THE **DEUTSCHLAND83** MINISERIES.
TECHNOLOGICAL REPRESENTATION OF THE COLD WAR BETWEEN OSTALGIE AND VERGANGENHEITSBEWÄLTIGUNG

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**ABSTRACT**  
The article analyzes the German television series *Deutschland83* on air, not only in Germany, since 2015. The author wants to demonstrate how the use of representation in the eight episodes of the series of numerous technological objects from the Cold War period represents a way to tell in Germany’s recent past before reunification to a new generation audience. From a methodological point of view, the article leans on semiotic and cultural studies themes, analyzing for each episode which type of technological object is highlighted by the plot and why. In the article neither the historical reconstruction nor the summary of the eight episodes of the series are left out. The vintage technological objects present in the *Deutschland83* series can be divided into objects of common use and objects not of common use: in the first case, the objects have the task of historically contextualizing the series, in the second case, the objects not of common use they have the task of influencing the whole plot centered on the espionage activities of the protagonist Martin / Moritz and his attempt to thwart nuclear war.
Recently, the thirtieth anniversary of the collapse of the Berlin Wall (1989-2019) has passed. The European collective culture and its mediums, old and new, continue to investigate from numerous points of view what was a historical caesura, not only symbolic, but real and tangible, perhaps the last to have marked European history. The collapse of the East German political system led to the reconstruction of Germany and the search for identity of many German citizens of the West and East who still today look for a lost Heimat⁴. Although a few decades have passed since reunification and the end of the Cold War, a widespread sentiment continues to spread, especially in the former East Germany. This phenomenon, which is defined as Ostalgie⁵, has become increasingly popular, especially in recent years due to its exploitation in marketing.

Ostalgie is a crisis between the German words Osten (East) and Nostalgie (Nostalgia). (The word officially entered the German vocabulary in 1993 when the Gesellschaft für Deutsche Sprache³ included it among the ten most representative words of that year). Born in the 1990s as a common feeling of nostalgia for life in the GDR (DDR), or East Germany, Ostalgie soon became featured as a trend of costume with the recovery, in fact, of objects, living styles and clothing, typical of a world that has now disappeared or that perhaps did not exist at all. In short, it became a nostalgia for a country that “is never the country it was, but what one would have wanted it to be: as such, a refuge from the aggressions of history, a space of resistance to the cancellation of the past, the claim of a difference” (Banchelli 2006: 13).

In 2003, the Ostalgie phenomenon became global thanks to the success of the film Good Bye, Lenin! directed by Wolfgang Becker and whose plot revolves around the protagonist’s attempt to reconstitute the daily routine of life in the GDR precisely through the objects, places, and consumption that characterized it before the transition and reunification. Emblematic is the frequency with which in the former East Germany, during the film, the well-known Coca Cola arrives, complete with pervasive and omnipresent advertising actions for the western drink that was going to replace the Vita-Cola of the East, produced since 1957 in the GDR and still today in Germany on the basis of the Ostalgie phenomenon. Other manifestations of Ostalgie are also the DDR Party, real private ostalgie parties, but also organized in public places and during which you can consume East German products, listen to the music of that time and dress as then. Speaking of food products, and as already mentioned for the Vita Cola case, in the wake of Ostalgie many companies have resumed the production of East German products which at that time were frequently considered of poor quality. An example of this are the chocolate brands Knusperflocke and Bambini which reappeared on the shelves in the late Nineties; Mokka-fix coffee; Kabinett cigarettes and others.

In recent years, film and television production has also ridden the sentiment-trend of the Ostalgie. In addition to the aforementioned Good Bye, Lenin!, Go Trabi Go⁶ and Go Trabi Go 2 must certainly be mentioned, two films from 1991 and 1992 respectively; Das Versprechen (The Promise) from 1994, set in Berlin where the Wall is being built since 1961 and defined as “Ein eindringlich gespieltes, politisches Melodram”⁷ (Lexicon des Internationalen Films).

