

WHAT

REMAINS



Everyday Encounters with the
Socialist Past in Germany

JONATHAN BACH

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WITH THE SOCIALIST PAST
IN GERMANY

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CONTENTS

List of Illustrations ix

Acknowledgments xiii

Introduction i

1 “The Taste Remains” 13

2 Collecting Communism 45

3 Unbuilding 91

4 The Wall After the Wall 137

Epilogue: Exit Ghost 171

Notes 183

Bibliography 223

Index 245

ILLUSTRATIONS

FIGURES

- Figure 1.1. Intershop 2000 in Berlin 14
- Figure 1.2. (N)Ostalgia T-shirt 16
- Figure 1.3. Cigarettes from Saxony 26
- Figure 1.4. Spee brand detergent box from the GDR 30
- Figure 1.5. An East packet 32
- Figure 1.6. Ostalgia schnapps 34
- Figure 1.7. East products trade fair salesman 40
- Figure 1.8. Sternquell beer and youth dreams 42
- Figure 2.1. Newsletter from the Society for the Documentation of
GDR Everyday Culture 55
- Figure 2.2. Entry ticket to Zeitreise Museum 57
- Figure 2.3. Flyer for GDR Museum Kampehl 58
- Figure 2.4. Televisions on display 60
- Figure 2.5. Grocery store with full shelves 61
- Figure 2.6. Stack of hi-fi units 69
- Figure 2.7. Intimate garments 72
- Figure 2.8. Trying on clothes 72
- Figure 2.9. Living room diorama with woman mannequin ironing 73
- Figure 2.10. Surveillance footage from GDR era 75
- Figure 2.11. "Interrogation Room" at the DDR Museum Berlin 78

- Figure 2.12. Confronting viewers with their past 82
- Figure 2.13. Grocery store with meager products 88
- Figure 3.1. Milk Bar in the Palace of the Republic 94
- Figure 3.2. The Palace of the Republic 99
- Figure 3.3. The famous glass flower in the palace 101
- Figure 3.4. Dancing in the palace 102
- Figure 3.5. Castle simulation 112
- Figure 3.6. “The castle will be built” 118
- Figure 3.7. Palace interior after asbestos removal 122
- Figure 3.8. The Mountain (*Der Berg*) 125
- Figure 3.9. “Dying is also an art”: Supernova performance in the palace 126–127
- Figure 3.10. Demolition of the Palace of the Republic 131
- Figure 3.11. The Anti-Humboldt 133
- Figure 3.12. “The GDR Never Existed” 133
- Figure 3.13. Lawn where the palace once stood 134
- Figure 4.1. Black crosses at Checkpoint Charlie 143
- Figure 4.2. Cobblestone wall path 146
- Figure 4.3. Berlin Wall History Trail Map 147
- Figure 4.4. Steel rods marking the Berlin Wall 152
- Figure 4.5. Berlin Wall National Monument 153
- Figure 4.6. Chapel of Reconciliation 153
- Figure 4.7. Fake soldiers at Checkpoint Charlie 156
- Figure 4.8. Tourists posing with Berlin Wall segment 157
- Figure 4.9. See the wall here! 159
- Figure 4.10. East Side Gallery in 1990 161
- Figure 4.11. East Side Gallery in 2009 161
- Figure 4.12. Encampment in Potsdamer Platz, 1990 163
- Figure 4.13. Luxury apartment building Living Levels rising above the East Side Gallery 165

MAPS

- Map 2.1. Location of GDR Everyday Life museums 54
Map 3.1. Location of the Palace of the Republic and castle 107
Map 4.1. Map of Berlin Wall and its main memory sites 138

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This book emerges from an over thirty-year long relationship with Germany. Its focus is after unification, but I was lucky enough, if that's the right term, to visit the German Democratic Republic, aka East Germany, in the 1980s while a student at Heidelberg, when Germany's division seemed immutable. A little later, in 1990 I witnessed the currency union when the East German mark was replaced by the West German D-Mark, the midnight streets around Alexanderplatz punctuated by the pop of small, spontaneous fireworks as shops unburdened themselves of their stocks and replaced them with Western products. In retrospect it was fitting that I witnessed this axial moment in the history of the GDR's material culture, since in the years ahead I would come to explore how materiality figures in society's negotiations over multiple, overlapping, and often contradictory pasts. On that night, however, I was staff (from a U.S. research institute) at a somewhat surreal conference in East Berlin, held at the former foreign ministry guesthouse in Treptower Park and hosted by the last GDR foreign minister, Markus Meckel. I returned shortly afterward to study in Berlin, once again witnessing an epochal midnight moment standing with friends on the former death strip next to the Reichstag when fireworks, considerably bigger this time, heralded unification itself.

As unification receded further into the past, I found its long echo reverberating through my continued visits and projects over the coming

decades. Research, drawing from over such a long period, takes multifaceted forms. Some of the last twenty years was spent in formal research, connected to academic institutions and funding, but it is often hard to say precisely where research starts and stops. This is especially true when working ethnographically in one country over many years. As with any long-term fieldwork, my observations, conversations, and perambulations relied heavily on the generosity, friendship, and inclinations of others. The following acknowledgments, therefore, encompass much more than the “informants” of a typical ethnographic study. This book owes its existence to a wide range of essential friends, supporters, mentors, enablers, and assistants and to those who shared with me their experiences, feedback, and perspectives or sometimes simply a kind word of encouragement.

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WHAT REMAINS

INTRODUCTION

The GDR never existed.” Nonsense, of course—the German Democratic Republic, aka East Germany, existed for forty cold war years as the front line of the Soviet Bloc, as West Germany’s socialist double and as a lived reality for sixteen million people. Yet, eighteen years after German unification in 1990, this phrase could be seen sprayed in foot-high letters on the remaining foundation of the recently razed East German Palace of the Republic, smack in the middle of Berlin.¹ This wry provocation expresses how unification created a ghostly situation: the GDR became a present absence, invoked mostly to be disavowed.² When in 1990 the most advanced socialist country dissolved with breakneck speed, the artifacts it left behind appeared as debris, detritus, suddenly out of time and out of place, anachronistic remnants of a failed dream for socialist modernity. This book concerns the aftermath of such radical discontinuity. It looks at what happens when the state vanishes, leaving behind a material legacy that both resists and demands a response from ordinary people. I trace this response through contemporary encounters with things and places from socialist everyday life as they become repackaged as nostalgia items, redeployed as social criticism, and reused in ways that transform the meaning of coming to terms with the past.

When the prominent former East German activist Joachim Gauck, soon to become Germany’s president, was asked in an interview whether

nostalgia for the GDR was a danger for democracy, he replied, “Self-evidently. Nostalgia for the East—*Ostalgie*—diminishes everything that constitutes our democracy. Through selective memory, trivialization, and denial we risk losing the political judgment that can distinguish dictatorship from democracy.”³ This common refrain extends to the discussion of everyday life under socialism, leaving little space for ambiguity: “The only people who could possibly have regarded everyday life as normal in the closed society” of the GDR, reads a 2014 educational publication on “Everyday Life” from the think tank associated with Germany’s main conservative political party, “were those prepared to acquiesce to scarcity, pollution, surveillance and shoot-to-kill orders, or who repressed or accepted this reality as inevitable.”⁴

At the same time, public opinion polls twenty years after unification show half of former GDR citizens, about eight million people, see “more good than bad” in their memory of the failed state.⁵ *Ostalgie*, a major social phenomenon characterized by the neologism that combines the German words for east and nostalgia, has lasted decades, encompasses commerce, media, and tourism and is a perennial topic of political and cultural discussion. The sentiments that socialist intentions were in principle laudable, or that friendship was more genuine in the East despite the surveillance state, or that specific GDR social welfare programs such as childcare were more progressive than in the West, are not limited to recalcitrant regime loyalists. To appreciate what is at stake in the “profoundly unhelpful . . . polarization of positions” that has emerged around the legacy of the GDR, especially concerning everyday life, it is important to locate contemporary discussions in the context of the double inheritance of the Nazi and socialist past.⁶ While ideologically opposite, these regimes are often colloquially bundled together as Germany’s dual dictatorships.⁷ For a nation whose current identity rests in large part on its substantial accomplishments in coming to terms with the past, this contentious comparison haunts and shapes debates over remembering the socialist, and by extension the National Socialist, eras, with implications for a wider European ethics of memory that relies heavily on the German model.⁸

The everyday is thus far from an innocent subject. This book sees the everyday as neither a site for damnation or redemption. The everyday transcends and transgresses the boundaries of the political through its malleability—the everyday as refuge, as false consciousness, as a space for liberation and collusion, retreat and restlessness. Material culture offers a unique vantage point on the workings of the everyday in situations of radical discontinuity because it confers on ordinary things an important yet underexplored role in working through the living legacy of contested pasts.

