

Beating the East German Blues: Musical Representations of Freedom in Leander Haussmann's *Sonnenallee* and Michael Schorr's *Schultze Gets the Blues*

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Introduction

The West German diplomat and journalist Günter Gaus (1983) famously described East Germany in the 1980s as a "niche society", which allowed spaces of comparative freedom in the private sphere, to which citizens might repair in order to gain respite from the reach of the communist state. For young people in particular, popular music – and especially pop music from the west – offered a potent symbol around which to imagine such a niche. This article examines two quite different post-unification German films – Leander Haussmann's *Sonnenallee* (1999), which looks back with self-conscious nostalgia on the GDR, and Michael Schorr's *Schultze Gets the Blues* (2003), which examines the current-day situation of a retrenched East German miner – in order to explore how such an identification with music operated, what its limits were and how it could also manifest itself after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Beyond this, it examines how music is employed as both filmmakers contend with the legacy of the East German past and/or imagine a future in the Berlin Republic.

Ostalgie and the Rediscovery of (East German) Pop

If nostalgia – which, for many, is often bound up with music and the memories it invokes – is a universal affect, then it has had a special context in the former East Germany. The *Wende* (fall of the Berlin Wall) in 1989–1990 consigned the East German state to history and to memory. However, how the

state was and is remembered would be hotly contested (see, e.g., Jarausch 1999). Particularly during the early 1990s, when a series of scandals relating to the coverage of the State security apparatus emerged, it was common, especially for Western commentators, to reduce the communist state to an "*Unrechtstaat*" (unjust state) and discount any prospect that citizens might have enjoyed a degree of normalcy, notwithstanding the restrictions. In this context, a realisation dawned on the part of some (East) German writers, including *Sonnenallee*'s screenwriter, Thomas Brussig, that an examination of the GDR's everyday life could provide a new account of the state (Hage 1999: p. 255). This could also "write back" against the view of an all-encompassing "*Unrechtstaat*" (see generally Cooke 2005; Kapczynski 2007). However, this strategy would be associated with what many critics dubbed a recuperative "*Ostalgie*". At a basic level, *Ostalgie* is the nostalgic evocation of the East German past, and in particular of the more cosseted realm of everyday life, which nevertheless stops short of actually wishing for a return of the communist regime (see, e.g., Brussig, cited in Lambeck 1999). From a socio-psychological perspective, one important motivation behind *Ostalgie* appears to be that some Easterners have sought refuge from the economic uncertainty of the post-*Wende* present – by 1997, one in two East Germans had had some exposure to unemployment (Grix 2002: p. 3) – in comforting images of the past (Cooke 2005: p. 147). In comparison, *Ostalgie*'s critics attack the way in which it tends to paper over the brutal realities of the regime and thereby impedes a sober account of history (see, e.g., Cooke 2005: p. 104). However, as Paul Cooke (2005: p. 105) stresses, *Ostalgie* is a "multi-layered phenomenon", and one ought always to query whether a particular author allows the recipient to indulge in a non-self-reflexive consumption of the past.

On the (not so) Sunny Side of the Street?

Sonnenallee is a superficially "ostalgic" coming-of-age film which looks back from the post-*Wende* present to provide a (self-consciously rose-tinted) vignette of everyday life during the 1970s amongst a generation of East Berlin teenagers that has been inured to the utopian claims of socialism. Whilst the film, on one level, deliberately de-exoticises the GDR by focusing on universal themes such as first love, it also identifies the specificities of life as a teenager in the GDR (Cooke 2005: p. 113). One of those specificities relates to popular music, the thematisation of which in *Sonnenallee* Ken Woodgate has also explored (2005). Popular music emerges as an intimate sphere in which a degree of escape from the restrictive GDR was possible. However – and here I take a less optimistic view than Woodgate – *Sonnenallee* also reveals the limits of that "niche".

