

## On the Construction of Socialist East Germany in Contemporary German Film

Mandy Tröger

Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich

Daria Gordeeva

Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.6093/2532-6732/7472>

### Abstract

Though the German Democratic Republic (GDR) collapsed in 1990, after 41 years of existence, the socialist state lives on – in schoolbooks, museums, novels, films and in the memories of those who witnessed the “workers’ and peasants’ state.” With GDR memory being a highly embattled discourse in Germany more generally, we ask how the GDR is constructed in German film. This means more specifically, what stories are being told and what interpretations suggested within the broader GDR memory discourse? To answer these questions, we offer a comparative three-level-analysis of the feature films *Balloon* (2018) and *Sealed Lips* (2019). Looking at the film-immanent, the structural and the actor-centered level, we find that East German directors, producers or actors can bring different albeit divergent perspectives on the GDR in film whose construction is currently dominated by West German elites.

**Keywords:** German Democratic Republic; Film Analysis; Cultural Memory; Pluri-medial Networks.

### 1. Introduction

“There are people who [...] gloss over this dictatorship, this system of oppression. It’s difficult to understand” (Seidl, 2019). This statement was made by well-known German director Michael “Bully” Herbig. His lack of understanding referred to narratives about the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The small socialist state that existed from 1949 until German unification in 1990 provides the setting for his thriller *Balloon* (*Ballon*) (2018). Showing “one of the most spectacular GDR escapes in collective German-German memory” (von Uslar, 2018), *Balloon* celebrated a huge national success with almost one million visitors (FFA, 2019). The film has also been shown internationally, made the pre-selection for the German Film Awards 2019 and received the German Film Award for Peace – The Bridge. According to critics, the film offers “cinema-appropriate GDR history for a large audience” (Kürten, 2018) and has everything a box office hit needs: a grippingly clear story, well-known actors, lots of promotion and money. “A great spectacle,” concludes Herbig’s German colleague Bernd Böhlich.

Also Böhlich released a film about the GDR in 2019. *Sealed Lips* (*Und der Zukunft zugewandt*) (2019) tells the story of German communists in the GDR in the 1950s. The film shows “how the failure [of the GDR] has already been inscribed in its great lie of the beginning” (Elstermann, 2019). *Sealed Lips* is a movie close to Böhlich’s heart. Addressing a different topic and audience, Böhlich is critical of Herbig’s “very one-sided”

representation of the GDR in *Balloon*: its protagonists suffer in an oppressive socialist dictatorship and can find happiness only in the free capitalist West. It makes Böhlich “angry” when movies dealing with the GDR only tell “sensational stories about the Stasi [State Security Service], doping [in sports] and barbed wire. Unfortunately, nowadays, there is far too much of this mediated crap.”

This article addresses these issues of representation of the GDR in German film. In doing so, it responds to a predominantly German body literature and allows for glimpses into battles over shaping memories in film that are generally reserved for a German-speaking academic community. Though there is no lack of English-language literature on the topic (i.e. Hodgkin, 2011), our focus on German literature and debates (or the lack thereof) also speaks to the state of Film Studies in Germany more generally. The overarching question (who tells what sort of history by means of film and why) is of increasing relevance regardless of disciplines and national boundaries.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, various institutions have been struggling to define the “correct memory” of the GDR in Germany (Seegers, 2008, p. 38). Also 30 years after German unification, the actual spectrum of memories and remembrance offered in museums, schoolbooks, media and feature films still is limited. Martin Sabrow’s (2009) much-cited memory typology is helpful to understand the issue. In a “tripolar force field” between the memory of dictatorship, arrangement and progress “the GDR past is renegotiated on a daily basis” (p. 20). “Memory of arrangement” means: telling everyday live stories from an East German perspective. The focus is self-assertion under difficult conditions and pride in what has been achieved. By “memory of progress” Sabrow means maintaining the idea that socialism does offer a legitimate alternative to capitalism. The third ideal type, the “memory of dictatorship,” focuses on political oppression and its courageous overcoming in the peaceful protests of 1989. This means, the GDR experience is primarily interpreted through the eyes of perpetrators, victims and resistance. In Germany, this latter type became the institutionalized collective memory. It, thus, is dominant in media discourse, political debates, academic research, literature and museums (Eigler, 2005; Klinge, 2015; Meyen, 2013).

Historical feature films are part of this collective memory. Although they only provide a highly subjective and selective construction of the past, they are central to the interpretation and narration of history. While “university-level studies and school education have lost their ‘information monopoly in matters of history’ – if they ever had it” (Wende, 2011, p. 9), the so-called “histotainment” is on the rise. Films transform a “‘dead’ story into a living cinematic present” (Fischer & Schuhbauer, 2016, p. 22), make history tangible and reach the hearts and souls of the audience partly due to their emotional content. All channels combined (from cinema to TV to online streaming services), no other memory agent reaches more people in a given period of time. Thus, film is the “leading medium of cultural memory” (Ertl & Wodianka, 2008, p. 1), whereby filmmakers (directors, producers, authors) play a key role in conveying historical “reality.”

Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck’s internationally acclaimed Stasi drama *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*) (2006) serves as an excellent example for the influence of film on historical narratives. “In Germany today, but also and especially abroad, no feature film – and possibly no other media product – has shaped the idea of the former GDR as long-lasting as the Oscar winner” (Winkler, 2009). Of course, this success is only “the tip of the iceberg.” In Germany, the cinematic representation of the GDR remains a battleground in the construction of memory more generally. In this battle, competing

narratives are transformed into specific depictions of the GDR past in accordance with current socio-political discourses and interests.

