

"Like a small trip back to the GDR"?

East German evaluations of the television serial *Weissensee* and its authenticity in a dynamic discourse landscape

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I take the example of the historical German television fiction success *Weissensee* and ask how East Germans have read and judged the way this serial constructed their past more than a decade after its television premiere. This question is raised against the background that *Weissensee* was produced at a time when all questions related to the German Democratic Republic (GDR) seemed to have been answered. In the meantime, the remembrance discourse has changed. Hall's encoding/decoding model, Giddens's identity theory, and Sabrow's typology of memories of the GDR provided the theoretical framework. Empirically, this study draws on five focus groups of East Germans, and the findings demonstrate that the dominant media memory, the dictatorship discourse, still operates within three reading positions. More recent discourses are visible but have not (yet) expanded the horizon to relocate oneself in the past. This study contributes to the rare research on authenticity from an audience perspective.

KEYWORDS: audiences and authenticity, historical TV serials, GDR, reading positions, discourse, memory, identity

Introduction

When in the 2010s East Germans were watching television fiction about the German Democratic Republic (GDR), such as the public service television serial *Weissensee*, they did so within the dominant German media remembrance discourse, in which all questions related to the GDR seemed to have been answered. East Germans' past was reduced to a life in a dictatorship. In fictional film, East German viewers experienced that their history of the GDR was successfully told to an all-German audience as a Stasi story (Lüdeker, 2012). The emergence of this "standard depiction" of the GDR was closely connected with the international success of the drama *The Lives of Others* (2006) (Brockmann, 2023: 226). Following this standard depiction, *Weissensee* told the story about a Stasi family and a dissident family in East Berlin in the 1980s and in the early months after the accession of the GDR to the Federal Republic of Germany (Hißnauer, 2016). The promotion campaign emphasised the historical authenticity of this serial (Das Erste, n.d.-a). With its four seasons (the first broadcast of the last season in 2018), *Weissensee* became an audience success and is available to this day.

With this article, I aim to find out how East Germans have read the way *Weissensee* constructed their past more than a decade after its television premiere. This question is raised against the backdrop of a shift in discursive spaces negotiating GDR memory. In recent years, discourse opened up and introduced new opportunities to relocate oneself in the past. In the renewed discourse about the East–West divide, the developments after 1990 have been criticised, such as unemployment, East German career chances, and power asymmetries of speakers. Political conflicts have put the legacies of the GDR back on the table, particularly in discussions about the right-wing political party Alternative for Germany (AfD). The new attention for the GDR has included its everyday life (Brockmann, 2023: 264; Haag & Hilmar, 2024; Kellner-Zotz, 2023). Furthermore, the aesthetic and narrative scope in fiction about the GDR has expanded (Himmel et al., 2025; Kötzing, 2020; Orth, 2020).

Considering that fictional representations of history are particularly fascinating when they promise authenticity (Sender, 2012), this contribution intends to answer the following questions:

- How do East Germans assess the authenticity strategies of *Weissensee* regarding what is narrated, how, and by whom?
- How relevant is the evaluation criterion authenticity to them?
- How do East Germans deal with *Weissensee*'s "it was like that" claim ten years after its first broadcast, under different discursive conditions?

The aim is to mark the spectrum of readings, not to cover all possible positions. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, the concept of authenticity, and Anthony Giddens's identity theory provide the theoretical framework, complemented by Martin Sabrow's typology of memories of the GDR. Five focus group discussions with East Germans built the empirical foundation.

This article is located in an interdisciplinary field. Memory studies demanded to study the dynamics of media remembrance culture more thoroughly and underlined that “the ongoing process” must be understood, “in which individuals and groups continue to reconfigure their relationship to the past and hence reposition themselves in relation to established and emergent memory sites” (Erlil & Rigney, 2009: 2). This study conceptualises those sites as established and emergent media discourses. While media-centred processes seem, however, to remain the focus in memory studies on these dynamics (Erlil et al., 2024), as a communication scholar, I focus on the audience. I contribute to this field by studying media relations of individuals engaged in identity and memory discourses.

This study, moreover, connects to the rare media research on historical authenticity from an audience perspective (Han, 2021; McElroy & Williams, 2011; Monk, 2011). It directs attention to authenticity evaluations as a way subjects relate to historical popular media to (re-)negotiate their social identity. As the identification potential of *Weissensee* is ambivalent, this serial is well-suited to explore this relation. Generally, I am interested in the “effect of authenticity suggestions” in popular media (Sabrow & Saupe, 2016: 19). The present study sheds light on the alleged authority of historical authenticity in a changing discursive context.