The protagonist Micha and his friend Wuschel are, like many adolescent men, music enthusiasts. As in other parts of the world, popular music provides them with a distinctive code, which is employed within the peer group to distinguish between those who possess more or less "symbolic capital", to use Pierre Bourdieu's terms (1984). Whilst Bourdieu holds that taste maps closely with social class, the situation is more complicated in the theoretically classless GDR, where Eastern pop music competes with Western, and the "legitimacy" of each is the subject of official state decree. For Micha and Wuschel, the top of the taste hierarchy is held by the Rolling Stones, who were regarded by the regime as perpetrators of a particularly degenerate, imperialist music threatening to undermine the state; for many years, their music was forbidden to be performed or broadcast in the GDR. By contrast, German-language "GDR-Rock" was officially legitimate, but, as the film demonstrates, distinctly "out" from the point of view of young East Germans (see generally Rauhut 1993; Larkey 2004). It is the whiff of subversiveness vis-à-vis the state that elevates the Rolling Stones' value. This

music allowed a young person to imagine himself as resisting the regime, as being "somehow against the system in a diffuse way", an affect that continued well after the wall, and may well have contributed to the reasons why 1.2 million East Germans consumed the film upon its release (Krause 1999; Engels 2000).¹

An important prerequisite for strategies of music-based distinction in East Germany is therefore access to (the sometimes prohibited) Western music. Micha is fortunate in that he possesses equipment that allows him to make cassette recordings from Western radio, or from friends' records. The cassette player brought with it considerable latitude to consume, produce and disseminate music in spheres unable to be controlled by the GDR state, and contributed to the ability to create a niche within that state (Rauhut 1993), not that the state necessarily recognised this, or, if it did, was able to do anything about it. In the film the regime is depicted as clueless about the potential which technological change such as the cassette recorder holds. At the start, the police officer fumbles over Micha's portable cassette player, unsure of how to stop it. He might confiscate the cassette, but he does not confiscate the recording device itself – which would surely have been a more effective strategy to restrict the dissemination of "subversive" Western music.²

¹ That it could function in this way is inferred by Gunnar Decker's review for *Neues Deutschland* (1999). Cf. Brussig's own comments cited in Falck 2000.

² Even more telling is the scene involving Micha's West German Uncle Heinz, who, whilst crossing the border, is called in by the East German guard for what he fears will be an interrogation. In fact, the guard simply wishes to demonstrate why East Germany is more advanced than the West. He does this by comparing a cassette recorder which he has just confiscated from a western visitor with the trusty standard issue East German "Minetta" radio. The Japanese cassette recorder is far too complicated, he explains, whereas the "Minetta", with few features beyond an on/off button, is simplicity and perfection itself; what more could a consumer want? Uncle Heinz is left to shake his head in dismay. The East German model of "consumer socialism" is thereby held up to ridicule. However, this scene is significant for another reason too – the cassette recorder, about whose music-democratising significance the border guard is oblivious, fuses when he plugs it in and is responsible for causing a blackout in the *Sonnenallee*. In a very real sense then, the communist regime is

Yet "liberation out of the spirit of rock music" has clear limits, as demonstrated by the two concluding sequences of the film.³ Wuschel must, at all costs, own the Rolling Stones' *Exile on Main Street*. He locates a copy on the black market, however its exorbitant price means that it long remains out of his reach. The pleasure to be derived from finally obtaining it is short-lived. Absentmindedly, he strays too close to the border zone for the police officer, who is on high alert given that a blackout has just occurred. When commanded to stop, Wuschel runs away. He is shot in the process, and appears to all onlookers – and viewers – to have been killed. However, the pathos of the moment is relieved a short while later when Wuschel begins to stir. Had it not been for the double record, which he had stuffed down his jacket, he would certainly have died. In a tragi-comic moment, the Stones record has broken the path of the bullet, saving Wuschel but destroying itself in the process.

Wuschel gets another chance to own *Exile on Main Street* when an accident delivers a windfall in Western currency. In the last sequence he settles down to listen to the record; yet even here an "authentic" experience of the Stones evades him. It turns out that the record is nothing but a fake; in reality it contains a tinny Eastern European variant of rock music. It is only after Micha urges him creatively to re-imagine this music as new, unpublished Rolling Stones material that Wuschel's despondency can be dispelled.⁴ Indeed, by this act of fantasy, a moment of liberation can be attained – Micha and Wuschel start playing along on their "air guitars", as for a moment they become "the glimmer twins of the GDR" (Platthaus 1999). Meanwhile, their adoring fans gather below their balcony and

"powerless" in the face of superior (and potentially subversive) technology from the West.

