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Letztes Jahr Titanic (1990) and Große weite Welt (1997)

Documentary (Re-)Presentations of the Transformation Process in and of the GDR

1 The Presence of “the West” in “the East”

Despite all efforts towards ideological distinction on both sides of Germany during the forty years of division, there were still reciprocal relationships at various levels. The historian Sascha-Ilko Kowalczuk even speaks about an omnipresence of “the West” in “the East.”¹ He considers Western media, which could be received in most parts of the eastern German Democratic Republic (GDR), as the most important factor. The images of “the West” presented by Western media influenced East Germans’ ideas of “the West” significantly. Western media not only transferred political information but also represented the broad product range of the Western consumers’ world. The resulting perceptions of a difference between East and West were intensified by the tradition of the so-called *Westpaket* (Western package) and the existence of so-called *Intershops*. The Western package symbolized the decades-long practice of sending care packages to friends and family relations between the East (GDR) and West (Federal Republic of Germany, FRG). In a metaphorical sense, it can be found in the collected volume *Erinnerungsorte der DDR* (Places of remembrance of the GDR) edited by Martin Sabrow: “There once was a flavor which was inexpressibly delicious and delightful and which was created by a mixture of oranges, soap, coffee, chocolates, and some other ingredients. It was the flavor of the big wide world, exotic and luxurious and happy, who could enjoy it.”² The Intershops were established in 1962. Initially, Western visitors could go to them to buy Western products using Western currencies, which provided an accrual of foreign exchange for the GDR. Since 1974, GDR citi-

1 Sascha-Ilko Kowalczuk, *Endspiel: Die Revolution von 1989 in der DDR* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2009), 181. See also Stefan Wolle, *Die heile Welt der Diktatur: Alltag und Herrschaft in der DDR 1971–1989* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 1998), 69–71.

2 Petra Kabus, “Das Westpaket,” in *Erinnerungsorte der DDR*, ed. Martin Sabrow (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2009), 441. All quotations from German references have been translated by the author unless otherwise noted.

zens were also allowed to own West German currency and the Intershops turned into an attractive shopping possibility for all with West German currency.³

In the context of the generally restricted travel opportunities between the East and West, it was almost impossible for Eastern Germans to travel to the western Federal Republic of Germany. Apart from privileged exceptions, this was only possible for retired persons, starting in 1964; as of 1972, it could also be permitted for younger persons in cases of urgent family affairs. However, these allowable travel opportunities did not alleviate the longing for “the West”; rather, they seemed to have the opposite effect. The exit and refugee movement increased continuously until the end of the GDR.⁴

“The West” represented a “projection screen” for “hopes and longings” as well as for “fears of threat.”⁵ To understand the latter, we have to keep in mind the officially propagandized enemy stereotype of “the West” as warlike and exploitative imperialism.⁶ Of course, we should suppose a differentiated perception of these enemy stereotypes, but the image of a warlike imperialism might still be plausible against the backdrop of the Cold War and its international conflicts and debates on international armament. Moreover, we can assume that the Eastern critique of the capitalist system, with its consequences of poor working conditions and mass unemployment, met with approval. Thus, there was not only an exit and refugee movement in the GDR in 1989, but there was also a strong protest movement which formulated the slogan “We stay here.” This movement wanted to achieve democratic change in the GDR but not necessarily the end of the socialist system.

Taken as whole, the causes for the end of the GDR were diverse and complex. Beyond doubt, the increasingly organized and growing opposition that gained more and more visibility at the end of the 1980s and occupied the streets and public places in a lot of cities with their protest demonstrations in the autumn of 1989 was a crucial driving force. By this, the Central Committee of East Germany’s Sozialistische Einheitspartei (Socialist Unity Party, SED) was already under pressure when they were confronted with economic bankruptcy in the autumn of 1989.⁷ Moreover, throughout the whole year, the increasing exit and refugee movement was a constant problem: already in the summer of 1989, 100,000 people were re-

3 Kowalczyk, *Endspiel*, 182; Wolle, *Heile Welt der Diktatur*, 74–78.

4 Kowalczyk, *Endspiel*, 183–192.

5 Wolle, *Heile Welt der Diktatur*, 196.

6 May Jehle, “Visuelle Codierungen des geteilten Deutschlands in Staatsbürgerkundelehrbüchern der DDR und ihre Behandlung im Unterricht: Eine Analyse historischer Videoaufzeichnungen von Unterricht im Zeitraum 1978–1986,” in *Der Kalte Krieg im Schulbuch*, ed. Franziska Flucke et al. (St. Ingbert: Röhrig Universitätsverlag, 2017), 95–115.

