An Aesthetics of Narrative Performance

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Theatrical Narratives

FILM ‘MADE IN GERMANY’
AROUND 2000

FILM HISTORIANS have suggested that the 1990s mark an ‘unspectacular’ era of German film. After the New German Cinema of the 1960s through early 1980s, on the one hand, and the East German DEFA (Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft) cinema, on the other, had come to their respective ends, the stage was left to light comedy fare. Reveling in mainstream-compatible, ultimately heteronormative gender trouble, and presenting the struggles of the ‘new federal citizens’ (i.e., East Germans) “as an entertaining comedy of errors” (Cook 206), mainstream 1990s German cinema found its political identity as a “Cinema of Consensus” (Rentschler). In certain respects, German cinema as such had come to its end. While the notion of ‘national cinema’ arguably overall only makes sense “as a category of contestation” (Hake 3) in that production and distribution industries as well as film languages had had significant transnational dimensions throughout the twentieth century, processes of globalization fully caught up with the German film industry after unification. The “state-subsidized ‘high cultural’ didactic system,” which had enabled the artistic experimentation of New German Cinema in the West, gave way to “a market-oriented popular cultural entertainment system” characterized by a rising number of international coproductions.
and the establishment of Hollywood affiliates in Germany (Halle, “German Film” 251).

Precisely these developments, however, also allowed for a new diversification of film production. With funding available from emerging EU subsidy systems, smaller production companies began to make “‘smart films’ for the international market” (Halle, “German Film” 254), which are perhaps better designated as films “‘made in Germany’ or from ‘location Germany’ [Standort Deutschland]” than as “German films” in that they preserved ‘national cinema’ only by recontextualizing it and “radically changing its significance” (252–53). Variously crossing the boundaries between entertainment and “European art house” styles (254), these films began to initiate an international comeback of films made in Germany, as indicated by the growing number of international awards won by productions such as Good Bye, Lenin! or The Lives of Others (Das Leben der Anderen) in the early 2000s. As suggested above, I begin with this ‘smart’ popular cinema because it provides the most straightforward case for exploring the aesthetics of narrative performance. First, I can draw on existing film-theoretical discussions about the interplay of narrative and performance and develop them for my turn-of-the-twenty-first-century German context. Second, the case of cinema at the turn of the twenty-first century is less complex than that of literature or theater in that I diagnose a confluence of intermedial trends with media-specific trajectories. That is, the overall prominence of theatricalized forms in the larger cultural landscape of the 1990s, as shaped by postmodern epistemologies and artistic projects, finds its most clear-cut form in this particular medium, in response, not least, to the dominance of invisible narration in popular cinema throughout most of the twentieth century.1

Camp Reconfigurations

LOLA UND BILIDIKID

Kutluğ Ataman’s Lola und Bilidikid (Lola and Billy the Kid 1999) exemplifies the trend toward a transnational cinema from “location Germany.” Born in Istanbul, the director graduated from UCLA and has since lived in Barcelona, London, and Istanbul; beyond researching and shooting Lola und Bilidikid, he has not spent significant time in Germany. The film itself, however, is set in Berlin and was filmed there with mostly Turkish-German actors and a Ger-

1. On contemporary cinema’s overall affiliation with theatricality, see also, e.g., Samuel Weber 314.
man producer. After opening the “Panorama” section of the 1999 Berlinale, it was “received in Germany as part of a mini-boom of Turkish-German cinema” (Clark, “Transculturation” 555), and at the Istanbul film festival later that year, it won the “people’s choice award” in the international competition. Ataman’s decision for “location Germany” points to the equally deep and troubled interlocking of contemporary Turkish and German histories. When the so-called economic miracle in 1950s West Germany produced labor shortages, the government negotiated recruitment treaties with a number of Mediterranean countries. Although the recruitment was explicitly intended as temporary, the long-term interests of both workers and German employers conflicted with this design. After the oil crisis prompted a ban on new recruitments in 1973, many ‘guest workers’ decided to stay and made use of their right to bring in their families. Due to continued economic pressure and the politically instable situation in Turkey, Turkish ‘guest workers’ were particularly likely to immigrate, and the Turkish-German community became Germany’s largest ethnic minority—as well as Turkey’s largest emigration community. Since Germany’s citizenship legislation was based on the principle of ius sanguinis until 2000, many third-generation immigrants continue to be politically disenfranchised, with their lives shaped also by social marginalization and the postunification resurgence of neo-Nazi violence. After subsequent governments had held on to the official credo that ‘Germany is not a country of immigration,’ the Social Democrat–Green Party coalition elected in 1998 eventually challenged this state of denial and initiated overdue reforms.

In the world of scholarship, analogous moves toward inclusion mostly replaced earlier vocabularies of ‘cultural hybridity’ as an encounter between presumably incompatible, essentially distinct worlds with those of transnationalism and transculturalism. However, Ataman’s film has been described as “a hybrid” (Hillman 45) in terms of its intertextual and generic references. Already in its title, Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s Lola meets a hero of the American West, albeit one who is linguistically ‘Turkizised’ in the German

2. Martin Hagemann, with Zero Film GmbH (Berlin).
3. Quoted from Internet Movie Database [IMDb], http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0137079/ (accessed 06/25/09); see also Clark 560.
4. In the early 2000s, there were approximately two million Turks plus half a million naturalized Germans with a Turkish background living in the country (see Şen 209–11).
5. Children born in the country to immigrant parents with long-term residence permits now automatically become German citizens, but eventually they have to choose between their German and their parents’ citizenship because Germany does not officially support dual citizenship.
6. On Lola und Bilidikid specifically, see Blumenrath et al.
7. And indirectly also its intertext, Sternberg’s The Blue Angel (see Mennel 298).
title *Lola und Bilidikid*. Additional intertexts include Fassbinder’s *In a Year with 13 Moons* and Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Conformista*. Thus, European art house film is wedded to American genre cinema: in addition to the Western and the model of melodrama with which Fassbinder himself was playing, Ataman’s mixture also includes comedy and the thriller (see Clark, “Transculturation” 562). The film’s reception indicates continued scholarly discomfort with those popular worlds. While critical voices among reviewers perpetuated “the traditional devaluation of melodrama” by complaining about the film’s “insufficiently ‘realistic,’” stereotypical narrative worlds (as summarized by Clark, “Transculturation” 562), or its “perhaps too ornate” character (Faller), Christopher Clark himself praises Ataman’s “performance of competence in conventional narrative cinema” as (merely) “strategic” (562).

My own reading instead insists on the actual productivity of the generic match, underlining its perhaps less ‘hybrid’ than ‘syncretistic’—that is, non-conflictually productive—character in creating the film’s complex aesthetics of narrative performance. In the scholarly debate on *Lola und Bilidikid*, the issues at hand have been explicitly conceptualized in terms of narrative vs. performance. The background for this discussion is formed by film-theoretical arguments about the role of spectacle in narrative, as exemplarily—although far from exclusively—developed in, and in response to, Laura Mulvey’s canonical 1975 essay on “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Mulvey’s argument is well known and has been debated and amended in a myriad of ways.

What is important for my context, however, is the overdetermined way in which the notion of “erotic spectacle” (11) is positioned in Mulvey’s text. On the one hand, spectacle is the mode of “to-be-looked-at-ness” through which “woman” is objectified by the “controlling and curious gaze” of (Freudian) “scopophilia” (11, 8; italics in original), that is, performance as framed by the filmic apparatus into a mode of domination, or, as Samuel Weber puts it, “a certain kind of theater,” which “presents itself as a non-theatrical reality.”

On the other hand, spectacle is also a subversive performative in Mulvey’s account, an “alien presence,” which tends “to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (11). Based on a Freudian notion of sexual pleasure as an antisocial force, spectacle in

8. In fact, a debate about this particular film constitutes one of this book’s points of origin. I would like to acknowledge my productive exchange about our diverging readings with Barbara Mennel. My own early take on the film is published in German as Breger, “Queering Macho Identities.”

9. See, e.g., Doane; Kaplan; de Lauretis; Neale; Rose; Bukatman.

10. Samuel Weber 12, on Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* (first published 1967), which develops a related—although ultimately pronarrative—argument beyond the realm of film only. Regarding the latter, see also Bukatman 76.
this second sense stands in for “another kind of theatricality” (Samuel Weber 12), or the “pleasure of disruption” (Bukatman 76, italics in original). As indicated here, psychoanalytically informed discussions of film spectacle have not positioned presence and theatricality against one another but rather imbricated them in celebrating those forms of framing that expose physicality as an obstacle to diegetic continuity. Thus, Mulvey spells out, Sternberg’s fetishistic scenarios break “the powerful look of the male protagonist (characteristic of traditional narrative film) . . . in favor of the image in direct erotic rapport with the spectator” (14). At the height of antinarrative avant-garde sentiments in 1975, however, her overall argument for the “Destruction of Pleasure” in “narrative fiction film” (7, italics in original) underlines that Hollywood generally neutralizes this potential for subversion by integrating spectacle “into cohesion with the narrative” (11), paradigmatically through (for example, Hitchcock’s) sadism as a narrative investigation and punishment of spectacle.11

Scholarly discussions of Lola und Bilidikid have focused on the relation between stage spectacle and narrative. Clark’s dissertation positions the film in the context of Berlin’s real-life Turkish-German queer subculture, namely, the cabaret performances of the Salon Oriental in the part immigrant, part radically left-wing district of Kreuzberg. As we are shown during the film’s exposition, Lola is part of a drag performance group that calls itself “The Guest Workers,” thus referencing the early model of postwar labor immigration that continued to shape hegemonic perceptions of Turkish immigrants as ultimately nonbelonging, culturally ‘foreign’ and ‘backward,’ paradigmatically symbolized by the headscarf-wearing woman. As the film’s “Guest Workers” play with the headscarf on stage while expressing their sexuality through dance and audience address (“Dear friends, I am burning”), Lola und Bilidikid embeds this icon into a subversive spectacle, developing “a queer utopia of sexual and cultural freedom” in which seemingly incompatible identities can coexist.12 Deniz Göktürk, however, argued that the promise of these drag acts is not sustained by the film’s narrative worlds. While the “Guest

11. The debates about the “cinema of attractions” have unfolded the ambiguities inscribed in Mulvey’s notion of spectacle. While Gunning elevates performance into a medium of “Utopian promise” and “revolutionary possibilities,” which “precedes and subtends the system itself” (Bukatman 71–72; Gunning, “Attractions” 32), this emphasis on subversion has been challenged by subsequent critics analyzing how attractions and narrative can be “effectively imbricated, even integrated” in early cinema (Musser, “Rethinking” 395) as well as the Spectacular Narratives of the contemporary cinema of digital “attraction” (Geoff King) or the commercial worlds of the American musical (e.g., Feuer).

12. Clark, quoted from Mennel, “Masochism” 291. Clark’s more recent “Transculturation” differentiates the point (and is, in many details, consonant with my own reading), but it remains conceptually primarily interested in the film’s politics of drag.
Worker” performances “succeed . . . in dissolving essentialist identities,” the film’s overall “exploration of family relations and machismo,” Göktürk cautions, “seems exaggerated and does fall back into ethnic stereotyping at some points” (“Turkish Women” 74).