³ This expression has been borrowed from Gunnar Decker's review of the film (1999).

⁴ The significance of fantasy is also thematised in Micha's imagined diary account of his own past life, through which he recreates himself in the image of a resistance fighter. As Cooke notes, this gently prods eastern viewers of *Sonnenallee* to examine their own engagement with the past, including with respect to *Ostalgie* (2005, p. 117).

boogie towards the border. Rock music leads to the fall of the Wall, we are led to infer (c.f. e.g., Hedinger 1999; Peitz 1999). That this is, of course, nothing but a fantasy is revealed when the sequence cuts to Micha and Wuschel dancing along a deserted street, eyes closed, and playing their air guitars.

If we know from the work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies that all cultural consumers engage in the act of creative readership, fashioning their own meaning from an extant text, then *Sonnenallee* reveals that the imperative to do so may have been felt more strongly in Communist countries, where the stock of texts from which to select was restricted, and the "face value" of those texts could have undesirable associations. The film nevertheless pulls the rug out from underneath any (revisionist) attempts to view pop music consumption as embodying significant resistance, or for bringing about the *Wende*. Western pop allows a sub-cultural niche; however, it is largely in the mind. Like the Stones' music itself, that niche must be actively imagined, and is ultimately powerless against the brutality of the regime. Even if Wuschel is quite literally "saved" by the Stones record, the musical artefact is destroyed in the process and his attempt to escape is rebuffed. In the film, music therefore appears to be of great significance, but within certain clear limits; it cannot deliver anything more than a fleeting moment of more or less illusory freedom. The bullet scene, in particular, cuts through feelings of musically grounded *Ostalgie* that the film might otherwise propagate.⁵

Schultze Gets (and then Loses) the Blues

Michael Schorr belongs to the same generation as *Sonnenallee's* authors. However, he was born in the

⁵ It is therefore a little bizarre that it was this scene – in which Wuschel shows more emotion about his destroyed record than over the fact that his life has been saved – that attracted the ire of the Help e.V. organisation, a body representing the interests of "victims of political violence in Europe". Help instituted (somewhat misguided) legal proceedings, considering that this scene belittled the suffering of those who had been harmed by the GDR regime (Bisky 2000; Thomann 2000; Cooke 2005: p. 111).

Rhineland Palatinate, in the (old) FRG. And yet, in his first feature film, he turned to (former) East Germany for his subject material. Not having grown up in the GDR, Schorr had no visceral, identity-based connection with East Germany, nor a heritage to “rescue”, and he expressly set out to avoid any “ostalgic” attributions being given to his film (Schorr 2004a).⁶ *Schultze* is different from *Sonnenallee* on a number of levels. Its protagonists – Schultze and his two former mining colleagues, Manfred and Jürgen – are (unwilling) early retirees, rather than young people.⁷ It is unambiguously set after the *Wende*, and the restrictive communist regime has long been unseated, even if the economic legacy of that past is still very much in evidence, not only in the former miners’ retrenchment. In terms of setting, it takes place deep in the East German province, rather than in metropolitan East Berlin. Finally, the film is far more forward-looking than *Sonnenallee*.

For all their differences, the two films share the thematisation of Anglo-American music – or at least certain sorts of it – as a phenomenon invoking freedom and liberation for its downtrodden East German consumers. Whereas *Sonnenallee* reveals the identificatory power of Anglo-American rock for young East Germans pre-*Wende*, and also for those Easterners who “ostalgically” consumed the film, the newly retrenched Schultze identifies with zydeco, a hybrid music from southern Louisiana influenced, in equal parts, by French Cajun music, Caribbean music and the Blues. He chances upon a late night broadcast of this music and is instantly

⁶ Schorr also subtly thematises *Ostalgie* when he has his protagonists sit down to dinner together. When the mealtime conversation shows signs of drifting into sentimentality towards GDR times, one of the men puts a quick stop to it. *Ostalgie* was a particularly hot topic in 2003, when Schorr shot the film. A suite of controversial *Ostalgie* TV shows were broadcast during that year (see, generally, Cooke 2005).