In the following, we ask how the GDR is constructed in contemporary German film by means of a comparative analysis of the films *Balloon* and *Sealed Lips*. We ask what sort of GDR narratives do these films depict, what interpretations of the GDR do they suggest, and what contribution do they make to the larger memory discourse? In answering these questions, this article offers a method and findings that can be applied to other case studies in other national contexts.

## **2. *Balloon* and *Sealed Lips*: Three levels of analysis**

The GDR in the early 1950s under its prime minister Walter Ulbricht (*Sealed Lips*) was different from the GDR in the late 1970s under Erich Honecker (*Balloon*). Nonetheless, the German federal authority for evaluating film and media (FBW) rated both films as being “especially valuable:” The “paranoia and escape thriller” *Balloon* for its “meticulous [...] reconstruction of the topography and atmosphere around 1979” (FBW, 2018); the “exciting and well-narrated” historic drama *Sealed Lips* for having taken up a topic that has received little media attention (FBW, 2019). Looking at the significance of both films in the cultural memory of the GDR, we analyse both films on three levels.

The first, “traditional” film-immanent level is limited to the analysis of all information in the film (Mikos, 2015, p. 74). The focus lies on dramaturgical and creative aspects, namely the plot, the characters or cinematic means (camera work, coloring or music). This includes the film’s audiovisual worlds of the GDR and the meanings they produce.

While on this first level both films are inherently equal, on a second, structural level, they acquire their significance only in the context of cultural memory. What matters here are the modes that influence “memory-making” in film and practices by means of which these films exert their sociopolitical influence. Astrid Erll (2008) uses the term “pluri-medial networks” to describe the constellation of any such practices surrounding film: the financing of production and distribution, marketing campaigns, accompanying material, awards, but also media coverage and public debates (pp. 390, 395-396).

The third, actor-centered-level runs like a red thread through the first two. Based on interviews with both directors, we ask for their socialization, their experiences with the GDR and the stories they tell in their films. In the case of Michael Herbig, we used already existing interview material readily available in German (film) magazines and newspapers. Bernd Böhlich we interviewed ourselves in February 2020 in Berlin by means of a guided interview. We then connected the key findings of these interviews with the qualitative content analysis of each film as well as with its production and reception history. One of our hypothesis is that just as historical representations conveyed by media meet specific patterns of perception, also the production of these constructions is closely interlinked with and “compared to personal experience and one’s own biography” (Seegers, 2008, p. 22). This means that, due to their socialization, East German directors, producers or actors can bring different albeit divergent perspectives on the GDR in German film that is heavily dominated by West German elites.

### 3. The cinematic GDR

In examining the representation of the GDR in film, we are not entering uncharted territory. The variety of research conducted in historical, cultural and media studies is almost impossible to summarize. While some texts deal with the cinematic construction of the GDR over time linking it to changing discourses (e.g., Hodgins, 2011; Lüdeker 2012, 2015), others are devoted to individual films. Here, the focus is generally put on productions that have decisively shaped the cultural memory of the GDR: the cult film *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003) (e.g., Barney, 2009) and the Stasi drama *The Lives of Others* (2006) (e.g., Berghahn, 2009; Seegers, 2008). Occasionally, studies also deal with specific discourse fragments, for example the work of the Stasi (Kötzing, 2018), the Berlin Wall (Dorgerloh, 2011) or everyday life in the GDR (Weihrauch, 2015). There is only a limited number of comparative film analyses, however.

The films of Herbig and Böhlich have not yet received any significant attention, partly because both are relatively new. Our study, however, also differs methodically from other work. While most film analyses predominantly focus on the film-immanent level and assign a rather subordinate role to contextual factors (without, however, completely ignoring them), we direct our attention to the context of production and reception. We, thus, systematically investigate the cinematic construction of the GDR by means of a category-led, three-step film analysis based on standard works on film analysis (Hickethier, 2007; Korte, 2000; Mikos, 2015) as well as the reflections of Erll and Wodianka (2008).

#### 3.1. The GDR in *Balloon*

*Balloon* constructs the GDR as an inhuman, criminal dictatorship that imprisons and spies on its people. The film also carefully distinguishes between “bad perpetrators” and “good victims,” a common pattern to the thriller genre but not without consequences.

The film is a remake. The escape of the Strelzyk and Wetzel families, who crossed the inner-German border in August 1979 in a homemade hot-air *Balloon* heading for the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), was filmed by Disney in 1982. Against the background of the Cold War, the Hollywood material was hotly contested and politically controversial. In 2018, Herbig, who found the Disney film “extremely superficial” (Arnold, 2018), tried his hand at a supposedly “real” depiction of the GDR. Thus, from its beginning, the movie offers historical facts by means of numbers: Between 1976 and 1988, 38.000 GDR citizens failed in their escape to the FRG, at least 462 people died. “For the GDR regime,” the film tells us, “they were traitors to their fatherland.” The subsequent reference “Based on a true story” suggests that what is being shown is a real depiction of history. The movie then delivers “a kind of best-of GDR border cliché images ... in the first ten takes” writes journalist Moritz von Uslar (2018): German shepherd dogs tearing at chains, a trotting border troop with Kalashnikovs, circling searchlights. Over the course of the movie, three main narrative patterns develop as have been identified by Lüdeker for analysing movies dealing with the GDR: stereotypical characters, moral contrasts and constructions of “authenticity” (Lüdeker, 2015, p. 67).