Conceptually developing the conflict, Barbara Mennel suggested that the film’s “contradictory trajectories emerge from the tension between camp and narrative”—with “camp” defined as the “‘non-narrative components’ in ‘film spectacle: the film image parsed, however momentarily, from its situation within a larger diegetic world of events, temporality, and causation.’” Queer theory of the 1990s had emphasized the critical potential of camp (as the “essence” of which Susan Sontag once described as “its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration,” 275), championing it as a mode of theatrically undoing identities “at the intersection of social agency and postmodern parody” (Meyer 9). Against this overestimation of “camp as a form of resistance,” Mennel, in the spirit of Mulvey’s original analysis, insists on investigating how camp’s potential is contained by narrative integration. Whereas on stage, Lola performatively deconstructs ‘guest worker’ femininity, her offstage life is circumscribed, and eventually taken, by the joint forces of heteronormative, racist, and culturalist violence. As Mennel argues, the film becomes unwillingly complicit with these forces as it reproduces “the aesthetic conventions and traditions associated with” hegemonic concepts of gender (“Masochism” 292). My own reading amends—and partially displaces—this account in a twofold way. First, I underline that the ideological work of sustaining hegemonic identities—to which the film, in fact, contributes—is based not on the ways in which narrative simply contains performance but on the active interplay of these nonantagonistic forces. Second, I supplement this analysis of the film’s ideological work by arguing that Lola und Bilidikid does also critically challenge the heteronormative and culturalist orders it evokes, and that it equally does so by joining the forces of narrative and performance in a mode of playfully explorative, and in effect democratically dialogic, reconfiguration proceeding through the intertwined forces of difference and similarity.

Already the introductory drag performance in the club is complexly embedded into the film’s narrative exposition. While Lola dances on stage, the film doubles this act—that is, contrasts but also associates it—with that of a German man who tries to seduce her “husband” Bilidikid with an offstage dance. Bili responds affirmatively to the playful invitation, but later he beats up the German in the bathroom when he is unable to pay for the sex,
which, as it turns out, was “labor” for Bili, as opposed to the playful and creative identity “work” of camp.\textsuperscript{14} Upset about Bili’s violent behavior, Lola leaves by herself in her drag outfit. As Bili follows her, trying to force reconciliation with—still rather violent—caresses, the film associates his ‘attack’ from behind with another attack, which Lola expects fearfully at the very moment: a group of young neo-Nazis has been threatening her. With an eye on the German adolescents, Lola eventually gives in to Bili’s advances, but their relationship is threatened by his proclivity to violence on a more fundamental level. The (as Lola puts it) “macho,” whose straight peers find Lola “weird/queer” (\textit{komisch})\textsuperscript{15} even in male attire, tries to talk her into a sex reassignment surgery.\textsuperscript{16} Fantasizing about a “normal” life in Turkey, Bili dissociates himself from the Berlin subculture in the name of his cultural identity: “We can’t live together like these German fags.”

With his demands, Bili becomes involuntarily complicit in Lola’s death, as he pressures her to get money for the sex change by reclaiming her inheritance from her family of origin. Many years earlier, they had thrown out the adolescent Lola after she showed up at the dinner table in a red wig. Lola is now surprised to meet her brother Murat, who was, as his mother tells him, conceived to “replace” her. The teenager, whose own coming out is another focus of the film, found the wig in his mother’s closet and now returns it to Lola as a token of bonding. Lola seems to struggle with the memories the gift brings back. As Murat and the spectator eventually learn, her provocative drag act at the family table was a desperate gesture of protest against her older brother Osman, who had raped her after finding out about Lola’s homosexuality. Fearing that Lola might disclose the incest, Osman now kills her—in place of the neo-Nazis, as the film suggests with a dramatic narrative ellipsis. After another fight with Bili, who jealously inquired about the origin of the red wig, Lola had walked off into the night by herself again. In fact attacked by the neo-Nazis this time, she tried to save herself by stopping a cab—which, as we find out at the end of the film, must have been the cab Osman drives for a living.

\textsuperscript{14} Tinkcom, as quoted by Mennel, “Masochism” 293, with reference to Hannah Arendt’s categories of work vs. labor.
\textsuperscript{15} The English subtitles translate the notion with an ellipsis: “He looks a little . . .”
\textsuperscript{16} While Lola’s male birth name is never mentioned in the film, and her friends use female pronouns, she herself has no desire to become a biological woman. The film’s critics have charted her and her friends’ identities differently: whereas Yekani pleads for analyzing transfemininities beyond drag (265–66), Clark tries to salvage their ‘inessential’ playfulness as he insists that Lola’s coperformer Kalipso cannot possibly be serious in fantasizing about real breasts (571). However, her fantasy does find its representation alongside Lola’s contrary position. Showing how both negotiate the relations between their drag personae and their everyday identities differently, the film bridges the critical gap between drag- and identity-focused approaches.
In ultimately locating “homophobic violence” in the “patriarchal . . . Turkish migrant family,” Mennel argues, the narrative underwrites a culturalist view (“Masochism” 304). Reifying the gender “roles taken on by Lola and Bilidikid,” the film sadistically identifies her with “sacrificial femininity” while fetishizing his violent “Turkish masculinity” (300–301, 296). In the brutal showdown, Bili literally performs the act of castration he fantasized about on one of the neo-Nazis whom he believes to be responsible for Lola’s death. Meanwhile, her camp femininity has found its narrative integration in the sight of her dead body: the film relates Lola’s death by showing her corpse, still adorned with the red wig, as it floats in the Berlin river Spree, next to the Oberbaum bridge connecting (the Western) Kreuzberg with the formerly East Berlin district of Friedrichshain. This symbolic location may implicitly remind the knowing spectator “about the potential consequences of German unification for those who do not conform to narrow definitions of ‘Germanness’” (Clark, “Transculturation” 566), to the effect of figuratively blaming the neo-Nazis after all. Literally visible, however, is the spectacle of death, mediated for us by the gaze of a kid, who asks twice: “Are you a mermaid?” As Mennel argues, the film aestheticizes this image through a static shot from above, with the face “surrounded by the fake curls of the red wig untouched by the water,” inscribing Lola into the iconographic tradition of dead femininity analyzed by Elisabeth Bronfen in *Over Her Dead Body* (Mennel, “Masochism” 302).

In my view, this scene highlights that narrative proceeds precisely through spectacle also in the production of the ideological effects targeted by Mennel. The arrestation of movement does not yet amount to the overall “scarcity of . . . mise-en-scène” Mennel locates in the corpse shot as well as the preceding confrontations between Lola and Bili, in contrast with the “cinematic excess during cross-dressing performances” (“Masochism” 299). Rather, the heightened artificiality of the corpse image indicates the ways in which the film theatricalizes not only its liberated designs of gender. In this context, the film’s use of melodramatic form—noticeable, in particular, in its emphasis on color, decor, and acting—is significant. In genre studies, melodrama has served as a film-historical site for exploring what presents itself as “states . . . in excess of” narrative from the angle of narrow horizontal definitions (Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* 2) but can instead be conceptualized as narrative marked by “more complex forms of symbolization” than “linear externalization of action” (Elsaesser, “Tales” 10). Psychoanalytically discussed in analogy to, if not as, Freudian dream work (Elsaesser, “Tales” 11) or “acting out” (Brooks, “Melodrama” 19), the loaded images of melodrama open up spaces for articulating dramatic conflicts that cannot be directly expressed in words or simple storylines (see Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* 4;
Elsaesser, “Tales” 7). In this way, melodrama’s “rhetorical excess” or “theatricality” in both mise-en-scène and editing casts its diegetic world as a world marked by the presence of conflicting ideologies and desires.17

As melodrama scholarship suggests, the effect of these visual ‘excesses’ is twofold: the mise-en-scène both contains and questions the presumed naturalness of the portrayed identities. Lola’s wearing of a wig in death indicates how the film’s onstage drag performances quite literally cross over into the offstage narrative world. The scene of her preceding fight with Bili is dominated by close-ups of Lola. Along with the red wig, she wears an equally bright blue jacket and scarf, the fabric of which resonates with the curls on her head (see figure 1). Focusing on that spectacle, the camera ‘listens’ attentively while Lola tells Bili about their love in the form of a parable. The sex reassignment surgery—a deadly solution to unrequited homosexual love, as audiences familiar with Fassbinder’s In a Year with 13 Moons may recall—would destroy their relationship, Lola warns, because the woman Bili would marry would no longer be “the man he had fallen in love with.” While her story conjures up the housewife femininity to be embodied by Bili’s fantasy woman, tears run down her face, smearing and thereby highlighting the makeup that whitens her skin. In this way, the scene visually superimposes the narrative of naturalized heteronormative femininity with the theatrical spectacle of drag.18

But the theatricality of gender thus explored provides not only a critical counterpoint to the film’s narrative. Rather, it is also one of its critical

17. Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination 36, 13; see 10–11; see Elsaesser, “Tales” 7–8, and Mulvey’s revision of her spectacle argument for melodrama (“It Will Be” 128, 131). In their book Theatre to Cinema, Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs make a closely related point for the narrative forms developed in cinema around 1910 through the notion of a pictorial conception of the image. As they claim, this notion had remained influential in melodrama after its general devaluation in the wake of Diderot, as traced by Fried. The pictorial image, Brewster and Jacobs argue, undercuts “present-day” oppositions between narrative and performance (18) in that it is not self-contained, as it (a) acknowledges the spectator’s presence, and (b) presents a specific state of affairs within a narrative context, thus creating narrative as “a series of” emphasized “situations” nonetheless “anticipat[ing] or sum[ming] up a series of cause and effect relationships” (18–19, 22).

18. Another encounter between drag and hegemonic femininity is explored in a scene in which Kalipso, one of Lola’s coperformers, leaves her Kreuzberg apartment in flamboyant drag attire, shocking both her friends and a middle-aged neighbor wearing a traditional headscarf. Whereas for Mennel, the scene contrasts the film’s “performative” drag “femininity” with that inscribed as “authentic” in its “one-dimensional” narrative portrayal of Kreuzberg’s “patriarchal and heterosexist” Turkish spaces (“Masochism” 296, 305), I think that authenticity itself becomes precarious with drag’s infiltration of these everyday spaces. The film satirizes most of its (German as well as Turkish) minor characters as part of its also comedic agenda (discussed below), and when the cliché neighbor theatrically spits at Kalipso in response to her sexual mockery while both are watched by Kalipso’s friends, she comes across as an integral part of the film’s hilarious stage personnel rather than an image of authentic Turkish femininity.
Figure 1
Film still, *Lola und Bili-dikid*. Copyright Martin Hagemann; zero fiction film GmbH.
sources, that is, a force of reconfiguring identities. This productivity can be pursued with respect to another form of ‘drag’ crossing over into everyday spaces, as explored in the first scene of confrontation between Lola and Bili. Here, we see them naked on a bed with red and golden blankets, in a room adorned by candlelight and flowery wallpaper. When Lola asks rebelliously why Bili wouldn't do the sex change himself if he is so keen on it, he theatrically stretches out on the bed. The camera positions his muscular upper body in the center of the frame as he replies: “Because I am a man, and you are not.” In line with the modern European convention that naturalizes masculinity, Bili's muscles rather than a wig make him into a spectacle here, but the background decoration implicitly adorns him, too, putting his gender identity on display. Through the ways in which Lola und Bilihundikid thus stages not only femininity but also masculinity as an—erotic and openly theatricalized—spectacle, the film investigates Bili's violent gender performance. Still unaware of Lola’s death, Murat later waits for her at a German fast-food booth, “Hella's joint,” which Lola had specified as a meeting point when he brought her the wig. Bili hangs out there as well, waiting for johns next to the adjacent public bathroom. Trying to cope with Lola's disappearance after their fight (which upset him, as underlined by repeated close-ups of his face), he is drinking with a buddy, and the alcohol functions as a diegetic explanation for the ways in which he, artificially cheerful, exaggerates his overall mode of self-presentation in this scene (see figure 2). With his fitted leather jacket, white t-shirt, his glossy, heavily styled hair, big grin, self-aggrandizing rhetoric, and playful poses of street and toilet competence, Bili performs a seductive coolness through which the film casts his masculinity as a form of spectacular (‘drag’) hypermasculinity.

