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Ostalgie: Revaluing the Past, Regressing into the Future

In the winter of 1996, I attended an *Ostalgie Party* in Lutherstadt Wittenberg, a small East German town of about 60,000 inhabitants, where cultural events were often cancelled for lack of attendance. That night, however, more than 800 people were lining up for admission. Many of them had voluntarily dressed in recycled East German soldiers' or Pioneer uniforms. After patiently waiting for over 45 minutes in the chilly December night, 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 foods and drinks from the vanished GDR. According to the Party's organizer, the Thuringian "staatlich geprüfte Schallplattenaufleger" Ralf Heckel, the idea for the Ostalgie Party was born when he and a few friends decided to revive East German products, like their favorite "Nordhäuser Doppelkorn" Schnapps, that had disappeared from the unified German market.

Besides revitalized GDR products, the Party also showcased ample symbols of the GDR, such as memorabilia and flags. As entertainment it featured GDR propaganda movies, a look-alike for the GDR's last president, Erich Honecker (actually a pensioner from Eisleben), the "Easty Girls" who sang rap versions of former Young Pioneer and Free German Youth songs, as well as GDR rock music that very few East Germans would have voluntarily listened to before the changes. A wide spectrum of people of all ages attended, ranging from the middle-aged to teenagers, who, like the 17-year-old Easty Girls, could not have remembered much of the GDR.

Initiated by an East German, this Party exhibits all aspects of *Ostalgie* (nostalgia for the East) which has arisen as a cultural dominant in East Germany around 1992 and taken a variety of (sometimes incompatible) forms. The widely popular *Ostalgie Party* circulates GDR products, mobilizes a repertoire of communal symbols and cultural icons from everyday life in public exhibits of GDR history, and constitutes a venue for the communal (re)construction of a collective identity that is otherwise rarely if ever available in unified Germany. But the interpretation of nostalgia and its various forms has remained highly contested. Exemplary of the ongoing controversy concerning the meaning and purpose of *Ostalgie*, four recent fictional representations by the "Wossi"¹ Thorsten Becker, the ex-GDR writer and dissident Wolfgang Hegewald, and the two East German writers Reinhard Ulbricht and Jurij Brëzan evaluate the sentiment in strikingly different terms. They disagree because of their different positions toward the GDR as either West Germans, dissidents, or as part of what East German

author Daniela Dahn has called the GDR "sub-public" (*Westwärts* 180). Since these authors contribute to the recovery of politicized practices from everyday life and popular culture in the GDR, their fictional work seriously questions the modernist divide between high literature and popular art.

In their novels *Schönes Deutschland* (Beautiful Germany, 1996) and *Ein Obskures Nest* (An Obscure Place, 1997), Thorsten Becker and Wolfgang Hegewald reiterate the dominant view of *Ostalgie* in unified Germany, which characterizes it as a useless sentiment for an irretrievable temporality and/or a longing to return to a totalitarian system. Similarly, American observer Richard S. Ebnshade has dismissed *Ostalgie* as the "ever more powerful forgetting" (84). This characterization repeats the post-structuralist characterization of nostalgia. According to cultural critic Susan Stewart, nostalgia functions to avoid discussions of current problems in favor of constructing a more idyllic past that never existed. This application of Western theories of nostalgia to developments in East Germany implies a view of the GDR as a totalitarian country, in which the subject was completely subjugated to the state. This view only recognizes resistance in the paradigm of the highly vocal and visible dissident who, in many cases, eventually left for the West.

Reinhard Ulbricht's *Die Spur der Broiler* (Trace of Roast Chicken, 1998) and Jurij Brëzan's *Die Leute von Salow* (The People of Salow, 1997) demonstrate that this view overlooks the more complicated features of socialist reality, which allowed for the negotiation of mutual concessions by both the state and its citizens. In the absence of a civil society, East Germans developed a strong tradition of what the East German writer Daniela Dahn has called "interior dissent" (*Westwärts* 201)² or what Svetlana Boym with respect to the former Soviet Union has termed "minor everyday dissent" (284) from all pervasive socialist ideology. According to Dahn, East Germans' dissidence differed markedly from the "internalized subalternity" of most Westerners with respect to their system (*Westwärts* 180). In fact, even though the East German revolution of 1989 was initiated by East German dissidents, it could have never succeeded without the support of the masses who finally turned their interior dissent into open political activism. This political protest manifested itself in humorous critiques of the Honecker system, evident in the range of banners at demonstrations that are now being exhibited in the Berliner Deutsches Historisches Museum (<http://www.dhm.de>).