With the 1999 film Sonnenallee⁸, they were launched a series of successful comedies linked to the theme of Ostalgie, and also the film in question, in addition to gaining appre-
ociation in Germany, was then screened in US cinemas between 2000 and 2001, and in Italy in 2005, but directly on television.

Not so lucky, the broadcast of the 2004 series Meine schönsten Jahre (My Best Years), centered on the life of a boy from the East against the backdrop of a Berlin in the 1980s, was interrupted. To the detriment of the low ratings, it should be remembered that this series also had the merit of bringing to light the finds of life in the GDR without caricaturing them: “Die Platte, der Trabi, das Westpaket von Omi, genüsslich holt Regisseur Ulli Baumann alle Klischees über die DDR hervor, ohne sich über sie lustig zu machen” (author’s translation).

In general, and to arrive at a synthesis of elements that will be useful to us in reading the series Deutschland83, it is possible to affirm that the sentiment-tendency of the Ostalgie should not be classified as a desire on the part of former citizens of the GDR to want to restore that political system. Rather, it is a phenomenon based on a real search for identity, a “Symbol der Identitätskonstruktion und der Selbstverteidigung” (Pollack 2003: 10), a nostalgia that is not total, but rather for some aspects of a world in which, like it or not, many citizens had lived by internalizing their civil values, lifestyles, perspectives. The latter, in particular, suddenly disappeared, so rapid and unexpected was the dissolution of the socialist world and the transition to a reunified Germany.

The Ostalgie is therefore distinguished by an ongoing and rather complex phenomenon because it is connected to the concept of nostalgia, where the latter “is not only a fashion or a trend. Rather it very often expresses or hints at something more profound, as it deals with positive or negative relations to time and space. It is related to a way of living, imagining and sometimes exploiting or (re) inventing the past, present and future” (Niemeyer 2014: 2). And the re-invention of the past can only pass through the new media (Niemeyer 2014: 3).

Alongside the Ostalgie phenomenon, of crucial importance for the understanding of certain cultural phenomena, there is the all-German concept of Vergangenheitsbewältigung. The word was born in the 1950s, but it became commonplace only twenty years later. It meant confronting the past, but it also contained the expectation of being able to put a stone on it” (Vannuccini and Predazzi 2004: 64). Closely connected to the elaboration of historical and individual responsibility for the Holocaust, the Vergangenheitsbewältigung has assumed a purely historical significance in German-speaking countries.

Over the decades, an extensive bibliography, both critical and derivative, has developed around the theme. Specifically, there have been many literary works, but also films and television that have faced overcoming the past and the processing of collective guilt connected with the Holocaust. In particular, Das Erbe der Nazis (The legacy of the Nazis), a television miniseries in two seasons, from 2015-2016, deals with the theme of the denazification of Germany and the Vergangenheitsbewältigung process from 1945 until 2015 in a documentary perspective.

In this article we will investigate how the recent mini-series Deutschland83 was inserted in the historical-cultural background of reunification, and how it deals with the two socio-cultural phenomena of Ostalgie and Vergangenheitsbewältigung. It will also be pointed out how the series, in a precise and non-trivial way, has been able to recount historical facts in themselves abused from the point

9 “The record, the Trabi, Omi’s western package, director Ulli Baumann brings out all the clichés about the GDR with gusto without making them ridiculous” (author’s translation).

10 “Symbol of identity construction and self-defense” (author’s translation).

of view of media exploitation (films, novels), adapting an almost traditional content to the new medium of the television series, and then implementing a re-writing and re-narration for contemporary audiences.

The theme of technology is addressed in this article under a double methodological and epistemological key. From a narratological point of view, we will try to demonstrate how the narrative construction of the individual episodes deals with the technological objects. From a semiotic point of view, we will evaluate how these objects, brought to the fore today, in a completely changed context, instead have a central function of re-semioticizing the past.