On the diegetic level, the seduction works on Murat here. Oscillating between playful eroticism, brutality, and mentorship, Bili initiates the boy—who ran away from home after his meeting with Lola and is now as hungry as apparently enticed by Bili's performance—into sex work. After learning that Murat is Lola's brother, Bili softens his address into that of a—as he says, still flirtatiously—“brother-in-law.” Sternly, Bili now wants to know: “You are not gay, are you?” When Murat remains silent, Bili orders him to deny that if necessary and insists that it be crucial he doesn’t allow himself to be penetrated: “A man is a man. A hole is a hole. . . . Never be a hole.” Bili’s machismo is a masquerade that functions to deflect stereotypes of effeminacy (or unmanliness as ‘nothingness’), a strategy of generating status against the background

19. While Mennel initially cites this scene for scarcity of mise-en-scène as well, the reworked version of her argument acknowledges its “baroque” quality (The Representation 165).
Figure 2
Film still, Lola und Bilidikid.
Copyright Martin Hagemann;
zero fiction film GmbH.

I don’t cheat people,
so they don’t cheat me.
THEATRICAL NARRATIVES

of his marginalized, economically dependent positionality, which is abject in the eyes of both ‘respectable’ Turks and racist Germans, who may associate his ethnic background with effeminacy in orientalist tradition (see Mennel, “Masochism” 289). Half playfully, the—ultimately good-natured but rough—Hella just called him a “Ntte,” that is, “slut” or “whore,” after he had answered her insistence on the immediate payment of drinks with references to the harm her German “race” had wrought historically. In his drunken cheerfulness, Bili had acknowledged her interpellation by replying: “Takes one to know one.” The theatricality of Bili’s masculinity performance does not make his violence any less real, but the film employs its artificiality for narratively (re)developing its genealogy. When Bili advises Murat not to be a “hole,” he references what has been cited as “Turkish culture’s traditional understanding” of homosexuality (Clark, “Transculturation” 559, with reference to Hüseyin Tapıç). However, the film does not present this ostensibly national masculinity performance as the product of a closed tradition. Although spectators with respective background knowledge may associate Bili’s advice to Murat with traditional Turkishness, this link is never explicated in the film. Instead, the evoked image of Turkish masculinity is situated in the realm of transnational media discourse and self-stylizing mimicry when Bili himself points to the film’s title in introducing himself to Murat: “My friends call me Bili. It’s short for Bilidikid. The Western hero!”

If such cultural transfers constitute identity, its national(ized) performances are the product less of local traditions such as ‘Turkish patriarchy’ than of transnational media cultures of heteronormative masculinity. The controversial analogies between Bili—as well as Osman—and the German neo-Nazis established in the film receive a new significance from that angle as well. The difference between Bili, on the one hand, and Osman and the neo-Nazis, on the other, however, is that Bili is also a Western hero. Unattractive throughout the film, Osman is reduced to a pathetic—in hegemonic parlance, emasculated—state at the end of the film when he begs Murat, who just charged him with murder, not to tell their mother, who is actually listening at the door and will shortly slap Osman in the face. In contrast, Bili’s theatrical hypermasculinity effectively functions as seductive masculinity; he just had another grand entry in the film’s violent showdown. To be sure, the film clearly criticizes Bili’s performance of the outlaw’s vigilante justice. After he has castrated one of the neo-Nazis, Bili’s white T-shirt is half red. A spectacle of excessive violence, he is shot and dies along with the second one of his antagonists. But while the film sentences Bili’s model of heroic masculinity to death, it has also restaged him as an object of queer desire with countless close-ups on his upper body strength. Falling from the empty factory building where the showdown is
located, Bili dies in the water of an adjacent river—thus symbolically reunited with Lola who, as her parable emphasized, “loved” him. Thus, the film narrative integrates the spectacle of heroic Western masculinity through the two-fold articulation by which Linda Hutcheon characterized postmodern parody: it simultaneously deauthorizes and performatively reinstalls the spectacle of the hero (see *Politics* 101).

The notion of parody is to be understood more literally here than it may seem so far. The remainder of my argument about *Lola und Bilidikid* concerns the way in which the film supplements its prevalent melodramatic tone and tragic spectacles with comic doubles and, in presenting these repetitions (in the sign of both difference and similarity), develops alternative narrative figurations of—livable—queer Turkish-German identity. In film studies, the “physical gags” and “acts of anarchy” constituting comedy, especially slapstick (Crafton 108; Gunning, “Crazy Machines” 103), have served as another generic locus for working through the relations between spectacle and narrative, in a scholarly conversation closely connected also to that about the early “cinema of attractions.” In Donald Crafton’s discussion of slapstick, the “non-narrative gag elements” function analogously to metaphor in its antinarrative conceptualizations (cited above), as they intrude “antagonistically” into the narrative as a “violent, embarrassing gesture” (107). Tom Gunning countered by drawing on Crafton’s own metaphoric descriptions of these gestures as “the potholes, detours and flat tires encountered” by an automobile during its (narratively fueled) journey (Crafton 111); as he suggested, these “potholes” are precisely what “Barthes and the Russian Formalists would call the ‘delays’ of narrative”: elements disrupting an initial stasis that constitute “even the most conventional narrative.”

Crafton himself concedes that the single gag often contains “its own microscopic narrative system” (109), and Gunning develops this point for the “mischief” gag characteristic of early cinema, which follows the “basic” cause-and-effect “structure of mischievous preparation and laughable consequence,” with an optional third element of “counteraction” or “punishment to the rascal” (“Crazy Machines” 90). The optional status of such

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20. See Gunning, “Attractions” 32–33. In developing the concept, Gunning suggested that spectacle and performance went “underground” in the age of narrative integration, “both into certain avant-garde practices and as a component of narrative films, more evident in some genres (e.g., the musical) than in others” (“The Cinema of Attractions” 57). Crafton then argued that the cinema of attractions remains “overt, flagrant and flamboyant” in slapstick comedy (111).

21. “Response” 120–21. Nonetheless, Gunning himself remains hesitant vis-à-vis the conceptual challenge of fully including “the centrifugal energy of the comic gag” into a more inclusive concept of narrative (Gunning, “Crazy Machines” 94; see “Response” 121).

22. See Karnick and Jenkins 80–81 for an overview; also Carroll 109.
punishment points to just one of the ways in which gags can be employed to tell “the story . . . differently,” or to configure different stories—with be it sadist or more gentle content. Conceptualized, in line with my general suggestion, as performative acts of reconfiguration, gags both provide alternative (small) stories and form elements of larger, complexly figurative narratives ‘fueled’ by funny deviations.

In *Lola und Bilidikid*, comic dialogue and sights are specifically condensed in a plot thread I have not yet summarized. Early on, Iskender, another hustler and admirer of Bili’s coolness, meets Friedrich von Seeckt, an aristocratic middle-aged German architect. Subtly theatrical in itself, Friedrich’s quiet performance of distinction in his old-fashioned suits and elegant scarves turns hilarious through the incongruity between his and the hustler’s demeanor. In his encounters with Friedrich, Iskender initially imitates Bili’s aggressive coolness, differing from him only through the more nervous and flagrantly inappropriate—funny—character of his rough performance. When Friedrich asks what gives him the privilege of a shared dinner, Iskender responds: “I like your car.” This ‘pothole’ for his performance of professional distance, a splendid old Daimler that actually belongs to Friedrich’s mother, has already been presented to us by the spectacle-hungry camera in a sustained, slowly panning close-up, if not without narratively motivating the indulgence with Iskender’s interest by halfway aligning the shot with his gaze. When Iskender later, in the midst of half-naked wrestling, declares that “The rich should be shot” and “borrows” the Daimler for Lola’s birthday outing without Friedrich’s consent, Iskender becomes both subject and object of a humorous rebellion against social inequality—we are invited to laugh with as well as about him. While the presentation of Iskender’s awkward aggressiveness will probably distance the spectator to a degree, she may still take pleasure in his little acts of anarchy when, for example, Iskender returns the Daimler with an excessive bouquet of white calla lilies—a metaphoric quasi-proposal by virtue of their association with weddings— which he stole from a German flower lady duped by his appearance in the expensive vintage car. No punishment follows.

At Lola’s funeral, Iskender’s and Bili’s tough masculinity performances part company. After he has observed Bili hitting his hand against a wall repeatedly in violent agony, Iskender walks to a phone booth, calls Friedrich and admits, in an awkward pose of understatement, for the first time that he “like[s]” him. From there on, the Friedrich-Iskender love story more fully reconfigures Turkish-German relations at the intersection of ethnicity and class. Short of

23. The quote is from Teresa de Lauretis’s response to Mulvey’s condemnation of narrative (156). Based on structuralist conceptualizations of plot as a negotiation of norm and excess, she suggested early on to rethink the “work of narrativity” as “a mapping of difference” (121).
presenting any utopian resolution, the comic narrative probes subtle shifts that make power relations 'playable' and thereby less deadly. Thus, narrative performance imaginatively reconfigures the social by making use of the mode of fictive theatrical hyperbole, which creates a twofold distance from real-life worlds while still winning some of its humorous force from its virtual referential link with actual scenarios of social inequality.24

As critics have noted, Friedrich's character presents a multilayered embodiment of German histories. His last name recalls a Prussian monarch who headed the German army in Turkey in 1918 (see Hillman 48), and his first name the Prussian king Frederick 'the Great,' who is associated with homosexuality as well as heroic masculinity and the road to fascism in German cultural memory. In bringing such associations into play, the Friedrich-Iskender plotline unfolds a fantasy of resignifying these histories. Although light in tone, it is not ahistorical but rather builds on the ambiguity of historical signifiers. Namely, kings, queens, and other aristocrats (beyond just Frederick II) became available as models for queer appropriations of power by virtue of the ways in which they have been discursively associated with queerness in opposition to models of bourgeois respectability in the modern European imagination (see my Szenarien). The film humorously develops the liberatory potential of these historical associations when Friedrich's mother (Inge Keller26), apparently completely out of sync with her time, conceptualizes her son's love for Iskender exclusively in terms of class. As she hilariously reigns on her son's sofa with her lapdog in the color of her mink, her 'inappropriate' insistence performatively undoes the issue of sexual orientation that plagues the film's major characters: "It's nothing more than this chauffeur thing . . . that gets us from time to time . . . It's completely normal." Making fun of established authority, her role portrait thus simultaneously draws on it for authorizing queer desire. Underscoring her concerns regarding Iskender

24. This wording responds to critics of queer performance who have insisted on the difference between aesthetic fantasy and social reality (see, e.g., Tim Edwards). Obviously, a refiguration such as the one discussed here does not offer a solution that can be directly translated into extrafilmic lives, but the theatrics of identity is not played out at the expense of the social (see Morton 373), either.

25. See also Blumenthal et al. 217. Implicitly positioning playful performativity against a properly serious engagement with history, Hillman argues that the film defies "historical gravity" (47). However, other layers of the film, including the neo-Nazi subplot, precisely underline such historical gravity. More generally, see the critique of "ludic" postmodern theatricality politics in terms of its presumed ahistoricity (thus Morton 375).

with dramatic gesture, the mother proceeds to warn, insisting that she knows what is going on in the world: based on new legislation, the two lovers could be married soon, and “then he’ll become the sole heir to the Seeckt fortune.”

