Walter, Hinrich experiences disappointment in the wake of reunification. The film similarly remains grounded in the present and makes few overt references to the past. The audience remains unsure if Hinrich was ever successful in the GDR. What becomes clear, however, is that his unemployment and

³⁰ Berghahn, "East German Cinema After Unification," 93. Berghahn elaborates further on Walter's internalization of his powerlessness and his need to express it through violence.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 91.

³² Berghahn, "East German Cinema After Unification," 93. Berghahn links Walter's suicide with his craving for totalitarian power and control over a rapidly changing society. His inability to find power in the new system, Berghahn argues, leads Walter into a state of hopelessness.

³³ David Clarke, *German Cinema Since Unification*, (London: Continuum with University of Birmingham Press: 2006), 2-3.

³⁴ Hodgin, *Screening the East*, 168.

loser status stem, in part, from the forces of reunification. But employment is not the sole solution to overcoming his masculinity crisis. Because his career lacks prestige, Julia and her sister immediately criticize Hinrich's job as a traveling salesman instead of applauding it. Hinrich's attempts to overcome the impact of reunification are thus ridiculed by those close to him because he has not conformed to the high expectations that capitalism places upon him as a man.

Hinrich, however, views the job as an opportunity, and he embraces capitalism to an extreme. He successfully manipulates the nostalgic needs of his East German compatriots. By tapping into the money making potential of *Ostalgie* products, Hinrich gains recognition from his boss and later the company as a whole. By winning this recognition as a strong, masculine capitalist, he is able to impress his estranged wife. After winning her back with his newfound success and confidence, Julia remarks with pride that Hinrich has become, "*ein genauer Kapitalisten*," or a true capitalist. Only once he has overcome his personal and professional impotence does Hinrich overcome his status as a damaged male. It is telling that, through his embrace of the new post-reunification economic system, Hinrich achieves success and stability in his personal and private relationships.

Conclusions

The films discussed in this work present a contrasting vision of masculine crisis in post-unification Germany. Both films conform to or acknowledge the cinematic relevance of melodrama in the GDR, focusing on interpersonal relationships and the male figures' shifting roles within society. *Wege in die Nacht* seeks to reject the usual outcome of the GDR melodrama. The strategic use of *film noir* style portrays a disturbed man struggling to find a place in a Germany that no longer needs him. His eventual self-implosion further subverts the ideals of GDR melodrama, which for ideological reasons shied away from violence and especially suicide. On the other end of the spectrum lies *Der Zimmerspringbrunnen*, a perversion of the melodrama, which uses the techniques of a Hollywood-style romantic comedy. After embracing capitalism via the manipulation of *Ostalgie*, Hinrich overcomes all barriers westernization poses for him.

Taken together, these films highlight the damaging force of instability brought on by reunification. Both Walter and Hinrich react differently to the loss of the GDR state. Despite Walter's best and most extreme efforts, he cannot change the gender and power imbalances in his relationships with individuals and society. Compounding this loss of masculinity with the further pressures to conform to capitalism, Walter forever ties himself to the GDR state that provided him with success and recognition. Rejected by society, jobless, and incapable of providing for

his wife, he finds no place for himself in the rapidly evolving environment that is quickly ridding itself of any remnants of the GDR. Walter thus decides to disappear along with East German society. In stark contrast, Hinrich's identity does not appear to be tied as closely to the GDR as Walter's sense of self. Hinrich shows no remorse for embracing capitalism and profiting off of the *Ostalgie* phenomenon. He instead quickly severs his ties to the GDR and his former East German masculinity, adopting the necessary measures to conform to his newly westernized reality. In the end, he concerns himself primarily with his professional success because it enables him to succeed in his private life. Thus, while the fall of the Berlin Wall threw East German masculinity into crisis, the ultimate ability of the individual to adapt is the key to repairing these damaged masculinities.

