

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Goodbye Lenin

Credits:

Production: Germany 2003.

Running Time: 1 hour, 58 min.

Director: Wolfgang Becker

Screenplay: Wolfgang Becker, Bernd Lichtenberg

Producer: Stefan Arndt

Editor: Peter R. Adam

Cast: Alex Kerner

Ariana Kerner

Mutter

Lara

Daniel Brühl

Maria Simon

Katrin Sass

Chulpan Khamatova

Précis – Brian Conboy

At the beginning of *Goodbye Lenin* we are presented, through the metaphor of a Russian space launch during the 1970s, all the hopes, dreams and ideals of youth and certainly of the social and political experiment that was the German Democratic Republic. Concurrently we are given the reality: a repressive police state and a population in despair. This juxtaposition between radically conflicting ideals and realities, indeed the compulsion to construct and maintain elaborate lies to create the illusion of the ideal, is presented again and again in the story and forms its thematic basis.

Alexander Kerner lives as a young adult with his mother and sister in East Berlin during the tumultuous time before and during the collapse of the communist regime. Years before his father escaped to West Berlin and abandoned the family, ostensibly for another woman. Alex's mother is a dedicated communist, a teacher, a communist party member and community activist. She works and advocates tirelessly for the betterment of her community, for women and particularly for children.

In the crucial year of 1989, Alex, having already lost faith in the system, participates in a street demonstration against the government. His mother coincidentally happens on the scene in time to witness her son being arrested and carted off by the police. She collapses in shock from a heart attack and subsequently falls into a deep coma. While she lies unconscious in the hospital the amazing political events of that time proceed apace. The Berlin Wall falls, soon followed by the East German government itself. When the mother awakens from her coma after nine months the doctors sternly warn that any amount of stress or trauma could trigger another perhaps fatal heart attack.

Thereafter Alex dedicates himself to the construction of an elaborate façade: that the GDR is still alive and well. He scours the neighborhood for his mother's favorite East German foods and products, which are fast being

replaced by products from the west. He even produces fake East German news broadcasts. The film features much of this *ostalgia*, or nostalgia for the GDR and its myriad foods, products and social peculiarities, often with very comedic effect.

The film is about lying: not just a simple lie but the sort of pervasive dishonesty that permeates individuals, families and especially entire cultures. Alex's façade, motivated by his tender devotion to his mother, gradually evolves into an absurd dogma, and he clings to it long past reason and necessity. If the hypocrisies, lies and injustices of the communist system are clearly presented in the film, western capitalism is in no way given a free pass. After the initial euphoria of the collapse of communism, the realities of capitalism begin to set in. Alex's school principal, formerly a respected member of his community, becomes an unemployed alcoholic. Other former citizens of the GDR complain bitterly of the devastation of losing work. Alex's family loses all of their savings when the East German currency is eliminated, and Alex's sister must work a menial job in a Burger King. Moreover, the glamorous culture from the west that invades soon after the collapse is repeatedly viewed as glitzy, superficial and materialistic.

Goodbye Lenin is a political film as well as a family drama and comedy. Its worldview lies distinctly outside the boundaries of mainstream western ideology and has the temerity to dispute several universal assumptions. It gives us a mother and citizen, who sincerely believed in and worked for the core values of socialist community and the betterment of society, and did so with honesty and decency despite the repressive nature of the regime. The film also quite clearly avers that western capitalism, despite massive promotion and public relations which tell us that we are at the pinnacle of civilization, is permeated by superficial materialism and brings its own forms of despair and hardship. Intertwined with this perhaps unsettling political message is a family drama full of humor, honor for its characters and family devotion. It skillfully balances its jokes and absurdities with family tragedy and bitter-sweet emotions. It gives us universal

values and ideals, which like the rocket burst in the final scene, forming a perfect bookend with the opening scene, soar above the gritty politics on the ground.

Biography:

Wolfgang Becker was born in 1954 in Hemer/Westphalia and studied German, History and American Studies at the Free University in Berlin. He followed this with a job at a sound studio in 1980 and then began studies at the German Film & Television Academy (dffb). He started working as a freelance cameraman in 1983 and graduated from the dffb in 1986.

Selected Filmography:

Kinderspiele (1992)
Das Leben ist eine Baustelle (1997)
Good Bye, Lenin! (2003)