In exploring how the past is appropriated in the present, this book shares a core concern with memory studies about how symbolic meaning is produced and attached to places, objects, and people.⁹ It enriches such approaches by looking at how different modes of engagement with material remains take the forms of commodification, display, and performance—what I refer to as acts of appropriation—explored in this book. These modes of engagement add, displace, and challenge the settling of symbolic meaning. Whereas memory studies is often concerned with how such engagements produce new narrations of the past, I want to show how material culture from the past comes to circulate in overlapping economies of the present: the marketplace for “East” products, the symbolic economy of national symbols, the creative economy of twenty-first-century Berlin, and the global memory economy.

The effect of circulation is not to settle on a new narrative about the past (even if it advances contenders), to make money (even if some money is to be made), or to keep the past “alive” (even if some historical awareness is amplified and transmitted across generations). Rather, it is to keep the present unsettled, to keep narratives from congealing. The material culture I examine in this book sits uncomfortably between different poles of value. Some items from the past, like antiques, have value and circulate but are not unsettling (unless perhaps they are looted). Other items, like certain obsolete products, have no value and cease to circulate (except perhaps as waste). The orphan artifacts from the former GDR examined in this book have an ambiguous value, and their circulation increases that

ambiguity. Their value, so to speak, lies not in exchange but in their ability to unsettle.

These objects unsettle because everyday objects and places—here household products, television sets, buildings, and even the Berlin Wall itself—are (mis)used in ways not anticipated or sanctioned by their makers, original users, or mainstream society.¹⁰ As they move between invisibility and visibility, they reveal how vestiges of socialism become vernacular forms of remembrance and chart a different trajectory alongside, and often against, official public memory discourses. This book traces the unsettling effects of these artifacts unmoored from their vanished state and demonstrates how ordinary people use the spaces of the everyday to create memory from below.¹¹

The story of this book begins when East Germany, considered the most economically and technologically advanced country in the Eastern Bloc, disappeared in 1990, less than a year after its fortieth anniversary. With its precipitous collapse, an entire modern state's materiality seemed abruptly obsolete, from clothes and detergent to factories to the Berlin Wall. Such a thoroughgoing reversal was possible because the East's end was technically an accession to the West, not integration between two equal states: at midnight on October 3, 1990, federal (West) German law applied literally overnight throughout the East. Many former East Germans (and some former Westerners) decried this approach to unification as disabling the agency of the East to set the terms of its transformation, betraying the spirit of the original revolution against the communist government and coming uncomfortably close to colonization. Whether unification was fated to happen in this way or not, it set the stage for both an unequal power relationship and an unprecedented case of cultural obsolescence, as an entire country's infrastructure, products, and standards were in short order widely considered inferior, antiquated, undesirable, and quickly replaced by Western goods.

Cultural obsolescence and fetishizing of Western goods occurred all throughout the former Soviet Bloc as the market economy swept former

socialist countries in the 1990s. Yet the process was much more far reaching in the former GDR because of its whirlwind accession to West Germany. This makes the GDR transition unique while prefiguring the transformations in material culture and everyday life across the postsocialist world, from Eastern Europe and the Balkans across Russia and Central Asia to, in its own way, postreform China.¹²

The especially rapid shift in the German case poses an unusual challenge for understanding the modalities of the everyday. Ethnographic work on the everyday usually assumes that the everyday is embedded, grounded, and embodied in fine-grained routines. Yet because unification happened so abruptly, the socialist everyday in today's Germany appears dislocated, disembodied, and out of context. The everyday appears not as a given sphere of analysis, but itself as an artifact open to reappropriation, recombination, and resignification. For those who lived under socialism, the everyday became a sphere where people confront their life experiences under new circumstances and where encounters with everyday objects from "back then" in the present raise difficult questions about what constitutes complicity in the former system and acquiescence in the current one.

This sense of complicity is tied to the status of material culture under state socialism, where the material world—from household products to grocery stores to buildings—was explicitly enlisted by the state to mold and discipline class consciousness. Something as banal as a colorful plastic eggcup from the GDR contains within it the condensed history of East German plastics as an ideological front line in the struggle for socialist values and power.¹³ This gives rise to the powerful subtext in scholarly and political discourses that the socialist everyday inescapably hides a darker antidemocratic agenda. One person's souvenir kitsch, or cherished memory, can thus also be condemned as a symbolic trivialization of the past. The German word to trivialize—*verharmlosen*—means literally to make harmless, and the last thing a responsible, democratic citizen wants is to be accused of declaring Germany's history of dictatorship harmless.

While everyday life in former East Germany has grown in interest for historians, comparatively little scholarship has examined how the socialist everyday carries over into united Germany as a vector for working through the past.¹⁴ Even less attention has been paid to how socialist material culture figures in the process of unification at the everyday level.¹⁵ This book shares with historians of the everyday a conviction that change is located not only in grand structures but also in quotidian practices. It emphasizes individual agency and contingency, as does historical work on everyday life under fascism and similar work about the socialist era. However, this is a contemporary, not historical investigation; I am not trying to reconstruct the past through the everyday or to explain the “problem of normalcy” in historical perspective.¹⁶ Rather, I am investigating what happens to this everyday sphere *after* it is abruptly disrupted and turned into a troubled inheritance of the united German present.

Drawing from interviews, field research, scholarly and media analysis conducted over more than two decades, *What Remains* takes the form of an ethnography of encounter, in Lieba Faier and Lisa Rofel’s sense in which “meaning, identities, objects, and subjectivities emerge through unequal relationships involving people and things that may at first glance be understood as distinct.”¹⁷ Encounter, for Faier and Rofel, is the process through which categories emerge through “engagements across difference.”¹⁸ What we consider contemporary German identity results, in part, from the kind of encounters described in this book. These encounters are between people and people, people and things, and things and people. Through these encounters, the artifacts explored in this book become sites of active unsettling that keeps them in circulation in the media, popular consciousness, and market.

Beginning from the local, the intimate, and the small, *What Remains* moves to the national and global, the impersonal and large. It looks at consumer objects of nostalgia, museums of everyday life under socialism, the controversy over the former East German parliament building, and traces of the Berlin Wall. These mostly unassuming sites differ from high profile cases such as secret police files or border guard trials. Unlike studies

of political institutions, intellectuals, or the persistence of stereotypes across the former East-West border, these sites capture the play of presence and absence in the wake of political upheaval that comes from the stubbornness of material remains: present and future generations have little choice about whether to encounter remains from the past—the things are there.¹⁹ Yet they are not automatically part of what we loosely call memory; on the contrary, it takes work to imbue objects with memory value.

This book argues that such memory work happens through acts of appropriation—the process of making something one's own—and that appropriation deserves a conceptual status within scholarship on memory to understand how ordinary people engage with disavowed pasts. Appropriation is a key mechanism by which things once thought bygone or deemed unworthy of memory are actively (re)incorporated into the present and given new value. The term *appropriation* is often used in English to express taking something at another's expense, a forceful transfer of property that is in some way illegitimate or at least morally questionable. It can also refer less judgmentally to the process by which an object is incorporated into people's routines and thereby into their sense of self. Indeed, the pragmatist philosopher William James elevated the act of appropriation to the central action by which identity is constructed out of experience. Our present self, "the hook from which the chain of past selves dangles" as James put it, appropriates the past and is appropriated by the future.²⁰

I use the term *appropriation* because it draws attention to both materiality and the processual nature of otherwise singular events. Unification is what the sociologist Robin Wagner-Pacifici would call a restless event, rather than an event with a clear beginning and end upon which a teleological transition rests.²¹ The objects that this book follows, from the trash heap to the store and museum, are restless items, and encounters with them form and reform identity along the chain of past and future. In anthropological studies of cultural appropriation, the meaning of objects that move across cultural borders shift as they become the objects of aesthetic desire—a once sacred statue becomes a private ornament, gifts

become commodities, use value becomes exchange value. As they cross borders, be they temporal or spatial, their value changes, similar to how commodities “step up” or “step down” in value when they cross national borders.²²