In the sentiment of *Ostalgie*, this tradition of interior dissent is currently re-emerging in opposition to East Ger-

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many's rapid transformation to market economy. German unification has gone far and above the East Germans' initial revolutionary desire to reform but not abolish their "Ossified" regime by drawing on socialist values. Since it has been completely dominated by West German state and corporate actors, East Germany's transformation has taken on characteristics of colonization. East Germans have been economically expropriated as a combined result of unification laws that stipulate the restoration of pre-socialist property rights and of the Treuhand's policy of rapid privatization. According to estimates by the East German writer Daniela Dahn, as much as half of the East German population (*Wir* 20) are affected by this retroactive re-allocation of property rights to predominantly West German claimants, ninety-seven percent of whom are only heirs of the former owners (*Wir* 11). Between its foundation in 1990 and its dissolution in 1994, the Treuhand privatized all but 350 of the over 13,000 formerly state-controlled enterprises (Pickel 117). East Germany's virtual deindustrialization has caused massive lay-offs in industrial and agricultural sectors as well as serious problems in the existing private sector.³ The gap in wealth between East and West has remained immense. According to sociologist Andreas Pickel, East Germans constituted nineteen percent of the German population, but owned barely seven percent of unified Germany's assets (119).

Because a majority of East Germans now recognize that they have been forced into a new position of dependence and second class citizenship⁴ and that they cannot meaningfully participate in the civil society of a unified Germany, their opposition has, again, taken the form of a dissident sub-public. This sub-public manifests its resistance to processes of Westernization in attempts to rescue the "everydayness" of life in East Germany into the present against the wholesale equation of the GDR with totalitarianism. Grounded in the past, this non-nationalist search for a distinct East German identity satirizes the GDR's totalitarian characteristics and recovers its everyday features in opposition to both Westernized modernism and socialist realism.

Thomas Becker's novel *Schönes Deutschland* portrays *Ostalgie* as the naive East German belief that a return to the GDR past would be possible without a renewal of its totalitarian rule. His protagonist, a West German actor at the Berliner Ensemble in East Berlin, witnesses the literalization of *Ostalgie* in the time-space reality of the late 1990s—the restoration of the GDR on its former territory and West Berlin. As in the *Ostalgie Parties*, Erich Honecker (or his double, a "pensioner from Eisleben or Zwickau or even Saarbrücken" [41] Becker's protagonist is not quite sure) flies in from Chile to become head of the recreated state to the tune of the GDR's national anthem. Soon Western cars are impounded, porno stores and fast food restaurants are closed down, and soldiers in slightly altered GDR uniforms

as well as official GDR symbols (flags and Lenin statues) reappear.⁵

Although it abolishes unemployment and poverty and retains a few aspects of market society such as consumerism and access to Western media, Becker's recreated GDR quickly returns to its former totalitarian practices. Ostensibly designed to protect citizens against a fictive Yugoslavian takeover of Germany, the new GDR closes its borders and locks its citizens inside. The remaining aspects of Western market society also turn out to be fake: since consumerism is not accompanied by advertising, East Germans are said to be soon confronted with a "lack of possibilities for self-deception" (120), which quickly reintroduces the boredom so typical of the old GDR. East German reports about the Yugoslavian takeover of West Germany also turn out to be fabricated, just as the supposedly Western reporting is in reality produced by the GDR. Becker writes: "To avoid the fate of the first, vanished GDR, the second produced Western TV programs itself" (111).