The aim of the article is to demonstrate how, at the level of narrative construction, Deutschland83 revolves around technological objects and how a new storytelling of those times is still possible today, and indeed desirable. The period of the late Cold War changed the fate of European history, and therefore that of the world, but it has left behind the rubble of a world, made up of material objects, which however no longer exists. It is precisely the objects and material culture, well highlighted in Deutschland83, that can contribute to the narration of that historical period. The miniseries will be analyzed with particular reference to the representation of technological objects in each episode: we can divide the objects in question into objects of common use, which serve to give historical-cultural depth to the story and objects not of common use but derived from the application of the science to technology and which are intended to advance the narrative. We can define the latter, which are the most relevant from a narratological point of view, and on the basis of Propp’s classification as:

From Propp we also know how all the elements of a narrative, as well as these magical means, are linked together by a series of well catalogable functions, so that if we want to consider the magical means from the point of view of their transmission, which, in the series occurs frequently in relation to technological objects of the second type not in common use, then we can refer to two main types of functions:

1) Possession of the magical medium, connected with the attempt to destroy the hero (kill and friends), with the request for a second season called Deutschland86 and which pre-

15 “Magical means that come into the possession of the hero. They can act as a magical means [...] 3) objects that have a magical property, such as clubs, swords, shells, orbs and many others; 4) powers given directly, such as strength, the ability to transform into different animals, etc” (author’s translation).
Deutschland83 is produced by Ufa Fiction from an idea by Anna Winger, Anna’s husband, Joerg Winger, produced and directed by Edward Berger and Samira Radsi. The cast includes Alexander Beyer, a well-known face in German cinema and who plays the role of law professor Tobias Tischbier, a spy from the GDR, who has always infiltrated the Western capital, Bonn, unperturbed and completely devoted to the political mission; and Sylvester Groth as Comrade General Walter Schweppenstette. Jonas Nay plays the protagonist role of Eastern frontier soldier Martin Rauch, who infiltrates the West by pretending to be Moritz Stamm, aide-de-camp to a West German general.

Undeniably, Jonas Nay reached a wide popularity with Deutschland83 and from one of the interviews he gave about his starring role in the series, we can see his in-depth preparation and attention to character construction in that historical context:

My closest adviser for historical questions and in NATO maneuvers, like “Able Archer” for example, as well as for my conduct as an ordnance officer, was the military adviser and NATO expert Steffen Meier, who helped me in my preparations for the role, as well as on location. He is a former high-ranking military adviser of the West German army during the Cold War and therefore could help me with firsthand experience on a political and military level.21

In addition to scientific advice from NATO counselors, the production also focused on the construction of the double character Nay was required to perform:

Martin and Moritz is not a double-role in the usual meaning. Martin adopts the identity of Moritz Stamm, and finds himself forced within the shortest time to change his front. His personality and also his worries, like leaving behind his sick mother and his girl-friend, his learning how to adapt to a new surrounding, a differently-influenced culture and a new working place, are still the worries of Martin.22

Nay’s assumption of double identity in the series is therefore not devoid of a certain existential complexity. The world into which Martin is catapulted, from East to West, attracts him with colors, tastes, possibilities, but disgusts him for its extreme pragmatism and cynicism.

Coming specifically to the series, we must first briefly illustrate the structure of Deutschland83. As mentioned, it is a miniseries for television whose original language is German, and the first season ([Staffel]) is divided into eight episodes...
lasting about forty-five minutes each. Each episode has a title that summarizes in a more or less direct way the theme of the episode itself. The original titles are: “Quantum Jump” (1.01), “Brave Guy” (1.02), “Atlantic Lion” (1.03), “Northern Wedding” (1.04), “Cold Fire” (1.05), “Brandy Station” (1.06), “Bold Guard” (1.07), and “Able Archer” (1.08). Each episode is preceded by a summary of previous events, then a few minutes of anticipation, the initials, and then the entire episode.

The theme song consists of the song “Major Tom (Coming Home),” in the English version, by Peter Schilling. The original song, titled “Major Tom (Völlig losgelöst)” was recorded in West Germany in January 1983 when quickly gained first place in the charts of the most listened to songs in Western German-speaking countries (West Germany, Austria, Switzerland). In the autumn of 1983, given its success, a version was made for the US market where it soon reached second place in the charts. The popularity of the song in the West is certainly justified also by the theme it tells: it refers to the invented character Major Tom, who had already been the protagonist of several songs by David Bowie, including “Space Oddity”. The story of an astronaut lost in space because his mission is not going well suits the historical context of the Cold War in which Deutschland83 is set.

