

Ironic (N)ostalgia or the Aesthetics of Survival

Imagine that you decide to go on a (n-)ostalgic trip to Berlin. Imagine that you arrive at the capital of unified Germany via Schönefeld Airport. On your way to the metro you pass by two booths selling “GDR-products” – fur caps, matrioshkas, former military insignias and newly-made badges. Heading further towards the city, the metro S9 also passes by Ostbahnhof: if you look to the right you get a glimpse of the sign “Ostel“ attached to a tall grey building. “Ostel“ is a big hostel decorated entirely in “GDR-style“. You can book a bed for 9 Euros per night in the dorm “Scout Camp“. The “GDR Holiday Hideaway apartments“ cost around 35 Euros per person, per night.

Arriving at Prenzlauer Berg, Mitte or Friedrichshain (the hippest districts right now) you might go to a nice café, and on your way to the toilet you might notice a blue banner¹ with big white letters: “DDR Museum“. You might decide to visit this museum or you might go to “Checkpoint Charly“, “The Story of Berlin“, the “Wall Museum“ or even to the “Stasimuseum“.

You may buy some souvenirs and gifts at these museums or at the TV-Tower on Alexanderplatz or in one of numerous souvenir shops. Maybe you will encounter a shop assistant who is trying to convince you to buy the original GDR-hand-held-blender RG 25 he or she has been using for thirty years. And when you leave you may have one or two objects in your luggage similar to the products displayed at the exhibition “Villa Sovietica“.

This article is about the consumption and longing for (former) East German products – about the phenomenon “Ostalgie“– a portmanteau of the German words “Ost“ (East) and “Nostalgie“ (nostalgia). A popular cultural phenomenon which, in my opinion, even an ordinary tourist coming to Berlin cannot miss. I'm interested in the history, or rather the emergence of “Ostalgie“, and how this phenomenon is represented and analysed. Ultimately I want to find out what is so special about these “eastern” products and their design, and how I can interpret people’s desire for them and also place it within my own life.

History

It is almost twenty years ago since the most striking historical event in my lifetime took place: when the Wall came down. In my case this wall was rather green and actually a fence. I grew up in a very small village about three miles away from the Bavarian border. I was too young to grasp the full meaning of the events, but I remember watching the news together with my parents and understanding at least that something big was going on.

In relation to the phenomenon of Ostalgie an assured development took place in three stages. First of all, during 1989/1990 the peaceful revolution occurred, accompanied by the spontaneous removal of GDR-Symbols; secondly the currency changeover was introduced, followed by the abrupt disappearance of all GDR-products; and finally the official accession of the GDR into FRG, accompanied by the mandatory removal of GDR-Symbols (Ahbe 2005 :3).

1 Until now I saw this flyer in every café I went to.

On Monday the first of July in 1990, the D-Mark was introduced. On the preceding Friday and Saturday, shops were emptied: they got rid of the old products in order to fill everything with new and shiny things from the West. In 1990 East Germany produced 1.2 tons garbage per citizen², three times more than their Western counterparts. As mentioned, not only the products but also the old symbols disappeared. Famous examples are the renaming of the Saxonian city Karl-Marx-Stadt to its old name, Chemnitz, and the long discussions over the removal of the “Palast der Republik” (Palace of the Republic) which finally resulted in its demolition. There are now plans to rebuild the “Berliner Schloß” (Berlin City Palace), because the “Palast der Republik” was built on its site. The “Berliner Schloß” was damaged during World War II, but eventually demolished by the GDR government authorities in 1950, as they regarded it a symbol of Prussian imperialism. There is no financial sponsor yet. The “Palast der Republik” or “Balast der Republik” is dead and buried, and grass will grow on the building works soon.

After boundless consumed euphoria followed a deep crisis, and apart from the unemployment rate the most striking criterion for that crisis was the extreme decline in birth figures. 180.000 kids were born in East Germany in 1990 and 80.000 in 1994. Or with other words in 1990 the average of the total fertility rate in East Germany was 1.52 children – and in 1994 only 0.78 per woman.³ This was the lowest fertility rate ever measured. In Germany this “demographic shock” is often referred to as “Wendeknick” (after Unification kink).