⁷ In fact, young people are mostly absent from the film – which surely reflects the continuing migration westwards of many young people after unification. And yet, one important theme of the film is the ageing – and ailing – Schultze’s re-discovery of his youth. This is particularly apparent in a scene where Schultze’s doctor reminisces on his failure to follow his own adolescent dream to become an opera singer, and urges Schultze to pursue his dreams.

attracted to it. This is partly a result of zydeco’s instrumentation: it features the accordion, on which he has, for many years, performed the “Schultze polka”, so-named because his father also played it. However, the pace of zydeco and its syncopated rhythm is quite different from the polka.

The “Schultze polka” can be read as a metaphor for the East German province, which is depicted in the film as both dreary and backward, as well as traditionally “German”. The ubiquitous wind turbines barely move, and the only things that travel with any speed are the trains that hurtle through town. And yet it is clear that the province is changing, albeit not necessarily for the better; the pub, for example, which Schultze and his friends frequent, installs a new (and disturbingly noisy) poker machine, symbolising the encroachment of the capitalist west. The East German province also appears, as was quickly realised by several West German commentators in the years after unification, as more “German” than the (already westernised) West Germany of the filmmaker, Schorr (c.f. e.g., McKay 2002: p. 25). Hence, traditional *Volksmusik*, and a grass roots culture of clubs and societies, have a secure place in Schultze’s hometown – the appropriately named “*Teutschenthal*” (literally, “German valley”, although this does not convey the archaic spelling of the original). Indeed, the “*Harmonie*” amateur music association, of which Schultze – like his father before him – is a member, is preparing to celebrate its 50th anniversary. This maintenance of folk culture and emphasis on amateur music-making was in line with the cultural policies of the communist party, particularly from the late 1950s onwards (Rauhut 1993). By contrast, German folk music had a much harder time of it in West Germany, given the associations between it and its abuse under the Nazi regime (see, e.g., Steinbiss 1984).

Significantly, however, Schorr does not at all glorify the traditional “Germanness” of *Teutschenthal*, and for that reason I would disagree with those who identified the film as an East

German "Heimat" film (see, e.g., Engels 2004).⁸ It is precisely this *Volksmusik* culture – and its nationalist undertones – which Schultze finds so oppressive after the *Wende*, perhaps even more so than the economic hardship which unification has caused. Hence, when Schultze performs his zydeco-inspired number at the "Harmonie" club's 50th anniversary, it is violently denounced by one member of the audience as "shitty Negro music", a term of abuse dating back to the Nazi-era, at least, and the ideological attacks against jazz, but which became less and less acceptable in the FRG during the post-war era. In fact, the scene takes on a clearly (neo-)Nazi tone when another member of the audience – a young man with cropped hair – jumps to his feet to vigorously defend the "Negro music" remark. In this way, Schorr is suggesting that the Nazi past is less "worked through" than in the FRG, a point raised by many after unification, particularly in the wake of the attacks on foreigners in places like the East German Rostock.⁹

Like the young Germans in the post-war era who were attracted to jazz, and like the young Easterners in *Sonnenallee*, Schultze instinctively grasps the appeal of Anglo-American music – indeed his body visibly relaxes when he is playing (his version of) the zydeco, as opposed to when he is performing the stuffy polka. When he finally has the opportunity to visit the Deep South and sample the music live in its original context – he receives an airfare from Teutschenthal's sister city New Braunfels in Texas, which has expressed its interest in a traditional German folk musician performing at its annual "Wurstfest" – we witness his body relax even further. Schultze's American odyssey – which has filmic predecessors in the New German Cinema, even if it

⁸ The *Heimat* film is a German genre, particularly favoured during the 1950s, which represents the idyllic realm of the rural village, in which an intact sphere revolving around family, love, friendship and traditional culture exists.