As often happens, the first series always turns out to be the densest in meaning and most faithful to the original aesthetic idea. In Deutschland83, the plot certainly does not stand out in originality: in the autumn of 1983, in the height of the Cold War, NATO announced military maneuvers in West Germany, a signal received, both in Moscow and in East Berlin, as a preparation for the so-called first nuclear strike to the East; the frontier soldier Martin Rauch is recruited by his aunt, a collaborator of the HVA - Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung, the foreign intelligence secret service of the Ministry for State Security, better known as the Stasi. Martin is forced to infiltrate in disguise in the West and report the secret plans of NATO and the Bundeswehr, that is the apparatus of the armed forces of the Federal Republic of Germany. Thus begins the most classic of spy stories, in which each ingredient appears predisposed to involve the viewer in the dichotomy of good vs. bad, usual and reassuring since everyone already knows which side to be on. Instead things are different and the first episode of the series, which partly represents its summa and contains its stylistic code, shows that it is still possible to invent a way of talking about the Cold War without fear of repeating paths already beaten.

There is no doubt that the originality of Deutschland83 focuses on the representation of the way in which the ability to know how to wage a war with new technologies, in that precise historical juncture, represented the key to the outcome of the events, both for how they really went, and for how they are narrated in the series.

From this point we will start again by analyzing the eight episodes of the series, always in consideration of the distinction that was made in the introduction to this article, that is, between commonly used technological objects and non-commonly used technological objects.

The first episode, titled “Quantum Jump”, well illustrates this dichotomy of technological objects. In fact, also in order to achieve a historical-geographical contextualization, we see various technologies appearing in order, the first of which is precisely a television that is broadcasting, to the West of course, the famous speech given by the President of the United States Ronald Reagan on March 8, 1983. Not only in this episode, but widely throughout the series, television will have the function of historically contextualizing the events. In fact, the historical-political events of that year will not be narrated by an external narrator or by the protagonists themselves. The television will instead appear with the original speeches that, from time to time, the opposing political leaders will hold in that historical period and which well summarize the climate of an imminent war.

So television, even as an object of common use, has a didactic function in the series. That is, it represents that component of commentary and summary that in the Greek theater was personified by the choir, then in the dramatic text or in the film script are realized in the indications and contextualizations of the author or director.

A whole series of objects of common use then take over for the training of Martin who became Moritz, but here valued in the espionage activity that will have to be carried out: camera and micro camera are just some of the technologies with which Martin, a young man in the ‘80s, will encounter

23 Pierre Michael ‘Peter’ Schilling (1956), is a German singer. Among the major exponents of the German New Wave [better known as NDW - Neue Deutsche Welle], he was particularly successful in the 1970s and 1980s.

24 BRD (Bundesrepublik Deutschland), Federal Republic of Germany, commonly known as West Germany, was a state that existed from 1949 to 1990 with Bonn as its capital. It included the British, US, and French occupation zones. The subdivision was the consequence of the Yalta Conference of 1945.

25 The speech, delivered in Orlando before the National Evangelical Association, is also known as Evil Empire Speech, as for the first time R. Reagan, openly, defined the Soviet Union as the ‘empire of evil’, putting an end to the so-called ‘politics of the détente’ which, albeit in the climate of the Cold War, had characterized the previous presidencies.
for the first time once he reaches the West. The same goes for technologies such as a telephone with answering machine: symptomatic is the scene in which Martin, taken on duty as General Edel’s attendant, is grappling with an incoming call and proves not to have the slightest idea of how to use a telephone set with answering machine and call forwarding buttons. All this happens in the West, since in the first episode and in the scenes set in the East the world of objects is a much more naive world, made up of old radios that don’t keep the frequency, manual coffee grinders and wall phones; in everyday life, technology does not create problems, you do not have to train to use it, it remains in the background of a strongly ideological lifestyle in which objects of worship – or from which you can benefit, leisure, and even profit – remain old chessboards and books, especially those not marketed, as banned, in the East. In both cases, however, whether they are technological or artisanal objects, both in the West and in the East it is true that “After several decades of thinking centered on persons, more attention is now being given to things, as they are seen as important, and active, constituents of social life” (Sánchez 2012: 29).