Friedrich, whose own aristocratic positionality is presented as inverted also by the fact that he lived in the socialist East (where, as he reminds his mother, “[w]e were the servants”), angrily responds: “Why not, goddamit.” At this very moment, Iskender honks outside, waiting to play chauffeur, that is, to drive Friedrich’s mother home in the Daimler at Friedrich’s request. While the lapdog loudly articulates her owner’s hostile feelings toward her son’s “impossible” partner, Friedrich’s mother proposes a “deal” in the car: she offers Iskender an expensive brooch in an attempt to bribe him out of her son’s life. Enraged, Iskender throws the piece of jewelry out of the window and affirms his “love” for Friedrich in front of both her and Lola’s coperformers Kalipso and Şehrazat, who sit in the back. Be it in response to this declaration or to Iskender’s accompanying threat that he will otherwise chop her up into dog food and poison the barking mutt with it, Friedrich’s mother ‘shuts up’ and later apologizes. Tenderly stroking Iskender’s hair, she requests “peace,” only to reassume a hierarchical pose after he consents, ‘allowing’ him to carry her bags inside.

While this satirical resolution of historical baggage into outrageous behavior (“Unbelievable!” Iskender mutters to himself) presents a less deadly alternative to the violent encounter between Bili and the neo-Nazis, the ending of the film also doubles the family (melo)drama with a different Turkish-German scenario. Most critics have focused on the former: the mother of Murat, Lola, and Osman, who has until now struggled to negotiate her own feelings with the acceptance of Osman’s authority she deemed proper, finally rebels. Walking into the street, she throws off her headscarf in what appears to be a highly symbolic gesture in support of the ostensibly feminist mainstream discourse of Western liberation from Turkish ‘backwardness.’ To be sure, Murat, who follows her in solidarity, picks up the headscarf, supplementing her energetic gesture with a less striking one, which does not seem to imply any decision about the scarf’s future use, but arguably a moment of respect for the metonymy of identity it presents.

More definitely, the fact that the screen now fades to black for a moment does not yet signal the end of the film. In what is in fact its concluding scene, Şehrazat and Kalipso are riding in a cab, both of them in full drag. On one level, this ending stages a comical fantasy of redistribution. Recognizing the place where Iskender threw the brooch out of the window, Kalipso asks the

27. See Mennel 307; also Yekani on the film’s reproduction of gender clichés.
driver to stop and retrieves it at the risk of ruining her tights. No less significantly, this incident is embedded in a scene of flirtation. Speaking in Turkish, Şehrazat makes conversation with the cab driver, who is thereby marked as Turkish himself. Charmingly, he asserts that he has remained unmarried since he never “met a beautiful woman like you.” Upon returning to the cab ecstatically after locating the brooch, she responds by warning him: “Listen, I am a woman with balls. Don’t say I never told you.” We cannot be sure whether he understands this declaration metaphorically or literally, but this very uncertainty mediates an inclusive blending of feminist, queer, and transgender agendas in the playfully accepting smile with which he acknowledges her self-identification. Thus replacing Osman with another cab driver in a final act of doubling (as, again, a repetition balancing difference and similarity), the film ends on the note of asserting a diegetic space for livable formations of Turkish-German identity short of, or beyond, the assimilation marked by the charged headscarf gesture. In the closing shot, Kalipso and Şehrazat ride—not quite into the sunset, but “towards a clearly lit symbol of the city to which they all belong” (Hillman 53): the Siegessäule (Victory Column), an overdetermined Berlin landmark of Prussian militarism and queer desire (the phallic column gave its name to the city’s major gay magazine).

Diplomatically, Mennel suggests “to keep as an open question” whether “this coda queers the narrative or whether the narrative closure contains the camp” (“Masochism” 308). I agree that we still need to account for the weight of the previous scene and the overall effect of those acts of narrative performance in the film that configure its tragic outcome. However, the “coda” itself is part of the film’s narrative. Even while the preceding fade-out marks it off as supplementary rather than the film’s one valid ending, the final scene is not an unrelated ‘extra’ to an otherwise coherent story. Rather, it grows out of one of the film’s major plotlines, multiply interwoven with the tragic thread through parallels in characterization, props, and overall mise-en-scène. Through the ways it connects its different plot elements, Lola und Bilidikid presents images and counterimages, dialogically configuring them into a complex commentary on contemporary Turkish-German identity politics. While aesthetically underscoring the artificiality of all the identities it stages, the film does not simply claim that—as the postmodern politics of theatricality has been charged with claiming—the figuration of gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity is a matter of voluntaristically choosing your drag outfit of the day. Rather, its narrative (melo)dramatically underscores the force of (diegetic) real-life constraints and violence while simultaneously probing possibilities of intervention in a mode of comic replay—whereby ‘replay’ designates a mode of sociosymbolic operation intertwining change and continuity. Performative
reconfigurations of identity find their contours only within, and through, the differential repetition of the narratives provided by society.

Performing Subversion through Narrative

SONNENALLEE

Leander Haußmann’s comedy Sonnenallee (Sun Alley), the biggest German box office hit of 1999 and simultaneously winner of a government-issued screenplay prize (see Cafferty 253–54), introduces us to a different facet of ongoing processes of collective identity formation in postunification Germany—as well as a different narrative reconfiguration of the subversion fantasy that has permeated both performance theory and cultural practice. The film’s title refers to a street in Berlin that was divided by the wall until 1989. A border checkpoint allowed West Berliners but not generally East Berliners to cross. As specified by the title of the novel, Thomas Brussig’s literary variation on the screenplay that he coauthored with Haußmann, the narrative world is actually located Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee, on its literally and metaphorically “shorter end”: in the East. Like Good Bye, Lenin!, Sonnenallee is part of the “sub-genre” of “unification comedy” (Allan 106). With their relatively light tone, these films differ from both preceding and more recent filmic takes on the GDR focused primarily on the legacy of the surveillance state. The success of the unification comedies has been contextualized as part of the concomitant emergence of ‘ostalgia,’ that is (perceived) nostalgia for the East.

Ostalgia itself is a highly contested phenomenon. Associated, in particular, with resurging fascination for GDR material culture, it has been described, with respect to film form, as the use of “the texture of the past as a source of visual attractions” (Kapczynski 80, quoting Koepnick on heritage films). In this sense, the aesthetics of ostalgia undertakes what Gumbrecht has described

28. Since the early 1970s, West Germans and West Berliners were able to visit the GDR on day visas. GDR citizens, however, were generally allowed to travel to the West only after reaching retirement age.

29. As Wehdeking points out, this configuration of film and novel exemplifies the new intermediality that overall characterizes turn-of-the-twenty-first-century poetics (41). I focus on the film, though, which I find much more interesting. Employing a comparatively conventional third-person, past-tense narrative form, the novel inserts explicitly didactic narrator commentary in place of the film’s intricate first-person commentary format.

30. This includes, e.g., Margarete v. Trotta’s 1995 Das Versprechen and Das Leben der Andere.

31. See Cooke 157 for an overview of respective voices on Sonnenallee; Kapczynski; Cook; Joziwak and Mermann on Good Bye, Lenin!; Hell and von Moltke on both as part of a larger, not exclusively East German nostalgia trend.
as “the presentification of past worlds,” that is, an attempt to make the past “tangible again” (94; italics in original). In political terms, Gumbrecht contrasts the implied phenomenological gesture of bracketing context with techniques of “learning from the past,” thus specifying presentification as a mode of letting ourselves “be attracted by” it and “indulge” in it (123, 125). In the ostalgia context, such (presumed) absence of a critical attitude has translated into morally charged images “of East Germans as deluded ingrates longing pathetically (if understandably) for the socialist past” (Bach 546), and, in turn, provoked alternative conceptualizations of ostalgia as a legitimate reaction to the asymmetrical process of unification also known as West German “take-over.”

Thus, ostalgia has been read “as a form of resistance to colonization” (785) or an “attempt to reclaim a kind of Heimat” (home) that “does not entail an identification with the former GDR state, but rather . . . with different forms of oppositional solidarity” (Daphne Berdahl, quoted from Kapczynski 84). Yet other critics have interpreted ostalgia as having originated in West German stances and desires: a depoliticizing, pseudo-ethnographic rescue operation for the lost ‘other’ culture (see Bisky 119, 127), if not a means of deferring the burden of the German past by claiming “East Germans’ neurotic entanglement with authoritarian pastness” (Boyer 363). Instead emphasizing mediation and distance, Jonathan Bach has distinguished a “modernist” form of n/ostalgia, which he describes as “less a longing for an unredeemable past as such than a longing for the fantasies and desires that were once possible in that past,” from “a (p)ostmodern” n/ostalgia “of style” through which “ironic westerner[s]” or also “‘sophisticated’ easterner[s]” value “the artifact . . . precisely for its lack of emotional attachment to a specific past” (546–47). A “capitalist nostalgia,” the latter is organized around “a highly aestheticized and decontextualized sense of camp” (554).

Bach’s twofold conceptualization is the most relevant for my reading of **Sonnenallee** and **Good Bye, Lenin!** Specifying these films’ evocation of ostalgia as a configuration of such modernisms and postmodernisms resonates with how they frame the presence of their nostalgia objects. Rather than an aesthetics of presentification, **Sonnenallee** and **Good Bye, Lenin!** develop a highly theatrical game of narration. Some critics have in fact qualified their reading in terms of “ostalgia” by asserting that through the “the use of irony,” the films “actually deconstruct . . . the phenomenon of ‘Ostalgie’ itself” or self-reflexively parody their own engendering of it. Looking more closely at the

32. Jozwiak and Mermann 781. The controversial procedure basically established East Germany’s “Beitritt” (accession) to Western law rather than a joint effort in recreating political and legal identity.

33. Uecker 192; Cooke 163, 158; Cormican 251; see similarly Kapczynski on Good Bye, Lenin! 82–83.
aesthetics of theatrical narration employed in both Sonnenallee and Good Bye, Lenin!, I develop these readings but also underline that irony and self-reflexivity account for only part of the ways in which the films bracket a nostalgic attachment to the past. Analyzing the unfolding of diegetic worlds through the process of theatricalized narration, I show that both films displace (certainly nonmodernist) nostalgia also through the ways in which they contextualize GDR spectacle within their plots. Developing ‘excessive’ theatricality not as a counterpoint to narrative but as a source of powerfully creative, if ambiguously (un-)authoritative world-making, they offer their heterogeneous (East and West German) audiences complex configurations of critique and pleasure, which I describe in terms of identification-at-a-distance and acentral empathy.

Sonnenallee and Good Bye, Lenin! do so in overlapping but also partially contrary ways. Critics have associated these differences with the different positionalities of the filmmakers: whereas Sonnenallee’s director Leander Haußmann and screenwriter Thomas Brussig grew up in East Germany, Wolfgang Becker and much of his team are from the West. Without discrediting these biographical explanations, my reading focuses on aesthetic distinctions, underlining how generally similar techniques of narrative theatricality develop highly divergent effects in specific configurations. Although not simply advocating “n/ostalgia,” Sonnenallee in fact resists hegemonic notions of history in postunification Germany through the ways in which its playful narration explores notions of subversive performance, both formally and thematically. While the film satirically displaces the fetishization of (antinarrative) spectacle and insistently draws it into the realm of political complicility, Sonnenallee still champions its own fantasy of narrative performance as a means of counterhegemonic memory fueled by the longing for resistant subjectivity. Good Bye, Lenin!, in contrast, is not primarily interested in subversion at all. Although the film satirizes both the GDR and postunification society, it ultimately enlists the powers of narrative performance for a project of integration: interrupting nostalgia (by putting it on theatrical display), Good Bye, Lenin! reconfigures both Western and Eastern emotional attachment to the past into a narrative foundation for postunification society (see Cook).