The first section describes the encoding/decoding model, which helped identify how *Weissensee*’s authenticity strategy “is effective in practice” (Hall, 2018b: 160). The second section sets out the strategies of film to create historical “truth” and summarises the knowledge about how authenticity and identity are related. The third section summarises the literature on media discourse about the GDR, reflects on Sabrow’s typology, and introduces *Weissensee*. This is followed by methods and findings.

Hall and Giddens: Studying audiences’ readings of historical media constructions

Individuals read historical media constructions differently depending on their past and identity. I employed the encoding/decoding model (Hall, 2018a, 2018b), because it not only allows to distinguish different readings but also to consider the frameworks of knowledge influencing the relationship between media readings, past, and identity (Hall, 2018a). Hall’s approach provides a theoretical explanation of the power of media discourse and a differentiated view on audiences’ readings. Hall assumes that both media and audiences are influenced by frameworks of knowledge and material structures (Hall, 2018a: 260).

According to Hall (2018a: 269), drawing on Foucault, every society has its knowledge order, prevailing in a given moment in time: The different areas of social life, such as collective memory, are organised within patterns of preferred or dominant meanings which have “the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them” (p. 269) and carry with them “the stamp of legitimacy” (p. 273). The news media (remembrance) discourse is a permanent base not

only for audiences to learn about the dominant meaning structure but also for scriptwriters and film directors (Hall, 2018a: 266–269). Historical film portrays the past at a given moment in remembrance culture. *Weissensee* presented, in a popular way, what the dominant collective memory of the GDR in 2010 was (Brockmann, 2023; Hißnauer, 2016; Rothauge, 2020).

The audience encounters what Hall (2018a: 269) coined maps of meaning through the particular code of (fictional and serial) history television. Authenticity strategies belong to this code. These maps of meaning may not appear as univocal. Professional codes in television, for instance, serve to reproduce dominant definitions, and at the same time, they may produce contradictions when looking back at them after the discourse has moved on into different directions (Hall, 2018a: 273). Dominant discursive formation in the media is often shared by the audience, or at least it is known. Through socialisation and internalisation, media reality becomes subjective knowledge (Hall, 2018a: 266). Assuming that there is a relative autonomy of reception, Hall emphasises the differences in how individuals interpret media messages. He distinguishes the three well-known ideal-type positions on which subjects make sense of media discourses: preferred reading, negotiated position/professional code, and oppositional position (Hall, 2018a: 272).

To understand how (historical) identity plays out in media readings of historical fiction, I draw on Anthony Giddens's work. According to the British sociologist, individuals have to keep the "story" of their selves going. They do so in social processes and for the purpose of maintaining a feeling of navigating through life in a self-determined way. To keep the story going, the past is continually reconstructed based on the present, and individuals are continually challenged to integrate incoming information from the external world into their narratives of the self (Giddens, 1991: 53–54). Mass media are not the only but a central source for monitoring incoming information. The continual experience of a divide between personal experiences and the way the media construct the past may create a challenge for a "coherent sense of one's life history" (Giddens, 1991: 72).

Authenticity in history television and as an evaluation criterion

Authenticity is a controversial concept (Frey, 2018, 2022). In this article, (historical) authenticity is understood as a social construct generated in discourse and identifiable in audience evaluations. What a "realistic historical experience" is can be contentious and may change over time (Frey, 2018: 1). Authority and authorisation influence what is accepted or rejected by subjects to be "their" cultural heritage (Sabrow & Saupe, 2016: 13). Authenticity serves the purpose of legitimating a certain historical truth claim. In historical television, it is also a factor of aesthetics and marketing (Frey, 2018). The impression of provable accuracy is created by set design, location, costumes, casting, language and dialect, historical recordings, or through advice by historians (Frey, 2018; Han, 2021). These methods of authentication, also applied in *Weissensee*, hide the

constructedness of the historical narrative. Many historical films claim to be based on real-life stories or to be inspired by true events. Yet, as fictional narratives, they enjoy some narrative freedom (Bergold, 2019: 14). In the last years, some films and serials about the GDR have expanded this narrative freedom. They do not focus on “evidence”, but on creating an authentic feeling of past lifestyle, for instance, by music or language (Orth, 2020; Frey, 2018). These strategies of authentication influence the perception of authenticity (Sabrow & Saupe, 2016: 14).

Studies on audience perceptions of authenticity in historical television are rare. It is known that it matters to viewers how “realistic” a historical programme is and that audiences negotiate authenticity (McElroy & Williams, 2011: 90). Spotting supposed inauthenticity may be “a source of active enjoyment” (Monk, 2011: 129). The way in which audiences are connected to the remembered past is not only influenced by their perception of factual accuracy, but it is also significant to them how they are tied to “the tone and atmosphere of the production as a whole” (McElroy & Williams, 2011: 89).

