



# DEUTSCHLAND 83

A Postmodern Reimagining of the Past





Dazzled by the choice,  
Martin marvels at life  
across the border


I spy with my little eye...  
Martin Rauch (played by  
Jonas Nay) snaps plans  
for the Stasi



Images courtesy of Fremantle

Despite adhering to many of the conventions of the cold-war era spy genre, *Deutschland 83* offers a refreshing and postmodern reimagining of East and West German stereotypes. Chris Harris explains.

Representations of Cold War-era Germany often fit a stereotypical binary 'good vs evil' The Cold War – the state of tension and hostility between the Soviet bloc countries and the West from 1945 to 1990 – has inspired a series of film and media texts within the spy genre. These texts often present the East and West as binary opposites through codes and conventions. The communist East is presented grey and stark, no billboards, culture or entertainment and strict limitations of citizens' movements and availability of certain foods (e.g. coffee and bananas). The capitalist West, in contrast, is a world of department stores, restaurants and cars, pop-culture and entertainment and free movement. These texts traditionally offer a pro-West 'them versus us/ good versus evil' ideological viewpoint through their narratives and how characters are represented. The spy genre was a staple of 70s television, most notably on the BBC – *Codename* (1970), and *Quiller* (1975) and shows concerning defectors from and traitors to the West like ITV's *Philby*, *Burgess and McClean* (1977) and BBC's *Tinker Tailor, Soldier Spy* (1979). The quintessential *James Bond* movies during this period saw a hero that represents alpha western individualism often pitted against a faceless collective



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communist enemy (*The Spy Who Loved Me's* 1977 opening sequence being a particularly good example of the genre). More recently European texts like *The Lives of Others* (2006) and *Farewell* (2009) have focused on protagonists who defy the restrictions of state scrutiny in the communist East during this period. Contemporary American films like *Breach* (2007) and *Bridge of Spies* (2016) have focused on individuals who are caught up in the dynamics of accusations of spying and trade-offs between the Eastern Bloc and the West.

*Deutschland 83* however is not your typical Cold War text for a number of reasons; but perhaps the most significant is that it has a young Stasi officer as its main protagonist. It is an example of a text that reimagines the past by blurring the established views of the Cold War through a postmodern treatment, perhaps accounting for its success (it was the first German language TV programme to air on a USA network; it has become the highest-rated foreign-language drama in UK history). Postmodernism is characterised by the self-conscious use of historical styles and conventions, a mixing of different artistic styles and media, including the playful use of intertextuality, blending of fact, fiction and genre hybridisation, pastiche, parody and irony. So, for Media Studies students *Deutschland 83* is a particularly good starting point for an analysis of postmodern treatments.


## The Opening of *Deutschland 83*

All postmodern texts create a relationship with the past and the first episode of *Deutschland 83*, 'Quantum Jump', does this with intertitles that frame its historical context. The location is the 'East German Diplomatic mission' situated in Bonn, West Germany in 1983. A woman is listening to US president Ronald Reagan's 'Evil Empire' speech on a television set. This intertextual footage with its message to 'pray' for those who live in 'totalitarian darkness' creates ambiguity – Reagan talks of the 'quiet men' who conceive and order this 'greatest evil' in 'carpeted well-lit offices.' We are in such an office, but it is in West Germany with Laura Rauch, an East German high-ranking female Stasi officer assertively positioned through a slow tracking shot as she takes on board the significance of Reagan's message. We cut to an interrogation sequence of two young actors in East Berlin who have bought some Shakespeare plays on the black market. This is conducted by our communist protagonist Martin Rauch and a colleague. The sequence in part parodies typical interrogation scenes from the spy genre – the crime is not serious and it ends with the release of the two men and a trading of the texts by Shakespeare with those by Marx. It finishes in a comedic fashion with both guards bursting into laughter as the actors leave (and we later see Martin give a Shakespeare book to his mother for her birthday).