Whereas Lola und Bilidikid theatricalized its narrative primarily through the means of mise-en-scène and acting, Sonnenallee and Good Bye, Lenin! emphasize film discourse much more flagrantly through voice-over narration, metaleptic camera work, manipulations of film speed, and the montage of nondiegetic materials. Voice-over, to begin there, was dominantly shunned by film theory and criticism throughout much of the twentieth century. Various cast as too ‘theatrical’ and too ‘literary,’ it was sometimes positioned as a descendant of early cinema’s live commentator; its use would be critiqued as an authoritarian device, especially in the heterodiegetic variations prominent
in epics, Westerns, and documentaries (Kozloff, here 9, 17, 80–81; see 74). Until postmodernism redeemed the technique precisely for its challenge to presumably unmediated forms of storytelling, and specifically its ironic potential in the play of unreliability introduced where image and voice make divergent truth claims (Kozloff 110; see also Chatman, “New Directions” 332), its mainstream uses were subject to significant constraints: homodiegetic rather than heterodiegetic, Hollywood voice-over narration would be typically concentrated in the films’ exposition and at their end (see Kozloff 41; Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 26–27).

Although the use of voice-over in *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye, Lenin!* still gestures at these constraints, these films severely stretch the limits of the conventionally acceptable by having their narrators surface also at various moments in between, and thus making their presence into an ongoing feature to be integrated with the spectator’s immersion into the filmic world. Even more flamboyant, however, is the way in which the voice-over operates specifically in *Sonnenallee*. Almost throughout in the present tense, it does not function as the epic framing device introducing personal memory known, for example, from the mid-twentieth-century worlds of film noir. Thus lacking the straightforward indications of temporal distance that naturalize first-person narration, 34 *Sonnenallee*’s voice-over also mostly does not follow the other “classical fictional model” (Bruzzi 55) of presenting an interior monologue, which would immerse the audience directly into a seemingly self-contained personal world. In fact reminiscent of the “exhibitor” of the early “cinema of attractions,” *Sonnenallee*’s narrative voice instead operates as an explicit tool of commentary throughout most of the film. Acknowledging the viewer and thus soliciting “a highly conscious awareness of the film image” (Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment” 121), its operation of showing as (de)monstration (see Gunning, “Attractions”; Kessler) underwrites the theatrical distance that is also generated by the “stage-like nature” of the set intentionally made to look artificial (Rinke 33; Cooke 164, quoting Haußmann).

“I live in the GDR,” the voice of the film’s adolescent protagonist explains during the introductory credit sequence. Throughout the exposition, the narrator presents individual elements of his world to the audience, for example, by introducing his family members as the camera shows them in characteristic poses. While his father is watching West German television, his mother warns his sister to be “careful” (*vorsichtig*)—the mother’s favorite word, as the narrator informs us—since the frosted glass door to her room gives away that she is passionately kissing her boyfriend of the week. Critics have argued that

34. See Cohn, “I Doze and Wake;” as discussed in chapter III.
we are thus presented with the horizontal panorama of a society rather than ‘properly’ plot-driven cinema. However, *Sonnenallee* is not just a postmodern “Nummernrevue” (Wehdeking 42), in that this expository sequence also plants the seeds of narrative conflict by introducing personnel, props, and motifs. But narrative exposition happens almost casually, with the function of story development ostensibly subordinated to the presentation of spectacle.

“Other than that,” the narrator adds after explaining that he lives in the GDR, “I don’t have any problems.” His world is parodistically sketched as a predominantly comical one. As shown by the interplay of voice-over and camera, it is not presentified for straightforward enjoyment, with the exception perhaps of the (notably Western) jeans proudly showcased by one of the narrator’s friends and fetishized in camera close-up in the introductory sequence. Instead, the objects of the GDR are remembered as media of humor, including the gross slapstick effects generated by the (malfunctioning) “MuFuTi” (multifunction table) in the family’s living room. Arguably presenting “the GDR as a zoo” (Cooke 161), the film invites its audience to view a more or less ‘exotic’ spectacle. Thus, we watch from a position doubling that of the Western tourists who peek into the shorter end of the Sonnenallee from the viewing platform erected on the other side of the wall in an introductory mise-en-abyme of the film’s narrative setup.35 “Guck mal, ’nen Ossi” (Look, an Easterner), a Western girl shouts from up there as the protagonist walks onto the street at the end of the introductory sequence, adding sneeringly, “Isn’t he cute, you could almost get a crush on him.”36

The film’s regime of presenting its narrative world as a comical attraction complicates matters of identification. While the explicitly presentational function of the voice-over recalls the sensationalist ‘exhibitor’ of early cinema, who would “engage the viewer’s curiosity” rather than creating “empathy with character psychology” (Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment” 121), *Sonnenallee*’s homodiegetic narrator does show his own world, resulting in an intricate constellation of distance and proximity. In the introductory encounter with the Western tourists, the steep camera angles highlight the spatial hierarchy inscribed in the situation, aligning us first with the protagonist, then momentarily with the Western adolescents while they look down upon and, as the voice-over explicates, “humiliate” him. For the Western spectator, this

35. See Baßler 51 on the analogous scene of the novel.
36. “Da könnt’ man sich ja glatt verlieben.” As Cooke has pointed out, the derogatory notion “Ossi” is a postunification term (161). Implicitly, the film thus acknowledges historical distance here. The DVD edition supplements an explicit historical framing by adding a sequence before the actual start of the film: we see the neighborhood cop from the film, with his family all in national colors, changing back into his GDR uniform as the decision is made to re-erect the wall. Thus, *Sonnenallee* is set in the world of historical time undone.
configuration of voice-over and camera work thwarts her enjoyment of ‘exotic’ GDR spectacle with a critical reminder of the power relations inscribed in the judgmental gaze onto the GDR that acquired overall discursive hegemony in postunification society. But also the East German spectator, whose “sense of an East German group identity” is generally played to the film’s cultural references (Rinke 36), is interpellated at a distance. Although the Eastern subject of narration, with whom she has already been aligned for a couple of minutes, clearly comes across as more sympathetic than his torturers on the platform, the protagonist’s narrative act of exhibiting his world locks the audience into the role of (potentially critical) spectator, creating acentral empathy through identification-at-a-distance.37

In response to the Western adolescents’ complacent “We are doing well, and how are you?” the narrator explains that he isn’t doing “so badly,” although he won’t tell “them.” As he elaborates, his tone slowly changes from annoyed self-defense to propagandistic cheerfulness: “At any rate, no one is homeless here, and no one is starving, either. Staple foods are inexpensive, prizes stable.” In comically eager support, the camera underscores his discourse by presenting a store's street display of local vegetable fare. The narrator’s twofold position of a commentator simultaneously embodied as part of the spectacle makes it difficult to decide whether we are invited to read his tone as a signal of intentional irony or if we ought to charge him with lacking critical distance to the ideological discourses of his society—thus inviting questions about the relationship between narrator and implied author. But perhaps, these very questions suggest my overinvestment in narratological systematicity as a viewer. Because of the narrator’s function and position, the narrative situation created in Sonnenallee is structurally haunted by specters of metalepsis, and the interplay between camera, voice-over, and music explicitly unfolds such exchanges between diegetic world and discourse level in a number of scenes, to the effect of flaunting the contingency of narrative authority. In what has been described as prototypically postmodernist fashion, this contingency enables a fantasy of sovereign narrative play here. In Derridean manner, that is, narrative authority is located exclusively in the act of narrating when, for example, in the described introductory scene the protagonist now buys a head

37. In the attempt to combine cognitive and psychoanalytical approaches, I use the notion of empathy for what Murray Smith, with Richard Wollheim, calls "acentral imagining" (and defines as "sympathy" himself) while I prefer the psychoanalytic notion of "identification" (which Smith discards entirely) for "central imagining" (i.e., Smith’s empathy, “Emotional Response” 36). Identification-at-a-distance (a notion developed by Kaja Silverman in Threshold of the Visible World) overlaps with empathy, but the psychoanalytic notion describes the process in terms of its identity-generating (or -dissolving) impact on the subject, whereas cognitive discussions of empathy are primarily oriented toward intersubjective processes.
of cabbage and uses it to play ball with his friend Mario, until they throw it at a surprised border guard.

But if this playfulness confounds my questions about the narrator on the level of narratological system building, they still make sense here. Namely, the protagonist’s twofold relationship to his society is developed also diegetically as the narrative unfolds. During the credit sequence, the narrator introduced himself as Michael Ehrenreich, that is, Michael “Rich-in-Honor.” Beyond indicating his lead role in the film, the name designates an overdetermined formation of heroic subjectivity. A camera pan during the credit sequence gave us initial hints by presenting the paraphernalia of his adolescent identifications—at first glance, a surprising configuration of transnational affiliations. Posters on the wall feature the “victorious Indian native hero” played by the GDR’s most popular actor (Rinke 29), through whom the state-run film company aligned its socialist spectators with the fight against white imperialist America, next to declarations of allegiance to a world of (imperialist?) “rock and pop” visualized by stars in the colors of the American flag. As the narrator explains, he always wanted to be a pop star. Whether pop star, native American or outlaw ranger (like Bilidikid), however, the ‘Western’ hero develops his contours in his rebellion against the law and norms of mainstream society—including those of the socially (in many respects) conservative GDR. As the narrator explains, we join him in the process of copying a song that is “verboten.” Having grown up in a society where “they like” to ban and interdict, and “do so a lot,” his pop star fantasy finds its form in the antirestrictive theme of becoming someone who “moves something” (the German “etwas bewegt” translates also as ‘making a difference’). Half-hearted rather than radical, however, the narrator immediately considers that most pop stars die early. Reminiscent of his mother, his cautiousness positions the heroic designation inscribed in the family name as ironic. A bunch of “ordinary conformists” (Cafferty 260), the Rich-in-Honors gain their diegetic contours also as model citizens of their society, which constructed its hegemonic subjectivities along the model of the socialist hero always ready to sacrifice personal happiness for state and community.

Casually introduced in the expository sequence, the film’s central narrative conflict revolves around precisely that demand. “Today,” the voice-over explains when Michael first joins Mario on the street, they have “only one topic of conversation,” namely, whether they should pledge three years of army service in school the next day. Whereas Mario, who unlike Michael dares to cross the street on a red light, resolutely protests such consent to the—officially optional—extension of required service time, Michael worries that saying “no” would likely prevent him from pursuing university studies. Com-
bining cautious complicity with rebellious desire, the heroes of Sonnenallee are neither the oppressed victims and guilty perpetrators of hegemonic postuni-
fication memory culture, nor do they present a self-confidently “irreverent” countermodel (thus Rinke 36). Rather, the film’s adolescent protagonists are subjects of a longing for resistant identity. Their presentation provides Bach’s modernist n/ostalgia with a critical twist. Bach’s concept of longing for the fantasies—rather than realities—of the past concretely targets a fusion of “the socialist projection of a harmonious future” and “fully developed Self” with their capitalist analogues induced by television advertising (547). In Sonnen-
lee, the fantasies at stake find their form as a fusion of Eastern and Western fantasies of individual heroism qua political subversion.

The film unfolds these fantasies through the themes—and means—of comedy, musical, and sexual spectacle. After the introductory debate about the imminent army service decision, Michael, Mario, and their friends start dancing on the street to the song just copied by Michael, the 1968 hit “Mos-
cow” by the West German band Wonderland. When they are interrupted by the local police officer, the ABV (Abschnittsbevollmäch-
tigter), who has overheard their conversation about how “verboten” the song is, the adolescent boys shrewdly defend themselves by claiming that the notion was merely an expression from youth language, a presumably harmless adaptation of an already contained oppositional gesture. Does this strategic reading veil the song’s subversive potential, or does it suggest that ultimately nonpolitical pop is easily contained, if it could ever be radical in the first place? Without fully coming down on either side of this debate, Sonnenallee emphasizes the contingency of subversion within the system of control that frames it. Half convinced, the police officer confiscates the tape but announces that he will make a copy for himself and play it at one of the police parties where he functions as a DJ (Schallplattenunterhalter in GDR language). When doing so later in the film, he will in fact get in trouble, but only by producing the subversive nature of the musical act through a performative attribution of illegal status. Imitating the cool poses of youth culture, he introduces the song as “verboten” and thereby triggers an old officer, who had been sleeping through the police party.