Viewers draw on their personal experiences and (supposed) knowledge to evaluate a film’s authenticity. This evaluation is also influenced by media discourses, by the recurring historical events, and by images and frames (such as “peaceful revolution”, “dictatorship”) in television, movies, and the press (McElroy & Williams, 2011). Personal and mediated memories might overlap.

While some authors assume that “authenticity is [...] the primary reading protocol for historical films” (Frey, 2022: 441), I take into account that audiences do not only have authenticity in their mind when watching historical programmes. A television audience, in general, “has a complex set of needs which it seeks to satisfy” (Fiske, 2002: 151). Historical programmes can certainly serve the purpose to assure oneself of one’s own memory and identity, but watching them might also satisfy other needs, like escapism or mood management. Moreover, knowing that a programme did not live up to authenticity expectations can produce tensions for those who, for other reasons, enjoyed watching it (McElroy & Williams, 2011: 89). In any case, audiences might apply different criteria of evaluation. Evaluations are usually inconsistent and incomplete since they depend on the framework and memory available at the moment of conversation.

Three analytical dimensions of audience authenticity evaluation can be distinguished for *Weissensee*: 1) the construction of the GDR (plot and characters – what is told about the GDR?); 2) the filmic strategies (set design, location, language, etc. – how is the GDR told?); and 3) the production context (organisation, cast – who tells about the GDR?).

Weissensee and the (media) discourse about East German history

The historical drama *Weissensee* tells the story of the Stasi family Kupfer and the dissident artist family Hausmann in East Berlin (Hilßnauer, 2016). The first season, broadcast in 2010, was followed by three more seasons produced until

2018. The show aired during prime time on one of Germany's major national public television channels (*Das Erste*). *Weissensee* maintained high ratings throughout its four seasons, with only the last season reporting a slight drop in viewer attention. The serial has been rebroadcast on television and is sold on DVD and streaming platforms (Rothauge, 2020; Leinweber, 2022).

Its audience success has been widely related to its authentic depiction of the GDR. Leading press outlets highlighted that the story was told by means of set decorations with original items of the 1980s, and in original locations in East Berlin (Denk, 2018). The press echoed the promotion by the public service broadcaster and film company. The depiction of the GDR was grounded on the "historical facts", said the West German screenplay writer of the numerously awarded serial (Das Erste, n.d.-a). The West German production designer talked about all the museums, private and public photo books, and libraries that were consulted to ensure "historical truth" (Das Erste, n.d.-b). According to him, the goal of the West German director and producer was to "create a believable world so that each viewer can identify (with someone or something) where possible" (Das Erste, n.d.-b). To accomplish this mission, the GDR-born historian Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, an expert on repression in the GDR, was hired as an advisor to the production. To further increase the impression of authenticity, ARD released a documentary in which the actors were questioned as contemporaries (ARD, n.d.).

Film analyses have found that *Weissensee* addresses the GDR in an ambivalent way. On the one hand, its main subject is the Stasi, but on the other, the Stasi issue is wrapped up in two family stories with different characters and a love story. There are three generations and complex, partly ambiguous characters as well as depictions of everyday life. Thus, although there is the dichotomy of perpetrators and victims, the serial offers a certain spectrum of identity anchors for East Germans (Hißnauer, 2016; Rothauge, 2020). Some studies speculated on the question of the extent to which East Germans would perceive this serial to be "authentic". They came to contradicting results (Brockmann, 2023: 254; Arp & Goudin-Steinmann, 2022: 203–204).

At the time of *Weissensee's* release, historian Martin Sabrow (2009) identified three GDR memories in Germany. He called the first one the memory of dictatorship. This memory puts an emphasis on political repression and is focused on the perpetrators and victims of the system (Sabrow, 2009: 18). The memory of the dictatorship has become the official memory of the GDR. The memory of arrangement combines a repressive system with everyday life in the GDR. It tells about the irrevocable normality of party rule, happy youth, and the pride of self-assertion under unfavourable conditions. It is widespread in East Germany and can be found in parts of the literature. The memory of progress remains "in the shadow" of the memory of dictatorship and can be found among former GDR elites (Sabrow, 2009: 18). It focuses on the beginnings and achievements of the GDR and maintains the idea of socialism as an alternative, legitimate societal order.

