

## **“The Taste Remains”: Consumption, (N)ostalgia, and the Production of East Germany**

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Ten years after German reunification, a relic from the past appeared in an industrial corner of what was once East Berlin: an original “Intershop.” Part of a chain of state retail establishments set up by the German Democratic Republic (GDR) for hard currency sales, the Intershop had formerly served as a type of duty-free store for Western time travelers on their rare visits to the world of the East. In socialist days, these stores stocked scarce consumer and luxury items such as chocolate, electronics, and perfume. For all but the privileged few, these shops were a constant reminder of not only the material failings of the GDR economy, but also the incongruity of the socialist ideal with the state’s own hard currency-seeking activities.

Today’s Intershop is a distorted commentary on the events of the last ten years: old GDR products are offered that, in some cases, are now almost equally as scarce as the Western goods once were. The rebirth of the Intershop can be traced to a 1999 exhibition, conceived by two western Germans, on everyday life in the socialist East. The decision to house the exhibit in an old Intershop worked in accordance with the show’s emphasis on design, as the structure was essentially a kind of transportable barracks, easily assembled or stored and easily recognizable to easterners and westerners alike.<sup>1</sup> The exhibit sought to capture the

1. This particular Intershop possessed historical significance as part of the store once located at the famed Friedrichstrasse border station; it was incongruously reassembled nearly ten years after unification in a parking lot amidst stolid warehouses in an industrial quarter of former East Berlin.

material culture of a rapidly vanishing era through commercial products and quotidian accoutrements. Inspired perhaps by these historical and aesthetic sensibilities, visitors consistently attempted to purchase the items on display. To accommodate a demand for items that, at that time, could only be found in flea markets or wholesale warehouses, the curators-turned-owners split the Intershop into a historical exhibit and a version of its original role as a retail shop. From senior citizens seeking familiar products to young, western collectors of kitsch, visitors came to peruse the shelves for GDR brands and memorabilia.<sup>2</sup>

The new Intershop arrived on a wave of *Ostalgia*, by now a household word for the perceived nostalgia for the East (*Ost*) that presents itself in the form of theme parties, newly revived products, and a general flowering of things eastern. If, shortly after unification, East Germans famously abhorred anything made in the East (even milk and eggs) in favor of items from the West, ten years later the situation is substantially reversed. *Ostprodukte* (East products)—everyday items from the GDR that are still or once again available—have been making a comeback. These goods consist especially of foodstuffs (e.g., chocolate, beer, mustard) and household products such as the beloved dishwashing detergent Spee. Some of these items are available in GDR specialty shops, others in ordinary grocery stores displaying the sign “we sell East products,” and most can be found on the Internet.

In conversations with Germans the newfound popularity of former GDR products usually appears as that ephemera of a questionable nostalgia evoked by the very term *Ostalgia*. The term embraces a spectrum of colloquial usage that is both pejorative and playful. When referring to the habits of easterners, *Ostalgia* confirms a widespread western image of East Germans as deluded ingrates longing pathetically (if understandably) for the socialist past. Yet when the subject is the knowingly ironic westerner (or the “sophisticated” easterner) enjoying the

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The new location (Ehrenbergstrasse 3–7) itself bespeaks the clashing aesthetics of the old and new East Berlin, for the once forbidding warehouses and factories of the district have been renovated into chic office space, leaving the old Intershop forlorn and shrunken amidst postmodern facades and new construction.

2. The curators originally sought to make fun of the *West* by calling the shop *Kaufhaus des Ostens* (KaDeO, or Department Store of the East) as a conscious satire of the famous *Kaufhaus des Westens* (KaDeWe, or Department Store of the West) in West Berlin. A letter from KaDeWe’s lawyer convinced the curators to change the name, and a similar legal problem enjoined their second choice, *Kaufhalle des Ostens* (Shopping Hall of the East). So it was back to the GDR and Intershop. The official name, Intershop 2000, is presumably in deference to the large electronics chain store that uses the name Intershop.

retro aura of GDR era design, Ostalgia appears as a (p)ostmodern artifact valued precisely for its lack of emotional attachment to a specific past. Thus I see Ostalgia as simultaneously two forms of nostalgia, forms that are similar to the distinctions Marilyn Ivy (1995) discerns in relation to nostalgia in Japan: a “modernist” nostalgia (see Jameson 1991: 19) in former East Germany and a “nostalgia of style” primarily (but not exclusively) in the West.

