

sion and the political requirements of the system, yet he continues to go on with his work and life. His son Sascha (Alexander Fehling) on the other hand has drawn a different conclusion and escapes to the West shortly before the birthday celebration of his grandfather, abandoning his girlfriend and their son.

Umnitzer's wife Irina suffers because of her separation from her Russian homeland. She drowns her *Heimweh* for her *Heimat* in alcohol. Her marriage is only an arrangement on the basis of their common past in the Soviet Union, even though tender moments happen occasionally. Umnitzer has an affair with another woman. Although Irina knows of this affair, they continue their marriage.

During the birthday celebration the broken family relationships intersect with the rituals of state order. Both the personal and the political are in a state of flux, necessarily yet barely cohering. The disappointing fates of the various characters are thrown into sharp relief through subtly evocative sequences and scenes. In this setting, the emptiness of the enacted rituals is starkly apparent. A state of uncertainty envelopes everything as everyone moves across the thin ice of the crumbling DDR. Thus we are given the spectacle of a dysfunctional family going through the motions of continuing to function within a dysfunctional society that will soon cease to function altogether.

This film is richly realized in every aspect. The casting is outstanding, with convincing performances even in the supporting roles. Bruno Ganz impresses with a remarkable portrayal of senility and clarity. The visual qualities (the grey and brown tones, the indoor setting, the massive furniture) engender a morbid mood which intensifies the prevailing theme of failure and frustration. Almost thirty years have passed since the peaceful revolution in East-Germany. During this time there have been very few movies that have achieved a compelling, multi-faceted portrayal of the DDR. This film belongs among that very few.

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Friday Film Fest Series



In Zeiten des abnehmenden Lichts

Directed by Matti Geschonnek

January 18, 2019

• 6:30 PM •

Film, Food & Discussion

The German Society of PA

611 Spring Garden St.

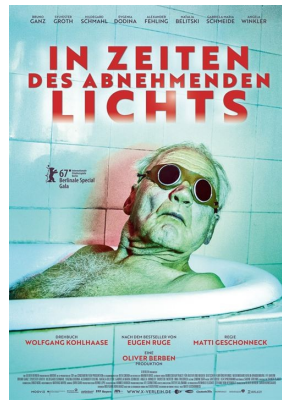
215-627-2332

Support provided in part by the
Philadelphia Cultural Fund.



In Zeiten des abnehmenden Lichts (In Times of Fading Light) (2017)

Director: Matti Geschonnek
Screen play: Wolfgang Kohlhaase
Eugen Ruge
Production: Oliver Berben
Sarah Kirkegaard
Dieter Salzmann
Camera: Hannes Hubach
Cut: Dirk Grau
Length: 101 Min
Cast: Bruno Ganz as Wilhelm Powileit
Sylvester Groth as Kurt Umnitzer
Hildegard Schmahl as Charlotte Powileit
Yevgeniya Dodina as Irina Umnitzer
Alexander Fehling as Alexande (Sascha) Umnitzer
Gabriele Maria Schmeide as Lisbeth
Commentary: English translation of the German text written by **Diplom-Sozialwirt Norbert Voss – Hannover/Germany**



Tragic Comedy

This movie is based on the book of the same title that won the German Book Prize in 2011. The author, Eugen Ruge, grew up in East-Germany (GDR/DDR) and celebrated his debut as a writer with this book. Director Matti Geschonnek and scriptwriter Wolfgang Kohlhaase, are from the former DDR as well.

Ruge tells the history of the DDR through two families, spanning over fifty years and three generations. The movie employs a method akin to the structure of a chamber play, compressing the essence of the book in space and time to a select few locations and days. The pivotal event is the 90th birthday celebration of comrade Wilhelm Powileit in East-Berlin.

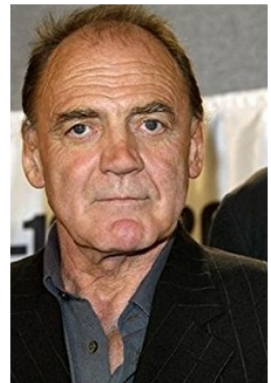
Powileit (Bruno Ganz), renowned as an old resistance fighter and exemplary socialist, ended up in Mexico with his wife during the chaos of World War II. Later he helped to build the DDR as a head of personnel or party cadre ("Kaderleiter"). By now he is a senile, self-righteous dogmatist whose political insights have been reduced to slogans.

The setting is the early fall of 1989 shortly before the "peaceful revolution" in the DDR. The guests enter the decrepit villa one by one and express their congratulations to the old man who sits in his chair and endures the

celebration with obvious displeasure. Within this mise en scene the movie unfolds a societal panorama of failed hopes and utopian schemes through the sobering stories of the family members who attend. There is Powileit himself– ostensibly the central figure of the movie, at least in appearance. He seems to struggle with the stigma of not having gone to Moscow like so many other German communists but instead to far away Mexico.

It is not entirely clear why Mexico became his place of exile. At one juncture it is suggested that Stalin gave him the order to assassinate Trotsky, but this seems dubious. Obviously an exile in Mexico didn't have the cachet of an exile in the Soviet Union. An exile in a Latin American country was seen as too comfortable and not effectively engaged in the fight against Nazi-Germany. Powileit attempts to deflect this painful awareness by launching sharp reproaches against his stepson, due to the latter's incarceration in a soviet labor camp during World War 2.

His wife Charlotte (Hildegard Schmahl) who had two sons from a previous marriage, had married Powileit in the thirties. She followed her husband to Mexico while her children were sent to Moscow for apparent safety reasons. The shared exile in Mexico seems to have been a positive experience for Charlotte that still reverberates. The winter-garden of her house in East-Berlin is decorated with exotic plants that seems to remind her of her Mexican past. Bitterness and mistrust dominate their marital relationship at the core.



Bruno Ganz

Her son Kurt Umnitzer (Sylvester Groth), Powileit's stepson, emerges as the central figure of the movie. Through the lens of his life, we see juxtaposed the disappointments and contradictions of the people's experiences against the backdrop of the historic development of the communist social experiment. At the end of the thirties he had come to Moscow with his brother, wanting to fight against Hitler. But at the beginning of the German invasion of the Soviet Union both were deported to a labor camp in the East, presumably because of the mistrust of their German heritage. Kurt spent ten years there, witnessing the death of his brother through hunger and cold, and meeting his wife Irina (Evgenia Dodina).

Despite these conflicting experiences, Umnitzer becomes a history professor at the university when he returns to the DDR after the war, thus becoming part of an academic milieu that legitimizes the socialist system. He manifestly suffers from the tension between the principles of his profes-