*Balloon* draws a simple, easy-to-understand storyline that carefully differentiates between “good victims” (people striving for freedom) and “evil perpetrators” (Stasi employees and an obstructive state). This low level of complexity and the sharp moral

contrasts between “good” protagonists and the “evil” state increase “the emotional impact of the film narratives on the audience” (Lüdeker, 2015, p. 67). At the same time, Herbig attaches a great importance to cinematic authenticity: “From the very beginning I wanted to avoid people saying: ‘Here comes the comedian from Bavaria and wants to tell us what it was like in the GDR’” (Arnold, 2018). In almost every interview before the film’s premiere, Herbig emphasized this concern. In consequence, throughout the film, a plethora of props and costumes create an “authentic” look of the past, down to the smallest detail. This “went so far that the decorators used the same bad wallpaper glue so that the wallpaper threw the typical waves” (Arnold, 2018), explains Herbig.

In all this, the GDR is gloomy, its economy ailing, there are long queues at stores. The music is dark. The barrier-free version of the film comes with subtitles such as “threatening roar,” “oppressive music” or “ominous hum.” Only when the families land in the West, the music becomes “harmonious,” “euphoric” and “stirring.” This is partly because the Stasi – that is men in gray suits with umbrellas, briefcases, photo cameras and notebooks – is omnipresent in the GDR. The Stasi watches the Strelzyk and Wetzell families at all times, everyone seems to be an informant, everyone is suspicious. However, there is no distinction between the state, the party, the Stasi, the People’s Police, or military patrol. “They” stand for all structures that embody the unjust character of the GDR. “They” shoot women and children at the Wall and put innocent people in prison. This mixture, according to the FBW (2018), makes *Balloon* a well-suited movie to convey the dark sides of the inhuman GDR dictatorship to a young audience. The escape becomes an act of liberation and part of a “story of suffering and success” (Lüdeker, 2015, p. 68).

### 3.2. The GDR in *Sealed Lips*

*Sealed Lips* shows its protagonists in all their contradictions and ambivalences and underlines the dichotomy between socialist ideals and the GDR reality (“the great lie of the beginning”). Thus, while Herbig reduces the narrative structure of his film to a clear perpetrator-victim or state-citizen contrast, *Sealed Lips* tells GDR history from various perspectives, creating neither stereotypical characters nor moral opposites. The movie shows personal and political contradictions in a chapter of German post-war history that has hardly been addressed before: the fate of German communists who went to the Soviet Union in the 1930s out of conviction, were innocently sent to labor camps (Gulag) during Stalinist purges, until East German officials brought back the few survivors.

The film’s plot and characters are complex: In 1952, Antonia Berger returns from a Gulag to the GDR with her former fellow inmates, Susanne Schumann and Irma Seibert. They are welcomed with flowers at a small train station. Antonia is given a new multi-room apartment, money, food cards and one of the first TV-sets in the GDR. She becomes the director of a cultural center, Susanne acquires a job in a publishing house, Irma is about to start working in the gastronomy. But the price for these privileges is high: The women are forbidden to talk or write about their Gulag experiences. Instead, they must lie and claim they “worked in different areas of the Soviet Union.” Any violation of this rule leads to imprisonment.

The women deal with this censorship in different ways: Antonia believes in the ideals of Communism and chooses to live in the GDR. Susanne loses her faith in a state “with such a dowry” that dictates what may and may not be said: “Do you know what a sick life

this is? Is this to be the new world, the new state, socialism?” Susanne leaves for West Germany and becomes a “traitor” to Irma whose inner self breaks because she cannot talk “normally” to anyone: “Sometimes I no longer know who I really am. [...] It drives me crazy.” Three lives and three perspectives on the early GDR. Böhlich shows them all because, as he says, “that is simply part of the truth.”

Part of this “truth” is also the voice of the “powerful,” embodied by the Secretary for Agitation and Propaganda, Leo Silberstein. According to Silberstein, what the women had experienced in the Soviet camps had “nothing to do with Communism.” They all were building a new state, following a path no one had been on before. This chance would be lost if the women made their experiences public. For:

These people change their beliefs like their laundry. Yesterday brown [Nazi] shirts, today they are [Communist] blue. Do you know what happens if we tell them where you were and what you experienced? They change their clothes immediately - and our chance is lost. [...] We must be able to rely on you.

In *Sealed Lips* idealism, conviction and disillusionment are closely tied together. The physician Konrad Zeidler, for instance, sees his future in the GDR. There are more important things in life than money, he insists. When he learns about Stalin’s crimes, the GDR is no longer his country and he asks Antonia to leave with him. Antonia stays: “I am not leaving, never. [...] Because otherwise everything was pointless.” Throughout the movie, her torment of silence stands for the deep inner dichotomy between ideal and reality as part of the DNA of the socialist state. In it, repression is not a physical act, but above all, one of the mind and spirit. “If a society that has so many great plans has so many skeletons in the closet - not only metaphorically but literally - and never talks about them [...], then this society is doomed to failure,” Böhlich concludes.

#### 4. The cinematic GDR in contrast: An actor-centric analysis

The production of cinematic (historical) representations always relates to one’s own socialization. This is our finding. In the following, we show how we came to this conclusion by drawing analytical lines between the actor (filmmaker) and his film.