The mundane objects explored in the first half of the book—once discarded or derided items that can be eaten or worn—change their value as they circulate anew through commodification in the market economy and museum displays. This enables such objects to function as a form of cultural transmission across generations, becoming generative of new practices rather than passive symbols for political manipulation, redemption, or resistance. Commodification of the past, I argue, does not in itself pose an obstacle to “the positive goals of recollection” but rather allows for amateur, popular, and performative forms of appropriation to produce legitimate forms of knowledge about the past.²³

This process appears in a different way in the second half of the book, where we shift from objects consumed (originally) in private to the consumption of urban spaces of former socialist state power. Here the everyday is inverted in the form of monumental socialist public works that once sought to co-opt and coerce everyday life. By following prominent structures as they are actively unmarked—unbuilt, desecrated, demolished—and then re-marked through their subsequent appropriation, we see how they reappear at the site of their disappearance and thus circulate in a contested struggle over the meaning of the past, the nation, and the very nature of authentic representation and experience. Two dialectical disappearances form the central cases—the former East German Palace of the Republic and the reappearance of the Berlin Wall as a memory site after a generation of absence—and embody the active struggle over inheritance not as mourning for a lost past but as efforts to harness and direct the excess symbolic power contained in material objects.

Chapter 1 begins with consumer wares from the GDR era known as “East products.” It follows their disappearance and reappearance along with the accompanying trope of nostalgia for communism. The strong

emotions raised by these seemingly quotidian objects, I argue, signify the difficulties of confronting “normal” life under a dictatorship in a country where the Nazi everyday remains controversial. The chapter opens with a visit to the then newly opened store Intershop 2000 in former East Berlin and investigates how consumption became a mechanism for psychological and social processing of the rapid cultural reversals brought about by reunification, closing with a visit to a trade fair for East products in Berlin in 2013, showing how East products evolved from derided ephemera to a regional industry. East products have become the objects of “ostalgia,” or nostalgia for things from the East, claiming new forms of value in unified Germany. Against the standard media dismissal of East products as glib or trivial holdovers, I show how the nostalgia they embody functions in a trickster role, subtly undermining the national project of collective memory through irony, wordplay, and symbolic ambiguity. I argue that commodification is central to nostalgia as a collective phenomenon because marking representative items from a past era as valuable keeps them in circulation and gives them the capacity to transmit cultural knowledge. By dislodging and recombining the symbols, slogans, and styles of the old regime, objects of nostalgia become effectively contemporary.

Chapter 2 follows everyday socialist objects away from the store shelf and into the museum, contrasting the previous chapter’s tactics of commodification with emerging strategies of display and representation in the creation of cultural memory. Turning everyday objects into museum artifacts, it argues, draws ordinary people into contact with political and scholarly debates concerning the “correct” way to remember life under the socialist regime. The chapter’s core is an ethnographic exploration of how amateur, privately funded museums of everyday life under socialism arose to challenge and supplement state-supported representations of the East in professional history museums. It shows how a motley group of collectors evolved into an amateur museum landscape and how they use representational strategies to claim the mantle of authenticity. Set against a political context in the GDR where the everyday was thoroughly

politicized, I critically analyze the museums' claims to apolitical authenticity as a way of unsettling the historical narrative and the politics of memory. As the museums confront the tension between lived experience and politics, I argue, these controversial amateur spaces play an important role in positioning the everyday as an integral part of the process of working through the recent socialist past for both East and West Germans.

Chapter 3 shifts the debates about the everyday to the built environment, looking at how a historically layered site in the center of Berlin becomes the focus of projections about the "proper" handling of inherited remains. It follows the former East German parliament, known as the Palace of the Republic, as it is "unbuilt" and transformed into a complex case of inheritance, both spatially between East and West and temporally across generations. It argues that the palace's unique function during socialist times as a hybrid political and everyday space made it an especially ambiguous site when, after unification, it was condemned, demolished, and replaced with a copy of its predecessor, the former imperial castle. This appropriation through erasure contrasts with previous chapters' exploration of appropriation through commodification and representation. The chapter shows how the site became a *cause célèbre* for former Easterners seeking to save the palace, for conservatives determined to rebuild the imperial castle as a symbol of the new Germany that harks back to its Prussian past, and for a younger generation seeking to subversively reuse the space through performance to transcend both nostalgia and national imagery. In the process, I argue, the palace becomes a focal point for debates about the role of modernity in representing Germany's national aspirations and self-consciousness as well as an experimental space for performative appropriation by the post-unification generation.

Having moved from local objects of nostalgia to the national space of Berlin's palaces, the final chapter moves to an international symbol for state repression, the cold war, and the overcoming of borders, the Berlin Wall. This chapter shows how the material space of the wall disappeared as a border to reappear nearly a generation later as a site of memory,

incorporating modes of commodification, display, and performance introduced in the earlier chapters. It argues that the wall was first taken “out of time” (detemporalized) and then retemporalized within narratives of trauma, consumption, and the political through three key sites of commemoration—the Berlin Wall Memorial at Bernauer Strasse, Checkpoint Charlie, and the East Side Gallery. Independently, and as part of the city’s official “concept” for memorializing the wall, the chapter shows how these sites connect the city as much to its search for new frontiers of possible futures as they do to its past. It argues that a confluence of conscience, “cool,” and commercialism transformed the wall from a source of shame into a positive symbol of the city’s ability for cultural regeneration.

An epilogue offers a coda on the emerging landscape of appropriation explored in the previous chapters. It follows members of the first generation to come of age after unification as they create and perform a play more than twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The play, 1989 [*Exit Ghost*] is a complex act of appropriation combining Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the GDR playwright Heiner Müller’s play *Hamlet Machine*, notes from rehearsals for the first East German production of *Hamlet Machine* in 1989 as the Berlin Wall was falling, and documentation of contemporary texts and media. In this performance the events of 1989 are used to ultimately form a backdrop for the appearance of recent protests in Greece, Spain, and the Middle East, raising new questions about what it means to do justice to the past and the present through the act of inheritance.

The cases explored here cover the first quarter century since the fall of the Berlin Wall, roughly one full generation. Each chapter ends as the relation between vernacular remembrance and collective memory starts to shift toward institutionalization: the market’s embrace of East products, the tentative embracing of everyday life by state-supported museums, the final effacement of the Palace of the Republic to clear the way for the reconstruction of the castle, the incorporation of the East Side Gallery into the Berlin Wall Foundation. In what has been a story of memory from below, these moments seem to mark a new assertiveness in the role of the state. Yet in the epilogue the younger generation, reflecting

on 1989 as they watch the Arab Spring revolutions flourish and fail, shows how the continued invocation of the everyday disturbs, subverts, and redirects efforts to reconcile Germany's layered historicity. The unification of Germany presented an unusual second chance for Germans to practice the art of coming to terms with the past. In the chapters that follow, *What Remains* ethnographically captures how ordinary people practice this art through everyday encounters that unsettle both past and present.

1

“THE TASTE REMAINS”

In October 1998, a squat building with oddly sloped walls and a big red *M* over the door appeared on a grassy empty lot in an industrial area near the former border. The oddly modernist, vulnerable building was one of the last surviving “space expansion halls” from the former East Germany, a telescoping portable house of aluminum and beaverboard that could be assembled in one day and carted around on a trailer. Once produced in the thousands and ubiquitous in the socialist landscape, this forlorn specimen now formed a temporal and spatial contrast against the backdrop of massive, nineteenth-century factory buildings. Five years earlier these impressive edifices still housed the East German Narva light-bulb factory. Now they were undergoing transformation from an “age of industrial exteriors,” as the area’s development company put it, to an “age of information interiors.”¹

Fitting neither neatly in the age of industry nor information, these incongruous “space expansion halls” had once belonged to Mitropa—a ghostly contraction of “Central Europe” (*Mittel Europa*) that was the name of the dining car company of the even more anachronistically named German Imperial Railway (Deutsche Reichsbahn), socialist East Germany’s truncated rail system. After unification in 1990, the Western German Federal Railways took over the East German system. The cost of scrapping these now useless buildings ran into the thousands of dollars; Elke Matz, a West Berlin graphic designer and collector of Mitropa artifacts, bought two of them for the symbolic price of one German



FIGURE 1.1 Intershop 2000 in Berlin. Intershop 2000 (*right*) next to another former Mitropa “space expansion hall.” The shop is located on the site of the former GDR Narva light bulb factory in an industrial section of the popular Friedrichshain district in Berlin. 2012. Photo by author.

mark and opened them as an exhibit-cum-store called Intershop 2000 (see figure 1.1).