I have applied Sabrow's ideal types of memory to analyse focus group discussions. The aim is to identify memory- (and thus identity-) related readings. This is done with two reflections. First, while Sabrow's work is strong in synthesising the three memories, the German historian remained vague in distinguishing distinct institutional sites of memory production, such as the media. Other studies provided evidence: Content analyses have found that the leading press has mostly followed the memory of dictatorship (Meyen, 2013). This memory also found its way into movies and feature films, where the dichotomy of perpetrators and victims became the dominant construction from the middle of the 2000s on (Lüdeker, 2012; Brockmann, 2023). The internationally successful Stasi drama *The Lives of Others* (2006), for example, suggested that the activities of the Stasi reached far into the lives of people (Wolle, 2006: 498). The fact that people could live a life beyond dreariness and oppression in East Germany is unimaginable according to this film (Seegers, 2008: 25). The memory of dictatorship diverges from many East Germans' memories in which the Stasi usually remained in the background of everyday life, mostly acting unnoticed by people (Mau, 2019: 101).

A second reflection is that Sabrow's typology is quite old. In 2009, all questions related to the GDR seemed to have been answered. There was hardly any public attention left for East Germany. Around 2015, the GDR started to reattract news media attention, because its legacies once again required explanation (Haag & Hilmar, 2024: 3). At first, because of Pegida (the right-wing populist movement mobilising thousands on East German streets), and afterwards because of the election successes of the AfD party, particularly in East Germany. Thus, the media discourse seems to have changed since Sabrow built his typology. There are several developments: While the memory of dictatorship continues to dominate German remembrance discourse, scholars asked whether (news media) discourse shifted to a more diversified representation of the GDR, to everyday life as well as to post-reunification experiences. In recent film, constructions also seem to be more differentiated (Brockmann, 2023; Gordeeva, 2024: 299; Kötzing, 2020). The aesthetic and narrative scopes have expanded. Genres, colours, protagonists, and music have challenged conventional authenticity strategies. The German film *Gundermann* (2018) has not only altered the Stasi narrative by an ambivalent protagonist and everyday life scenes, but also added a pop cultural nuance (Kötzing, 2020; Himmel et al., 2025). Even earlier, the serial *Deutschland 83* shifted to a more action- and body-oriented, colourful, and musically rich depiction of the GDR (Orth, 2020). A final aspect is the issue of West German media dominance. The power asymmetries in media structure and speakers led to an omnipresence of West German constructions of the GDR. A new generation of East Germans is raising its voice, presenting a positive awareness of East German origin, if not "East Pride" (Prinz, 2025). In the political realm, the AfD party presents itself as *the* representation of East German interests. The party has been using historical references to the GDR and has compared Stasi and today's institutions (Fiedler, 2023; Menke & Wulf, 2021).

Method: Focus groups

The aim of this study is to carve out the range of reading positions, not to identify all readings. For this purpose, the qualitative method of focus group discussions was chosen to allow for exploring how interpretations and meanings are collectively constructed and how identity comes into play during media usage. Group discussions provide a relatively natural context (McElroy & Williams, 2011: 85) to study the practices in which audiences make sense of television (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996: 85), and the approach grants access to perceptions about the serial and to evaluation criteria. Based on the theory, a system of categories was developed to structure the discussion guideline, the analysis of transcripts, and the interpretation of findings. Main categories were:

- Authenticity evaluation of *Weissensee's* construction of the GDR, of authenticity strategies, and of the production context,
- sources for authenticity evaluation (e.g., personal experiences, media discourse),
- memory of the GDR,
- (East-)German identity,
- monitoring of the media discourse about the GDR,
- and biographical characteristics.

Participants were selected by theoretical sampling (Fuchs-Heinritz, 2000: 230–233) in order to gain a sample as diverse as possible. Age, gender, and educational qualifications served as selection criteria. Regarding age, different GDR generations were considered (Ahbe & Gries, 2006). Participants were expected to have watched (ideally) all four seasons of *Weissensee*. They were preferably recruited via third parties (through the wider personal environment of student interviewers) and online by self-recruitment, for example, in Facebook groups. Therefore, the sample was made up of ready-to-talk fans as well as people who were less involved with the serial and its general topic – an aspect that had to be considered during analysis. Five focus groups were conducted, lasting between 75 and 120 minutes. Groups had a size of three to five participants. Two qualitative interviews were conducted due to scheduling problems. Participants were born between 1942 and 1978, mostly in the 1960s and 1970s. During the GDR, they had been living in different regions of the country. Today, three of them are living in West Germany.

Discussions were held between 2021 and 2023 via a video conferencing platform (Webex) to bring together people living in different areas of (East-) Germany. Several issues arose with conducting discussions online. There were technical problems, which sometimes created a distracting environment for interviewees. Two people left the focus group without comment. The sample included 22 persons, of whom 13 were male and 9 were female. The relatively small number is a product of recruitment difficulties: social distancing rules, rejection of online discussion, a very specific purpose (serial), and the triviality of entertainment.