The production and consumption of *Ostprodukte* function as the main symbolic locations for the crystallization of these two types of nostalgia. In the case of modernist nostalgia, the consumption of *Ostprodukte* appears as a form of production itself—a reappropriation of symbols that establishes “ownership” of symbolic capital or what Michel de Certeau (1984: xiii) calls a “manipulation by users who are not its makers.” In the nostalgia of style, *Ostprodukte* constitute floating signifiers of the “neokitsch” that undermine consumption as an oppositional practice by at once turning the consumer *into* the market and the goods into markers of personal ironic expression.

### Modernist Nostalgia

Nostalgia is colloquially a form of longing for the past, but its modernist variant is less a longing for an unredeemable past as such than a longing for the fantasies and desires that were once possible in that past. In this way, modernist nostalgia is a longing for a *mode* of longing that is no longer possible. In the GDR, the socialist projection of a harmonious future, in which the people’s hard work would produce a utopian state, became fused with images of the West garnered largely through the western television shows so avidly watched by East Germans, in which a similarly fictional world exuded the appearance of living in accord with one’s material surroundings. This fusion created a desire split temporally (into the future) and spatially (onto the West). In an insightful article Milena Veenis (1999: 86) carefully shows how

the beautiful material [East Germans] saw [in the West], with its harmonious aesthetic compositions and its tangible, soft and sensuous characteristics, somehow seemed to be the concrete realization and the ultimate fulfillment of all the beautiful-sounding but never-realized (socialist) promises about the Golden Future, in which we would all have a fully developed Self, while living in complete harmony with each other.

Thus GDR longing was premised on an unattainable object of desire, the “fully developed Self” promised by both socialism *and* western materialism. The long-

ing for a socialist utopia was therefore perversely connected to a fetishism of western material culture. The sudden possibility of unification in 1989 and 1990 held the incredible promise of instantiating these temporal and spatial fantasies. The inability of unification to act as the *Aufhebung* (sublimation) of the socialist-trained and capitalist-propelled desire for harmony resulted in a form of postunification nostalgia in the East that has as its object not the GDR itself, but the longing associated with the GDR. What had been a frozen aspiration for an indefinitely deferred future shifted to nostalgia for that aspiration.

Nostalgia for the loss of longing is part of a more general sense of loss experienced by the citizens of the former GDR, a loss that Gisela Brinker-Gabler (1997: 265) describes as a dis/re/location from Germany to Germany, “a rupture of the collective East German subject and the individual subject—which is also a rupture of language—and a replacement in a reunited Germany with new conditions of experience.” The GDR was a leader among Eastern bloc nations in technology and industry. Even during the revolutions of 1989 and 1990 the GDR seemed to be the winner, literally “becoming western” overnight while its socialist neighbors could only dream of such transmogrification at the end of a long path.<sup>3</sup> But once incorporated into the West, citizens of the former GDR were faced with a clear subordinate status. The high rate of unemployment, lower wages, and social anomie that pervaded the East soon after unification were at first viewed as transitional effects but quickly became stubborn markers of eastern Germany’s relative position. East Germans, as a representative article in a respected western German journal put it, “have learned to live with the fact that they are second-class citizens, and will remain so for the foreseeable future” (Pollack and Pickel 1998: 23).<sup>4</sup> This is an astonishing admission of the failed promise of unification to bring the East up to the level of the West. In this context, it is hardly surprising that eastern Germans would not be content with the “fact” of their second-class station. Articulating an East German identity, however, is a precarious task, since the East firmly occupies the discursive space of

3. East Germany became an instant member of the European Union through its accession to West Germany. But more than ten years after the end of socialism, the other former Eastern bloc countries have yet to join the EU despite ongoing negotiations.

4. It is usually the East that is blamed for not assimilating quickly enough for a variety of reasons, including the GDR’s persistent ties to an authoritarian past overcome by the West and the area’s lingering trauma from forty years of socialist socialization. The Western understanding of what is “wrong” with the East stems from a Western double fiction during the Cold War, a fiction, as John Borneman (1998: 109) describes it, “of the East as a spatially distinct and antithetical Other outside the territorial West, and of the East as a lost part of the West, rightfully belonging inside the West and needed for completion of the self.”

inferiority and, practically speaking, western Germans dominate the economic, cultural, and political landscape of the East.