The original Intershop was a chain of state retail establishments set up by the GDR for hard currency sales. It was a type of duty-free store for Western time travelers on their visits to the world of the East and a honey pot to suck up precious hard currency that found its way into Easterners’ pockets as gifts from Western relatives. In socialist days these stores stocked scarce consumer and luxury items such as chocolate, electronics, and perfume. The 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.

Intershop 2000, whose then futuristic name (in 1998) announced the tenth anniversary of reunification, showcased old GDR products that were, in most cases, now almost equally as scarce as the Western goods once were.² It was intended initially as an exhibit to capture the material

culture of a rapidly vanishing era through commercial products and quotidian accoutrements, but visitors consistently attempted to purchase the items on display. To accommodate a demand for items that, at the time, could only be found in flea markets or wholesale warehouses, the curators-turned-owners split Intershop 2000 into a historical exhibit and a version of its original role as a retail shop. From senior citizens seeking familiar products to hip Western collectors of kitsch, visitors came to peruse the shelves for GDR brands and memorabilia.

The inverted Intershop caused a media flurry, catching a wave of nostalgia for socialism known in Germany as *ostalgie* (the neologism made by removing the *n* from *nostalgia*, leaving *ost*, which means "east").³ Intershop 2000 was part of a burgeoning phenomenon in the late 1990s, before the film *Good-bye Lenin* pushed the trend from counterculture to mainstream.⁴ Back in 1998, nostalgia parties blossomed sporting "visas" for entry tickets and nostalgia bars sprung up, such as Wallflower, featuring a papier-mâché Berlin Wall, VEB Ostzone (People's Factory Eastern Zone) with its undrinkable cocktail "the General Secretary," or The Conference, which greeted its guests with figures of former party chiefs Walter Ulbricht and Erich Honecker. If, shortly after unification, East Germans famously abhorred anything made in the East (even milk and eggs) in favor of items from the West, nearly ten years later the situation underwent a certain reversal: *Ostprodukte* (East products)—everyday items from the GDR that were still or once again available, especially food-stuffs and household goods—staged a comeback in specialty shops with names like East Oasis, ordinary grocery stores, and the emerging online marketplace of the Internet.

Such nostalgic themes struck a nerve in the media and among politicians who mostly castigated the phenomenon as a misguided or naive trivialization of the failed socialist regime and its violent apparatus of repression. Ironic appropriations that openly mocked the failed regime stood a chance of social acceptability, but any expression that could be interpreted as longing for the GDR was quickly derided as delusionary and ungrateful (figure 1.2). In spite and because of this opprobrium,



FIGURE 1.2 (N)Ostalgia T-shirt. The text reads, in part, “Not everything was good, but a lot was better! There was more time for love, children were taken care of, we still had neighbors and colleagues, work and training for everyone.” Radebeul, 2009. Photo by author.

ostalgie quickly became a standard term in public discourse, embracing a spectrum of colloquial usage both pejorative and playful. When referring to the habits of Easterners, *ostalgie* tends to confirm a widespread Western image of East Germans as deluded ingrates longing pathetically for the socialist past. Yet when the subject is the knowingly ironic Westerner (or the "sophisticated" Easterner) enjoying the retro aura of GDR-era design, *ostalgie* appears as a (p)ostmodern artifact valued precisely for its lack of emotional attachment to a specific past. *Ostalgie* is thus simultaneously two forms of nostalgia, forms that are similar to the distinctions Marilyn Ivy discerns in relation to nostalgia in Japan: a "modernist" nostalgia in the former East Germany and a "nostalgia of style" primarily (but not exclusively) in the West.⁵

This chapter examines the production and consumption of East products as a key symbolic location for the crystallization of these two types of nostalgia. It shows how these forms of nostalgia play into the shifting role of East products from contemptuous ephemera to a regional industry and accepted part of united Germany's cultural and memory landscape. The chapter begins by examining the role of modernist nostalgia that coalesces in the former GDR in the decade after reunification, where the consumption of East products appears as a form of production itself—a reappropriation of symbols that establishes "ownership" of symbolic capital or what Michel de Certeau calls a "manipulation by users who are not its makers."⁶ Nostalgia in its modernist vein functions as a mechanism for psychological and social processing of the rapid cultural reversals brought about by reunification. The chapter then turns to the nostalgia of style, in which East products 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.

As the phenomenon of *ostalgie* becomes increasingly institutionalized and commodified within Germany's larger cultural memory landscape, it is the Janus face of nostalgia that allows it to function as a means for transmitting cultural knowledge. I argue here that nostalgia is a collective

phenomenon that emerges *through* the effects of commodification, which transforms everyday objects into nostalgia objects and enables their circulation and recombination with contemporary debates, tropes, and symbols. Examining the relation between materiality and nostalgia helps understand not only how ostalgia emerged but why it did not wane with the coming of the first postunification generation, rather becoming seemingly entrenched. The German case also helps us think through broader questions about the function of nostalgia as a form of cultural transmission.

MODERN LONGINGS AND THE LONGING FOR THE MODERN

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, what can be called a modernist nostalgia is a longing for a *mode* of longing that is no longer possible. This form of nostalgia became particularly acute in the case of the ex-GDR, where socialism generated a particular mode of longing that was exceptionally integral to its identity, only to be inverted and voided with exceptional speed after the state collapsed and was absorbed by its alter ego. The socialist state had projected a harmonious future in which the people's hard work would produce a utopian state of material satisfaction once capitalism withered away. At the same time, East Germans had wide access to Western images, especially through television, that showed in their own fantastical way the appearance of living in accord with material surroundings. These two projections—the socialist utopia of countless slogans, speeches, and posters, and the consumer utopia of West German television advertisements and media spectacles, fused into a desire split temporally (into the future) and spatially (onto the West). Milena Veenis notes how when East Germans saw “the beautiful material” of the West, “with its harmonious

aesthetic compositions and its tangible, soft and sensuous characteristics, [it] 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."⁷

Longing in the GDR was thus premised on an unattainable object of desire, the "fully developed Self" promised by both socialism *and* Western materialism. The longing 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 fulfill the dialectical fantasies by sublimating the seemingly opposed socialist-trained and capitalist-propelled desires for harmony produced a modernist form of nostalgia in the former East. This nostalgia 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 was part of a more general sense of loss experienced by the citizens of the former GDR, a loss that Gisela Brinker-Gabler 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."⁸ The GDR had been 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. 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. By the mid-1990s the rap group A.N.T.I. sang, "Eastniggers . . . /are what we all are. /

The color of our skin is white / yet in Germany we are the last shit."⁹ A representative article around the same time in a respected western German journal put it somewhat differently: East Germans, the scholars wrote, "have learned to live with the fact that they are second-class citizens, and will remain so for the foreseeable future."¹⁰ With such open admissions of the failed promise of unification to bring the East up to the level of the West, 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 inferiority and, practically speaking, western Germans quickly dominated the economic, cultural, and political landscape of the East. It is here that East Products helped take the psychological edge off of the western advantage in unification. Daphne Berdahl 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.¹¹ East Products 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 seeks to use the market symbolically against the West.

At first the inversion of the value of East Products was a direct reaction to the shame that surrounded GDR products as inferior in quality, a sentiment widely shared in the West and internalized in the East. In this way East Products served as a form of cultural intimacy in Michael Herzfeld's sense, where a set of objects define insiderhood through their disapproval by powerful outsiders, in this case West Germans.¹² The products of everyday life that returned to or remained on the market—detergent, pickles, mustard, beer—were intimate also in the literal sense of being ephemeral products that came into close contact with the body. In the early years after reunification some people stockpiled goods out of practicality, like a man who recalled hoarding a year's supply of *Spee*-brand detergent when he realized that stores suddenly considered it worthless. After the initial clearing of the shelves of all things Eastern, a few stores began to hang signs saying "We Sell Eastern Products," offering certain popular GDR

brands to appeal to consumers both exhausted by the task of trying new items and seeking to save money.