Exemplifying *Ostalgie* in the protagonist's East German girlfriend, Becker shows that her longing for the past neglects to consider the GDR's totalitarian characteristics. Despite "her many lectures ... about the innumerable advantages her vanished GDR supposedly possessed if not vis-à-vis the old FRG than definitely in comparison to the miserable situation of unification" (48), his girlfriend immediately decides to flee to the West after the GDR's recreation. When they arrive there, the protagonist and his girlfriend are diagnosed with symptoms of "GDR trauma." They are told that what they thought they witnessed as the recreation of the GDR was simply a figment in their minds. This collective nostalgic hallucination confused a West German soap opera, which invented the Berlin Wall and Erich Honecker, with reality, according to which the GDR ceased to exist after the 1953 uprising of East Berliners against their government.⁶ In labelling *Ostalgie* as a disease, Becker's novel reiterates the widespread view of the sentiment as a passing malaise that will, if properly treated, disappear within a few years. Written by a former GDR dissident who managed to move to the West in 1983, Wolfgang Hegewald's novel *Ein Obskures Nest* also emphasizes the totalitarian aspects of the GDR which were more than evident to those who, like him, did not conform. Probably in reference to plans for an "Ossi" theme park near Berlin, Hegewald fictionalizes the "repetition of the GDR en miniature" (141) in the form of a park/adventure playground. Called "Interzone," the park is enclosed by a wall, secured by border guards with electronic cattle prods, and admits only those visitors who exchange their Deutschmarks into "gristle," a currency issued by the "*BroilerBank GmbH*." The Interzone has two heavily patrolled streets—the Lenin Avenue and the Bitterfelder Boulevard—as well as two restaurants: SonderBar and WunderBar. Weekly, these bars elect the most brutal waiter and offer

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entertainment in the form of a *Tschekistenball* and a vaudeville called "The Imprisoned." The vaudeville is staffed by the transvestite, the homosexual, the bishop, the feminist, the dissident, and the escapee. Prison inmates can be bought by the West for daily changing amounts of the Deutschmark (141-3).

Hegewald does not only describe *Ostalgie* as a commercial venture that benefits from the emergence of collective nostalgia for the East. He also characterizes *Ostalgie* as an individual search for one's blissful childhood. But he insists that even this seemingly "innocent" type of nostalgia is tainted by the GDR's totalitarian features. When he meets a GDR policeman, Hegewald's protagonist recounts: He "pungently stunk like my childhood, like tadpole breeding, roll call and chalk dust, like golden rain and licorice, Alete milk and the international cycling race for peace, like the National Front, Old Surehand, informant sweat and disinfection, like overachiever piss, cod-liver oil, potato harvesting and the package from the West. Like summer camp, the shooting pond, free school meals, a fluid *Weltanschauung* and easily soluble antifascism. ... So much hated, so familiar" (169).

Becker and Hegewald's desire to show that *Ostalgie* obscures the GDR's totalitarian characteristics overlooks the sentiment's ironic and self-reflexive overtones which have been nourished by the re-emergence of most East Germans' critical stance toward the new system. Although in his novel *Die Spur der Broiler*, Hegewald's contemporary Rainer Ulbricht remembers some of the same GDR characteristics as Hegewald, they take on completely different meanings. On the book jacket, Ulbricht characterizes himself as a "learned GDR citizen" and freelance writer since 1986. In his satiric chronicle of his protagonist Bernie's life from 1953 to 1989, Ulbricht mobilizes communal memory by emphasizing that East German identity formation is inextricably influenced by the GDR's political organizations, products, and cultural icons.

Rather than depicting totalitarianism as the all-determining factor of his life as a dissident like Hegewald understandably does, Ulbricht consistently and successfully satirizes totalitarian elements of the GDR, which were, to a large extent, already well-known and silently opposed by many East Germans under socialism. Immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall, East Germans helped reelect a bourgeois government. Its politics of amnesia about the socialist past resulted in the removal of all visible signs of the GDR such as Lenin statues, street names, and official national symbols like flags, hymns, and holidays. In a next step, West Germans replaced almost ninety percent of East Germany's elite (Lange 5) who were collectively dismissed as either ideologically aligned with the GDR system or as professionally incompetent.⁷ After all memories of the socialist past had been absorbed, it could then be associated with totalitarianism and an unending succession of Stasi-related

revelations. As Daniela Dahn writes with respect to the seat of the former Socialist Unity Party (SED) in Berlin, "everything that reminds one of the SED can only be connected with associations such as regime, injustice, baggage, and terror, but not with the residency in the city's biggest building that spanned two generations" (*Westwärts* 167).