7 Kowalczyk, *Endspiel*, 431–433.

corded as having left the GDR, recalling similar numbers in the crisis years of 1953 and 1961.⁸ In the summer months, more than 80,000 people fled via Hungary.⁹ The images of the occupied embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany in Prague became iconic, especially the moment when the West German foreign minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, proclaimed from a balcony that the waiting masses were allowed to travel into the Federal Republic. During their train passage through the GDR, people collected at the railways and stations. They cheered and waved to the travelers, and some wanted to jump on the trains. There were violent riots when the police tried to intervene and, as a further consequence, more demonstrations. Thus, the existence of the GDR was also seriously threatened by the increasing exit and refugee movement.¹⁰

Against this backdrop, we can interpret the process of transformation in and of the GDR after the Peaceful Revolution of 1989 as a process of “going West” in different ways. At first, there was the extensive migration of people from the GDR to the Western federal states. Then, there was the process of the transformation of the whole GDR that could be interpreted as a process of the whole country “going West.” With this in mind, I will present two documentary films, which accompanied both people who moved to the West after 1989 and people who stayed in the East. The films thus represent experiences of migration to the West on an individual, biographical level as well as representing individual experiences in the context of the transformation process after the accession of the GDR to the Federal Republic of Germany on October 3, 1990.

2 The Series of the *Leipzig Filme*

The double DVD with the title *Leipzig Filme*¹¹ was released in 2015 and includes five documentary films made by Andreas Voigt between 1986 and 1997. The first film, *Alfred* (1986), was Voigt’s diploma project at the film academy in Babelsberg. He portrayed the worker, anarchist, communist, and unionist Alfred Florstedt through distinct phases of German history: from the First World War, through the Weimar Republic, during National Socialism and the Second World War, and in the Cold War. The film documents his conflicts with these distinct political sys-

⁸ Kowalczyk, *Endspiel*, 346–347.

⁹ Kowalczyk, *Endspiel*, 351.

¹⁰ Konrad Jarausch, *Die unverhoffte Einheit: 1989–1990* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), 29–46.

¹¹ *Leipzig-Filme 1986–97*, directed by Andreas Voigt (Fridolfing: absolut MEDIEN GmbH, 2015), DVD.

tems, and likewise in the GDR. It also took a critical stance, especially in its documentation of the despair young female workers felt and of the derelict industrial landscapes.¹²

Andreas Voigt and Gerd Kroske shot the film *Leipzig im Herbst* (Leipzig in autumn) between October 16 and November 7, 1989. Production was preceded by an intensification of public political protests: regular demonstrations against election fraud; protests around the fortieth anniversary of the GDR; the increasing exit and refugee movement, with the embassy occupation in Prague as a symbolic climax, and the escalating protests during the train passages of these refugees through the GDR; the increasing influx of prayers for peace in Leipzig's Saint Nicholas Church; and the Monday demonstrations that followed. Specifically, the Monday demonstration in Leipzig on October 9, 1989 can be considered the historical turning point of the Peaceful Revolution. Despite the expectation of a violent police operation, more than 70,000 people rallied at the demonstration. Even before they moved, the police had received the order to not intervene. That was thus a sign of a shift in power from the party headquarters to the street.

In consequence, the DEFA filmmakers felt it was their responsibility to document these events and got conditional permission to do so for archive purposes.¹³ The protesting crowd greeted them with cheers. The film documents the demonstrations and discussions at a meeting place of the citizens' movement called *Neues Forum* (New forum). The filmmakers interviewed demonstrators, workers, party functionaries, and police forces. Through these interviews, it becomes obvious how narrowly they had escaped a violent escalation of the demonstration on October 9. Moreover, the film shows how impressively and widely the particular atmosphere of change had spread to all sections of the population. It is an atmospheric picture of an open-ended and hopeful political self-empowerment.

By December 1989, Voigt had already started the shooting for *Letztes Jahr Titanic* (Last year Titanic). With this film, he mainly accompanied five protagonists from Leipzig through the whole of the following year, up until December 1990. By documenting their daily life and interviewing them, he created another atmospheric picture: this time it is a picture of the last months of the GDR and the first months in the reunified Federal Republic of Germany.