### The East Chooses

It is here that *Ostprodukte* can help to take the psychological edge off of the western advantage in unification. Daphne Berdahl (1999: 140) notes that while the eastern German seeks “oneness” with the western German, the westerner has no need of such unity and is, in fact, empowered to deny it. *Ostprodukte* work precisely to reverse this: by refusing the self-evidently superior western goods for the “good old” East German products, it is the easterner who is seeking to use the market symbolically against the West.

This reversal is apparent in common advertising slogans found throughout the former East:<sup>5</sup>

Kathi baked goods: *Der Osten hat gewählt* (The East has chosen)

Club Cola: *Club Cola: unsere Cola* (Club Cola, our Cola)

*Hurra, ich lebe noch* (Hurrah, I’m still alive)

*Von einigen belächelt, ist sie doch nicht tot zu kriegen: Club Cola—die Cola aus Berlin* (Belittled by some, it can’t be killed: Club Cola—the Cola from Berlin)

*Super Illu* (newspaper): *Eine von uns* (One of us)

Rondo Coffee: *Natürlich war nicht alles schlecht, was wir früher gemacht haben* (Naturally not all things we made before were bad)

Juwel cigarettes: *Ich rauche Juwel, weil ich den Westen schon getestet hab’.*

*Eine für uns.* (I smoke Juwel because I already tested the West. One for us.)

Karo cigarettes: *Anschlag auf den Einheitsgeschmack* (Attack on uniformity of taste)

f6 cigarettes: *Der Geschmack Bleibt!* (The taste remains!)

This discursive terrain is immediately recognizable to Germans, East and West. These slogans carry a sharp sense of double entendre that plays to the bittersweet encounter with the once-golden West and that can be said to fall into three main

5. On these and other slogans see Lay 1997 and Roth and Rudolf 1997. All of these goods and dozens more can now be purchased on-line from a variety of eastern German ventures. The earliest of these companies, [www.ossiversand.de](http://www.ossiversand.de), specialized in *Ostpakete* or gift packages of eastern goods to be sent (presumably) to easterners now living in the west. It is a highly ironic reversal on the *Westpakete* (West packages) that western relatives used to send to their eastern brethren for holidays and special occasions.

tropes of critical significance. The first, exemplified by Kathi and Juwel, implies that things were better in the East and that the West failed to live up to expectations: The baked goods advertisement “The East has chosen” evokes the scorn that easterners heap on western bread rolls, whose hard crust contains a light interior that they find airy and “empty” in comparison to the hearty rolls of the East. Juwel is far less subtle with its slogan “I already tested the West.” This is wordplay with a double target, countering at one level the popular cigarette brand “West” with its infamous and ubiquitous advertising slogan “Test the West” and at another level providing a sarcastic rejoinder to the thinly veiled unification subtext of becoming western by buying western goods. The second trope, represented by Karo and f6, deepens the disillusionment and turns bitter. Karo’s “attack on the uniformity of taste” is a harsh pun, since in German “uniformity of taste” also means “the taste of unity.” F6’s slogan “the taste remains” can be read as a terse answer to Christa Wolf’s controversial book about the demise of the GDR, entitled *What Remains* (1995). Finally there is the sense of victimhood and survival in slogans such as Club Cola’s “Hurrah, I’m still alive,” with its eerie echoes of a post-1945 slogan, *Hurra, wir leben noch* (Hurrah, we’re still alive).

### **The *Echt* and the *Ersatz***

These products not only re-create a romanticized East Germany; they additionally hark back to a time when the relation of the *echt* (the real) to the *ersatz* (the substitute) seemed coherent. The “real” used to be considered characteristic of western products: real coffee instead of chicory, real orange juice instead of orange flavor, and so on. In this context, even empty soft drink cans famously assumed fetishized roles (after all, Coca Cola is “the real thing”). The authentic product, linked to the authentic self, was located in the West. Its relics consistently seeped into East German consciousness through advertisements on western television, gifts from western relatives, and various accounts of visits “over there” by the fortunate few.

This view of authentic products is closely connected to East Germans’ experience with commodity fetishism. In spite of official proclamations of victory over commodity fetishism, if anything the socialist system worked to constantly deprive and stimulate consumer desire in an ongoing cycle. This cycle had its roots in the relationship between the first and second economies, or, more specifically, between the official circuits of exchange and those of the black market. The second economy was not merely parasitic on the first but co-constitutive: without the black market, the official economy would have completely collapsed.