38. Part of the scene’s comical effect results from the circumstance that the content of the song remains unspecified. Before the arrival of the police officer, Micha’s friend Wuschel had claimed with an air of knowingness that the song was banned because of the English lyrics. Vis-
à-vis the police officer, he now asserts that they don’t understand the text anyway; after all, they learn only Russian in school. The film sparked online discussions about why and whether the song was in fact banned in the GDR, or perhaps only thought to be banned. http://de.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080516113436AA67Ked (accessed 07/08/09).
Comedy diminishes its objects, here both the youngsters’ resistance poses and the state’s response. Some of the nostalgia charges raised against Sonnenallee were based on the film’s ‘trivializing’ representation of GDR authorities and oppression practices. If we subtract the anticommunist hysteria fueling them, they translate into questions about the effectiveness of the film’s comical critique. With Bakhtin, Sonnenallee’s representation of the ABV reads as a carnivalesque subversion of authority. In close-up, the film audience gets to enjoy the spectacle of the police officer as he struggles to find the “eject” button on the boys’ simple tape recorder, with the tip of his tongue in the corner of his mouth to signal great concentration. Then the camera cuts to a border guard lifting up his binoculars, and back to the police officer in a shot on his ass as he leans forward in his struggle with the recorder. As the continuity editing-trained audience will likely conclude, the border guard enjoys the spectacle of ‘anally exposed’ authority as well. Although it seems rather far-fetched to tag this playfulness as nostalgic, the “triumphant postwall recollection of the comic side of GDR absurdity” (Cafferty 268) is, in 1999, politically subversive only to the degree to which laughter about authorities is still, or newly, “verboten” in postunification Germany. While some indignant reactions to the film could almost suggest so, the gag itself is old in that it draws on an established topos of political critique in twentieth-century German discourse, namely, the association of totalitarianism (traditionally, fascism) with homosexuality (see Hewitt). As if imitating its heroes’ cautiousness, moreover, the film immediately contains the ABV ass spectacle through an act of narrative correction. While we look at the police officer’s behind, the onset of extradiagnostic music signals that something is happening. Shortly, this event is specified as the appearance of Miriam, the heroine of our romantic comedy—who, as the film audience is now invited to conclude, may have been the actual target of the border guard’s initially maladjusted gaze. Although once more underlining the contingent nature of narrative authority, this corrective act gestures less at the sovereignty of (Derridean) narrative play than at the constraints imposed on it by social and cinematic norms (as underlined in Butler’s critique of Derrida; see chapter I).

Shot in soft focus and slow motion, Miriam’s appearance, which normalizes the carnivalesque sight of the police officer, is staged as a truly grand spectacle disrupting the flow of action everywhere around. While Michael’s

39. See Cooke 159; Jozwiak and Mermann 788. The film was even compared to comedy under National Socialism, which not only downplays the historical differences between the two regimes but also ignores the circumstance that Sonnenallee provides precisely the sort of political satire of which NS comedy fell short (see Cafferty 254–55). If playfully, the film targets the GDR system of oppression rather than eliding it.
voice-over introduces her as the object of his fantasies, his desire metaleptically infiltrates the overall mise-en-scène, as other men around stall their cars and walk against walls in staring at Miriam. Beyond containing the preceding spectacle of authority, the scene receives its significance as one of Sonnenallee's most excessive moments of theatricalized narration. Hyperbolically literalizing Hollywood conventions, it not only mocks the scripts of teenage love (thus Cooke 162) but quite forcefully showcases the notion that (musical, sexual, comedy) spectacle interrupts narrative as such. And importantly, it thereby marks a transition point at which the film's seemingly undirected playfulness molds into a more clear-cut project: the scene's hyperbolic theatricality prepares the ground for a narrative interrogation of precisely that notion of subversive spectacle. The political dimensions of Michael's desire for Miriam begin to unfold when she kisses “the class enemy”—a young man from West Berlin—at a school party, a ‘subversive’ act presented as nearly as disruptive to the film's narrative flow as her initial entrance. Consequently, Miriam is sentenced to prepare a “self-critical contribution” for the next state youth organization election conference. In an attempt to trump his rival, Michael begins to depart from his conformist ways, sentencing himself to give such a speech as well after he took the blame for one of Mario's classroom jokes, which had transformed the working class's “vanguard”—in German, Vorhut—into its “foreskin” (Vorhaut). While Michael's 'subversively' private intentions are beyond doubt, the mechanism of self-critique is a tool designed to recuperate challenges to the state through their theatrical restaging in narrative context—and as narratively configured in Sonnenallee, this tool works effectively. With Michael's enthusiastic speech, spectacle is recuperated for hegemonic ideology (see variously Feuer; King; Musser, “A Cinema,” “Rethinking”): fueled by flirtation behind the scenes as well as the rhetorical training provided by the professional actor whom his sister is dating that week, Michael has the full attention of his diegetic audience as he passionately praises Marx’s, Engel’s, and Lenin’s “love” for the working class. To be sure, this effect of containment is counteracted on the extradiegetic level, as the audience of the film is invited to laugh at Michael's hyperbolic use of official language, before his words are altogether drowned out by music underlining his enthusiasm. On the diegetic level, however, Mario fumes: “First, you commit to a woman, and then you commit to the system quite quickly.”

While thus narratively bracketing the fantasy of resistance through sex and music, the film does salvage it to a degree with the further development of Michael's love story—if only through the intervention of narrative, or more precisely, a heroic act of narrative performance on the diegetic level. After Michael had one of the drug cocktails of Mario's existentialist girlfriend, Mir-
iam expresses disgust with his stoned behavior and declares that she is fed up with such “superficialities.” His face and shirt still smeared with pie after a slapstick insert, the desperate lover promises Miriam to show her his diaries as proof of his presumed ‘deep’ oppositional thinking. Since these diaries don’t exist, Michael now needs to retroactively fabricate them during a long night shift. Self-reflexively thematizing the production of memory in the process of representation (Cooke 166), the film diegetically doubles its production of a longing for past fantasies of resistance. Going back to the moment in which the first grader deems it worthwhile to begin a diary because he can finally spell “shit,” Michael’s writing produces a subversive autobiography. With his voice mostly functioning as interior monologue rather than external commentary in this scene, the film allows us to get close to the protagonist here; however, theatricality is recuperated when he flaunts his diaries’ artificiality by titling them “the early years” and “the present.”

With its comically besmirched origins, Michael’s autobiography produces theatrical agitation that seems initially fake but turns real in the course of the performative process, aided by some more play with metaleptic exchanges. As the nightly writer imagines an attempt to escape to the West, a short-circuit created by a border guard’s attempt to play music on a confiscated Western stereo recorder causes an alarm outside. In panic, Michael’s friend Wuschel runs into the border zone, trying to protect the precious “Exile on Main Street” album that he has finally acquired on the black market, and is shot by the ABV. Since Sonnenallee is a comedy, the double album pressed to his chest stops the bullet and saves Wuschel, but nonetheless, Michael, who witnessed the incident, returns to his writing with the insight that resistance is “not a game.” In the next scene, he officially objects to military service: not just the three-year extension, but armed service as such, which would have put a definite end to his hopes regarding university studies in the historical GDR (Schult).

The reaction of the official in the film is less definite but simultaneously more menacing. Michael’s defiant insistence that his decision places him “outside” the system is answered with a cynical “That’s what you think.” The implied threat is concretized when on his way out, Michael runs into Mario, who is expected by a Stasi (secret service) official. Mario, whose record had been shaky before, was suspended from school earlier for the drug experiments, and the resulting “freedom” did not last. When his girlfriend got pregnant, the Stasi capitalized on his desperate situation; at the end of the film, their wedding in traditional dress cements the recuperation of their rebellious poses (“The family is society’s smallest cell,” reads an inscription at the door of the civil registry office). The threat of Mario’s fate indicates that, in the reality of the film’s socialist world, the dialectic of subversion and containment is
not yet undone by the stabilization Michael’s act of resistance received from its autobiographical contextualization. Nonetheless, the film suggests that his narrative production of depth did make a difference: For a moment, its overall comic narrative is interrupted by sad musical-acrobatic spectacle. Shocked by Mario’s Stasi involvement, Michael beats him up until both of them sit on the floor crying. Drowning out diegetic sound, the melancholic Graeme Jefferies guitar music gives us a glimpse at mourning as an alternative mode of memory, in acknowledgment of the limits of fantasy.

To be sure, this disruption does not last, either. With the subsequent, comically staged death of the Ehrenreich family’s Western uncle Heinz, the aroused sadness is rechanneled and the film’s overall humorous mode resumed. Negotiating the official’s (realistic) threat regarding Michael’s future with his, and the film’s, own fantasy of (real) resistance, Sonnenallee concludes by displacing the spectacle of subversion into the realm of play once more. The film’s grand finale affirms the fantasy, if not without emphasizing its counterfactual- ity already on the diegetic level. Inspired by love (diaries in hand, he finally got to kiss Miriam), Michael once more resorts to the “power” of his productive “imagination” (Allan 115) when Wuschel despair upon discovering that the replacement “Stones” album he acquired on the black market had a fake label. Stubbornly insisting that the music they hear is authentic Western rock, Michael performs the “verbotenen” song with an imaginary guitar. Reluctantly at first, the friend joins in and, standing on a Sonnenallee balcony, they finally become pop stars. In musical fashion, their performance inspires the diegetic audience to go along. Soon, almost the entire cast of the film dances on the street, ‘rocking’ toward the wall in an imagined gesture of social liberation. Still comical rather than heroic, this concluding fantasy scenario includes Mario with his wife in their wedding clothes and the police officer, who was cleaning the street in underwear, having been degraded after the border incident with Wuschel.

Flamboyantly antirealistic, the presented image of ‘verbotenen’ pleasures presents less the GDR as “Hippie-Republik” than a ‘Hippie’ fantasy of its performative dissolution into a realm of social liberation. As we have seen, Sonnenallee is overall not nostalgic in that it champions the fantasy of a better society, but at best in Bach’s ‘modernist’ sense of a nostalgia for the long-

40. They now play “The Letter” by the Box Tops, in a version by Dynamo 5, i.e., five members from Sonnenallee’s cast (see Cafferty 255).

41. This wording, which apparently goes back to Haußmann himself, is used in several reviews (e.g., Lau 58; Anke Westphal, quoted from Basler 55).

42. The ending of the film may seem to contradict that argument. As the rocking masses are faded out, the protagonist’s voice shifts into the past tense, providing narrative closure by
nings of the past—critically twisted, however, into a fantasy of historical resistance (see Jung 275 on the novel). Through the ways in which Sonnenallee mixes these longings with ‘postmodern’ detachment in its theatrical aesthetics of spectacle, as well as its narrative configuration of that spectacle, the film degrades rebellion and insists on the power of social containment in actual life. Simultaneously, however, Sonnenallee’s celebration of playfully productive theatricality also endorses the fantasy of subversive performance—as a forceful fantasy—by imagining it as victorious in the end. Thus, the power of ‘free’ narrative play is defended, if only for the realm of the imagination, against the knowledge of how it is constrained by convention even here, and channeled into an imaginative intervention into postunification historiography. The liberties taken in freeing the film’s concluding fantasy from the weight of historical reality constitute the major difference between Sonnenallee and Good Bye, Lenin!, where the GDR is not dissolved into an imaginary realm of liberation but into the regime of D-Mark and McDonalds.