The documentary film *Glaube Liebe Hoffnung* (Faith, love, hope) from 1993 mainly consists of interviews with radical youths from the left-wing and right-wing scenes. The filmmaker contrasted pictures of luxurious shopping malls

¹² Helen Hughes, "Documenting the *Wende*: The films of Andreas Voigt," in *DEFA: East German Cinema, 1946–1992*, ed. Seán Allen and John Sandford (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999), 288.

¹³ Hughes, "Documenting the *Wende*," 289–291.

built by West German investors with the living environment of these youths, who portrayed a broad spectrum of social problems between family violence, various forms of neglect, and unemployment. Since its presentation of statements that trivialized violence and racism and extreme right-wing and neo-Nazi attitudes were not commented upon, the film is considered the most controversial of the whole series.

With the film *Große weite Welt* (Big wide world) from 1997, the filmmaker returned to some of the protagonists from the two preceding films. He documented their living environments in the mid-1990s and confronted them with sequences from the preceding films, which were presented as a filmic montage. In 2015, the year of the double DVD of the film series appeared, twenty-five years after the reunification of Germany, and the year that marked the thousandth anniversary of Leipzig, Voigt also released the film *Alles andere zeigt die Zeit* (Everything else is shown by time) in which he returns once more to these protagonists and continues to tell their life stories.

As a whole, these films present a panorama of different moods in Leipzig over the years. Specifically, the films *Letztes Jahr Titanic* and *Große weite Welt* represent the first experiences of “going West” in the literal as well as in the metaphorical sense. While retrospective perspectives tend to be a retroactive linearization of these experiences,¹⁴ these films present contemporary perspectives on individual experiences within processes of transformation. By accompanying the protagonists over years, the films also offer the opportunity to analyze these experiences over the course of time.¹⁵ With this intention, I will focus in the following on the filmic representations of imaginations of and experiences with “the West.” Based on the film *Letztes Jahr Titanic*, we can analyze experiences in the early phase of transformation after the Peaceful Revolution, and we can contrast this with the perspective from the mid-1990s that is represented in the film *Große weite Welt*.

3 Documentary Films as Sources in the History of Education

The intended analysis and discussion of the filmic representation of experiences of “going West” need, to begin with, some methodological considerations on using documentary films as sources in the history of education. For a long time, German

14 Harald Welzer, *Transitionen: Zur Sozialpsychologie biographischer Wandlungsprozesse* (Tübingen: Edition Diskord, 1993), 295.

15 Hughes, “Documenting the *Wende*,” 285.

historians approached documentary films as sources with skepticism. This especially concerned the relation between historical facts and media representation.¹⁶ We can at least consider that it is common sense that documentary films refer to reality and real people.¹⁷ The actors shown in a film present their individual perspectives on the subject. The film as a whole is a consciously created representation of specific events that we should keep in mind during the analysis. As sources, we can consider documentary films as media constructions within a specific context and with specific intentions that contribute to the societal generation of meaning. East German documentaries, particularly from 1989/90, are themselves documents of a revolutionary time that open a new context and condition for the production of documentary films.¹⁸

Differentiations between intentions of filmmakers cover a wide range of possibilities. It includes the aspiration for representations that are as realistic as possible or objective representations that consider various perspectives. In addition, we find biased views, investigative revelations, informative or solution-oriented approaches, and contributions to public opinion. The media design features used might refer to specific documentary film traditions and can be consciously used to accentuate specific intentions. The selection and composition of the footage, the camera perspectives and settings, the succession of scenes, the use of direct quotes and authentic sounds, and comments or text overlays combine to create a specific narrative of the subject of the film. We can differentiate if filmmakers have used original footage or if they have re-enacted the event, if they have taken an exclusively observational perspective or if they have interacted with the actors, the inner logic by which they have organized the succession of sequences, and if they have let them speak for themselves or have given them explicit comments. The reconstruction and analysis of these elements and their interplay enable differentiated classifications within the various genres of documentary films and further interpretations of the filmic means, the narration, and the possible intentions or effects on its reception.¹⁹

16 Artur Schlegelmilch, "Die Historie und der Dokumentarfilm; Vergangenheit und Zukunft eines schwierigen Verhältnisses," in *Der dokumentarische Film und die Wissenschaften: Interdisziplinäre Bedeutungen und Ansätze*, ed. Carsten Heinze and Artur Schlegelmilch (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019), 60.

17 Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 6–41.