The unofficial, if not outright illegal, economy helped to contain the dynamics of stimulation and deprivation caused by the inability of central planning to deliver the promised goods. Yet it also dispersed the market into all aspects of life. Valuable deals, connections, and opportunities could present themselves everywhere and at a moment’s notice (as in the often told anecdote about standing in a line without bothering to ask what it was for, since if there was a line the items at its origin must be scarce and therefore good), thus creating pent-up consumer desire.<sup>6</sup>

The transformation of eastern goods from *ersatz* to *echt* occurred in the aftermath of the apotheosis of this consumer desire: unification. “Socialism had trained them to desire,” observes John Borneman (1991: 81), “capitalism stepped in to let them buy.” The sense of unreality and fantasy brought about by the fall of the Berlin Wall was heightened by the conflated longing, described above by Veenis, for a socialist utopia with a western face. The first months of unification inaugurated a consumer frenzy in the true sense of the word, in German literally a consumer high (*Konsumrausch*).<sup>7</sup> Intoxicated East Germans used the medium of exchange to immerse themselves in the West.

Unification, of course, did not herald a hybrid Golden Future where fully developed selves lived in harmony. Quite the opposite. The advent of unscrupulous salespersons, scams, and the planned obsolescence of glitzy products quickly dispelled the illusion of material satisfaction as a stage toward a harmonious state of being. Accordingly, most easterners discarded the briefly (albeit intensely) held notion that western goods were ipso facto *echter* than eastern goods. By the end of 1991, nearly three-quarters of East Germans polled already expressed a preference for eastern products (Lay 1997). This set the stage for the ultimate reversal: GDR goods came in many instances to seem *more* authentic than their contemporary counterparts. The products from the old GDR context became associated with a form of symbolic capital once reserved for the seemingly superior products of the West insofar as they were thought to express an authentic, unalienated relation of self to product.

6. On the role of the second, “black” economy as essential to the functioning of the first, “legitimate” economy, see Verdery 1996. On the constant stimulation of consumer desire and its postsocialist effects, see also Borneman 1991, 1998, as well as Berdahl 1999, chap. 4.

7. The German word *rausch* means intoxication; hence consumer frenzy is literally consumer intoxication. This *rausch* is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s (1997: 56) remarks on Paris of the Second Empire, where commodity-saturated customers displayed the intoxicated charm of drug addicts. As with addicts, “commodities derive the same effect from the crowd that surges around and intoxicates them. The concentration of customers which makes the market, which in turns makes the commodity into a commodity, enhances its attractiveness to the average buyer.”

**Nostalgia as Style**

This sudden switch in the perception of western goods from real to fake is partially a result of eastern Germans behaving too much like the ideal consumer. They fell for advertisements and felt at once betrayed and wiser as they came to understand that guile is part of advertising. But of course the whole idea of packaging is motivated by the supposition of consumer gullibility. In the West consumers hover between giving into the seduction of commercials and an awareness that the inside of the package never looks like the picture on the cover. East Germans, however, had to undergo a certain learning process in order to acquire the necessary “cultural fluency,” as Berdahl (1999: 137) felicitously phrases it, in their practices of consumption.

Yet cultural fluency in consumption is accompanied by its own institutionalization. As intoxication of unification wore off, marketing firms moved in to track the changing tastes. The definition of tastes is a form of drawing the borders of identity (Bourdieu 1984), but it is also the foundation for creating a niche market. The ultimate irony is that many of the eastern products now regarded as more authentic are owned entirely by western firms. Advertising slogans like the ones discussed earlier are, as Conrad Lay notes, a marketer’s dream come true: personal biographies are inseparable from product histories. The western firms adopt a successful strategy of keeping the original brand name, bringing the quality up to western standards and only slightly modernizing the appearance (Lay 1997: 5). The former East German cigarette brand f6 provides a perfect example of the symbiotic relationship between demand for eastern products and western marketing. Phillip Morris, who owns f6, offers the following explanation from their public relations department:

The f6 stands for what’s good and trusted from days past and helps with the self-conscious articulation of East German identity. The f6 does not stand for a misunderstood conservatism, rather, this cigarette represents a part of East German cultural history that has come to stand for a significant portion of identity building for the citizens in the new federal lands. . . . Although quality and production have been decisively improved, the f6 remains exactly the same as it always was: powerful, strong, and incomparably aromatic in taste. (Lay 1997: 5)

The western marketing of an East German identity is an exemplar of the other form of nostalgia at work here, that which Ivy (1995: 56) calls a nostalgia of style, the packaging of “nostalgia products” with “no explicit appeal to return, no acute sense of loss, and no reference to embodied memory [to mar] the glib evo-



cation of vanished commodity forms.” Similar to the process that Ivy observes in the case of Japan, Germany also wants to overcome and retain its own past, to keep it “on the verge of vanishing, stable yet endangered (and thus open for commodifiable desire)” (65). This resurrection of the past-as-camp appeals at once to eastern Germans too young to actually experience East Germany and to westerners looking to consumption as “a privileged site for the fabrication of self and society, of culture and identity” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 299) in a new age of anxiety governed by the floating signifier of globalization.