Bernd Böhlich, born in 1957, grew up in the East German town of Dresden. He wanted to tell stories in pictures, applied for a job at GDR Television and finished his training in 1984, as the country’s youngest director. At the film academy, Böhlich was approached by the Stasi, and eventually had twelve unofficial informants (IMs) assigned to him. Still, although he was critical of the GDR and experienced repressions at work, he did not want to leave it: “I did not wake up in the mornings thinking how to get out of the country.” Also in *Sealed Lips*, the West is not necessarily and not for everyone an alternative. The topic of the movie came to him in 1988 when talking to East German actress Svetlana Schönfeld who was born in a Soviet labor camp. Böhlich felt called upon to film this material because of his origins – and his GDR biography gives him a certain legitimacy.

The case of Michael Herbig is different. The Munich-born director had “no connection with the GDR” (in Fabian, 2018). He had never been to the GDR, nor any relatives or acquaintances there. He grew up “quite sheltered in the West;” to him “this freedom was a matter of course” (Rahmlow, 2019). Herbig came in contact with the story due to the

Disney film *Night Crossing* (1982). Herbig felt entitled to make this movie “because I was the same age as Frank, the Strelzyks’ elder son, at the time” (Fabian, 2018). Able to sympathize with their urge to escape, Herbig knew “how lucky [he] was to have been born on the other side” (Fabian, 2018). Not surprisingly, the GDR constructed by Herbig is one only worth fleeing. The West, on the other hand, is a place of longing for everyone who strives for a better, freer life.

Different from Böhlich, Herbig uses his lack of personal reference to legitimize his work as being more objective: “I think it did the film good that it was made by someone who had nothing to do with the GDR, who worked his way through everything and was able to take a look at the system from the outside” (Petzold, 2018). Similar to Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, Herbig constructs himself as an unencumbered West German director who worked for years on a film, “passionately searching for truth and credibility” (Seegers, 2008, p. 29). During the six years of research, Herbig studied 2.000 pages of Stasi files, took both families on board, consulted with GDR experts and developed the script in collaboration with the Munich-based screenwriter Thilo Röscheisen and the US-born screenwriter Kit Hopkins. At the same time, Herbig says in interviews, it was important for him to have a GDR “DNA” in the film (Rahmlow, 2019). Leading actor Thomas Kretschmann, the Stasi agent in the film, was a GDR refugee in real life and appears as an authority with regard to GDR memory. This adds to Herbig’s repeated claim to authenticity, all of which is documented in the DVD bonus material. It features the cellar where the *Balloon* was sewn, glimpses “behind the scenes” and shots of the “real” families on the set, proving the truthfulness of the story being told.

Böhlich, on the other hand, tells a story without a *Balloon* but one of people. The inner and outer struggles of the protagonists carry the plot, they give insight into the rising and failing of a state. The why-question (*Why* was the working title of the film) comes up repeatedly: Why were Antonia’s friends shot for no reason? Why were German communists tortured by their own comrades? Why stay? Unlike Herbig, Böhlich hardly gives clear answers.

Both films also offer glimpses into the year 1989: *Sealed Lips* shows a fall of the Berlin Wall with Antonia following the news on TV, envying her deceased girlfriend. *Balloon* ends with snapshots of the Prague Embassy, masses of East Germans crying of joy, chanting “freedom, freedom!” Close to his own memories, Herbig comments: “I thought it was amazing, I thought it was great ... there was such a spirit of optimism. It was all upbeat, all positive” (Rahmlow, 2019). Finally, also GDR citizens were free.

“For me, nothing has changed since reunification,” Herbig adds, describing probably the biggest difference between him and his colleagues from East Germany. Because, even if Böhlich underlines that he is not really interested in the whole “East-West topic,” the year 1989/1990 changed everything for him. Everything was new, foreign, “even the language. Suddenly I had doubts about whether I could do my job at all,” Böhlich recalls. The dominant feeling of that time was “complete disorientation.” He did not know what to accept, what to take seriously, what to ignore. These were everyday questions few could answer and it would take years to understand the new system. “I don’t want to relive this time ever again,” his conclusion.

## 5. Structures

In addition to the filmmakers' socialization and their personal relationship to the GDR, also external factors play a role in the ways the past is being mediated. These factors include questions of funding, the production company, marketing strategies and accompanying film material, but also the film's public reception (for instance media responses) as well as larger socio-political discourses. With regard to the GDR, this refers for instance to the debate on whether or not the GDR was an "unjust state" ("Unrechtsstaat"). All of these "pluri-medial networks" determine how visible a film is to the general public and how strongly it influences the memory discourse. In general the following applies: "The more complex these networks are, the stronger is the significance of a film as a medium that forms or shapes collective memory" (Erlil & Wodianka, 2008, p. 6).

### 5.1. Financing

Film producers or production companies play a central role in the filmmaking process. They have available networks, capital and contacts. *Balloon* was created by herbX, Herbig's own production company, in co-production with SevenPictures and STUDIOCANAL Film. The latter, part of the media giant Vivendi, is one of the leading film production and distribution companies in Europe.