In the beginning of the nineties “Ostalgie” emerged. There are different reasons for this revival. Thomas Ahbe considers the emergence of “Ostalgie” as a special form of communication wherein East-Germans sought self-assurance. According to him, East-Germans had made a lot of effort to adapt to the new structures and rules of the FRG, while at the same time experiencing a big break. They had also become aware of the big differences in property and capital between East- and West-German citizens, and above all that their opportunities to participate within the economic reconstruction of the “new federal states” of Germany were extremely limited (ibid.: 42). East Germans experiencing a capitalistic market economy without native capitalists (Dahn 2003: 165).⁴ Last but not least, the official discourse representing the former GDR within the media and public was (and is still now) determined on “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” (coming to terms with the past) by focussing especially on the former GDR as “Unrechtsstaat” (repressive state) (Ahbe 2005: 42). This discourse does not reflect the experiences of the majority⁵– their normal lives.

2 Datenreport 1994 Statistisches Bundesamt.

3 <http://user.demogr.mpg.de/kreyenfeld/Lehre/TeachWinter2006/Bloch.pdf>.

4 If you are really interested in a critical view on the history of German unification, I would strongly advise you to read Daniela Dahn. According to her, 95 percents of privatised East German firms and companies changed to Western hands, and because of the doctrine: “Rückgabe vor Entschädigung” (restitution before compensation), a few hundred thousand houses, flats and datchas in East Germany were given back to their “original” Western owners after 40 years (Dahn 2003: 162). “The East German population contains the smallest proportion of land and home owners in Europe” (ibid.: 162).

5 By 2000, two million East Germans had applied for access to their personal “Stasi” dossier, and it is therefore safe to assume that eight million out of ten million employed persons living in East Germany in 1989 were not interested in their past or did not suffer from political repression during the GDR-regime

To regain a glimpse of this former daily life, people started to buy and consume resurrected eastern products. By the end of 1990 typical “GDR-products” had already re-captured the market. In 1991, “Spee and Fit” (cleanser), “Florena” (moisturizer), “Spreewald-Gurken” (gherkins from the Spree Forest), “Foron-Kühlschränke” (fridges), “Bautzner Senf” (mustard from Bautzen), “Nordhäuser Korn” (schnapps), “f6, Karo and Juwel” (cigarettes), in 1992 “Club Kola”, in 1995 “Knusperflocken” (chocolate fluffs), in 1997 “Rondo coffee” were launched on the market, increasing their sales steadily in West-Germany as well.⁶

The generation born between 1945 and 1960 (Ahbe 2005: 45) were particularly likely to go to “Ostalgie”-parties or related events like fashion shows presenting former GDR-clothes. Together they listened to “Ostrock”, eating “Spreewaldgurken” (gherkins from the Spree Forest) and “Thüringer Rostbratwürste” (sausages from Thuringia), clinking glasses filled with “Rotkäppchen-Sekt” (sparkling wine) and smoking “f6” cigarettes. Incidentally, the cabaret artist and actor Uwe Steimle (today known as an actor in the German whodunnit “Polizeiruf 110” and as an Erich Honecker impersonator), seems to be the inventor of the term: “Ostalgie” (ibid: 7).

“Ostalgie” came to a climax in 2003, especially because the movie “Good bye, Lenin!” by Wolfgang Becker was released. Due to the huge international success of this movie: “...DDR-inspired television shows have swept the nation” (Economist: 2003). ZDF started with the “Ostalgie-Show”, followed by Sat 1 with “Meyer und Schulz - die ultimative Ost-Show”, RTL called it “DDR Show” and on MDR: “Ein Kessel Buntes⁷” was broadcasted. After this high point the attention towards “Ostalgie” faded, although recently in conjunction with the upcoming anniversary in November 2009 I noticed more posters and announcements advertising events.

There are numerous journalistic and scientific articles about “Ostalgie”. I want to draw on some (clearly not all) of these articles in order to give a quick overview about the different views on – and explanations of “Ostalgie”. Ranging from critical voices towards “Ostalgie” (especially from Christian conservative politicians) suspecting: “trivialization of the GDR injustice” (Führer 2008) to the point of viewing “Ostalgie” as “symbolic resistance” (Berdahl 1999: 197). Jonathan Bach concludes that: “The modernist nostalgia of the East is straightforward longing, not for a past per se but for the fantasies of that past” (Bach 2002: 554).