It is therefore not surprising to find westerners among the purchasers of eastern goods, some of whom consider themselves *Wossis*, a hybrid term created from *Wessi* (westerner) and *Ossi* (easterner). Like the designation *Ossi*, *Wossi* is originally negatively coded, as it was used by *Ossis* to pejoratively characterize other *Ossis* who ostentatiously adopted the characteristics of the West. Now it has been partially appropriated, mostly by young westerners who have moved to the East (usually the hip east Berlin districts) in a positive if knowingly ironic sense. They decorate their apartments with what is now eastern kitsch and profess a predilection for eastern design that, according to one *Wossi*, is “totally avant-gardish. . . . Today it is almost modern again” (Schmundt 1996: 125). Hilmar Schmundt (1996: 129) calls these *Wossis* *Wostalgikers*—the westernized version of *Ostalgia*—noting that:

The “Wostalgikers” do not melt East and West Germany into one pot, rather they play the East against the West to achieve an Americanized, simulated hyperreality, a type of GDR-Disneyland. The Wostalgikers interpret pawned eastern objects in light of a postmodern horizon of experience, creating an “Eastmodern” concept of home [*Heimat*].<sup>8</sup> In the simulated environment of this (p)ost-modern home, it is design that determines being [*das Design bestimmt das Sein*].

The way in which *Wostalgikers* consume *Ostprodukte* is notable because it admits of an alternative process of differentiation mediated by something outside of the German-German binary: the hyperreality of Americanized ironic taste. For *Wossis* and the other consumers of East German products, the specificity of the past detaches itself from the material signifiers to create a “free-floating past” (Ivy 1995: 56) that can be reassembled and redeployed, like the Intershop barracks, in the search for commodifiable hipness.

8. “Eastmodern” in German is a pun on the words “postmodern” and the word “east” (*ost*). Drop the “p” from the word “postmodern” in German and it results in a neologism: “eastmodern.”

## What Remains

After ten years, the landscape of unification exhibits a dual nostalgia tied to the East's humbling encounter with "modernization" and the West's disorienting experience of "postmodernization," understood here in Jean and John Comaroffs' (2000) sense of capitalist consumer culture at the millennium. The modernist nostalgia of the East is a straightforward longing, not for a past per se but for the fantasies of that past. It is in this context that consumption as production represents a strategy for easterners to not be speechless in a discursive field of cultural production that is dominated by the West. This form of reappropriation is itself a legacy of the role of consumption during the GDR, where marketing could play on the borderline of political acceptability. The ownership of symbols compensated in some way for the lack of concrete ownership in a society without property. The consumption practices of *Ostprodukte* are thus directly linked to what Iris Häuser (1996) calls "counter-identities" (*Gegenidentitäten*) that emerged as a central part of East German political and social culture in the decade before the GDR's collapse. Such counter-identities have been reoriented rather than transcended by unification.

A contrary process is at work in the nostalgia of style, a primarily western phenomenon in which longing works not to maintain a past that hovers between confirmation and disappearance, but to actively empty signifiers, to make commodities float more freely. Consumption still functions as a signifying practice, but it alters the relationship of longing to belonging such that the market becomes an allegorical space for the construction of an "expressive individualism" (Lash and Urry 1994). In this way, consumption of *Ostprodukte* functions as a link between nostalgia for capitalism, ironically embodied here by a sense of loss for the former GDR's longing for the intangible material world across the border, and the capitalist nostalgia of today's unified Germany organized around an aesthetics of kitsch.<sup>9</sup> As direct memories of the GDR fade, the taste that remains may not be the bitter aftertaste of longing lost, but a highly aestheticized and decontextualized sense of camp.

9. Arjun Appadurai (1996: 85) presents consumption as the link between nostalgia for capitalism and capitalist nostalgia. He emphasizes the aesthetics of ephemerality in modern marketing to make this link, which is not identical with kitsch, though kitsch may be used to create an ephemeral fashion.

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