The discussions were structured by an interview guide that contained questions regarding the context of use, the evaluation of the serial, participants' experiences before and after 1989/1990, their (East) German identities, and their monitoring of the East German media discourse. During the discussion, a short clip was presented to reactivate memories of *Weissensee* and give a prompt for discussion.

Findings

This section is structured according to the analytical distinction introduced earlier. Despite the time that has passed since publication, Sabrow's (2009) ideal types of memory of the GDR were helpful to distinguish three current reading positions and identify differences in authenticity evaluations. In each of the following subsections, I consider the sources of authenticity evaluations and whether current discursive developments reached participants' arguments.

Authenticity evaluation of *Weissensee's* construction of the GDR

Authenticity was a central criterion to evaluate the plot and the characters of the serial. Initiated by the first question of how participants would describe the serial to someone unfamiliar with it, an immediate discussion developed in all focus groups. This discussion revolved around the truth of *Weissensee's* GDR representation. Opinions ranged from the affirmative position that *Weissensee* showed "how it really was in the GDR", like a 60-year-old instructor said, over a spectrum of negotiated positions to an oppositional position.

Applauding the basic plot about the Stasi and dissidence, an affirmative reading followed the dominant dictatorship memory (Sabrow, 2009). According to this reading, *Weissensee's* plot is very authentic. As a 1969-born employee of a state pension insurance agency put it: "It really is the past". This woman validated her view by telling about a house search in her parents' apartment when she was a child. A 1972-born secretary of a mayor and member of the conservative Christian Democratic Party said that *Weissensee* should be shown in schools, accompanied by talks with contemporary witnesses. His argument: The serial was "simply credible". Participants validated the serial's main plot by referring to their own experiences with suppression or with what they had heard in their close social circles. A man with a disability said he never encountered those "ice-cold" people like "Falk" (a character of a full-time employee of the Stasi) in reality, but "small examples" of them, trying to "rhetorically drive me into a corner".

The oppositional reading of *Weissensee* objected to its thematic approach. This was articulated, for instance, by a man, born in 1942, who had studied law and philosophy in Moscow. He said that *Weissensee* provided anything but a typical representation of the GDR with "the top-class Stasi family on the one side and the oppositional Hausmann family on the other side". Plot and characters were considered "polarising". Oppositional readers tried to advance an alternative framework of meaning with an emphasis on the positive aspects of the GDR,

aligning with the memory of progress (Sabrow, 2009). For this purpose, they drew on personal experiences.

The memory of arrangement shaped a range of negotiated reading positions. These interviewees negotiated their evaluations of *Weissensee* by relativising and questioning its focus on repression, and at the same time reproducing and justifying it with different nuances. One example demonstrates this negotiation: An employee in the chemistry industry said at first that she found the serial “very, very authentic”. Yet later in the discussion, this 1973-born woman admitted that the serial “had to exaggerate a little bit” because the West German audience needed “a little bit of excitement”. This woman gave a detailed report about her mother, who experienced pressure in the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). At the same time, she remembered “a great, great childhood” and found that “actually, the serial indeed tells only a small part of GDR history, the negative part”. Negotiating readers approached *Weissensee* typically from the (past) everyday life perspective. For instance, a 1969-born trained hotel manageress said the “plot is the history”, and then she talked about the difficult housing situation for young couples, haircuts, and breakfast routines in the late GDR, all shown in *Weissensee*.

Weissensee's main character, the Stasi Colonel Hans Kupfer, was a central authenticity reference for participants, regardless of their reading position. This character was read as being ambivalent – both bad and good. The Stasi Colonel was “not so evidently on one of the two sides”, thought a man with affirmative reading. And a 1962-born man, with a professional qualification in advertising, underlined that, in this serial, “several things were exaggerated”, but the “Stasisten” (Stasi characters) were “well-designed”. He referred to Colonel Kupfer, who “at the end [shortly before the Fall of the Berlin Wall] tended towards Glasnost”. This negotiating reader appreciated this ambivalence. It meant progress to him, comparing the serial with the dominant media discourse about the GDR: “One [of the producers of *Weissensee*] could have also poured a large pot of shit over the whole East”.

The memory of dictatorship discourse operated within each reading position, leading some to affirm this discourse, others to object to it, and still others to negotiate it. A 1956-born pensioner defended *Weissensee*'s “realistic” construction of the repressive sides of the GDR. He spoke about forced adoptions and remembered that he learnt “afterwards” (after the reunification) that such forced adoptions took place in the GDR. This source of evaluation – the media discourse – came into conflict with what this man remembered about a good health system and that no one needed to be hungry. During the discussion, the former technician solved the conflict by stating that the serial was not suited to learn about the GDR because it would transport a “wrong image”.