Thomas Ahbe (2005) ultimately regards “Ostalgie” as an integration-strategy, indicating that a part of the East German population does not want to abdicate deviant experiences, memories and values. Furthermore not everyone could easily integrate into the new society, participating within the political system or consuming culture as well as material objects, simply because they could not afford it due to unemployment and limited financial means, and would therefore withdraw to private life (ibid.: 30). Daphne Berdahl (in my opinion the anthropological authority in this field) concluded within the abstract of her article: “(N)Ostalgie” for the Present: Memory, Longing and East German Things with the following sentence: “In framing resistance to Western German

(Ahbe 2005: 42).

6 <http://www.oeko-net.de/Kommune/kommune1-97/tlay197.html>.

7 Referring to the title of a very popular Saturday night show in the GDR.

hegemony in terms of product choices and mass merchandising, I argue, practices and products of 'Ostalgie' both contest and affirm the new order" (Berdahl 1999: 192). This is not surprising since "the marketing and consumption of *Ostalgie* represents a certain commodification of resistance" and "several of the supposedly Eastern German products are now produced and distributed by Western firms" (ibid.: 206). Within her argumentation she also recalls the famous saying: "We emigrated without leaving home" (ibid.: 202). And I guess it is typical for immigrants to preserve memories and things from their home country within their new houses.

Towards Nostalgia

After naming a few positions in this field I want to stress again, that I really do not believe that a nostalgic feeling towards the former GDR actually implies wanting it back. I would like to quote an old German saying at this point: "Nostalgie ist die Fähigkeit, darüber zu trauern, dass es nicht mehr so ist, wie es früher schon nicht war."⁸ (Nostalgia is the ability to mourn that the present is no longer what the past never was.)

"While early writing on nostalgia tended to view it as a pathological condition (Hofer, 1688/1934), nostalgia has come to be considered as a sociological phenomenon that helps individuals maintain their identities in the face of major life transitions (Davis 1979). Nostalgia has attracted the attention of marketers, particularly within the last 20 years, who have attempted to evoke the emotional response through product management, advertising themes, music, and leisure activities". (Holak, Matveev, Havlena 2007)

Most writings about the phenomenon "Ostalgie" would stress concepts of memory and nostalgia. I will keep the quoted statement above in mind while identifying such concepts of nostalgia on the basis of several examples of former GDR product design and advertising within this chapter. In the final chapter of this article I'm going to demonstrate why I actually regard this nostalgia as ironic.

SED is not only the abbreviation of the former dominant political party of the GDR: "Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands" (Socialist Unity Party of Germany), the letters are also reused in a book title: *SED – Schönes Einheits Design* (often translated as: "Stunning Eastern Design", though I would prefer "Beautiful Unification Design"). The publication of this book was quite unusual: one would expect it to have appeared among the recent glut of such titles from "memory-seeking" East Germans, but actually this book was published in 1990 after the photographed objects from the book were presented in an exhibition in August 1989. Matthias Dietz and Christian Habernoll, a West German author and a photographer collected these items while travelling through the former GDR. On Amazon.com, I found the following customer review of the book (recently sold as *SED Design: 1949-1989: 25th Anniversary Special Edition*) written by Marc Mauer from Los Angeles:

"As an American looking at these images I have a sense of being nostalgic for something I never experienced (If there is a word for such a feeling, it is most likely a German word). Soap, toothpaste, appliances, food and drink... These items seem

⁸ <http://www.zitate.de/stichwort-Nostalgie.htm>.

to have come from a parallel universe – not just different, as products in Western Europe from the same time would have been, but with that slightly cheap, inferior quality: that ‘just off’ feel about it, that you know would have been evident in the taste and feel of these items as well.”⁹

It feels “just off” – pretty close for an American with a German surname! It reminds me of a Dutch friend who once said that he felt jealous of not having witnessed the fall of the Wall. Actually, I am jealous as well of those who were more grown up than I in 1989/1990. It is strange that we are leading this luxurious life full of choices and possibilities, and at the same time feeling nostalgia “for the good old days” (which we never had) when we see, feel, smell – in short, consume – “Eastern” products. It is strange, too, that these products “with that slightly cheap, inferior quality” get so much attention lately. The authors of “SED – Schönes Einheits-Design” are even more negative about the products: “... the fossils of articles appear shabby with their uninspiring basic form. [They] also lack expected smoothness and erotic suppleness. [They] are neither desirable, sophisticated, nor glossy” (Bertsch and Hedler 1990: 9-12). And Milena Veenis describes the East German material world as “extremely monotonous and distinctly functionalist” (Veenis 1999: 90), but actually explains carefully why this was the case:

“According to East German designers, editors, salesmen and producers, those objects aimed to ‘deceive the consumer’ (KiH, 1977 [2]: 3) and the desire to possess them is expressive of a sad form of ‘primitive thinking’, a ‘deformation of the aesthetic consciousness’, from which socialist people needed to be ‘freed’ (KiH, 1986 [6]: 4) as soon as possible. The hollow and vacuous power of attraction of these objects had to be unmasked and people had to learn that these things just did not fit with actual society and way of life (ibid.: 91).