Within a short time certain brands developed cult status, in part because they were still available, familiar, and inexpensive and in part because of their design, which emphasized the instantly legible retro-directness of socialist-era advertising. In conversations with friends, in stores, and in online forums, I encountered eastern Germans regarding Eastern products as better tasting in part because they were more authentic: some considered them purer in substance (less preservatives) and soul (less marketing gimmicks), even if this was not always the case. "Good old" East German products became vehicles of unobtrusive defiance, reflected in their bitingly tongue-in-cheek advertising slogans: "The East has Chosen" announced Kathi baked goods, while Club Cola declared that, though it was "Belittled by some, it can't be killed—Club Cola, the Cola from Berlin," adding, for good measure, "Hurrah, I'm still alive." Rondo coffee's slogan was even more direct: "Of course not everything we made before was bad," and a regional tabloid newspaper, *Super Illu*, touted that it was "One of us," presumably best read while drinking Club Cola, which also used the tag "our Cola." The advertisements from old East German cigarette brands were the boldest and most visible on billboards and across the cities: "I smoke Juwel, because I already tested the West. One for us." Karo cigarettes aggressively claimed an "Attack on the uniformity of taste," while the f6 brand declared boldly: "The taste remains."¹³

This discursive terrain is immediately recognizable to Germans, East and West. These slogans carried 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 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.¹⁴ Juwel is far less subtle with its slogan "I already tested the West." This is

wordplay with a double target, countering, on one level, the popular Western cigarette brand West, with its infamous and ubiquitous advertising slogan "Test the West," and, on 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" can also be read literally as "the taste of unity" (*Anschlag auf den Einheitsgeschmack*). Last, 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). F6's slogan "The Taste Remains" can be read as a terse answer to Christa Wolf's controversial book, published after the demise of the GDR, entitled *What Remains*.¹⁵

The romanticized East Germany recreated through these products is purposely provocative. They raise questions of authenticity by harking 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 in person and in the form of "West packages" sent by mail, 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 stoked it by constantly depriving and stimulating consumer desire in an ongoing cycle. This cycle had its roots in the relationship between the official circuits of exchange (the "first" economy) and those of the black market (the "second" or underground economy). 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 any line without bothering to ask what it was for, since, if there was a line at all, the items at its origin must be scarce and therefore good), thus creating pent-up consumer desire.¹⁶

The transvaluation of Eastern goods from *ersatz* to *echt* arrived with the apotheosis of this consumer desire: unification. "Socialism had trained them to desire," observes John Borneman, "capitalism stepped in to let them buy."¹⁷ The sense of unreality and fantasy brought about by the fall of the Berlin Wall was heightened by the type of longing that had placed Eastern socialist promises adjacent to Western consumer projections, thus imbuing each one with the fantasies of the other, as Veenis describes. The first months of unification inaugurated a consumer frenzy that brought to mind Walter Benjamin's remarks on Paris of the Second Empire, where commodity-saturated customers displayed the intoxicated charm of drug addicts. As with addicts, wrote Benjamin, "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."¹⁸ The German word for frenzy is *Rausch*, which literally means intoxication. In the immediate aftermath of open borders, intoxicated East Germans used the medium of exchange to immerse themselves in the West.

All intoxications are short-lived, of course, and unification 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. In a rapid turnaround, by the end of 1991, nearly three-quarters of East Germans polled already expressed a preference for Eastern products.¹⁹

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. They were, in a certain sense, a type of homecoming, tapping into what one former East German called "a 'reservoir of memories deeply anchored in the consciousness of the ex-GDR citizen about the positive side of the GDR and one's own lived past'" and receptive to displaced sites for emotional release: "I broke into tears of joy, good old Rondo," pronounced a customer upon encountering the reintroduced coffee brand in 1997.²⁰

ECONOMY OF APPEARANCES

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 to acquire the necessary "cultural fluency" in their practices of consumption.²¹

As cultural fluency in consumption grew, it was rapidly accompanied by the institutionalization of former East Germans as a niche market, with marketing firms moving in to track changing tastes. Here, the

modernist nostalgia for a style of longing under socialism met the Western market desire for customers who identify deeply with their products. The definition of tastes has long been recognized as a form of drawing the borders of identity, which also makes it the foundation for creating a niche market.²² Advertising slogans like the ones previously discussed are, as Conrad Lay notes, a marketer's dream come true: personal biographies are inseparable from product histories, making it attractive for Western firms to adopt a successful strategy of keeping the original brand name, bringing the quality up to Western standards and only slightly modernizing the appearance.²³

The ultimate irony is that many of the Eastern products regarded by consumers as more authentic are owned entirely by Western firms. This situation was driven not only by consumers' perceptions of quality (real or imagined) but by the sheer inability of East German firms to compete in the new unified German market. From approximately 700 brands, only 120 still existed (or existed once more) in 2009.²⁴ The federal trust agency in charge of privatization liquidated or sold most of the "people's own" firms that produced East German consumer products, with the result that the best-selling major GDR-era brands today are mostly owned by Western companies, even if in some cases they still produce locally. *Juwel*, for example, is owned by Phillip Morris, while *Club Cola* is owned by a Hessen-based (West German) beverage company; *f6* is the Phillip Morris subsidiary that produces *Juwel* and provides an example of the symbiotic relationship between demand for Eastern products and Western marketing (figure 1.3). The *f6* cigarette brand, cheerfully explains their public relations department, is actually therapeutic, because it

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.²⁵

Thus do the clever, critical, advertising slogans of Eastern products pretend to share in the loss of identity as a strategy to increase market share. The East appears as "exactly the same" yet "decisively improved," a situation that appeals to any consumer or citizen who fears change but still longs for a better life.

Consumers are both attracted and repelled by these transparent tactics of Western firms in Eastern clothing. In an interview from 1996, the cultural critic Horst Groschopp expressed skepticism that East products had a future. Who would go the extra mile for a tube of Chlorodont toothpaste, he wondered, adding, "maybe the toothpaste in the tube isn't even the original, and the whole thing is a marketing trick . . . the Ossi has become very suspicious about such things." With beer, he said, we



FIGURE 1.3 Cigarettes from Saxony. GDR brand cigarettes Juwel, f6, and Karo, manufactured in Saxony, in their postunification reincarnation after being bought by Phillip Morris. Photo by picture-alliance/ZB/Martin Schutt.

"now know" that bottles with local Eastern labels are actually full of Western beer. He immediately qualified this: "at least, that's the rumor. You never really know what the story is . . . that sets the mood."²⁶

This suspicion that things are not what they seem to be—your beer is not your beer, your toothpaste is not your toothpaste, and that maybe it's better like that ("exactly the same" yet "decisively improved")—is a symptom of a more profound sense of suspicion and disorientation. The dominant figure of postunification Germany was the IM, German initials for the "unofficial informer" for the Ministry for State Security colloquially known as the Stasi. Their existence was no secret during the GDR, but only after the state security files were opened after unification did the scale hit home, in many cases literally. Friends, family, colleagues, and neighbors, it was now painfully clear, had all informed on each other in an absurdist orgy of intimate accounting of everyone else, some with conviction, others giving false or misleading information and thus subverting the system while perpetuating it. Under the rules of openness after unification you could only see your own file, not others, and it was not unreasonable to suspect that anyone, if not everyone, could be something they did not appear to be. And after unification no one really was who they used to be anyway. Some, of course, reinvented themselves more or less legitimately, while others resigned themselves to obsolescence. But, as Groschopp said about where your beer comes from, "You never really know what the story is . . . that sets the mood."