What role did the recent thematic extension in public discursive spaces play? Despite the inclusion of the social and economic upheaval in East Germany after 1990, participants mostly limited their discussion to the plot of the first two seasons playing in the GDR before 1989. They rarely addressed the way the serial constructed the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the accession of the GDR to West

Germany. They did so, although the fourth season dealt with unemployment and “predatory capitalism” after 1989/1990 (Rothauge, 2020: 226). A man who had left his hometown for a job in West Germany in the early 1990s was one of the exceptional cases. He said he wished for a fifth season of *Weissensee*, one that told the story of the consequences of reunification and what became of the serial’s characters in the economically difficult times of the 1990s and 2000s. There might be two reasons for the focus on the time before 1989: First, the authority of the 30-year-old hegemonic GDR discourse has shaped the interviewees’ focus, and second, some participants had rewatched (only) the first season to be prepared for the focus group.

In film, some recent contributions aimed at a differentiated view of the Stasi, for instance, *Gundermann* (2018), in continuation of *Weissensee*’s portrayal of a Stasi person, thereby speaking more to audiences like the man who liked the more nuanced approach the serial took.

Recent East–West discourses in news media have also dealt with “normal” everyday life in the GDR – lives without Stasi experience. Unsurprisingly, I did not detect this thematic extension operating within the affirmative reading position. These participants underlined experiences of repression aligning with the memory of the dictatorship. *Weissensee* demonstrated “so clearly” that the Stasi “held a finger in every pie”, a woman born in a small town said. She remembered a surveillance case in her church back then. In contrast, articulating memories of arrangement or progress, the two other positions criticised *Weissensee* for having left out a “normal course of life”, as a 1959-born agriculturist said. Participants in oppositional and negotiating reading positions usually said that their families did not come into conflict with the state.

It is difficult to say whether the renewed East–West discourse has motivated participants to discuss the everyday-life depiction in the serial. There were few participants describing concrete observations of news media discourse. A man remembered the thirtieth anniversary of 1989, noticing that everyday life in the GDR had been addressed in 2019. In his view, news media attention for this issue has “quite increased” since then. Two Berliners criticised a regional newspaper (*Berliner Zeitung*) for repeatedly featuring Egon Krenz in recent years. They even believed to know that it was the new, East Berlin owner of this newspaper who initiated this featuring of the successor of Erich Honecker.

Evaluation of authenticity strategies

Participants evaluated the serial’s language, locations, colouring, or costumes. The affirmative reading referred to the authentic set design and dialogue to justify the realistic GDR construction. A 1969-born woman who emphasised personal experiences with the Stasi said that *Weissensee* was “like a small trip back to the GDR”. To her, furniture, houses, and the colour grey were “true to original”. A theatre scholar highlighted the language in the Stasi milieu. According to her, the language spoken within the state security apparatus differed from the dialogues at the dining table in the villa of the top-level Stasi family.

The oppositional position conceded that casting and set design were “professionally well done”, like an 80-year-old man remembered. He, however, insisted repeatedly that *Weissensee* does not provide a differentiated representation of the GDR history. The “extremely overstated” language sounded to him like language “from the National Socialist command centre”. This man, who had studied in Moscow, contradicted the argument of an affirmative reader that the grey locations appearing in *Weissensee* produced a “déjà vu” with all the “rotten houses” in the late GDR. He remembered that, compared to Moscow, East Berlin felt like being in the West.

Those readers who adhered to the memory of arrangement had to balance arguments. They mostly praised the serial’s sceneries and costumes because they reminded them of happy parts of their GDR lives. “That really took me back to my youth”, claimed one woman, who remembered a “great childhood”. The 1973-born woman, however, also said that she had seen her mother – who had been pressured by the socialist party – in the film story. Another negotiated reader also had ambivalent feelings about how authenticity strategies fit with the Stasi-dissidence plot. A 1971-born pension state insurance employee liked the setting of East Berlin, with its dirty cityscape and the use of the colour grey. He had been living near several film locations, knew the cars and streets, and “could not find any mistake”. At the same time, he criticised that the story did not provide a “representative cross-section” of how the GDR had been. He tried to solve his dissonance by the excitement such a serial had to offer to the (West German) audience, and thus with a professional argument (Hall, 2018a).