In the absence of East German institutions that could represent the political interests of East Germans (except the SED-successor party PDS), newly emerging economic, political, and social inequalities after unification could not be resolved or even suppressed in the political terrain. They have thus erupted in culture.⁸ In their nostalgia for the East, East Germans have replaced their initial attempts at assimilation, supported by officially-sponsored amnesia about the GDR, by a search for a distinctive East German identity. This identity is grounded in a longing for norms, lifestyles, and values from the past that turns GDR history selectively into private and collective mythology. Even though East Germans do not necessarily agree on the evaluation of their current economic circumstances, there is widespread consent about the value of certain realities and beliefs from their past (Misselwitz 26).

So that they are able to say that "Our lives have paid off" (157), Bernie and his friends displace what would have traditionally been seen as collective political resistance onto individual acts of "interior dissent" that take on economic and cultural forms—buying East German products and recovering GDR culture. Bernie emphasizes the impact GDR cultural icons like Digidags comics and GDR products, such as *Rotplombe*-pudding and the GDR *Goldbroiler* (the East German term for roast chicken), had on the formation of his identity. After initially disappearing from the market because East Germans quickly internalized Western consumerism in response to years of material scarcity and limited choice,⁹ many former GDR products resurfaced within a year after German unification. Already in late 1991, East German disappointment with Westernization expressed itself in a return to buying East German products that used to be part of their everyday lives in the GDR.¹⁰ This shift was not sponsored by any institution but emerged as the result of spontaneous individual actions that took on collective characteristics. Although East Germans have not rejected affluence and greater product selection as offered by market economy, they have filled their consumerism with political meaning, buying revitalized GDR products or, increasingly, locally manufactured East German goods.

The search for unifying cultural symbols and the resurrection of GDR products is increasingly also fuelled by market forces as nostalgia becomes a profitable part of a new commercial culture. Just as many East German memorabilia are being manufactured and sold by West Germans, many East German products are produced by West German companies that bought East German factories from the

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Treuhand. As Mark Duckenfield shows, the campaign for the survival of the Eastern *Ampelmännchen* was initiated by a committee that consists mainly of West Berliners and uses the icon as the basis of their Ostalgie product line. Similarly, GDR cigarettes such as “F6” marketed with the slogan “The Taste Remains” are now produced by Philip Morris. Club Cola, advertised with the slogan “Hurray I’m still Alive,” is manufactured by a company from Dortmund. However, since both the cigarettes and the cola are being produced in factories on the territory of East Germany, their consumption has helped recreate some East German jobs.

After Bernie and his friends become unemployed in the early 1990s, they open a *Broiler* restaurant in a Berliner *Neubaugebiet*. They agree to resurrect the roast chicken because it represents “something that we all know about” (154). As Bernie puts it: “If our people have nothing else to warm them, we at least put something hot on their plate that they know from the past” (154). Furnished in old GDR style, their “*Broilerstützpunkt Frohe Zukunft*” differs markedly from Hegewald’s two “Interzone Bars” because it satirizes the everydayness of the GDR’s culinary “culture.” The *Broilerstützpunkt* welcomes customers with a sign that reads “Please Wait. You Will Be Seated” and gives out aluminum silverware and plastic plates typical of the GDR. The menu offers so-called “Pioneer pudding” made of blue jelly and three types of grilled chicken: the “Engpass” (the shortage, namely a half portion), the “Gegenplan” (the anti-plan, namely a big portion), and the “GB 90.” This *Goldbroiler* 1990 is named in memory of the unification because, as Bernie says, since then the “Broiler belongs to everyone, and if you think about it, it is the real winner of history” (156).¹¹