In this episode, the so-called Pershing II missiles appear for the first time in the speech of the protagonists and in the images of the era, defined exactly as a ‘weapon system’ by the American army that created them. The Pershing IIIs, which entered service in 1983 to replace the Pershing I, were used by the US Army for a total of one hundred eight launches and for a total of two hundred and seventy-six missiles produced. They are uncommon technological objects that take on enormous importance in the Cold War phase told in Deutschland83: in fact, the Pershing II were modified for medium range delivery and armed with nuclear warheads. The aim of the users of these missiles, namely the United States and West Germany, which were the only holders, was to hit the most western countries of the Soviet bloc, such as Ukraine, Belarus or Lithuania. The missiles were an advanced technology, partly unknown in the Soviet Union, and Martin will have the task not only of making this technology known to HWA by photographing the technical data sheets of the Pershing II, but also and above all of intercepting the West’s plans for the actual launch of the missiles. The latter in fact represented the classic technology voted, in war, to the so-called ‘overkilling’, that is to say the risk of using such powerful and lethal weapons (nuclear weapons) capable of killing the enemy, many more times than necessary, as well as, given the use of nuclear weapons, to exterminate even themselves. In fact, in the series, General Edel’s greatest concern is precisely to see the German territory exterminated in its entirety without distinction of East and West if these missiles were used.

In the second episode, entitled “Brave Guy”, the same dichotomy between objects of common and uncommon use is substantially repeated. The most significant scene is the one in which Martin has to worry about checking the hotel room for the NATO official in Brussels Enrich Meyer who will have to give the famous Abel Archer report in Bonn precisely on the conclusions reached by the NATO leaders, namely that a nuclear war would not only be useless, but even disastrous for all mankind.

Martin, in Meyer’s hotel room during the inspection, places the most classic of bugs (a microphone), but in reality it is the surrounding technology that upsets him: central heating, light intensity regulator, remote controls, are all – along with a safe – things that he hears of for the first time. Regarding this object, he demonstrates ignorance not only of the mechanism, but also of its specific function. It will be mentor Tischbier who makes him understand what the safes are for when he tells him in a quick secret interview: “Yes! Capitalists love to buy objects, but then they are afraid that someone will steal them”. In fact, Martin manages to break into the safe and while he is already there with a micro-camera in hand ready to photograph the report, supposedly on paper, he finds himself in front of a square plastic object, steals it and invents a fake aggression in order not to blow up his cover: he was unable to put the collected object back in its place as he was unable to photograph it.

A floppy disk, this is the support of Meyer’s report, and is in a certain sense the technological object commonly used in the West, but not in the East and around which much of the series will take place in its subsequent episodes.

The third episode – “Atlantic Lion” - opens precisely with the leaders of the Stasi staring bewildered at the floppy disk; they are helpless in the face of that object and the so-called ‘technical office’ is involved to try to decode it. They try to do this with a Robotron AS120 computer, which does not read the media, and would therefore need at least an IBM 436 which, however, cannot be sent to East due to the embargo on certain assets imposed by Reagan.

26 The missiles are named after the American general John Pershing.
27 The USSR was equipped with missiles with much longer ranges and only two warheads.
“Are you trying to say we need American technology?” Schweppenstette asks one of his collaborators who, in contrast, looks at him affirmatively. At the end of the episode, a computer is finally found in which it is possible to insert the floppy disk, but, once inserted, its content appears encrypted and the all-technological challenge between East and West opens up again.