*Sealed Lips*, on the contrary, was produced by mafilm, a small production company in Berlin. According to Böhlich, trying to finance the film took him "an incredibly long way," precisely ten years. The only institutions committed to the project from the beginning were smaller regional film funding and media institutions. In the end, Böhlich received about 1.3 million EUR for its production and distribution. No comparison to *Balloon*: Herbig's film received 4.8 million EUR for its production, another one million EUR for its distribution and 140.000 EUR for film screenings abroad. Its premiere in Germany was preceded by a broad advertising campaign with a nationwide out-of-home campaign, YouTube features and interviews. In addition, two weeks before its premiere, the true-to-original 32-meter-high hot-air *Balloon* was on display in front of the Reichstag building in Berlin, followed by media reports and articles. It has been the biggest campaign STUDIOCANAL "ever implemented for a German-language film" (Janotta, 2018).

Vision Kino, together with STUDIOCANAL, also produced a comprehensive range of educational material intended at supporting young people in "developing a critical awareness [...] of a state that constantly monitored its citizens, hindered individual life, denied human rights and caused great suffering through conformity and repression" (Blome, 2018, p. 5). On more than 20 colorful worksheets, students learn about the Stasi, denunciation, escape and surveillance. Thus, the film and its accompanying material reproduce the hegemonic narrative of an "unfree regime," thereby legitimizing a free Western society. *Sealed Lips*, on the other hand, has a handout available, written by the film distributor Neue Visionen. Focusing on the foundations of communism, it explains terms essential for understanding a socialist state, such as "comrade" (Genosse/Genossin), "house of the people (Haus des Volkes) or "collectivization of agriculture" (Kollektivierung der Landwirtschaft). It also includes background information



on Gulag or the founding of the GDR, and, thereby, touches on a taboo. Neither these terms nor the topics are hardly ever explained in school (Selg, 2019).

## 5.2. Reception

The ultimate question, however, is: How were both films received? To answer this question, Astrid Erll and Stephanie Wodianka (2008, p. 6, 11) argue for investigating systemic factors, such as audience numbers, awards or media responses. Only these ultimately determine the relevance of a film for any public discourse on the past.

The world premiere of *Balloon* on September 12, 2018 in Munich received a standing ovation. Two weeks later, the film was released in cinemas across Germany. On the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 2019, *Balloon* played again in more than one hundred cinemas nationwide. Since its release, the film has attracted more than 920.000 viewers (FFA, 2019) in Germany, earning nearly 7.5 million EUR.

The audience figures of *Sealed Lips* remain in the five-digit range. In the East German town of Eisenhüttenstadt, where the film was shot, it was nevertheless “the cinema event of the year” (Neiser, 2019). Shortly after its theatrical release, *Sealed Lips* climbed to second place in the German arthouse cinema charts (Müller, 2019). By the end of 2019, the film had attracted 82.491 viewers in more than 120 German cinemas (FFA, 2019).

The overseable media response to *Sealed Lips* was throughout positive. The film offered an “unusual perspective worth seeing” (Peulecke, 2019) and showed “other facets of the early GDR” (Kürten, 2019), namely the conviction of a different, better way. According to Anke Westphal (2019) in the German newspaper *Tagespiegel*, asking about the founding myths of the GDR in the 30th year of the fall of the Berlin Wall was an excellent idea: “It is all the more gratifying that this – once again – is increasingly being done by GDR-socialized directors.” The question remains, why did it need an East German director to tell this story and what difference did it make? Journalist Peter Zander (2019) provides a hint – according to him, the story could have been told “from the perspective of the winners. But director Böhlich is always very close to his characters, in all their contradictions.”

In *Balloon* one looks for contradictions in vein. The film’s comprehensive marketing campaign was followed by a broad media coverage of the theatrical release. While interview questions and answers varied little, the opinions of film critics differed widely. Ranging from *Balloon* being “very big cinema: thoroughly researched, brilliantly cast, congenially equipped, masterfully staged” (Schoder, 2018) to the movie containing “too much music, too much pathos, too much drama” (Beisel, 2018). Others praised the supposed authenticity in Herbig’s depiction of the GDR and its contribution to the discourse of memory (Petzer, 2018).

In comparison, *Sealed Lips* received little media attention. Neither national magazines nor the newspapers wrote much about it. Be it because of a smaller network, less capital or because of the greater recognition of Michael Herbig, the result remains the same: The escape thriller with its fitting cinematic construction of the GDR is more visible than the sideline “struggles of conscience” of a communist in a “film about the value of freedom in private life as well as in politics” (ttt – title, thesen, temperamente 2019). The GDR memory discourse is dominated by Herbig’s cinematic vision.

## 6. Conclusion

Both films, *Balloon* and *Sealed Lips*, create their own visual and auditory world of the GDR. Both convey a certain interpretation or idea of the people who lived in the “workers’ and peasants’ state,” what they aspired to, what everyday life looked like, and what the state ultimately failed to achieve. Thereby, no film alone makes an effective contribution to cultural memory but it becomes a medium of cultural memory only within specific historical-political contexts.

Elaborate advertising and authentication strategies, an impressive media response, awards, its integration into school education and comprehensive accompanying materials made *Balloon* probably most important GDR “memory film” of the last years. Michael Herbig profited from his broad professional network and exhausted all funding and financing possibilities. By means of interviews, YouTube features and a substantial media presence, Herbig presented patterns of interpretation even before the film’s premiere and emphasized on the authenticity of his escape thriller.