NOSTALGIA OF STYLE: "ALMOST MODERN AGAIN"

The mood was different in the West, however. Even before East products began to make a comeback among former East Germans their design caught the attention of Westerners. Just months before the wall fell, in summer 1989, a small group of Western curators exhibited in Frankfurt the alluringly simple designs of late socialism as it was about to disappear,

publishing a catalog with the mocking name *SED: Stunning Eastern Design*, a play on the initials for the communist party (the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, or Socialist Unity Party). The catalog text was aggressively snarky, presenting the GDR as a "Galapagos Island of the Design World" that "unwittingly preserved fossils of articles" twenty to thirty years old in a "time-warp zone in which product forms, now obsolescent in the West, could continue to mutate in some frozen limbo," suffering from "chronic fetish deficit." The exhibit and catalog was a salvage operation, a self-proclaimed "lightening archaeological excursion into the world of consumer goods before this distinctive quality is submerged beneath the tide of Western goods."²⁷

This patronizing tone was accompanied by an extreme aestheticization of the products—glossy pages of products abstracted from context and floating against white or pastel backgrounds, at once mocked and elevated by this treatment otherwise reserved for museum-quality objects. Over 230 illustrations of batteries, toothbrushes, cocktail sticks, baby food, tampons, wallpaper, shopping bags, ties, and more form a phantasmagoric image of objects shorn mostly of context other than occasional window display formats. These goods, writes the curators, "appear mundane, curiously unfinished and improvised, and yet, by virtue of their flaws, touchingly human" (12). While GDR products "provoke a feeling of discomfort" and offend "the Western sense of touch" by their lack of "expected smoothness and erotic suppleness," which makes them "too rubbery and primitive" (9), they also, confesses one of the exhibit organizers, Matthias Dietz, "possess a certain sensuous appeal—and they have, in their very simplicity, something that we have lost" (30). Presaging the ironic appropriation of GDR products, the curators quote "a hard-boiled Frankfurt advertising executive" observing: "It seems to me that the exhibits here possess a totally original vitality. An unspoiled naivety. A cigarette brand called "Speechless" is simply miles ahead of any cigarette marketing concepts we have to offer. Design Punk in the GDR is much purer, more idiosyncratic and uncompromising than all our post-modern Memphis pieces" (37).

It is, as if on cue, precisely these cigarettes (actually cigarillos) that catch the attention of a young, Western, alternative, anticapitalist, squatter five years later in former East Berlin, declaring "Speechless Cigars—that is totally phat [*geil*]! Cigars that are simply called SPEECHLESS . . . SPEEEECH-LESSSS," while she leafs through the very same *Stunning Eastern Design* book.²⁸ As Hilmar Schmundt relates, this squatter known only as "F." finds inspiration, not condemnation, in GDR design: "it's totally avant-garde. I know lots of Westerners who totally dig East design. . . . Today it's almost modern again." But what really attracts F. and others like her is the "honesty" of GDR design and products when compared to their own world: "GDR design doesn't try to persuade me about anything—it makes things practically unsellable." The shabby quality of packaging is both unpractical and human (F. likes how the paper packaging becomes useless clumps when wet), and its negative social standing lends it an in-group intimacy that bonds among those who ironically and knowingly share its secrets. While Groschopp, an older ex-East German, finds something rotten when companies fill Eastern bottles with Western beer, F.'s housemate O., also a young Western transplant to Berlin, fills an old East German Spee washing detergent container with the western German ecologically friendly detergent Frosch (figure 1.4).²⁹

Increasingly, however, the border between Western and Eastern appropriations of GDR products and design blurred with younger generations, especially the alternative scene antinationalist youth. The Western squatters in eastern Berlin who decorated their apartments with GDR paraphernalia and put Western detergent into Eastern containers did not present themselves as Westerners per se. As Schmundt recounts, many squatters were self-appointed pioneers who saw 1990 as their "personal zero hour," best symbolized perhaps by a cut-up advertisement for the East German communist newspaper "New Germany" (*Neues Deutschland*) reassembled to read "German Virgin Soil" (Deutsch/es Neu/land).³⁰ At about the same time, Claudia Sadowski-Smith recounts how an Ostalgia party that attracted a massive crowd of eight hundred in the sleepy eastern German city of Lutherstadt Wittenberg had its origins in a few friends'



FIGURE 1.4 Spee brand washing detergent. GDR-era box. Spee became one of the most well-known objects of nostalgia. Photo: Illustratedjc, Creative Commons License.

decisions “to revive East German products, like their favorite ‘*Nordhäuser Doppelkorn*’ schnapps, that had disappeared from the unified German market.” The party, one of many of its kind all across the former East, had all the elements of an absurd, if not perverse, acting out of the East: “the crowd was frisked by simulated GDR border police and further harassed with horrendous admission prices and a ‘*Zwangsumtausch*’ (compulsory exchange) of Deutschmarks into worthless Eastmarks that could only be spent on food and drinks from the vanished GDR.”³¹ By sarcastically

simulating what was so recently rejected, Sadowski-Smith saw the Ostalgia party as a venue for a collective identity to be affirmed or created anew among losers of a process with scant other outlets for their sense of loss and identity.³²

For the Berlin hipsters and the many Westerners who have since decorated their apartments with GDR kitsch, however, a different yet complementary process is at work, something we can call, following Marilyn Ivy, a nostalgia of style, where the products and images emanate "no explicit appeal to return, no acute sense of loss, and no reference to embodied memory." Rather, they are a "glib evocation of vanished commodity forms" that detaches the specificity of the past from its material signifiers.³³ The Berlin hipster is not seeking to empathize with Eastern identity, but to use the aura of its artifacts to create a "free-floating past" that can be reassembled and redeployed like the advertisement for *Neues Deutschland*. We thus find two, seemingly contradictory, forms of nostalgia at work in Ostalgia as it emerged around disappearing Eastern products: a modernist nostalgia based on a longing for a style of longing and a nostalgia of style based on separating the object from any prescribed sense of longing. In their contradictory ways, both end up enabling a similar outcome: the reproduction in various forms of "vanished" artifacts that acquire (willingly or not) the label nostalgic. Nostalgia in market societies requires commodification, because that is the primary way in which objects circulate in societies where consumption functions as "a privileged site for the fabrication of self and society, of culture and identity," especially under conditions of anxiety and uncertainty.³⁴

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

A hallmark of Ostalgia culture in both its modernist and postmodern form (nostalgia of style) is its pervasive, self-conscious irony, starting with the neologism *ostalgia* itself. Even in the most serious of exhibits or store displays there is humor that serves to dislodge the slogans, symbols, and



FIGURE 1.5 East packet. East packet flyer for the shop Ostpaket. “East Packets” are a play on the so-called West packets that families in West Germany used to send to relatives in the East during the division. Today they are used mostly as gifts and come in dozens of variations. 2016. Author’s collection.

styles of the regime and make them usable as contemporary persiflage. In the apartments of hipsters, GDR flags became shower curtains, and tourist shops sell iconic brightly colored plastic eggcups, model Trabant cars, magnets with phrases such as "Wessi Free Zone," and the ubiquitous green and red Ampelmann (traffic light men) products. A specialty store's very name Ostpaket (East Packet) plays on the phenomenon of "West packages" (*Westpakete*) sent by relatives from West to East during GDR times. Its logo is the iconic Trabant against a silhouetted map of the GDR accompanied by the motto "good things from the East!" and it offers several ironic varieties of East packets for consumer to send as gift baskets (figure 1.5).³⁵ Similarly, the company Ostprodukte Versand (East product shipping) offers a "Hero of Labor" set of six products, including Hero shower gel, a bottle opener, and a certificate that adapts socialist language, for example: "The superhuman and exemplary tasks rendered by the bearer of this honorary title are worthy of emulation and continuous improvement. To learn from the hero is to learn victory," echoing the famous GDR slogan "To learn from the Soviet Union means to learn victory."

Humor accompanies East products in all its stages, from knowingly ironic appropriations, clever names, tongue-in-cheek advertising, and novelty products to redeployment of socialist slogans such as condoms bearing the Young Pioneers motto "be prepared—always prepared!" or GDR schnapps in four flavors: Agitator, Proletariat, Subotnik, and Black Channel, all under the motto: Never Backwards, Always Plastered!³⁶ (See figure 1.6) Humor, of course, works to strip official symbols of once feared power.³⁷ This was especially important in the early years after the GDR's collapse, when sarcasm was tinged with *schadenfreude* and the recently toppled structures needed to be dismantled discursively as well as administratively. In one sense, East products at their most ironic are the very *opposite* of nostalgia, conventionally conceived as abject longing: rather they convey the open expression of the kind of humor and irony that coursed through GDR society through countless jokes for which the GDR is justly famous. The absurdity, pettiness, and moral bankruptcy of the regime was the constant butt of jokes that turned ideological somberness backed by force into caustic caricatures emptied of their



FIGURE 1.6 Ostalgic schnapps. The motto Never Backwards, Always Plastered! is a pun on the slogan Never Backwards, Always Forwards used by Erich Honecker. 2009. Photo by author.

self-importance.³⁸ East products play on these once sacred images and slogans, turning busts of leaders and emblems of power into paperweights, gags, and reversals.