Historical Integration

GOOD BYE, LENIN!

While Sonnenallee to some degree united East and West German audiences in their shared post/modernist appreciation of GDR spectacle, it was not taken up internationally: distributors argued that the film contained too many

evaluating what we have seen in terms of personal memory: “Once upon a time, there was a land and I lived in it. And . . . it was the best time of my life, for I was young and in love.” However, the seemingly immediate (not-so-modernist) nostalgia of these words is bracketed not only through their fairy-tale framing but also by the accompanying music and camera work. As we hear East German star Nina Hagen’s 1974 hit “Du hast den Farbfilm vergessen” (You forgot the color film), which bemoans the resulting grey memories of a beautiful vacation on the Hiddensee island in the Baltic Sea, the film color fades into black and white as well. If thus apparently claiming the colorful ‘truth’ of the past lost in its ‘deficient’ representation, this concluding play of sound and image simultaneously highlights the decisive character of technological mediation. Furthermore, audiences with a GDR background could decipher additional layers of irony transforming the scene’s seemingly straightforward longing for the past into another example of Sonnenallee’s modernist longing for the (resistant) longings of the past. Namely, neither Hiddensee vacations nor color film were readily available in the controlled, shortages-afflicted economy of the GDR, and the song’s seemingly personal drama could thus be read as a veiled political critique. (If I recall correctly, this reading was first suggested by Cathy Gelbin; personal conversation.)

43. Cafferty describes Sonnenallee as a “unification-text” (269) because the film found one-third of its audience in the former West (254). However, precisely these statistics also point to substantial asymmetries, given that the former Western German part of the country has roughly three times as many inhabitants as the former East.
specific references for non-German viewers (see Rinke 26). However, the significance of such references has also been noted for Wolfgang Becker’s 2003 Good Bye, Lenin! (Allan 118), which was not only the biggest German box office hit since the fall of the wall but also became a global trademark of contemporary German cinema. Rather than as a simple matter of access, my reading explains Good Bye, Lenin!’s transnational marketability with the ways in which it aesthetically, and politically, departs from Sonnenallee, making it into a better fit for the (projected) desires of global mass audiences in the first years of the twenty-first century.

In many respects, both films are very similar in their combination of humorous spectacle with historical fantasy and their flamboyant theatricalization of narrative discourse. Nonetheless, history plays a different role in Good Bye, Lenin!, mediated by—and mediating—different forms of narrative integration. Whereas Sonnenallee embedded plot development into its unfolding spectacle of GDR society, Good Bye, Lenin! embeds GDR spectacle into its unification narrative. As readers may remember, the film plot spans the year between the political protests at the occasion of the GDR’s fortieth anniversary in October 1989 to unification. Alex, the teenage protagonist and homodiegetic narrator, relates these events through the focus on a family drama. Alex’s mother was on her way to the state’s official birthday celebrations when she accidentally observed her son’s arrest during the accompanying protests, leading her to suffer a heart attack and fall into a coma. When she finally awakes, having missed the fall of the wall and major parts of the unification process, the doctor warns that all agitation could be fatal. Alex decides to protect his mother by shielding her from the changing historical realities. More and more inventive, he reconstructs the GDR on their apartment’s “79 square meters” (as the film’s tagline has it). Rewriting current events in homemade television programs, he fights the intrusion of ongoing systemic change by means of the counterfactual imagination. In this way, the film intricately interweaves the restaging of the GDR as spectacle with its focus on a chain of public events that audiences know as actual unification history.

The representational claim advanced through this construction does not straightforwardly come at the expense of theatricalizing playfulness. No less than Sonnenallee, Good Bye, Lenin! highlights film discourse. While techniques of metalepsis are less prominent, the homodiegetic voice-over is even more regularly present than in Sonnenallee, and the film flagrantly uses montage techniques—that is, the other major paradigm of overt narration in mod-

44. With more than six million viewers in Germany alone, Good Bye, Lenin! was sold to more than sixty countries (Finger 44), won multiple European awards, and was nominated for a Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film.
ernist film—for developing its historical satire. Furthermore, self-reflexivity is also generated by the extensive presentation of television and film as representational technologies on the plot level. In seemingly paradoxical fashion, however, this heightened theatricality is bound up with a realist project. Previous scholarship has discussed the latter primarily in terms of the film’s alleged nostalgia, citing Becker’s use of documentary and pseudodocumentary GDR footage in its consumption with “authentic details” (Kapczynski 86). However, much of the film’s apparently authentic GDR footage is, in fact, explicitly theatricalized—and ultimately deconstructed as ‘false’ memory trapped in the ideological self-representation of state-supported socialism. Meanwhile, the film’s own project of (differently ideological) realist narrative does draw on techniques of documentary authentication in individual scenes, but primarily it employs the number one Hollywood formula of realism: ‘classical’ narrative form in the sense of White’s mode of historical representation, which “feigns to make the world . . . speak itself as a story” (“Narrativity” 2). My reading details how this narrative realism in part competes with the film’s flamboyant discourse theatricality, and in part—short of simple dichotomies—is also supported by it, as the film develops, but ultimately subjects the postmodern game of (phantasmatically sovereign) narrative to the naturalized authority of history.

A major difference between Sonnenallee and Good Bye, Lenin! is the operation of the voice-over. In the past tense throughout, Alex’s commentary constantly underlines the distancing force of time. Thus, Sonnenallee’s humorous exhibition of enjoyable attractions is displaced with a harsher satirical critique. As a teller, the narrator uses his distance from the events and memories shown for problematizing and ridiculing them much more systematically than Sonnenallee’s self-exposing narrator. Also in contrast to Sonnenallee, where voice-over and images worked primarily to support each other, this satire unfolds through incongruity. In the montage sequence that summarizes the eight months Alex’s mother spends in a coma, for example,

45. In analogy to Brecht’s epic theater, Eisenstein’s concept of a “montage of attractions” (inspired by early cinema) programmatically underlines the “tendentious selection of, and comparison between, events,” and thus admits to rhetoric as a means of intended persuasion (Eisenstein 26; Bordwell, Narration 238; see 235). Eisenstein develops narrative performance as an explicitly conflictual configuration by juxtaposing “incompatible elements,” knotting “motifs into clusters” and employing repetition to create “echoes . . ., amplifications and insistencies” in the “play of associations” (Rohdie 33, 36, 42).

46. While only the unfolding of the film performs this deauthorization (see below for details), already the introductory sequence explicitly frames its grainy home footage by introducing it on a small screen surrounded by black. Like/as a photo album come alive, it slowly expands to take over the entire film screen, drawing the spectator into a world of personal memory ultimately shown to be unreliable (see also Böhn 253).
Alex’s voice-over narration labels the documentary footage shown in ways considered inappropriate by mainstream postunification discourse. Cross-referencing GDR language, he disrespectfully verbalizes the dismantlement of the wall as a “gigantic . . . recycling campaign [Altstoffsammlung]” and describes footage of Western politicians singing the national anthem as a “classical concert.” In other moments, an ‘inappropriate’ image accompanies Alex’s inconspicuous—that is, mainstream postunification—discourse. Thus, “the first free elections” in March 1990, which to the surprise of many were won by Helmut Kohl’s conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), are represented through footage of flag-swinging crowds hailing the unification chancellor.

The critical narrative developed through such contrast between images and voice-over discourse is directed at both the GDR and the process of unification. While the figure of the ‘sleeping’ mother repeatedly evoked in Alex’s narrative summary contrastively accentuates the overwhelming speed of historical change evoked in the quick succession of images, the montage also unfolds the ironic counterpoint that the new social forms fall short of bringing true change. When Alex relates how the socialist “Helden der Arbeit” (heroes of work) became unemployed and his sister dropped out of business school for a job at Burger King, for example, her Employee of the Month picture (see figure 3), which the interventionist camera ‘proudly’ pins onto the apartment wall, highlights the capitalist ‘discipline and reward’ techniques that replaced the socialist dispositif of worker distinction.

Similarly, the film satirizes East as well as West German society, and consumerism in general, through its framing of GDR material culture. Unlike Sonnenallee, which juxtaposed fetishized Western jeans with malfunctioning East German household technology, Good Bye, Lenin! in fact features prototypical objects of ostalgia, notably the famous Spreewald pickles Alex tries to organize at the request of his mother. But while the references to familiar brand names may enable glimpses of enjoyment (see, e.g., Kapczynski 80, 83), the narrative contextualization and visual mise-en-scène of Alex’s search for Spreewald pickles parodistically diminishes the longing at stake and disables any sustained indulgence—not to mention any “identifying with the products” (thus Finger 54)—on the spectator’s part. With the intention of repackaging Western pickles for his mother (a scheme that will work just fine; authenticity is not in the product itself), Alex searches for a GDR pickle jar in the trash. In this scene, the elderly neighbor, an actual diegetic agent of ostalgia who

47. “Altstoffsammlung” specifically connotes the GDR’s state-prescribed efforts at heroic resource collection. In West Germany, recycling would have generally been referred to by the English term.
Figure 3
Film still, Good Bye, Lenin! Copyright Wolfgang Becker, X Filme Creative Pool GmbH.

Mitarbeiter des Monats

ARIANE und RAINER

Worker of the Month

ARIANE and RAINER
misunderstands Alex’s search as a desperate search for food, becomes the object of our laughter. The parody reaches its climax when Alex finally finds his jar in an unexpected place. Practicing for her nursing exam, his girlfriend had put him into a cast and left him helpless in the bathtub in a fit of rage about his constant preoccupation with the family charade. In one of the film’s few slapstick scenes (this form of humor is overall less pronounced here than in *Sonnenallee*), we observe how Alex struggles to get out of the tub—and, in the process, accidentally spots a dirty old Spreewald pickle jar holding some used painting utensils in a bathroom corner (see figure 4). Theatrically highlighting the dramatic moment, a series of still shots draws us closer and closer to the—absurdly banal—spectacle of the desired object.

Whereas the longing for GDR products is thus staged as contingent and laughable, *Good Bye, Lenin!_*—like *Sonnenallee_*—acknowledges the difference made by the (explicit) narrative development of performance in that it supports the identity-constituting pleasures of historical fantasy in a more sustained way. With the help of Dennis, a Western friend with filmmaking ambitions, Alex more and more imaginatively realizes a fictive “third way’ between real existing socialism and western capitalism” (Böhn 255), creating “the GDR I might have wished for.” After Alex’s mother has escaped onto the street, for example, where she could not avoid noticing the influx of things Western, their homemade GDR television evening news rewrites the 1989 exodus of GDR citizens via West German embassies as an exodus of frustrated, unemployed West Germans into the GDR. When despite all of his antiagitation efforts, Alex’s mother later ends up in the hospital with another, probably fatal heart attack, he decides to “end the charade.” “[I]n contrast to real life,” he turns another birthday celebration for the GDR into “a dignified Good Bye”48 by having Erich Honecker resign in favor of Alex’s childhood idol, the cosmonaut Sigmund Jähn, whose experience in space has, as Alex imagines, provided him with a different perspective on the world. Lovingly staged with flea market props, Jähn’s first speech declares the opening of the wall because socialism is “about reaching out to others”; relabeled November 1989 footage follows. Whereas Michael Ehrenreich fantasized about political subversion, Alex’s narrative video performance thus resists history in a more ‘positive’ way. As he, in fact, imagines a different society, he pays tribute to the significance of past GDR experiences. Primarily concerned with his mother’s health, however, he does so as a means of quieting rather than stirring political discontent—arguably also in himself, and in effect both Eastern and

48. “[E]inen würdigen Abschied.” The subtitles translate too loosely: “the send-off it deserved.”
Figure 4
Film still, Good Bye, Lenin! Copyright Wolfgang Becker, X Filme Creative Pool GmbH.
Western audiences ‘unhealthily agitated’ by the unification process or its capitalist outcome.