By comparison, *Sealed Lips* was overshadowed. This was not only due to its difference in genre and narrative style. With more capital resources, which include “artistic and technical know-how, organizational talent and financial security, [but] above all contacts and a ‘business card’ (an audience success, a prize)” (Wiedemann, 2019, p. 221), Bernd Böhlich might have received more attention with his drama. He would have, thus, gained more authority over the interpretation and construction of GDR history.

The film-immanent analysis shows that Herbig has subordinated the GDR past to the thriller genre, which is typically characterized by a black-and-white narrative, exclamation-mark-conversations and effective visual and audio effects. Correspondingly, the cinematic GDR is gloomy and scary, the story ends euphorically in the free West. In this way, *Balloon* serves the hegemonic narrative of GDR dictatorship memory as well as the viewing habits of its audience.

*Sealed Lips* constructs a different GDR. Böhlich’s drama provides a differentiated but not uncritical view of its society of the time. This can be seen in the three protagonists: one resigns and leaves the country; one drowns her sorrow in alcohol, and the third holds onto the communist idea. It can be assumed that this ambivalent view of the GDR receives less attention, partly because of structural conditions: *Sealed Lips* was produced for television, not for 100 square meter screens. It therefore has less filmic capital.

To this, Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk (2019) adds the question what it means when mainly West German elites are in charge of interpreting GDR history by means of the media, research and politics (p. 211). This question is an important one. It has factual consequences for filmmakers who, like Böhlich, offer different perspectives to the GDR. These filmmakers have less chances to produce their movies. Well-known East German director Andreas Dresen, for instance, like Böhlich, struggled for ten years to obtain funding for his recent critically acclaimed movie *Gundermann* (2018). Dresen found clear words on this subject:

What is wrong, I find, is when people from the East [of Germany] find it hard to tell their own story. [...] This voice should also be there, the voice of those who lived in the GDR, who all had very different experiences with it. It should be a diverse choir of statements on the topic. (from the film *Die verschwundene Heimat* (2019))

Also Böhlich finds it difficult, for instance “when [West German] up-and-coming directors use provocative topics without really being interested in the GDR past.” The result are generally very foreseeable storylines. Böhlich emphasizes that it should not be a matter of trivializing the GDR. “Of course, one must tell the GDR [history] in all its tragedy, pain and injustice – but right where it really belongs.” GDR history should be taken seriously.

Thus, the conclusion of our analysis is as follows: The under-representation of East Germans in film production and decision-making positions in the German film industry is problematic. Only more representation would allow (though not necessarily lead to) an expansion of GDR narratives. This means, as Bernd Böhlich emphasized in our guideline interview, that “especially in such a rich country like the Federal Republic and with such an endowment of film funding” there must be room “for blockbusters, as well as for more particular topics, such as the fate of German communists in the GDR of the 1950s.” At least in our study Böhlich, therefore, receives the final word.

## References

- Arnold, F. (2018, October 1). Interview mit Michael Bully Herbig über seinen Film *Ballon* [Interview with Michael Bully Herbig about his film *Ballon*]. Epd Film. <https://www.epd-film.de/meldungen/2018/interview-mit-michael-bully-herbig-ueber-seinen-film-ballon>
- Barney, T. (2009). When We Was Red: *Good Bye Lenin!* and Nostalgia for the “Everyday GDR”. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 6 (2), 132-151. doi:10.1080/14791420902833163
- Beisel, K. M. (2018, September 28). Mit viel Pathos in den Westen [With much pathos into the West]. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/ballon-im-kino-mit-viel-pathos-in-den-westen-1.4147406>
- Berghahn, D. (2009). Remembering the Stasi in a Fairy Tale of Redemption: Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck’s *Das Leben der Anderen*. *Oxford German Studies*, 38 (3), 321-333. doi:10.1179/007871909x475625
- Blome, G. (2018). *Ballon*: Filmheft mit Materialien für die schulische und außerschulische Bildung [*Balloon*: Film booklet with materials for school and extracurricular education]. Berlin: STUDIOCANAL.
- Dorgerloh, A. (2011). Westwärts — ostwärts: Die Mauer im Spielfilm [Westward – eastward: The Wall in the feature film]. In A. Kuhrmann, D. Liebermann, A. Dorgerloh (Eds.), *Die Berliner Mauer in der Kunst: Bildende Kunst, Literatur und Film* [The Berlin Wall in Art: Visual arts, literature and film] (pp. 329-416). Berlin: Ch. Links.

Eigler, F. (2006). Gedächtnis und Geschichte in Generationenromanen seit der Wende [Memory and history in generational novels since the Peaceful Revolution]. Berlin: Erich Schmidt.

Elstermann, K. (2019, September 4). *Und der Zukunft zugewandt* – packendes DDR-Drama mit Alexandra Maria Lara [*Sealed Lips* – gripping GDR drama with Alexandra Maria Lara]. MDR KULTUR.