In the fourth and fifth episodes – “Northern Wedding” and “Cold Fire” – technological objects of common use in the West appear again: the Walkman, the vacuum cleaner, the photocopier, and others with which the spy from the East, Martin, is much more familiar. The object Martin recognizes is the most classic of the bugs that is sold to him in a Brussels warehouse, where even the dealer cannot tell him what it is and if it works. Martin, on the contrary, recognizes it and knows how to make it work. Through technological objects, the socio-cultural gap between East and West is accentuated even more. At the same time, the use of screens, televisions or control monitors and computers of the time becomes more and more marked, in a sort of less and less subtle appeal to Orwellian Big Brother. And George Orwell’s 1984 is the text that is smuggled from West to East and used to encrypt the coded messages that Martin receives and sends.

The only unconvincing episode, the sixth – “Brandy Station” - sees the explosion of the individual conflict, but which is symbolic of a generational conflict of greater scope, by Alexander Edel, son of General Edel of whom Martin is an attendant. Alexander takes hostage General Jackson, a member of the US Army in West Germany, and who apparently supports the launch of the Pershing II. Alexander forces General Jackson to film a speech in which he reveals the war plans of the West. This also fails due to Alexander’s awkwardness in conducting the amateur shoot, but also and above all due to Jackson’s interruptions, which very openly suggests that he has no intention of authorizing the missile launch because he is aware of its uselessness and lethality. In front of the camera, the hidden human frailties emerge that stand out against the overheated historical context. Nonetheless, it all seems caricatured and even too immersed in the reality of the 21st century and not in that of the Cold War and the sense of a certain historical authenticity is partly lost.

In the seventh episode – “Bold Guard” - the misunderstanding between the alleged plans of attack of the East and the West respectively becomes increasingly evident and dramatic and this happens because the technologies used by the two sides in the game are no longer able to communicate: the bugs placed by Martin have been sucked up by a trivial vacuum cleaner; the activation codes of the missile launch are encoded in the West with the Lena computer; and in the East they cannot be decoded because they are too sophisticated. As an extreme consequence, and also thanks to a certain bad faith of the Stasi general Schweppenstette, who takes advantage of the fact that he is the only – or almost the only – one to have access to the floppy printed version of the Able Archer report, the latter is read to the East as an imminent operation of war.

In the eighth episode – “Able Archer” – Martin, blowing up his own cover, reveals with great personal risk that Able Archer is nothing more than the simulation of the scenario also envisaged by NATO and to be avoided in any way, and thus foils the operation of a preventive offensive that should have started from the Soviet Union with the launch of nuclear missiles. Misunderstanding between technologies is resolved thanks to human intervention.

In conclusion, it can be said that, for the realization of Deutschland83, historical research on common technologies was conducted with a certain diligence and above all with the ability to show the interaction between technological objects used in daily life (where available) and the more sophisticated ones which in that historical phase were mainly conceived to be applied to the Cold War in progress. Precisely in the last episode, in the Able Archer control unit, in full exercise, complete with a myriad of screens and lights on, you can see the original DEFCON push-button panel, a scale from one to five, with five different colors, from white to blue, and which would have served to indicate the level of probability of a Soviet attack when the buttons on the scale itself lit up.

Certainly, the use of the technological theme for a series produced in 2015 and which has the ambitious goal of returning again to the themes of the Cold War, was a winning choice both from the point of view of the Ostalgie mentioned at the beginning of this article, but more generally on the basis of a vintage mood which can be seen “come passione per il passato più che del passato, da fenomeno di nicchia sta diventando una tendenza mainstream” (Panosetti and Pozzato 2013: 24).

Looking away for a moment from the broader concept of nostalgia, which is always a passion for the past, but also and above all “sentimento disforico di un soggetto che sa di
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The strong thematic reference to technology in Deutschland83 therefore becomes an instrument of that typical German process, the Vergangenheitsbewältigung, that is the comparison with the past—and, we could add, the reflection on the broken identity that still attempts a synthesis today. But it is something more, that is, a completely new way of enhancing the past and its cultural heritage, also and above all through objects.

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