18 Marc Silberman, "Post-Wall Documentaries: New Images from a New Germany?" *Cinema Journal* 33 (1994).

19 Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 1–64, 94–119, 142–171; Schlegelmilch, "Die Historie und der Dokumentarfilm," 69; Thomas Weber, "Neue medienwissenschaftliche Perspektiven auf den dokumentarischen Film," in *Der dokumentarische Film und die Wissenschaften: Interdisziplinäre Bedeutungen und Ansätze*, ed. Carsten Heinze and Artur Schlegelmilch (Wiesbaden: Springer VS,

4 *Letztes Jahr Titanic* (1990)

Letztes Jahr Titanic was shot between December 1989 and December 1990. The film has a length of 97 minutes, and it is mainly filmed in black and white. At the beginning of the shooting, no one could foresee the accession of the GDR to the Federal Republic of Germany. Though one can interpret the results of the first free elections in March 1990 as a majority vote for the prospect of reunification. The citizens' movements that aimed at reforms in the GDR received only 2.9 percent of the votes.²⁰

The film hardly refers to any political events. Some protagonists talk about election programs, and the results of the elections are presented by the news program *Tagesschau*, which people watch at an election party. The Wirtschafts-, Währungs- und Sozialunion (Economic, Currency and Social Union) as well as the introduction of the West German D-Mark on July 1, are illustrated by scenes from a party on the evening before, according to the motto *Letztes Jahr Titanic*, yet there is no explicit reference to the accession itself. Later, following the first all-German elections in December 1990, the film only shows the results of the vote being presented again by a news program. This time, the TV is placed in a gambling game stall at the Leipzig Christmas market.

Basically, the film combines two documentary modes.²¹ With the regular interview sequences, the filmmaker used the participatory mode with the five protagonists. This also includes shorter singular interview sequences with others, like workers at a foundry and in the pub, two Bavarians who shot pornos with housewives, seamstresses at their workplace, and a policeman. The filmmaker let the scenes roll without any comments or explications. Thus, the recipients might have felt like participant observers during this process with its particular dynamic. In combination with its observational mode, the film documents the multilayered atmosphere. This mode includes longer sequences of people's everyday work, and at the end of the film, the machines are shut down. Moreover, it presents extraordinary events like a meeting of the sex league, which was founded in June 1990 with the intention to free sexual life. The weird atmosphere there, which resembles a party conference, and its strong contrast with the obscene porn filmmaker's performance, illustrate the societal eruption in various spheres of life. The film in-

2019), 84–91; Yvonne Zimmermann, "Analyse nicht-fiktionaler Filmformen," in *Handbuch Filmanalyse*, ed. Malte Hagener and Volker Pantenburg (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2017), 3–8.

²⁰ Jarausch, *Die unverhoffte Einheit*, 195.

²¹ Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 132–158.

terweaves scenes of a carnival, street parades, and political demonstrations, thus blurring the borders between the various spheres.

The eponymous party motto of *Letztes Jahr Titanic* is exemplary for that mixture of political and art performances. In one approximately two-minute scene, we can hear the national anthem of the GDR: *Auferstanden aus Ruinen* (Risen from the ruins). Since the 1970s, the GDR played the anthem officially without lyrics because of the line “Deutschland einig Vaterland” (‘Germany united fatherland’). At the party, we can hear the anthem with a full choir accompaniment. Against this backdrop, a man used a megaphone to demand that people abandon a ship after it collided with an iceberg. In the background, some young men remove their festive clothes and line up in their underpants (Fig. 1). Without knowing the exact intentions of the performance, we might interpret that as a symbolic performance of the country’s oath of manifestation. That another group shouts “Wir bleiben hier” (‘We stay here’) seems outdated rather than forward-looking. However, it is remarkable – if we take the metaphor further – that a safe rescue cannot even be guaranteed by the lifeboats.



Fig. 1: Scene from *Letztes Jahr Titanic* (Last year Titanic): Performance at the party on the evening before the Economic, Currency and Social Union (Voigt 2015, 00:47:18).

Additionally, the interviews with the five protagonists illustrate the ambivalence of reactions to the introduction of the D-Mark. Isabell, who had anticipated and supported the introduction of the D-Mark before the elections in March, is near to tears now. She will keep her GDR money in hopes that it will eventually be reintroduced. In contrast, Sylvia and her partner Dietmar happily and proudly rustle the new banknotes in front of the camera.