<https://www.mdr.de/kultur/empfehlungen/und-der-zukunft-zugewandt-filmkritik-elstermann-100.html>

Erl, A., & Wodianka, S. (2008). Einleitung: Phänomenologie und Methodologie des “Erinnerungsfilms” [Introduction: Phenomenology and methodology of the “memory film”]. In A. Erl & S. Wodianka (Eds.), *Film und kulturelle Erinnerung: Plurimediale Konstellationen* [Film and cultural memory: Pluri-medial networks] (pp. 1-20). Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Erl, A. (2008). Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory. In A. Erl & A. Nünning (Eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (pp. 389-398). Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Fabian, D. (2018, September 28). *Ballon* – Mehr als bloß heiße Luft: Das FILMSTARTS-Interview mit Michael Bully Herbig [*Balloon* – More than just hot air: The FILMSTARTS interview with Michael Bully Herbig]. FILMSTARTS. Retrieved from <http://www.filmstarts.de/nachrichten/18521262.html>

FBW (Deutsche Film- und Medienbewertung) [German Movie and Media Rating Board] (2018). *Ballon*: Jury-Begründung [*Balloon*: Jury statement]. Retrieved from <https://www.fbw-filmbewertung.com/film/ballon>

FBW (Deutsche Film- und Medienbewertung) [German Movie and Media Rating Board] (2019). *Und der Zukunft zugewandt*: FBW-Pressetext, Jury-Begründung [*Sealed Lips*: FBW press release, jury statement]. [https://www.fbw-filmbewertung.com/film/und\\_der\\_zukunft\\_zugewandt](https://www.fbw-filmbewertung.com/film/und_der_zukunft_zugewandt)

FFA (Filmförderungsanstalt) [German Federal Film Board] (2019). Jahreshitliste national 2019 [National annual hit list 2019]. <https://www.ffa.de/filmhitlisten.html>

Fischer, T., & Schuhbauer, T. (2016). *Geschichte im Film und Fernsehen. Theorie – Praxis – Berufsfelder* [History in film and television. Theory – Practice – Professional fields]. Tübingen: A. Francke.

Hickethier, K. (2007). *Film- und Fernsehanalyse* [Film and television analysis]. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler.

Hodgin, N. (2011). *Screening the East. Heimat, Memory and Nostalgia in German Film since 1989*. New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Janotta, A. (2018, September 10). Heiße Kinowerbung: Ballon über dem Reichstag [Hot cinema advertising: Balloon over the Reichstag]. W&V.

[https://www.wuv.de/marketing/heisse\\_kinowerbung\\_ballon\\_ueber\\_dem\\_reichstag](https://www.wuv.de/marketing/heisse_kinowerbung_ballon_ueber_dem_reichstag)

Klinge, S. (2015). 1989 und wir. Geschichtspolitik und Erinnerungskultur nach dem Mauerfall [1989 and us. Historical politics and culture of remembrance after the fall of the Berlin Wall]. Bielefeld: transcript.

Korte, H. (2000). Einführung in die systematische Filmanalyse: Ein Arbeitsbuch [Introduction to systematic film analysis: A workbook]. Berlin: E.Schmidt.

Kötzing, A. (2018). Bilder der Allmacht. Die Staatssicherheit in Film und Fernsehen [Images of omnipotence. State security in film and television]. Göttingen: Wallstein.

Kowalczuk, I.-S. (2019). Die Übernahme: Wie Ostdeutschland Teil der Bundesrepublik wurde [The takeover: How East Germany became part of the Federal Republic]. München: C.H.Beck.

Kürten, J. (2018, September 27). Mit dem Wind nach Westen: Michael “Bully” Herbig’s Film *Ballon* [With the wind to the west: Michael “Bully” Herbig’s film *Balloon*]. Deutsche Welle. <https://p.dw.com/p/35aBL>

Kürten, J. (2019, September 2). Erschütterndes DDR-Schicksal: *Und der Zukunft zugewandt* [Shocking GDR fate: *Sealed Lips*]. Deutsche Welle. <https://p.dw.com/p/3Ocqv>

Lüdeker, G. J. (2012). Kollektive Erinnerung und nationale Identität. Nationalsozialismus, DDR und Wiedervereinigung im deutschen Spielfilm nach 1989 [Collective memory and national identity. National Socialism, GDR and reunification in German feature films after 1989]. München: Ed. Text + Kritik.

Lüdeker, G. J. (2015). DDR-Erinnerung in gegenwärtigen deutschen Spielfilmen: Vom Dissens zum Konsens [GDR memory in contemporary German feature films: From dissent to consensus]. In H.-J. Veen (Ed.), *Das Bild der DDR in Literatur, Film und Internet. 25 Jahre Erinnerung und Deutung* [The image of the GDR in literature, film and the Internet. 25 years of memory and interpretation] (pp. 59-79). Köln: Böhlau.

Meyen, M. (2013). “Wir haben freier gelebt”: Die DDR im kollektiven Gedächtnis der Deutschen [“We lived more freely”: The GDR in the collective memory of the Germans]. Bielefeld: transcript.

Mikos, L. (2015). Film- und Fernsehanalyse [Film and television analysis] (3rd ed.). Konstanz: UVK.

Müller, J. (2019, September 11). Arthouse-Kincharts: *Und der Zukunft zugewandt* verfehlt Platz eins knapp [Arthouse cinema charts: *Sealed Lips* just misses first place]. Blickpunkt:Film.

<http://beta.blickpunktfilm.de/details/443591>

Neiser, J. (2019, July 29). Filmstar kehrt zurück [Film star returns]. Märkische Oderzeitung.

<https://www.moz.de/artikel-ansicht/dg/0/1/1743542/>

Petzer, A. (2018, September 21). Kritik zu *Ballon* [Review on *Balloon*], in: Epd Film. Retrieved from <https://www.epd-film.de/filmkritiken/ballon>

Petzold, D. (2018, September 27). DDR-Flucht im Heißluftballon: Michael “Bully” Herbig im Interview zu *Ballon* [GDR escape in a hot-air balloon: Michael “Bully” Herbig in an interview on *Balloon*]. Abendzeitung.