⁹ See, e.g., Cooke 2005: pp. 34–35. On the relative prominence of what he calls "defensive nationalism" in East Germany, see, e.g., Ross 2002.

involves a boat trip rather than a road trip¹⁰ – takes him finally to New Orleans, where he attends a zydeco dance with Aretha, an African-American woman whom he has encountered on his journey. Schultze at last appears to be completely at ease – until he collapses on the dance floor, to die, in peace, a short while later.¹¹

Although Schultze's American trip, and his increasing exposure to the zydeco music with which he identifies, culminates in his death, it can also be interpreted as portraying his attainment of freedom, as he finally sheds that stuffiness and self-denial which initially characterise his figure – and which were thought by some commentators to be a characteristic of East German identity, more broadly (McKay 2002: p. 25). By embracing (African-) American culture, he has finally shed the stodginess of the "Schultze polka", and all that it represents. He has thereby taken a very similar step to that taken by those young post-war Germans who embraced African-American jazz for similar reasons (see generally Hurley 2009). Although Schultze's solution to his post-*Wende* retrenchment is an idiosyncratic one, Schorr demonstrates that this does not leave the culture of Teutschenthal untouched. Schultze's ashes – and Aretha – return to Germany. At the conclusion of his funeral service, the members of "Harmonie" club perform a dirge which – like the marches performed at traditional New Orleans funerals – swiftly mutates into a joyful number; the tune is none other than a zydecoed-up version of Schultze's signature tune. Just as zydeco "spiced up"

¹⁰ Unlike Wim Wenders' film *Alice in the Cities* (1974) and Werner Herzog's *Stroszek* (1977), where the German protagonists embark on road trips through the United States, Schultze travels the rivers and bayous in a boat he has commandeered.

¹¹ The trip proceeds from the "Wurstfest" of New Braunfels through to a houseboat near New Orleans, thereby retracing the historical development of Schultze's beloved zydeco (cf. Schorr 2004a). Curiously, the music to which he is exposed in New Braunfels is, if anything, even more "German" than that of Teutschenthal's *Harmonie* club. He subsequently is exposed to a Czech polka band in Louisiana, which performs a hybrid type of music that is one step closer to zydeco. In a French Cajun-speaking part of rural Louisiana, he witnesses live Cajun music, and dances to it, if somewhat stiffly. By the time he reaches New Orleans his liberation is complete.

Schultze's drab life, it has left its positive mark on Teutschenthal. Even the wind turbines appear to be rotating slightly faster in the film's final scene.

Conclusion

Sonnenallee and *Schultze* are certainly two very different films, notionally about two different phases in East German life. Yet both demonstrate the redemptive power of non-German music and culture as a vehicle of freedom for its East German consumers, offering respite from repressive political, economic or cultural circumstances, albeit a freedom with certain limitations. Schultze is fortunate that, by a windfall, he can witness zydeco live; Wuschel and Micha must make do with a stand-in. However, Wuschel's Stones record saves his life, whereas Schultze dies at the very moment that he attains his musical redemption.¹²

However, both *Sonnenallee* and *Schultze* are more than just films about the power of non-German music for its East German consumers. Schorr's film – though it is made by a Westerner, and to a certain extent could be transferred to any economically backward setting in the neo-liberal world – offers quite a different "solution" from *Sonnenallee*. If critics of *Ostalgie* claimed that films like *Sonnenallee* provided East Germans with solace from the present in a rose-tinted version of the past, then Schorr's film locates hope for the future, not in images of the past – or in the Germanness that the "Schultze polka" represents – but in an image of the United States and in an openness to its culture. None of this is un-self-reflexive, of course: just as Haussmann and Brüssig interrogate the "ostalgic" attitude in their film, Schorr also questions the German recourse to an unreservedly positive "America" in his film, even if he is ultimately more than a little guilty of it

¹² This death is clearly an aesthetic choice – it saves Schorr's film from too sentimental an ending.

himself.¹³ Notwithstanding the self-reflexivity, Schorr's message is clear: East Germans ought not dwell in memories of the past, but to be open to the possibilities which the globalising world presents.

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¹³ In particular, he contrasts Manfred's very rosy image of life in the USA with the reality of what Schultze experiences on the ground. Nevertheless, it is certainly open to argument that his picture of the USA is still heavily romanticised; Schultze has no untoward encounters in the USA, and is made to feel welcome throughout, including by the African-American Aretha — a figure familiar from other West German cultural offerings dating back to the post-war era (see, e.g., Hurley 2009).

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