Ulbricht’s novel demonstrates that *Ostalgie* does not constitute the longing to reconstruct the GDR past completely and/or the desire to return to totalitarian rule. Besides cultural icons and GDR products, Ulbricht’s novel also revalues the GDR past by resurrecting the advantages of collectivity. Bernie’s childhood is overdetermined by participation in collectives such as the Pioneer and Free German Youth organizations, the people’s army, and later a socialist brigade. Whereas Ulbricht critiques this prescribed collectivity humorously, he also emphasizes its positive aspects. Throughout his adult life, Bernie retains three friends from kindergarten with whom he opens up the *Broiler* restaurant. It is a combination of his friends and GDR culture that result in Bernie’s return to the GDR from a trip to Hungary in the summer of 1989, as the only *Trabi* against the stream. Ulbricht writes that “something drew us back exactly to where all this mess came from: old times, our friends who were still there, Alfons Zitterbacke from the children’s book, the model Täve ... of all this a little something” (147).

The revaluation of this, in a sense, anti-modernist collectivity constitutes one of the most potentially progressive aspects of *Ostalgie*. In his novel *Die Leute von*

Salow, the Sorb writer Jurij Brëzan recovers GDR culture, which embraced such values as collectivity, full employment, solidarity, social equality and justice, to show how these could again become the basis for political action. He describes Salow’s collective resistance against BAAL, the “*Befugte Anstalt für Ab- und Auflösungen*” (Authorized Institution for Removals and Dissolutions), Brëzan’s spoof of the Treuhand. The people of Salow unite in new forms of opposition against BAAL in order to preserve their joint stock company LAFORAG (“*Land- und Forst-AG Grafenschaft*,” Land- and Forest-Joint Stock Company Earldom) from privatization. To “finally make ours, what belongs to us” (21), the people of Salow combined formerly state-owned property with collectively-held agricultural farmland and convert it into a collectively-owned but Western-type Joint Stock Company after the 1989 revolution. LAFORAG is, however, immediately dissolved by BAAL because it is seen as a “complete misinterpretation of the New Situation” (24). But as Salow’s mayor Franz Franzka says: “If BAAL tears all of this apart, we will become the country’s poorhouse” (116).

Instead of traditional forms of political opposition such as public demonstrations, Salow’s mayor organizes subtle forms of resistance that are designed to outwit BAAL. For example, he asks individual farmers to buy small parcels of land, strategically located in order to break up larger areas that could be of any interest to outside investors. Salow’s mayor also builds a new kind of coalition between Salow’s people and the heir of the former Count of Salow whose assets were transformed into state-owned property after the Second World War. Since he views the division of Salow’s property as the destruction of history, the heir buys parts of it from BAAL to immediately return it to Salow. After LAFORAG has received most of its property back through various forms of collective action, the council of Salow develops plans for its community that center around attempts to achieve full employment for all its residents. This goal opposes the Treuhand’s strategy of rapid privatization at any cost, which has resulted in a steadily rising number of unemployed in East Germany.

Brëzan’s notion of East German affiliation in opposition to Westernization is grounded in the political effort to salvage a community’s values of solidarity and collectivity in the present. This recovery enables East Germans to forge new hybridized identities out of their past and present in order to make their future thinkable. *Ostalgie* demonstrates that East Germans have retained strong links to the GDR as their place of origin but do not desire to actually reconstruct it in any space-time reality. Rather than highlighting the recreation of a specific cultural or national home (*nostos*), *Ostalgie* emphasizes the process of longing (*algia*) that stresses efforts at the recovery of what was lost. This reconstruction is mediated by irony about the past and present that combines widespread feelings of estrangement

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from the new unified Germany with a longing for the familiar.