<https://www.abendzeitung-muenchen.de/kultur/kino/ddr-flucht-im-heissluftballon-michael-bully-herbig-im-interview-zu-ballon-art-454174>

Peulecke, B. (2019, September 28). DDR-Drama im Kino: *Und der Zukunft zugewandt* [GDR drama in the cinema: *Sealed Lips*]. NDR.

<https://www.ndr.de/kultur/film/tipps/Und-der-Zukunft-zugewandt-DDR-Drama-im-Kino,zukunftzugewandt100.html>

Rahmlow, A. (2019, November 7). Wie wichtig ist Freiheit, “Bully” Herbig? [How important is freedom, “Bully” Herbig?]. Deutschlandfunk Kultur.

[https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/30-jahre-mauerfall-wie-wichtig-ist-freiheit-bully-herbig.1008.de.html?dram:article\\_id=462892](https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/30-jahre-mauerfall-wie-wichtig-ist-freiheit-bully-herbig.1008.de.html?dram:article_id=462892)

Sabrow, M. (2009). Die DDR erinnern [Remembering the GDR]. In M. Sabrow (Ed.), *Erinnerungsorte der DDR* [Memory spaces of the GDR] (pp. 11-27). München: C.H.Beck.

Schoder, G. (2018, September 26). Höhenflug der verzweifelten Hoffnung [A flight of desperate hope]. Badische Zeitung.

<https://www.badische-zeitung.de/hoehenflug-der-verzweifelten-hoffnung--157042181.html>

Seegers, L. (2008). *Das Leben Der Anderen* oder die “richtige” Erinnerung an die DDR [*The Lives of Others* or the “right” memory of the GDR]. In A. Erll & S. Wodianka (Eds.), *Film und kulturelle Erinnerung: Plurimediale Konstellationen* [Film and cultural memory: Pluri-medial networks] (pp. 21-52). Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Seidl, C. (2019, October 27). “Bully” Herbig im Interview über die DDR: “Es gibt nichts schönzureden” [“Bully” Herbig in an interview about the GDR: “There is nothing to gloss over”]. Berliner Zeitung.

<https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/kultur-vergnuegen/bully-herbig-im-interview-ueber-die-ddr-es-gibt-nichts-schoenzureden-li.71119>

Selg, O. (2019). *Und der Zukunft zugewandt*: Pädagogisches Begleitmaterial [*Sealed Lips*: Pedagogical accompanying material]. Berlin: Neue Visionen Filmverleih.

ttt – titel, thesen, temperamente [ttt – titles, theses, temperaments] (2019, August 25). Video: *Und der Zukunft zugewandt* [Video: *Sealed Lips*]. Das Erste.  
<https://www.daserste.de/information/wissen-kultur/ttt/videos/ttt-25082019-und-der-zukunft-zugewandt-video-100.html>

Von Uslar, M. (2018, September 19). Dem Stoff mal richtig einheizen [Heating up the fabric properly]. Die Zeit.  
<https://www.zeit.de/2018/39/ballon-michael-bully-herbig-film-flucht-ddr-ostdeutschland>

Weihrauch, Y. (2015). Leben in der DDR. Zur filmischen Darstellung des Alltags im Sozialismus [Life in the GDR. On the filmic representation of everyday life under socialism]. Hamburg: Diplomica.

Wende, W. (2011). Filme, die Geschichte(n) erzählen. Filmanalyse als Medienkulturanalyse [Films that tell story(s). Film analysis as media culture analysis]. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.

Westphal, A. (2019, September 4). Das Schweigen, das die DDR vergiftete [The silence that poisoned the GDR]. Der Tagesspiegel.  
<https://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/drama-und-der-zukunft-zugewandt-das-schweigen-das-die-ddr-vergiftete/24979998.html>

Wiedemann, T. (2019). Filmregisseurinnen und Filmregisseure in Deutschland. Strukturen und Logik eines heteronomen Berufsfeldes [Film directors in Germany. Structures and logic of a heteronomous professional field]. Publizistik, 64, 205-223. doi:10.1007/s11616-019-00501-6

Winkler, T. (2009, October 13). DDR im Film [GDR in film]. Kinofenster.  
[https://www.kinofenster.de/themen-dossiers/alle-themendossiers/dossier\\_ddr\\_10\\_2009/ddr\\_im\\_film/](https://www.kinofenster.de/themen-dossiers/alle-themendossiers/dossier_ddr_10_2009/ddr_im_film/)

Zander, P. (2019, September 2). *Und der Zukunft zugewandt*: Pakt des Schweigens [*Sealed Lips*: Pact of silence]. Berliner Morgenpost.  
<https://www.morgenpost.de/kultur/article226970621/Und-der-Zukunft-zugewandt-Pakt-des-Schweigens.html>

**About the authors**

Daria Gordeeva, born in St. Petersburg (Russia), completed her bachelor's and master's degrees in Communication Studies and Economics at the University of Munich. Since January 2019 she is a research associate and doctoral candidate at the Department of Media and Communication at the University of Munich.

Mandy Tröger, born in East Berlin (GDR), received her PhD from the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). Her research focuses on the post-socialist media transition in East Germany and Eastern Europe. She is currently an Assistant Professor at the Department of Media and Communication at the University of Munich.