Abstract

This paper concerns Ostalgie, or nostalgia for the former East German state in 2007-2010. During those years, many Germans (primarily Ossis, or ex-citizens of the former GDR) valorized material goods from the years before the Berlin Wall fell. Ostalgie became a widespread cultural movement: movies about the GDR became top-grossing, food and household products from the “good old days” of the command economy became popular, and popular journalism outlets like Der Spiegel examined the seemingly bizarre phenomenon quite regularly. Though the phenomenon was widespread, not all reactions to it were positive. While Ostalgie participants saw their actions as healthy connections to German history and national identity, critics decried Ostalgie as dismissive or accepting of a criminal political regime.

My paper uses close analyses of three manifestations of Ostalgie to disprove this critical view of Ostalgie. I analyze 1989 book Schönes EinheitsDesign to argue that hostility between Easterners and Westerners during unification was a) based on judgements of material culture and b) harsh enough to prompt Ostalgie as a defensive reaction. I use the 2003 film Goodbye, Lenin! to show the sentiment behind Ostalgie, which also is heavily based on material culture and does not engage with politics, valorizing the positive aspects of life itself in the GDR rather than the state itself. Finally, I examine the cluster of commodities surrounding the Trabant, the state-manufactured car of the GDR that has since become a cult icon, to explore how motivations for Ostalgie became diffuse in its later years, but still concerned emotional memory, not political approval, of the GDR. Each of these close analyses suggests that though Ostalgie may seem to critics to have its roots in support for the GDR state in its entirety, participants in the
phenomenon are instead motivated by a desire to valorize life as they remember it in divided Germany.

Use of Fondren Library’s Resources

Fondren Library’s resources were of immense help in the construction of this paper. For one, university subscriptions to academic databases like JSTOR made available many academic perspectives on Ostalgie, which were invaluable in shaping my understanding of the phenomenon. Notable examples include *The Twilight of the Idols: East German Memory and Material Culture* by Paul Betts, which introduced me to the phenomenon of Ostalgie and the breadth of reactions to it; *The politics of Ostalgie: post-socialist nostalgia in recent German film* by Anthony Enns, which introduced me to the film *Goodbye, Lenin!* and its place within German cultural and film landscape; and *November in Berlin: The End of the Everyday* by Joe Moran, which provided information about the economics and emotions of reunification as well as detailing conceptions of the Trabant throughout unification. These articles and more played foundational roles in the body of my research; without Fondren’s subscription services that granted me access to them, I would not have been able to make the arguments I did in this paper.

The most significant way that Fondren aided my paper was the Interlibrary Loan (ILLIAD), through which I attained the book *Schönes EinheitsDesign*. Fondren did not possess it in its collection, but the University of Pennsylvania did, and through ILLIAD Fondren was able to ship it from Pennsylvania to Texas. I received the book in a very timely manner and was able to keep it long enough to finish the paper.

As previously mentioned, the first section of my paper is a close reading of the book, which was written for a West German exhibit on East German design. The writers of *Schönes EinheitsDesign* speak of the consumer goods in their exhibit with a remarkable amount of
condescension, disparaging it as uncivilized, backwards, and corrupt when compared to Western design. They caustically push beyond design analysis and criticism, revealing a deeper belief: that East Germans themselves are just as deficient as their design is. I used this book to prove that Ostalgie was borne of this Western hostility towards Eastern material culture and life; the movement was a defensive reaction on the part of Ossis who wanted to honor the culture of their former home, and therefore was not at all motivated by political approval of the GDR.

This book was crucial in the formation of my paper. After reading Schönes EinheitsDesign and realizing the implications of the text—that Westerners heavily scorned East German material design was heavily scorned in reunified Germany, and projected this derision onto the Eastern way of life in general—I realized that the way to structure my paper was to closely analyze three disparate manifestations of Ostalgie for their similarities. Without ILLIAD, the book would have been inaccessible, and one of the three major sections of my paper and argument would not exist. As such, Fondren library’s resources played a crucial role in the formation and existence of my research project as it stands today.