Such sarcasm is a form of transgression after the fact, since the GDR leaders are no longer around to become inflamed when their human flaws are exposed through mockery. Yet while the power of these symbols diminishes it also lingers, and even more than two decades after the GDR's disappearance the ironic use of GDR symbols can elicit an angry response. In 2010, members of the conservative political party the Christian Democratic Union (the CDU), in power for most of the first two decades after reunification, called for a ban on all GDR symbols as “antidemocratic” (*verfassungsfeindlich*, literally, hostile to the constitution) and “supremely

insulting and injurious for all victims of the SED regime." "Nazi symbols were also banned for good reasons," says Kai Wegner, a member of parliament from the western Berlin suburb of Spandau. "We cannot forget the past," agreed the head of the CDU youth organization, calling for the use of logos of the former Ministry for State Security, National Peoples Army, and the ruling Socialist Unity Party to be subject to punishment.³⁹

This CDU demand shows one of the key contemporary boundaries of social acceptance that nostalgia troubles with its ironic, commodified forms: the memory politics of Germany's identity, especially the question of comparison between the Nazi and communist past—a central theme discussed further in the next chapter. The accusation that nostalgia amounts to apology for both dictatorships is always raised by critics, such as a fairly typical letter to the editor responding to an article on nostalgia in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*: "Would the nostalgia-interested reader also seek further historical-emotional experiences in a Gestapo suite or in the [Nazi] Reich's party convention lounge, which also had Kathrein-er's Karo Coffee (grain beverage) with folksy stews [*volkstümliche Eintopfessen*] and Chlorodont toothpaste in the bathroom?"⁴⁰ A commonplace remark after the success of the 2003 film *Good-bye Lenin*, which pushed nostalgia into the mainstream, was about how hard it would be to imagine "Good-bye Hitler." The film provoked those who saw in *Good-bye Lenin* a dangerous reduction of GDR symbols to harmless, miniaturized forms of kitsch. Though this might seem a venial sin, for those disturbed by nostalgia it undermined government-sanctioned rituals of memory by making the GDR past more accepted, more mobile, and less controllable and raising anew the older trope of German susceptibility to "antidemocratic" sentiments. In this context the CDU demand to criminalize GDR-era symbols draws attention to how nostalgia irony works against the implicit comparison of the fascist and the socialist past simply by making it possible to make fun of the one and not the other.

Nostalgia, then, gains its force in part by crossing the line that separates good and bad taste at both the social and aesthetic level. It also (re)draws the line(s) by creating intimacies and in-groups ("Wessi Free Zone!") as

well as by erasing or moving the line (e.g., "Wossis," a word that combines pejorative terms for Easterners and Westerners). This boundary crossing/drawing/moving function is characteristic of the mythical spirit or archetype of the trickster.⁴¹ Ostalgia, of course, is not a mythic figure in the sense of Hermes or the coyote. It may be a category error to think of a phenomenon as a "trickster" in the strict sense, since a phenomenon lacks the agency of an archetypal protagonist. And yet ostalgia is suffused with a humor-filled, underdog spirit that prods and needles straitlaced interpretations of the GDR past. It is hard to pin down what it *really* means, and in ostalgia one sees the traces of the socialist-era mimetic practice of *stiob* (a Russian term), a form of parody that drew its strength from the ambiguity over whether the actor was being sincere or ridiculing the powers that be (or both).⁴² This could be maddening for those who don't "get" it.

As Ivor Stodolsky points out, "stiob's 'unhinging' effect derives mainly from a momentary mis-recognition of sincerity."⁴³ We see this in the media and academic debates about ostalgia, forever asking whether the purveyors or customers of ostalgia products are themselves nostalgic. Is the joke on them because they are misguided, or on the critics for taking them too seriously? When people making and selling kitschy ostalgia products claim what they are doing is not part of ostalgia, how are we to understand this?

Perhaps a clue can be found in the philosopher Konrad Liessmann's analysis of kitsch as a "subversive aesthetic strategy." Kitsch, in Liessmann's analysis, is a double movement: in its naive sentimentality it seeks to "get back that which modernity refuses us . . . to enjoy what the radical modern and the political enlightenment wanted to deny" and is thus inherently antielite. To "enjoy" kitsch qua kitsch, however, requires a minimum of self-distancing in the form of irony. Kitsch, in the standard analysis, is dangerous because it speaks directly to maudlin human emotions that threaten to blunt our capacity for judgment. Yet, writes Liessmann, it "requires only a wink to become beyond reproach, that is, to become acceptable."⁴⁴ This irony ameliorates kitsch's inherent danger, turning bad taste into something so bad it is good again.

In the spirit of the trickster then, if not as a quasi-trickster itself, ostal-gia performs two social trickster functions through the deployment of irony and humor: First, it interrupts the establishment of smooth nar-ratives, opening space for rearticulations and reversals, wordplay and icon-oclasm. This is classic trickster territory, known as *disarticulation*—the removing of an object from its predictable place, whether it is the past where East products were said to belong and not today's store shelf, or the normative spaces such as schools or museums where the emblems and images of the Communist dictatorship are supposed to be encountered and not, say, on chocolates or condoms. Second, once disarticulated, ostalgia serves to reinsert objects into the mainstream as commodities. The more "normal" these products come to seem, whether as part of the souvenir landscape or as regional products, the more they disavow their very excep-tionalism, ultimately losing the very scent of nostalgia as such. Following Lewis Hyde's analysis of the trickster, we can see this as *rearticulation*, in which the story, here the GDR past, is connected in new ways to "larger social and spiritual articulations."⁴⁵

The trickster at work: on the one hand, ostalgia redraws the boundar-ies depending on where you stand—communist sympathizers versus defenders of the constitution, Ossis versus Wessis, postnationalist Wossi hipsters versus those who still think of themselves in national terms. On the other, it moves and blurs the lines, as when an anonymous contribu-tor to an online forum wrote, after viewing the film *Good-bye Lenin*, "and what am I really: an Ossi? a Wessi? A Wossiossi, ossiwossi, WOSI, Ostel-biger, Oderwestlicher? I myself do not know anymore," or in the detaching of the object from its original context and letting it float "free" of its for-mer political content, as with ironic appropriations of symbols on T-shirts and tourist products.⁴⁶ In the pop culture designs, we can see the work-ings of what Serguei Oushakine calls the "retrofitting" of socialist sym-bols, which in their new guises "offer a recognizable outline without suggesting an obvious ideological strategy of its interpretation."⁴⁷ This allows socialist symbols to be redeployed in new contexts and for new

generations. More to the point, *ostalgia* as trickster allows GDR identity to remain in circulation, neither fully dissolving nor persisting into the new era. *Ostalgia* becomes part of modern rituals of consumption, and by staying at that level, rather than being incorporated into formal rituals such as school, flag, or political speeches, it allows forms of GDR identity to persist and be questioned at the same time.

SOCIALIST IN FORM, NATIONAL IN CONTENT?⁴⁸

Ironically, so to speak, the term *ostalgia* is seldom used by those directly involved in what we can call the nostalgia industry. For example, the proprietor of the Ostpaket store “flew into a rage” at a journalist’s mention of the word, countering that “when someone in the West uses Nivea cream one doesn’t call him *Westalgie*.”⁴⁹ An annoyed contributor to a 2010 online forum about Eastern products complained how “*Ostalgia* is a Wessi-concept for defaming people whose right to their home [*Heimat*] is resented for arrogant, ignorant, bigoted, consumption-addled, socially insensitive, and politically charged reasons.”⁵⁰ The store Ost-Best bills itself as “iconic, not toxic” (*kultig nicht giftig*). Rather than seeing themselves as *ostalgic*, the specialty stores that could be said to be at the commercial heart of the industry present themselves as engaged in an earnest historical mission. In conversations, printed interviews, and their own materials, these store proprietors repeatedly disavow *ostalgia*, claiming simply to give the people what they want and keeping alive, as the store Ost-produkte Versand puts it, “affectionate memories of how, alongside the Wall, there was much loveliness [*so viel Schönes*] in our own country.”⁵¹

Similar to the museums explored in the next chapter, these commercial entrepreneurs see themselves as providing a vital social function of transmitting history to the next generation. Accordingly, these specialty store’s Web sites contain history sections with photos, guides to GDR currency or official abbreviations, lyrics to the GDR national anthem,

as well as trivia contests, editorials, and links to GDR-themed sites. Ostpaket, whose proprietor reacted so harshly to the term *ostalgia*, has created its own minimuseum, called "East Times" (*Ostzeit*), which seeks "to keep alive memories of forty years of living and working in the GDR."⁵² To this end, the store asks its customers to loan it objects along with stories to accompany the objects, for example, "on my turntable is the record by the band AMIGA, like it was when I got my first kiss!"