Alex’s rescue fantasy for new and old Westerners dissatisfied with the historical downfall of a systemic alternative to capitalism is enabled by the force of media technology and theatrical rhetoric. Implicitly drawing on postmodernist critiques of representation (and concomitant fantasies of free play), the voice-over muses at some point that historical “truth” is a “rather dubious concept” that can be “easily adapted” to established perception with the help of a video camera, some editing equipment, and immersion into GDR news program rhetoric. The trouble is that, in the logic of the film’s narrative, Alex is wrong here. Overall, to be sure, Good Bye, Lenin! endows the eloquent and male (if young) past-tense voice of its protagonist with a significant amount of authority, especially where it operates—like in the above-quoted montage sequence—in quasi-documentary, momentarily disembodied fashion. However, the attribution of such authority goes against the convention that, in cases of doubt and incongruity, “seeing is believing” in film’s two-track representational system (Chatman, Coming to Terms 136). In several crucial scenes of Good Bye, Lenin!, the film’s images in fact work to question Alex’s take on the story—and through their configuration, the film ultimately develops its narrative in part against its narrator.

Arguably, this deauthorization begins as early as in the film’s exposition. While the narrator, from his retrospective vantage point, diminutively describes the military parade at the occasion of the GDR’s fortieth anniversary as the “last performance of an oversized shooting club,” this banalizing insistence on the mere theatricality of state power is counteracted by the staging of the parade as rather threatening in its strict military formation. The sequence on the crushed protests later the same day unfolds the implicit suggestion of reading GDR state power in more serious terms than suggested by the narrator, whose take is in line with Sonnenallee’s comedy approach. Here, the film follows a code of restricted theatricality. While the narrator momentarily provides mere explanation instead of flamboyant commentary, the visual presentation of the events emphasizes dark colors in what the accompanying film book describes as meticulously reconstructed lighting. Only the melodramatically accentuated red dress of Alex’s mother betrays the film’s claim to reality for its “ghastly” mise-en-scène of the march and the following lineup of protesters in jail in an “almost uncanny” atmosphere of “fear and insec-

49. See, e.g., Bruzzi 52; Nichols, Introduction 107, on such authority generators.

50. My translation. The English subtitles (“the members of the world’s last great shooting club paraded outside our house”) do not capture the theatrical implications of the original German: “die letzte Vorstellung” of an “überdimensionierter Schützenverein.”
rity” (*Good Bye Lenin: Ein Film* 153, 23, 21). In the course of the film, this serious take on the GDR is further authenticated by plot development. Alex’s mother herself eventually confesses that she has performed her role as a committed socialist out of fear rather than actual devotion to the East German state. As the audience now discovers, Alex’s narrative has not just been linguistically inappropriate on occasion but also unreliable in crucial diegetic matters. When his father stayed in the West in the late 1970s, he did not do so because of another woman, as Alex told us, but because of the parents’ shared emigration plan that the mother did not dare to follow through with in the end. The mother’s confession—of “the biggest mistake of my life”—dramatically reemphasizes the theme of oppression in the film’s representation of the GDR, counteracting any indulgence in more conciliatory memory we may have entertained in the meantime.

However, both Alex’s onscreen behavior and his voice-over narrative, which is never adjusted to accommodate the new information, suggest that he is reluctant to learn. Apparently, he has become so enamored of his own fantasy that he is unwilling to part with it even after his mother’s confession has shattered the legitimation basis of his charade. Despite his own political disillusionment with the GDR featured earlier in the film, the ways in which Alex unfolds his historical fantasies suggest that he has not fully moved beyond the heroic ideologies of his childhood. Back then, the film’s introductory scenes showed, Alex was a television spectator himself, the arduously watching subject of ideological interpellation, eager to serve “the benefit of mankind” in the footsteps of his idol Jähn, the country’s heroic space explorer figure. Later, as his charade gets out of hand, he comments that he “felt like the commander of a submarine in the North Atlantic whose trusty [*kampferprobte*] steel coat is leaking” while he is fighting a “sharp west wind.” Alex’s ‘inappropriate’ rhetoric of military heroism positions his effort at rewriting history as an adolescent fantasy of omnipotence; in this way, the voice-over’s theatricality deconstructs Alex’s own undertaking in the film. His accompanying rhetoric of nature, however, is indirectly backed by the film’s overall narrative. Thus, the heroic fantasies of a megalomaniac youth are outdone by “the powerful tide of Westernization” (Kapczynski 82), the (quasi)natural force of history’s facticity (rather than the force of social convention, as in *Sonnenallee*). Stating what the film has already shown to be obvious, the narrator himself eventually contradicts his earlier claim to the adaptability of historical truth by emphasizing that the land of his fiction was “a land that in reality never existed in this way.” Thus, the interplay of plot development and narrative discourse reintroduces the distinction between fact and fiction with a vengeance.
Nonetheless, Alex’s voice-over continues to be ethically as well as factually unreliable (see Kapczynski 85); more precisely, he is misreporting as a consequence of misreading and misevaluating (see Phelan, Living to Tell 51). While he justifies himself with the words “I believe it was a good thing she never learned the truth. She died happy,” the audience has caught a glimpse at how without his knowing, Alex’s girlfriend tried to explain the situation to his mother before her death. Lara was critical of the charade throughout the film not only because it took so much of Alex’s time. When, for the mother’s birthday, Alex had adapted not only the biography of his sister’s Western boyfriend as needed but also Lara’s—solely for additional effect—she charged him with deliberate lying. Whereas in Sonnenallee, the counterfactual imagination served to produce liberation gestures, it invites moral charges of ‘false’ theatricality in Good Bye, Lenin! Thus, Alex’s performance of socialism, which is well intended but turns autocratic in moments of stress (see Boyer 376), doubles his mother’s long-term conformist charade, which she retrospectively evaluates in terms of her having “lied” to her children as well. In line with Hayden White’s classical discussion of historical narrative, the narrativization of events thus subjects the protagonist to a moral order—although the film’s judgment constitutes gentle admonishment rather than harsh rejection. Despite her anger, Lara remains on Alex’s side, and the mother’s initially confused, then inquisitive and tentatively amused glances at Alex during the performance of his final television show suggest that she may have in fact died happy, if in appreciation of her son’s loving care and imagination rather than in historical ignorance.

In this way, the film narrative develops its project of phantasmatic integration through the “work of mourning” (Uecker 194). At the end, the united film cast—cluding the Westernized father and the nostalgically assembled to disseminate the mother’s ashes with a fireworks rocket visually resembling the one that Alex built as a kid. The scene simultaneously puts Alex’s fictive GDR “to rest” and includes its memory into a “founding myth” that unites “Germans in the new Federal Republic into an imagined community” (Cook 211; see also Uecker 190). Thus, there is some space for counterfactual memory, as long as it is ‘properly’ framed and narratively integrated.51 Politically, the conciliatory conclusion allows for some continued flirtation with the anticapitalist fantasy that Good Bye, Lenin! has offered its (national as well as transnational) audiences exasperated with contemporary neoliberal realities and ideologies. However, the film’s configuration of such dissatisfac-

51. The film’s concluding shots return once more to the pseudo-archival home video footage from the beginning, which showed the mother’s devotion to socialist life, while the voice-over situates the images as coming from the protagonist’s own fictive motherland.
tions quenches any desire for rebellion, channeling (modernist) nostalgia—for the hope for a different future—into the acceptance of actual history as a path toward national unity and capitalist order. Sonnenallee, in contrast, refused ‘armed’ historiographic service, instead indulging in the (explicitly phantasmatic) imagination of spectacular rebellion.

The difference is, thus, in the detailed configuration of techniques of narrative performance in the individual films. In Good Bye, Lenin! flamboyant theatricality enables historical play but is also put to the service and—at moments—contained in favor of authoritative narrative realism. The intricate combination is summarized in the film’s use of the title-giving bust. One of German cinema’s first digital attractions (see Good Bye Lenin: Ein Film 154–55), Lenin’s spectacular flight is observed by Alex’s mother during her unsupervised walk on the street. An instance of playful excess, the scene seems to lack proper narrative integration in that it is never worked into Alex’s imaginative rewritings or otherwise contextualized through any discussion of Lenin’s role as a founding father of socialist ideology. However, the sight of the flying bust, which for a moment approaches the spectator—aligned with the mother—with its hands stretched out in an inviting manner, only to then be flown away into the remote distance of the sky, presents a succinct mise-en-abyme of the film narrative as a whole. In that sense, it does fulfill its diegetic role as a spectacular sight that entices the audience to accept the dismantling of the East.

Conclusion

My readings in this chapter have begun to develop the aesthetics of narrative performance by specifying different techniques and effects of theatricality. All of the films discussed programmatically combine theatricalization with narrative integration, underlining that a theatrical aesthetic does not equal the prioritizing of self-reflexivity over other forms of sense-making often associated with postmodern culture. While even more radically avant-garde productions have remained marked by the intimate interlocking of “[r]epresentation and skepticism about representation” arguably characteristic of postmodernism itself (Gibson, Towards 71), these ‘smart’ films made in Germany around 2000 are clearly more interested in the (playful) making than in the deconstructive unmaking of histories and thus develop their techniques of narrative perfor-

52. See also Kapczynski 86 and Cook 211. This does, however, not equal “Free-Market Nostalgia for Socialist Consumerism” (thus Cook’s title). As argued above, consumerism is parodied in all of its versions.
mance in the service of an imaginatively rich, layered storytelling. I started with Kutluğ Ataman’s Turkish-German drama *Lola und Bilidikid*, which presents not only a paradigmatic case of transnational cinema from ‘location Germany’ but also an exemplary site of film-historiographic debate on the function of spectacle in narrative. Working through these debates (in order to move beyond them), I unfolded the twofold operation of such spectacle—here specifically in the forms of gender drag and the theatricality of melodramatic and comical mise-en-scène—as it both constitutes sociosymbolic narratives in the service of—in this case culturalist—ideology and critically reconfigures them. As I argued, these reconfigurations are developed as a Bakhtinian dialogic play of images through the film’s emphasis on visual artificiality (including the performance of masculinity as well as femininity), which puts claims to realism on hold. Furthermore, techniques of doubling—that is, the production of difference in similarity—in characterization, the use of props, etc., serve to superimpose the film’s tragic scenarios with comically livable, if outrageous, alternatives.

The chapter’s following two readings pursued how widely the effects of narrative performance can diverge even within the frame of the aesthetics of filmic theatricality pursued in this chapter, and within a subgenre of thematically related films, in this case the so-called unification comedies. While both *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye, Lenin!* similarly highlight film discourse through prominent voice-overs (along with metalepsis and montage, respectively), “Sun Alley” configures its techniques of flamboyant commentary into a joyful fantasy of subversive—notably, narrative—performance as a medium of defiant countermemory, even as the film insistently analyzes the ‘real life’ power of convention and containment. In *Good Bye, Lenin!*, by contrast, the protagonist’s imaginative assertion of narrative authority enabling such freedom of fantasy is subjected to the moral order created by the naturalized—and thereby authoritative—narrative of official history. As the pleasures of counterfactual historical performance are thus integrated into real-life historical plotting, the film’s evocation of historical fantasy eventually facilitates imaginative reconciliation, to the effect of providing a narrative foundation for post-unification society.