Other presentations of artistic performances remain rather cryptic. For example, in one sequence, we see at first only a TV with a broadcast of a political debate. The next take shows a disguised man sitting on the floor in front of the TV who shouts that “in these days, weeks, months, they give away, sell, fix, destroy a lot.” With his somewhat incomprehensible words, he addresses a “president,” he utters sounds, gesticulates, and twitches. Finally, we see the whole room, which is almost empty except for some ropes and cables (Fig. 2). The whole scenario remains in need of explanation or contextual information.

In this manner, the film stages enactments by its protagonists who express their interpretations of the transformation. These result in a multilayered atmospheric picture which cannot be expressed verbally and leaves room for interpre-



Fig. 2: Scene from *Letztes Jahr Titanic* (Last year Titanic): Contextless cryptic artistic performance (Voigt 2015, 00:56:04).

tation. The montage of these various pictures creates an atmosphere between daily life and surrealism. The unexplained succession of the different scenes and scenarios generates the impression of a flow of events and experiences between awakening and decline without a coherent narrative line. What we see is a narrow entanglement of societal spheres, the parallel existence of close relatedness, and a sharp distinction between different living worlds.²²

Against this backdrop, the film outlines distinct lines of development with the recurring interview sequences with the five main protagonists. The iron founder, Wolfgang, had stayed in the GDR for family reasons after he was arrested twice because of attempted flights. At the beginning of the film, he talks about going to the West, and he hopes for the D-Mark, reunification, and economic recovery. At the end of the film, he is still there, and there is no work at the iron foundry anymore. Sylvia abandons her pub and goes to West Germany with her partner. She hopes for a better life, greater prosperity, and a beautiful and healthy living environment. She does not want to wait until things get better in the GDR. Isabell, a goth girl, seems disoriented. She has been living in condemned houses, fears the increasing violence on the streets, and does not have a specific idea of how her future will look. The former journalist, Renate, struggles with her involvement in the political system and her connections to the Ministry of State Security. She is trying to come to terms with her past. The “redskin,”²³ John, regards himself as being involved in a violent fight against fascists, whom he does not consider human because of their ideology. At the same time, the filmmaker also takes care to present the protagonists from different angles. For example, he presents the same redskin in the act of taking care for an old, disabled man in his free time, or shows him listening to a Mozart requiem.

However, the dominant motifs in these interviews are feelings of uncertainty and a lack of perspectives, fears, and threats; rather, the protagonists reacted with resignation or radicalization. In different ways, the actors expressed feelings of disempowerment. We can also observe these feelings of powerlessness and discrimination through the missing ideas of their own possibilities for action in other scenes. One of the protagonists, who is a worker in the pub scene, complains about the filmmaker’s attention to the contract workers from Mozambique. Others, who are seamstresses feel disadvantaged in relation to their Vietnamese colleagues because they can find work in Vietnam again. Moreover, the film itself is a document of the threat of unemployment. In the last interview scene, Wolfgang asks

22 Anna Lux and Alexander Leistner, “‘Letztes Jahr Titanic’: Untergegangene Zukünfte in der ost-deutschen Zusammenbruchsgesellschaft seit 1989/90,” *Historische Anthropologie: Kultur – Gesellschaft – Alltag* 29 (2021): 112.

23 In this context, *redskin* is the name for a member of a left-wing skinhead group.

the filmmaker about his future, and in his response, we hear that the film studio will be closed. Then there is a tracking shot that shows the front of a closed cinema, and we see a poster with the slogan, “Film is only an experience in a cinema,” and a neon sign of the video store Video World at the next corner. The introduction of the Western market economy and its long-desired products is presented in its ambivalence. The connection between “the West” and unemployment finds its confirmation through the people’s experiences. The beginning transformation requires the reorganization of their own life, causing an uncertainty that replaces the celebratory mood at the beginning of the film.

5 *Große weite Welt* (1997)

With his film *Große weite Welt*, made in 1997, the filmmaker returns to some of the protagonists from the films *Letztes Jahr Titanic* (1990) and *Glaube Liebe Hoffnung* (1993). He confronts them with film sequences from the former films and interviews them about their current living situations. The montage also includes scenes from *Leipzig im Herbst* (1989), even if there are no interviews with protagonists of this film. The film has a length of 90 minutes. The present-day scenes are shot in color while the scenes from the former films are in black and white. This differentiation facilitates the classification of the scenes, especially since the filmmaker also refrains from any explanatory comments in this film, as in his previous ones. The present-day and former sequences are contrasted in alternate order or stand alone. The interview sequences predominate in this film so that we can categorize it as being mainly in a participatory mode. Scenes that were shot in the observational mode document, in particular, the protagonists’ daily lives.