Because the GDR attempted to ground its national cohesion in an ideologically-based coalition with other socialist countries rather than in nationalist ideology, *Ostalgie* also represents East German opposition to the reification of the German nation (manifested in the notion of "reunification"). Resisting assimilation to a unified national identity, *Ostalgie* exhibits similarities with emerging sentiments of nostalgia in other Eastern European countries that pay further tribute to *Ostalgie's* non-national character. Although East German identities are predominantly constructed to formulate an image of communal difference from the West Germans, they thus also offer the possibility of the recognition of similarities with other East-Central Europeans.

Even though it is most pronounced in East Germany, the Polish writer Andrzej Szczypiorski generalizes the emergence of nostalgia in East Germany for other East-Central European countries, writing that *Ostalgie* signifies the "East's intellectual experience ... according to which people simply want something different, something more, that they want it differently and not like everything they have been given by the West" (86). Daniela Dahn has argued that "most of the East Germans have not accepted the main attraction of the West—the notion of freedom—into their value system" (*Westwärts* 187). She reports that when faced with the choice of freedom versus social rights, 68 percent of the East Germans decided against freedom in the fall of 1992. In the spring of 1994, that number had increased to 73 percent. Dahn concludes from this evidence that "the memory of a time in which existential fears were absent is deeper than expected" (*Westwärts* 187). Similarly, about Poland, Szczypiorski writes that in "this country there are many million people who do not feel at all like capitalism and market economy, because capitalism and market economy make different demands on people; they require a completely different lifestyle, a different behavior, a different mentality; and many people see all this as foreign, difficult, and even repulsive" (146). The transnational emergence of *Ostalgie* can also be interpreted as a response to the speedy integration of these formerly socialist countries into a worldwide system of capitalism. Nostalgia for the East might be raising old questions about the necessity to reform capitalism, which were believed to have become obsolete with the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Notes

¹A post-unification neologism blending the widely used, infantilized designations for West and East Germans ("Wessis" and "Ossis"), the term "Wossi" is supposed to represent those West Germans who have melted their original "West Germanness" with certain aspects of a now devalued East German identity.

²All translations from the German are mine.

³For more detailed critical work on the Treuhand that reveals its overzealous drive toward privatization, its bias toward collective business structures, its sale of property to dubious Western German buyers, and its support of attempts to get rid of East German competition see Jan Prieue, Otto Köhler, Wolfgang Dümke, and Peter Christ.

⁴A recent article in a local East German newspaper states that feelings about their second-class status are widespread among East Germans. See "Gefühle von Unterlegenheit."

⁵In Becker's novel, Honecker's reinstatement is supported by the new global players China and Brazil who will by the 21st century, from which Becker supposedly writes, have divided the world between themselves with Germany as the designated border. The recreation of the GDR is not resisted by the West, with the exception of a well-organized Turkish army in Kreuzberg.

⁶But the West German news coverage about East Germany is as fabricated as the GDR's reporting about West Germany, since it keeps insisting that "the country was still unified [and] the East a landscape that is trying to bloom" (161).

⁷See also Gert-Joachim Glaessner for a more in-depth discussion of these processes of elite displacement.

⁸As sociologist Andreas Pickel puts it, "there is ample evidence that the actual path followed serves the interests of West German actors, and since similar evidence is available to justify parts of this depiction of colonization, all unfavorable effects of transformation can be explained in terms of a representational bias in favor of West Germans" (64). As a result of the absence of political representation, two-thirds of East Germans believe that the possibility of democratic participation in the unified Germany is not greater than it was in the GDR (Duckenfield 56).

⁹According to Andreas Staab, East Germans' initial embracing of Western consumerism bore a striking resemblance to the FRG's economic boom of the 1950s, when a wave of gluttony and consumerism compensated for years of material and consumer privation (146-7).

¹⁰According to Andreas Staab, already in December 1991, almost three-quarters out of a total of 100 surveyed households deliberately chose Eastern over Western products, a sharp rise from 50 percent in December 1990 and 65 percent in mid-1991 (145).

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¹¹As Duckenfield's article shows, such East German defiance on an individual level can also be successful. East German resistance to the abolishment of the green arrow, a GDR traffic rule that allows right turns at red lights, resulted in its re-introduction in the East and its standardization throughout unified Germany.

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