On another point Veenis specifies on what designers had to focus on: “‘Sachlichkeit’ (succinctness), ‘Zweckmäßigkeit’ (functionality), ‘Notwendigkeit’ (necessity), ‘Minimalgestaltung’ (minimal-composition) and ‘das Wesentliche’ (the essential)” (ibid.: 89). Actually this list sounds to me a bit like the things from Ikea even students can afford, or the interior of a recently opened lounge bar. It also reminds me of discussing and adapting to art movements during my study of photography on an art academy. It is remarkable, that in the context of “Ostalgie” today this feeling of nostalgia, which I normally associated with romantic style and kitsch, is directed towards “modernist, minimalistic, functional and purposive” designed products!

Veenis describes furthermore that during the GDR regime, official aesthetics carefully avoided “crammed design” and “ornamental elements out of the past” (ibid.: 92), and that it was not surprising that East Germans’ desire before and after “the Wende” (the Change/ German Unification) was fixed on these very products. I can confirm this and it strongly reminds me of the mother of my former best friend, who in the beginning of the nineties decorated her living room, hall and her little office entirely with art nouveau furniture. On the other hand when I speak to East Germans now, some would proudly point to the fact, that they still have the old “Schrankwand”

⁹ http://www.amazon.com/SED-Design-1949-1989-Anniversary-Special/product-reviews/3836508362/ref=dp_db_cm_cr_acr_txt?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=.1

(wall unit) from GDR-times and never bought a new one.

Before unification Western products became “targets of largely unspecified, but extremely high hopes and expectations” (Veenis 1999: 94). The exorbitant expectations towards Western products were doomed to failure and in 1991 a general disillusionment has set in. As I have written already, by the end of 1990 a big comeback of certain Eastern products had taken place. In GDR times, local products were considered as bad copies or surrogates of West German Originals (Ahbe 2005: 47). The blue-white “Florena” (vanishing cream) was called “Ost Nivea”, real coffee came from the West, as well as “proper” cigarettes or chocolate (ibid.: 48). Today this appraisal of products is reversed. Eastern products are real, pure and unaltered. The cigarettes are not flavoured, the bread rolls are not “blown up” and sausages are not “light”, but crispy (ibid.: 48).

“Kost the Ost” (a parody of “Test the West”), “Altes neu erleben!” (Re-experience old stuff again!) and “Anschlag auf den Einheitsgeschmack” (attack against unification taste) became new slogans. Next to a commercialisation of resistance against a Western dominated market, even references to the concept of socialist history and GDR symbols became marketing instruments (ibid.: 52). Advertising messages, for instance, very often appear in front of a red background, and old socialist signifiers like sheaves of corn, the Soviet star or the former GDR- flag are re-used. Within the context of this recycling of a socialist, propagandistic language Cyrillic letters are sometimes applied.

I have not explained yet why Mark Mauer feels nostalgic, too. I suppose that the longing for a retreat into an idyllic, pre-modern World of simple pleasures has a long history. It is universal and characterises our World today. Within our “nostalgic desire for retreat from the complications of modern life in complex socio-economic systems” (Cook 2007: 207), we’re constantly searching for something that’s real, authentic... simple.

“The need for such an escape has grown as globalization has progressed, but it also became more acute in the Federal Republic after the fall of the Wall. During the years of divided Germany the Federal Republic existed in a state of suspension that sheltered it from some of the responsibilities expected of the Western economic powers. (...) The East served as an imaginary limiting factor to the pursuit of prosperity in the Federal Republic. (...) This produced certain contradictions in West Germany’s self image. It saw itself as both ‘capitalism with a conscience’ and the *Ellbogengesellschaft* [elbow society / dog-eat-dog society]. But ‘capitalism with a conscience’ functioned only as long as that conscience was confined to its own borders. This was more sustainable within the provisional situation of divided Germany, particularly when the good conscience was bolstered by the World’s most liberal immigration clauses for political refugees and exile seekers (ibid.: 415).