The title strip reuses the opening scene of *Letztes Jahr Titanic*: the motif of the train driving into Leipzig’s main station. The following scenes from *Leipzig im Herbst* present demonstrations and demonstrators who are arguing in support of socialist reforms and freedom of speech, travel, and “freedom at the workplace, oh all those freedoms.” In the next scene, which is in color, we see a young woman in a car who orders a cheeseburger and a Coke at the McDonald’s drive-thru. Implicitly, this montage already suggests an underlying narration that the call for freedom in autumn 1989 has been superimposed by these new Western-style consumer opportunities.

The young woman’s name is Diana: she is the girlfriend of Sven, a central protagonist from *Glaube Liebe Hoffnung*. Apart from a short episode in the East German right-wing scene, he was a member of the redskin scene at that time. By the time of *Große weite Welt* in 1997, he is a soldier in the German armed forces. He and Diana are planning their wedding. In the first flashback of the film, Sven talks

about the difficulties of finishing one's training and getting a job in the early 1990s. Later, actual interview sequences present his decision for joining the German armed forces, which in addition to responding to his love of adventure and physical fitness, was also pragmatically motivated. It guarantees financial security in an uncertain job market situation. Additionally, as we see in other scenes, he experiences professional recognition, and he receives military decorations as well as positive assessments and certificates. For this, he accepts longer periods of separation from his girlfriend due to specific missions. He wants to guarantee financial security for her as well while she is finishing her training.

The contrasting montage of sequences illustrates this personal transformation process. After a scene from *Glaube Liebe Hoffnung*, in which Sven talked about his job for a security service and its relation to firearms, we see Diana and Sven dancing intimately in a present-day scene. In another former scene, Sven talks about loneliness and the loss of solidarity. The following scene returns to the present when Sven and Diana are watering their flower beds. Private happiness has taken the place of regret for the loss of a solidary community.

At the end of the film, we see Diana and Sven again. They are sitting in a car in the parking lot of an industrial park. In the background, we see the sign of the McDonald's drive-thru. It is probably a continuation of the scene from the beginning of the film. During their conversation, the camera zooms out slowly. They think about the developments and changes that took place during the process of shooting the films and come to the conclusion that "the only thing that really lasts" is their love.

Another flashback from *Letztes Jahr Titanic* shows Sylvia when she closed her pub and went to West Germany with her partner. Now we see them in their new home in Bavaria. In the first present-day scene, we only see her partner, Dietmar, who is talking about the difficulties of acclimatization and about some travels. He describes the short, joyful period when "they [first] opened the big wide world." On the other hand, he also mentions the sobering experience that you need a job if you want to participate in the "good life." In other scenes, we see Sylvia in a rather passive role at home. She could not realize her former dream of opening a new pub. Instead, she is sitting on the couch and flipping through travel brochures. Dietmar talks about a new life as a diving instructor. Sylvia, too, talks about wanderlust and making a new start. "The West" is not what they had hoped for, but there are still prospects.

The presentation of the former journalist Renate and her story also begins with a flashback. In a scene from *Letztes Jahr Titanic*, she described her positive experiences from her involvement in the political system, her liaison with the Secret Service, and the fact that she was forced to cooperate with the Secret Service after being raped. In the following present-day scene that follows, she talks about

how she has not watched the film again since its original presentation. It would have been too painful. The montage of flashback and present-day scenes represents her struggle with the past. She says that one can never come to terms with that. Later in the film, she talks about an application to a literary association. They want to employ her, but the employment office still has to approve this job creation scheme. She says that she is refreshing her language skills and that she has gotten her driver's license. She also has a plan to make a new start. In the last scene, we see her taking an elevator upstairs. Those who know the film *Alles andere zeigt die Zeit* (2015) know that the new start did not succeed and that she died by suicide.

The issue of job prospects and financial security is a constant topic throughout the film, not only in the interviews with the main protagonists. One of the seamstresses from *Letztes Jahr Titanic* talks in the present-day scenes about working part-time jobs for additional income during her unemployment, about unsuitable retraining, repeated unemployment, and her hope for being retrained in accordance with her vocational interests. A former coworker of Wolfgang's at the iron foundry also appears again. As he says, when he lost his job, his world fell apart, and he talks about how he became an alcoholic after his wife passed away.