Has the recent broadening of aesthetics and genre codes in films and serials about the GDR influenced the readings of *Weissensee*? One could wonder whether the reception of fiction pieces like *Gundermann* or *Deutschland ’83*, also using pop cultural strategies of authentication, has inspired discussion. Participants, however, did not mention such newer fiction. They instead compared *Weissensee* with older films, most of all with *The Lives of Others* (2006), also with the Stasi drama *12 heißt: Ich liebe dich* [12 means: I love you] (2007), as well as with the comedies *Sonnenallee* (1999) and *Goodbye, Lenin* (2003). A 1978-born negotiating reader liked that *Weissensee*, contrary to *The Lives of Others*, showed that life in the GDR could be “colourful”. Being a writer and director himself, he emphasised that living in the GDR had also been “celebration and drinking” and “that it wasn’t always grey and you were not always just beaten”. A toolmaker found that *The Lives of Others* and *12 heißt: Ich liebe dich* were “completely different” from *Weissensee*. These films orchestrated the “perversions of the Stasi”, while *Weissensee*, to him, was rather a “soap”. The memory of dictatorship discourse has been the main reference in the evaluations of authenticity strategies.

Authenticity evaluation of the production context

East German interviewees assessed mainly the authenticity of actors and sometimes the director, the scriptwriters, and the two producers of the serial, all of whom socialised in West Germany. The promotion of the serial foregrounded

the GDR biography of several main actors. Participants hardly engaged with the public service broadcasting institution, which commissioned *Weissensee*, and the film production company.

It was typically the interviewees with oppositional and partly those with negotiating readings who discussed whether actors had a GDR biography or not. A 1959-born man on the oppositional position said that origin was important because every actor expresses their own experiences and living conditions. Although rejecting the serial's main plot, the oppositional readers recognised the performances of the actors, which allowed them to highlight the professional excellence of actors educated in the GDR. Oppositional readers were not only concerned with the origin of actors in order to reassure East German identity; it might also be seen in the light of the long-term marginalisation of their GDR memory that they emphasised the importance of the East cast in *Weissensee*.

The affirmative reading position was not much concerned with the origin of actors, director, or scriptwriters, with a typical argument being that a good actor is able to interpret any role. A 1964-born employee of a state environmental agency mentioned an actress who was “raised in the West” and “played it super touching”. In view of the broad representation of the memory of dictatorship in public discourse, affirmative readers of *Weissensee* had no reason to deal with those who tell the story. Yet, there was one exception: A meteorologist, who could not remember any positive aspect of the GDR, said that the serial was an “incredible achievement”, considering the screenwriter was a West German. He also found it “indeed fascinating” that one of the main Stasi characters was played by a West German. Unlike other affirmative readers, this man moved to West Germany in the early 1990s to study. There, he experienced that West Germans made fun of him, which he downplayed in the focus group discussion.

In the negotiated reading, balancing doubts about the Stasi-dissidence plot with the enthusiasm for recognised everyday-life items, settings, and for ambivalent characters led some participants to emphasise the authenticity of actors while others tended to play it down. A 1971-born negotiated reader, who summarised his film experience with the words that it “always comes down to the Stasi story”, assured that he “would not have bought these roles from West German actors”. Another man found *Weissensee* for the most part plausible. He was surprised when he found out that the screenwriters were West Germans. At the same time, he was convinced that a capable director, no matter if East or West German, could produce a good film about the GDR. The main thing to him was that a film would not “manipulate” the viewer.

The insistence on the East German cast among those applying a negotiated reading can not only be explained by serving one's own memory (arrangement) but also by the fact that this type of memory was long overshadowed by the memory of dictatorship in public discourse. Like within oppositional readings, the evaluation of actors' authenticity here expressed an East German identity. The founder of a Facebook GDR group said that the roles were played very well “by our GDR actors”. The fact that East Germans played the main roles in this television event was relevant to their identity.

Is the expansion of the East–West discourse regarding media ownership, executive positions, and voice identifiable in authenticity evaluations? Across the spectrum of readings, West German dominance is known but not necessarily criticised. Participants rarely knew about media and more often mentioned politics or economy (e.g., inequalities in wages and retirement pension, the marginal share of East Germans in executive positions). East Germans' low share of executive positions, in some institutions even decreasing, has been an issue that was repeatedly scandalised not only by news media targeting the East German audience but by state institutions (Kollmorgen, 2020; Beauftragter der Bundesregierung für Ostdeutschland, 2023). Following Hall's assumptions, one could interpret interviewee statements about such issues as the impact of a newer discourse on readings.

In the context of recent media discourse, the AfD appeared in statements across all reading positions. Participants approached the party in two ways: Firstly, as an alleged speaker for East Germany and secondly, regarding its election success.

The issue of the AfD as a speaker was raised by a representative of the affirmative reading. This man was critical of how the AfD has been engaged in a certain "revival" of the GDR. He addressed the party's election campaign slogans, such as "accomplish the Wende" (the turnaround of 1989/1990), and rejected the party's revolution narrative against current German institutions. This man believes that AfD trivialises the GDR dictatorship under which he felt suppressed.