I think that also the USA lost this “conscience”, when the Cold War was over, when America’s counterpart – the Soviet Union – did not exist anymore. Advertisings in general and especially in the case of “Eastern” products definitely drew on that “lost conscience”, on those feelings of loss, even if we never really experienced this. Furthermore during the Cold War, the World was in a way also in balance and suppressed desires existed on both sides. The desire for “endless

consumption” is fulfilled and disillusioned meanwhile, the desire for a “Sozialismus mit menschlichen Antlitz” (socialism with a human face) is still there: and still not part of the official discourse, but remains, possibly stronger than ever.

To Engage in Serious Irony

“As Alexei Yurchak (2006) has argued, within the context of socialist culture irony most often posited a transgressive force, a subversive poetic way of unmasking the inherent paradoxes built into ‘the system’ while at the same time protecting speakers from censorious response” (Rethmann 2009: 21).

During GDR times irony played a big part in everyday communication, it was a relative safe way of being critical without getting disciplined. Political jokes were extremely popular. For me “irony” is: “an expression or utterance marked by a deliberate contrast between apparent and intended meaning”¹⁰ that not everyone understands. The listener or viewer who is able to get the “ironic” content of such an expression or utterance becomes an accomplice automatically.

There is one story I always had in mind while writing this article. One of my sister’s friends went for her studies to Bamberg in Bavaria around fifty miles away from the villages we grew up in Thuringia. Most people from my home area work in Bavaria; today, without a cross or sign, one would not recognize the former border. In terms of cultural habits and dialect Southern Thuringia and Northern Bavaria are quite similar. When my sister’s friend went to the university she stood outside among the other students smoking “f6”. Because they were both smoking this East German brand my sister’s friend met another East German girl and they became house mates. In the case of East German students in Bamberg (or other West German cities) I guess, “f6” came to resemble an *Identity marker*, enabling East German students in West Germany to stick together, live together and help each other. It is for example quite difficult to call Bavarian people and ask for a room if you have a Saxonian dialect. Somebody from the Thuringian area from which I come from could easily hide his or her East German background as they would not fall into the stereotypes many Bavarian people hold about East Germans.

Instead of getting cigarettes from the machine, every week my sister’s friend goes to one of the two shops in Bamberg selling “f6”, keeping some packages at home. So while on one hand embracing Bavarian (or rather West German) culture – she is studying there, she is going to work there, she may get a house near the Alps later – she still refuses to be deprived from “her cigarettes” – from her East German identity. It is not always easy to be an East German in Bavaria, as there are a lot of prejudices. And those who get the irony, those who know and even smoke “f6”, automatically become accomplices within a disagreement against such prejudices. East German products in that sense can “fill a spectacular gap in existent desires to project visions of the GDR [and their inhabitants] as capable and ‘normal’” (ibid.: 23). Actually I never smoked

10 <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/irony>

“f6” and some people even say “f6” taste a bit like barbecue smoke. Besides that, “f6” is now owned by the “Atria Group” and the profit goes to “Philip Morris”. At least “f6” is still produced in Dresden, so you can preserve some of the few jobs in that area while smoking this cigarette – while tasting the bitter irony of East German history.

As I already mentioned an important anniversary is approaching and “Ostalgie” is getting more attention again. “DDR Parties” are celebrated - “Erich Honecker doubles” are booked more often. If we consider that we are facing a deep financial crisis right now it is actually ironic that suddenly nationalization of insolvent firms is being considered as a solution. *VEB Opel* (state-owned enterprise Opel) doesn’t sound weird anymore and ‘the classical Marxist interpretation of the growing importance of consumer goods in present-day, industrialized societies, as being characteristic of people’s alienation and false consciousness’ (Veenis 1999: 102) is really fashionable these days.

At the start of March 2009 the German *Spiegel* (news magazine) wrote an article about the recent trend for “Ostalgie-parties”. In that article they claim: ‘that nobody expected an old GDR-slogan like: "Alles mit dem Volk. Alles durch das Volk. Alles für das Volk." (Everything with the people. Everything because of the people. Everything for the people.) to become a prospective election campaign poster of the CDU (Christian Democratic Union of Germany) this year’ (Gutsch 2009: 70). *Spiegel* concludes that: ‘maybe the East German – “der ewige Kapitalismus-Azubi” (the everlasting trainee of capitalism) could be lengths ahead, because he knows how to survive without capitalism. And possibly he has the advantage of historical knowledge’ (ibid: 70). Isn’t it ironic?

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