The entry of the Western consumer's world into the former GDR is presented mainly in the background. One exception to this is the framing of the drive-thru scene and its continuation at the end: when Sven and Diana are talking in the car, the shining neon sign is still in the background (Fig. 3). Similarly, in another scene, we see an old man sitting at a bus stop and playing the accordion. After the bus has left, the camera is fixed on the facades of the industrial park on the other side of the road. One can recognize a reference to a scene in *Glaube Liebe Hoffnung* (1993). Between images of the demolition of the foundry and the properties of a Western investor, we see the same accordion player sitting in front of a kiosk. In the background, there are advertisement posters, the logos of Coca-Cola and Marlboro (Fig. 4). In a sense, these images call to mind scenes from the film *Goodbye Lenin* (2003), such as the one in which Alex tries to keep the recent political events from his mother, who was in coma between October 1989 and June 1990. However, at the same time, "the West" enters, with all its distinctive symbols.



Fig. 3: Scene from *Große weite Welt* (Big wide world): Sven and Diana talking in the car (Voigt 2015, 01:23:59).



Fig. 4: Scene from *Glaube Liebe Hoffnung* (Faith, love, hope): accordion player in front of a kiosk (Voigt 2015, 00:39:14).

The motif of “going West” in the individual biographies remains ambivalent in this film, too. We see opportunities and hope for new starts that indicate that the protagonists expected more in life. At the same time, the fear of unemployment and their dependence on public authorities is a constant issue. As a result, we observe a common type of pragmatism relating to career choices. The new starts mainly present a retreat into the private sphere. The protagonists are looking for individual happiness. We find various individual narratives which present a process of individualistic isolation. In *Letztes Jahr Titanic*, some protagonists were already mentioning the importance of the principles of efficiency and the merits of the Western job market as well as the issue of human isolation. Thus, in *Große weite Welt*, we can observe the continuation and further development of these motifs.

6 The Ambivalence of “the West” in the Context of the Transformation Process

In conclusion, what experiences and interpretations of “going West” do the films represent? The period of shooting *Letztes Jahr Titanic* presents the transition from the Peaceful Revolution to the accession of the GDR to the Federal Republic of Germany. In the retrospective, sociologists and historians characterize this period through the “specific dynamics of the events,” their “unpredictability and condensation,” and a “simultaneity of acceleration and uncertainty.”²⁴ The film conveys

²⁴ Lux and Leistner, “Letztes Jahr Titanic,” 98–100.

insights into how people connect their imaginations of “the West” with their experiences, how they find them confirmed, or how they transform them. Even if the perspective of the film includes the filmmaker’s interpretations, it is a contemporary perspective that presents the interpretation of experiences in progress and not from a retrospective perspective.

The presentation of the last months of the GDR and the first as a new part of the Federal Republic focuses on people’s daily lives. People perceive the entry of “the West” in different ways. We see people who joyfully receive the West German D-Mark while others part sadly with the East German Mark. Individual protagonists discover new perspectives on life, several stories representing a break from their former life. The film repeatedly presents scenes of people celebrating, a carnival, a Christmas market, and fireworks.

At the same time, uncertainty accompanies this transition; not every break is a new awakening with an aim in mind. The youth protagonists like Isabell, her friends, and John seem particularly disoriented. Concerns in the face of looming unemployment dominate in the factories. The GDR images of “the West,” which sharply accentuated the dark side of capitalism, are vindicated.

On this basis, the film *Große weite Welt* presents different lines of development. Those who went to the West report on confrontations with other unfamiliar mentalities. Dietmar mentions in particular that they had to explain their distance from the church in the mainly Catholic Bavarian village. Isabell describes a Swabian mentality that supports the idea that one acts in one’s own self-interests, an attitude that she has also acquired. In both the East and West, we observe mainly pragmatic decisions with regard to the job market and career options, particularly with the young protagonists giving priority to financial security. One has to be able to afford the new opportunities of the big wide world. At the same time, unemployment creates new dependencies: those who are looking for new job perspectives and need to be retrained are dependent on the approval of the employment office. People who acted amid their work collective and social environment in *Letztes Jahr Titanic* now sit alone in their living rooms. Thus, the film not only documents the hardships of the capitalist job market, but it also illustrates the isolating lifestyle and the lack of solidarity within a capitalist society.