An affirmative reader agreed with a former Federal Government Commissioner for East Germany who claimed that East Germans socialised in a dictatorship cannot help but vote for the AfD (election of an allegedly nondemocratic party) (Die Zeit, 2021). The participant said the problem was stigmatisation and lack of interest. West Germans were not interested in learning about the GDR dictatorship. He directly linked this problem with the serial: "They" should watch *Weissensee* "to get a feeling" for how the GDR had been. Oppositional and some of the negotiated readers shared the perception that politicians and journalists would not care for East Germany, but provided other reasons. Understanding that the producers had to make *Weissensee* exciting, they found the plot "too one-dimensional" because it did not represent the "normal life", as one man said. This negotiated reader came across the same one-dimensional depiction of themselves in the discourse about the AfD voters. Instead of devaluing East Germany simply as being "right-wing" or "AfD-like", another man said journalists and politicians should listen to East Germans. And still another added that if the other parties had made better "offers", then many voters would have decided against this party. Consequently, across the three reading positions but in different occurrences, the current discourse about the AfD and the voice of East Germans was present.

Conclusion

Due to their narrative and aesthetic and emotional instruments, serials are particularly suited for the ongoing process, in which individuals (re)configure their relationship to the past. This process was studied by taking the example of East German authenticity readings of the television serial *Weissensee*, which was produced in an earlier, different discursive context. I conclude that the opening of the media discourse about the GDR has hardly reached the interviewed East Germans. The established discourse of dictatorship is the main reference in the evaluation of the three dimensions of authenticity in this serial. It led the different reading positions to affirm it, to object to it, or to negotiate it.

Yet recent openings of discourse were visible in statements regarding everyday life in the GDR and the East German voice. The latter aspect of which speakers position East Germans in historical space appeared when participants evaluated actors' authenticity. In media discourse, the often-problematic reunification experiences have been addressed more recently, expanding the remembrance discourse to some extent. The interviews, however, only sporadically took up the political and social upheaval after 1990. More recent authenticity strategies in films about the GDR have not provided a basis for evaluating *Weissensee's* methods of authentication. Participants referred to the older film *The Lives of Others* as a classic, monochromatic grey film of the dictatorship discourse (Gordeeva, 2024: 156). Occasionally, the interviewees referred to more colourful and musically rich early comedies, such as *Sonnenallee*, which provided positive identity anchors. In sum, recent discourse has not (yet) profoundly expanded the horizon to relocate oneself in the past.

The typology of collective memories of the GDR by historian Martin Sabrow (2009), despite its age, proved to be analytically valuable. It helped to distinguish three readings of *Weissensee* based on underlying memories of the GDR: 1) the affirmative position, which judged the main storyline and characters to be "real" and "true", thereby reproducing the memory of the dictatorship discourse; 2) the oppositional reading, which rejected *Weissensee's* main storyline for misrepresenting the GDR and aimed at emphasising the positive sides of the GDR (memory of progress); and 3) the negotiated reading, where readers relativised and questioned *Weissensee's* focus on repression, at the same time reproducing and justifying it, as well as reproducing memories of arrangement. Overall, authenticity was a central criterion to evaluate the serial.

In view of the conclusions drawn by content analyses, this article points to the importance of audience studies in media memory research. Historical studies found that *Weissensee*, "in a very realistic manner", represented the "everyday life of GDR citizens" (Arp & Goudin-Steinmann, 2022: 203) and that the serial constructed everyday life in its plurality (Rothauge, 2020: 230). The findings of my study, however, point to a contrasting viewer experience. The interviewed East Germans were divided on whether *Weissensee* represents their experience. Another study found that East Germans' "memory of freedom" (Brockmann, 2023: 1) – meaning the experience of their democratic achievement

of the 1989 peaceful revolution – was not adequately depicted in *Weissensee* (Brockmann, 2023: 255). In group discussions, however, this experience did not play a role. Although the interview guide asked how they experienced autumn 1989, participants read *Weissensee* via their experience of the earlier GDR. While *Weissensee*, for the participants, has perhaps not been the “watershed moment” in the audiovisual representation of the GDR (Rothauge, 2020: 226), the sympathy and interest the serial received across all reading positions is remarkable.

Finally, this study points to the need for further research to examine more factors influencing identity-related readings of historical television serials. This study only points to the following factors which might help to understand different reading positions: importance of experiences with GDR, professional requirements (necessity to monitor media discourse), and west migration after 1989. Moreover, this text carves out collective ideas of the past within a Western country still marked by a deep East–West cleavage. By highlighting perceptions of power asymmetries in identity and memory discourse as well as in communication structure, it sheds light on “what is of collective importance today” and in the future (Nordicom, 2024).

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