This self-appointed role of store as unofficial historian can be interpreted as a response not only to generational shifts in historical experience but also to the shifting of East products' trickster quality as they become increasingly marketed as regional products, gaining a new form of legitimacy. This is especially the case for foodstuffs (e.g., chocolate, beer, mustard) and household products, which follow specific marketing strategies aimed at regional identities (except for alcohol brands, which are among the few to have nationwide recognition).⁵³ The national chain store Penny Markt, for example, stocks Eastern products in approximately 30 percent of its shelves in its almost six hundred eastern German branches, indicated by signs with the slogan "Eastern is Delicious," using an adjective that also means "exquisite" (*Östlich ist köstlich*).⁵⁴

Many of these goods can be found in East products trade fairs that travel around the former GDR three or four times a year. Unlike other trade shows, these seem less focused on wholesalers and more on retail customers, serving to promote goods from the former GDR region. They charge low admissions prices to the general public—2 Euros (about \$1.50) at the one I visited in Berlin on a gray and raw April morning in 2013, a long line of people snaking outside the Velodrome with the smoke from sausage stalls starting to waft up into the cold air. My neighbor in line, an older woman from former East Berlin, did not find the admission price reasonable: "Goodness gracious [*Herrje*]," she exclaimed, "it's become so expensive." Ostalgia was present in a small number of stalls selling novelty products, the GDR flag used as a tablecloth at the snack area, and a plastic kitchen item salesman dressed as a GDR-era policeman ("some people are upset," he told me, "but mostly they just smile") (figure 1.7). Yet it felt



FIGURE 1.7 East products trade fair. Salesman dressed as “People’s Police” at the East Products Trade Fair. Berlin, 2013. Photo by author.

more like ostalgia was being used to signify something that holds the various regional products together—honey and jam, leather bags and reclining chairs, linseed oil, organic soap, and specialty cakes (*Baumkuchen*), among many others.

Following a national trend toward buying local, GDR-era brands successfully give the impression of helping the struggling local economy, which is a reason often cited by consumers for purchasing them.⁵⁵ Thus some products are redesigned to seem even more local than they are, like mustard from Bautzen (also the site of infamous prisons), known in the GDR as Bautzener Senf and rebranded after being purchased by a Bavarian company as "Bautzn'er Senf" with the apostrophe suggesting a colloquial, folksy image.

The brands are gently disconnected from the GDR by a renewed emphasis on the prewar roots of many products, such as the Spreewald brand pickles made famous by *Good-bye Lenin* and almost universally identified with the GDR, but which, it turns out, had received a very early product endorsement in the writings of Theodore Fontane at the end of the nineteenth century. Even in the case where a product originated in the GDR, such as Nudossi hazelnut spread, which came into production near Dresden in 1970, some of its defenders claim it was already enjoyed in the Weimar Republic and therefore older than the "cheap sugar paste" Nutella, leading one irked Easterner to assert that not only do "western Germans have no sense of quality" but that to condemn it for being Eastern is as absurd as criticizing Goethe and Schiller, who also "spent much of their time in 'East Germany.'"⁵⁶ A promotion for Sternquell beer combined both, harking back to history and ostalgia by celebrating its 150th anniversary with a toy car and the tag line "Youth dreams in the GDR. Where you find your first love again" (see figure 1.8).

As GDR artifacts are progressively commodified, they are thus increasingly bifurcated, less between East and West and more between regional and kitsch products, between those that earnestly reinsert the GDR past into German history (by connecting, for example, Spreewald pickles with Fontane or Nudossi with Goethe) and those that assert the right to use humor to keep in circulation formerly sacred emblems and



FIGURE 1.8 Promotion for Sternquell beer. Commemorating its 150th anniversary, the copy reads: “Where you find your ‘first love’ again: youth dreams in the GDR.” Berlin 2013. Photo by author.

slogans. In a reversal of the old Soviet slogan that countries should be free to develop products “socialist in content, national in form,” the best-selling East products are increasingly national in content, and (superficially) socialist in their marketing form.

In Olga Shevchenko and Maya Nadkarni’s treatment of nostalgia in postsocialist Hungary and Russia, they locate its power within the ability of politicians to generate political capital out of nostalgic content.⁵⁷ In the German case, the ostalgia phenomenon has been decidedly less directly connected to the machinations of party politics, especially for successor parties to the former communists. Rather, in the German case, we see nostalgia functioning as a popular-cultural form of transmitting cultural knowledge. Commodification, the chapter has argued, plays a key role by marking representative items from a past era, usually from

everyday life, as valuable (both literally and figuratively) and allowing them to remain or reenter circulation through the market, giving them both legitimacy and a precariousness that requires additional symbolic investment to keep them alive and profitable. In seeking to understand how everyday objects become nostalgia objects by acquiring new forms of value, I am neither arguing that commodification is somehow a good in itself nor making a claim about the relative value or substance of cultural knowledge transmitted through nostalgia objects (e.g., whether the representations are historically accurate). Rather, the exemplary case of ostalgia shows how nostalgia products can function as a semiotically ambiguous repertoire in cases of transition, aiming simultaneously at the old and the new.

Through commodification and new forms of representational value, ostalgia has become recognized, if grudgingly, as a fixture in the larger landscape of German memory politics, accepted but not necessarily acceptable. This recognition manifests, as often as not, in rejection of the term itself by Germans (of all ideological stripes) as at best insufficient and at worst inimical for the task of doing justice to the lived experience of the GDR. Yet the widespread presence of GDR-themed consumer items in shops, combined with a robust nostalgia industry in the form of tourist attractions, embeds ostalgia in this objectified form in the German consumer and tourist topography. In this sense, we may be able to speak of ostalgia as a social fact. Thus, more than a quarter century after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we find Berlin's tourist office promoting the DDR Museum (the German acronym for the GDR), where "the kitchen still has the cooking smells of way back when," and the Trabi Safari where you can drive the cult cars from the old days. The old East German *Ampelmännchen* street crossing signals are found throughout the West and form the basis for an international brand with a chain of shops from Berlin to Tokyo. The Japanese Ampelmann Web site presents them as the "symbol of traffic safety, German unification, and resurrection" and sells their image on everything from lamps to noodles.⁵⁸ "Eastern product" shops like Ostpaket do a respectable business in the mid six figures,

plying over seven hundred items, and tourists can stay in Berlin's GDR-themed hotel, Ostel, taking in the hit East-West love story musical *Beyond the Horizon*, while more determined visitors can celebrate the GDR's anniversaries in the town of Tutow's GDR Museum with dancing and soljanka soup served in genuine Mitropa bowls.

Yet, however socially recognizable it becomes, nostalgia is unlikely to ever become fully socially acceptable and transcend its negative connotations as trivializing, campy, and kitsch. In the German case, where national identity is founded on a "will to memory," nostalgia functions as an insolent interjection to the "injunction to remember."⁵⁹ Trickster-like in its alternately innocent and ironic representations, nostalgia subtly undermines the redemptive quality of collective memory as a national project under the guidance of professional historians and state commissions. As Gil Eyal has written, collective memory in Germany is central to the state and its institutions as a guarantor of identity and a healer of wounds.⁶⁰ Nostalgia dislodges symbols of this project, prodding established identities and scratching at the wounds. Nostalgia allows the symbolic content of collective memory to be reappropriated by companies, and consumers, rather than the hermeneutic guardians of culture and history. It keeps the past, to borrow Marilyn Ivy's phrase, "on the verge of vanishing, stable yet endangered (and thus open for commodifiable desire)."⁶¹ By simultaneously seeking in this way to overcome and retain its own past, nostalgia tugs at our conscience, even as we enjoy its (guilty) pleasures.