However, the narrative line is still open-ended. The opportunity for a new start, and also new places, is still present. The individual stories still include future prospects. Though, they mainly present a retreat to the private sphere. In this sense, the series of the *Leipzig Filme* represents a depoliticization of ideals. The diverse biographies of its protagonists might help to explain why a more politically active generation did not arise after the revolution as had been expected by some journalists or sociologists in the 1990s. Instead, in the end, there was no ideological

superstructure for the uprising in 1989, and the individual protagonists were pragmatically looking for what was possible and feasible in their “new” lives.²⁵

Indeed, this narrative cannot claim to present historical facts. Nevertheless, the films present authentic interpretations and experiences of their protagonists through the course of transformation. Thus, the films claim to give the protagonists a voice and let them speak for themselves. The filmmaker created an aesthetic representation through his selection of sequences and their composition. In this manner, he connected the statements and images that formed an implicit narrative line. The presentation of the narrative in this way refers to the already existing experiences and interpretations that are aesthetically represented. By this means, they become available for others and provide potential references upon which future interpretations in the societal discourse can be built. Admittedly, we do not have valid data about the reception of these films. They probably presented rather a niche view of the societal media discourse. Nevertheless, the awards for some films in the series indicate the societal recognition for these representations of experiences and interpretations.²⁶

Moreover, the interpretative narrative that connects these experiences is also plausible against the backdrop of scientific discourses in social sciences and history. The films present the struggle for “the reclamation of security and stability” as a consequence of the complete replacement of the “systemic framework conditions of the political, economic, and social order.”²⁷ In particular, they address the effects of the economic and societal transformation on the individual level. Remarkably, the political dimension does not seem as significant.

In general, we can describe the protagonists’ reactions as a pragmatic assimilation. Even the protagonists who succeeded in securing their private needs focused their attention on the future. They asked themselves if this private happiness would remain secure in the future or if there were other prospects for greater freedom or happiness in another place. Despite the new opportunities, the experience of “the West” was also an experience of limitations. Aside from individual success, the experience of mass unemployment and social decline was almost om-

25 Steffen Mau, *Lütten Klein: Leben in der ostdeutschen Transformationsgesellschaft* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2019), 201–202.

26 Award given by the GDR Film Club for the best documentary film for *Alfred*; the Golden Pigeon (*Goldene Taube*) at the international documentary film festival in Leipzig for *Leipzig im Herbst*; the Adolf Grimme Award for *Letztes Jahr Titanic*; and the Grand Prix for documentary film at the Festival du Film, Strasbourg, for *Glaube Liebe Hoffnung*.

27 Heinrich Best and Everhard Holtmann, “Die langen Wege der deutschen Einigung: Aufbruch mit vielen Unbekannten,” in *Aufbruch der entscherten Gesellschaft: Deutschland nach der Wiedervereinigung*, ed. Heinrich Best and Everhard Holtmann (Frankfurt and New York: Campus, 2012), 9.

nipresent.²⁸ Additionally, the experience of dependency on anonymous authorities was not an individual case at that time, and it concerned all social classes.²⁹ Against this backdrop, we can trace the theoretical assumption of a depoliticizing individualization of modern societies which undermines social and solidary structures.³⁰ Thus, the narrative represented by the films that the process of transformation oriented to the West is connected with experiences of isolation and individual self-responsibility has proven plausible.³¹

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28 Steffen Schmidt and Hartmut Rosa, "Institutionelle Transformationen – Habituelle Irritation – Sozialstrukturelle Petrifikation: Empirische Befunde und transformationstheoretische Schlüsse zur deutschen Vereinigung," in *Aufbruch der entscherten Gesellschaft: Deutschland nach der Wiedervereinigung*, ed. Heinrich Best and Everhard Holtmann (Frankfurt and New York: Campus, 2012), 433.

29 Christa Uhlig, "Über Schwarze Pädagogik, Sozialdiskriminierung und strukturelle Gewalt – Erfahrungen aus dem Arbeitsamt," in *Jahrbuch für Pädagogik: Arbeitslosigkeit*, ed. Dieter Kirchhöfer and Edgar Weiß (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007), 27–39.

30 Ulrich Beck and Peter Sopp, *Individualisierung und Integration: Neue Konfliktlinien und neuer Integrationsmodus?* (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 1997).

31 Many thanks to Nicole Gotling for her attentive proofreading.

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