This Todorovian equilibrium – of Martin carrying out his fairly humble work for the Stasi – is soon to be displaced as we return to a conversation between Lenora and another high-ranking Stasi official about sending Martin to West Germany to spy on General Edel, who is thought to be colluding with America. The decision is made in an office that recreates 1980s mise-en-scène alongside tense and reflective exchanges that perfectly imitate and pastiche the period. In the scene that follows, Martin and his antagonists play a chess game (in itself a symbol of the Cold War) over uneasy dialogue and knowing glances, embracing spy genre conventions. However, the subsequent breaking of Martin's finger to ensure he perfectly fits the profile of the West German piano-playing man (Moritz) who he is to impersonate is over-exaggerated. It is presented as an extended length of shot and extreme closeup and is an example of a self-reflexive postmodern treatment. It draws attention to itself as artificial. There is a piano strategically placed behind Martin drawing attention to its ironic mode of address.

## The East German Experience

One of the ways that the text challenges the conventions of Cold War dramas is through its representation of the East. Naturally, there is no attempt to sanitise the activities of the Stasi: Martin's hand is broken, Moritz is assassinated in the name of ideology and Lenora is callous in her manipulation of her nephew and his sick mother. However, beyond that the text uses postmodern generic hybridisation to move beyond spy-genre typicality and explore the fictive East. Perhaps the most revealing is



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Jonas Nay as Martin and Maria Schrader as his callous aunt Lenora

the party scene at Martin's house when he returns from leave in East Germany. Martin arrives and embraces family members in a bright, sunlit garden setting. In the living room, young people (including his girlfriend, Annett) are drinking beers and dancing and singing to the Cold War era protest song '99 Luftballons' that is later played in the West German barracks too. This scene reimagines the representation of the East beyond the operators of the restrictive state to the humanity, care and affection of everyday family and friends. The vibrant youth camaraderie, anthemic rock music and positivity are in contrast to Lenora who represents the callous manipulative officialdom that is more stereotypically present in representations of East Germany. She looks on with displeasure, repeatedly in profile, through an ominous, dark kitchen hatch.

### Martin in West Germany

The idea of breaking down distinctions between high and low art and incorporating elements of popular culture is key to a postmodern treatment. Martin's first glimpse of West Germany connotes western opulence – a chandelier, the lavishly colourful images of Gustav Klimt's painting 'The Kiss' strategically placed within the wide shot. However, Martin's first taste of western consumerism, in the supermarket scene is playfully underscored by the Eurythmics 1980's pop song 'Sweet Dreams are Made of This' as Martin wonders at the volume and choice of products available in the West. In homage to the gadget-saturated spy genre (think of Q in the James Bond movies) there is a sequence where Martin's mentor, Tobias Tischbier, trains him in espionage techniques. The surveillance equipment used in the scene encodes the spy genre. However, the montage editing, jump cuts, soundtrack and humorous insertion of pop culture references as Martin learns different pronunciations of German words blends different artistic styles into an effective pastiche.

Ultimately though, the fact that our protagonist is a communist who is being manipulated by his own side indicates that this text is appealing to a post-unification audience who are ready to challenge fixed Cold War versions of 'reality'. A key theorist at A level is Jean Baudrillard with his ideas of 'Simulacra' – representations that depict things that have no original. We cannot know for certain how Eastern and Western Europeans behaved during this time – what we are seeing is only a reimagining and one that is influenced by the present. According to postmodern theorist Baudrillard, Simulacra reveal that there is no fixed, absolute truth; and *Deutschland 83* certainly challenges our preconceptions of this period of history.

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### The Cold War

The Cold War wasn't an actual, on-the-ground war with fighting but a state of ongoing ideological conflict between the communist East and the capitalist West. Germany was at the centre and was divided into East and West Germany by the Berlin wall. The Cold War lasted from the 1940s to the 1990s. Even now, despite the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, people in Germany talk about the 'wall in the head' – a cultural and psychological divide that still exists in the minds of Berliners.

