

OSTALGIE: A QUIET CULTURAL POLITIC

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From 1945 through most of 1989, Germany stood divided. In November of 1989, Germany was divided no more. Though the fall of the Berlin Wall rendered East and West Germany one political unit, emotional reunification of the country was delayed. For several years there remained a *Mauer im Kopf*—wall in the head—of many Germans. A tangible discourse of difference stood between Osis and Wesis, which from the beginning was coded in terms of difference in material culture and consumer goods. A particular strain of this material codification of Ossi-Wessi difference became known as *Ostalgie*, or nostalgia for the former East Germany. Especially in 2007-2010, Germans participated in a broad range of Ostalgie phenomena. For example, an online *Ostprodukteshop* still sells a myriad of Eastern products with such notable categories as “50 years of Trabant” and a category in which the symbol for the GDR’s Hero of Work award is on products from hats to liquor to “the official shower gel for heroic refreshment”.¹ GDR-themed nightclubs and parties, as well as merchandise with the GDR-era traffic symbol *Ampelmännchen*, are popular allusions to the culture of the GDR.^{2,3} Film and television hearken back to the days of the GDR, and specialty stores sell *Spreewald* pickles and *Spee* detergent in the original packaging of the 1960s. By buying these products or consuming these media, Germans retroactively valorize the material and consumer culture of the GDR in the context of a reunified Germany that largely rejected Eastern culture.

Ostalgie has inspired widely varying reactions. As an example: a popular manifestation of Ostalgie was the DDR Show, starring the darling of 1980s German figure skating, Katarina Witt. Supporters saw her donning of the Young Pioneer’s uniform as a kitschy, ironic portrayal of communist-idealist innocence.⁴ Critics, on the other hand, were openly condemning, with one accusing: “Once [Witt] was part of the most brutalized class of athletes this side of Saddam

¹ “Ossiladen - The Ostprodukte Shop - (N) Ostalgie,” accessed November 27, 2016, http://www.ossiladen.de/shopping/index.php/cat/c16_-N-Ostalgie.html.

² “tRÄNENpALAST |,” accessed November 4, 2016, <http://www.traenenpalast.de/>.

³ Daphne Berdahl, “‘(N)Ostalgie’ for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things,” *Ethnos* 64, no. 2 (January 1, 1999): 192–211, doi:10.1080/00141844.1999.9981598.

⁴ Anthony Enns, “The Politics of Ostalgie: Post-Socialist Nostalgia in Recent German Film,” *Screen* 48, no. 4 (December 21, 2007): 475–91, doi:10.1093/screen/hjm049.

Hussein; now she wants us to raise a glass of schnapps to the good old days”⁵. Similar reactions cropped up to nearly all manifestations of Ostalgie. A great many, especially in popular journalism, viewed it as a dangerous permission or acceptance of a criminal state. Articles told horror stories of “those who had succumbed to Ostalgie, dubious nostalgia for life in communist East Germany”⁶, who were looking for “a real life...in the midst of a sham”⁷. They depicted the GDR as an unjust, oppressive state, nostalgia for which is morally reprehensible: “Did we have movements in the 1960’s singing songs about how great the Nazis were and all the roads they built?”⁸ 2010 Presidential candidate Joachim Gauck, a vocal opponent of Ostalgie, even went so far as to claim that to participate in Ostalgie is to renounce the revolution of 1989 completely, to reject the political meaning of reunification. However, these critical objections to Ostalgie and the people who participated in it did not have enough momentum to quell the movement. Germans continued to celebrate East German material culture, asserting manifestations of Ostalgie as healthy connections with one’s national past and identity. This paper explores the experiences and motivations of these Ostalgie supporters and participants. I will closely examine three manifestations of Ostalgie to do so: The book *Schönes EinheitsDesign* as an example of Wessi hostility towards Eastern consumer life that prompted Ostalgie as a defensive reaction; the film *Goodbye, Lenin!* to demonstrate the sentiment that fueled Ostalgie, appreciation of Eastern material goods as representative of the positive aspects of life in the GDR; and the web of commodities surrounding Trabant cars to discuss the diffuse motivations behind Ostalgie’s commodification. I will argue that contrary to the beliefs of critics, participants in Ostalgie were more concerned with material, consumer, and everyday aspects of the GDR than with politics. They sought to valorize life itself as it stood in the GDR, not to dismiss or accept any part of the GDR’s government or economy.

⁵ Steven Zeitchik, “German Ostalgie : Fondly Recalling the Bad Old Days,” *The New York Times*, October 7, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/07/opinion/german-ostalgie-fondly-recalling-the-bad-old-days.html>.

⁶ “Endangered Species: East German Trabants Heading for Extinction - SPIEGEL ONLINE,” accessed November 27, 2016, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/endangered-species-east-german-trabants-heading-for-extinction-a-708896.html>.

⁷ “Homesick for a Dictatorship: Majority of Eastern Germans Feel Life Better under Communism - SPIEGEL ONLINE,” accessed November 6, 2016, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/homesick-for-a-dictatorship-majority-of-eastern-germans-feel-life-better-under-communism-a-634122.html>.

⁸ Zeitchik, “German Ostalgie.”

Book: *Schönes EinheitsDesign*

In 1994, art historian Georg C. Bertsch and artist Ernst Hedler published *Schönes EinheitsDesign* (Beautiful Unity Design, with the initials of the East German Socialist Unity Party), the book companion to an August 1989 museum exhibit near the West German city of Frankfurt am-Main. The bulk of the book is dedicated to factual, minimal photographs of East German consumer goods, all presumably part of the exhibit. The book also contains a written description of industrial and graphic design in the GDR whose language is so condescending and incriminating that it is easy to forget that the authors are speaking about East German design, not politics. In the words of Jeffrey Anderson, the narrative their writing creates is “a tale of two Germanys, one rich and prosperous—the other essentially a ward of the state”⁹. *Schönes EinheitsDesign* projects political judgments onto consumer goods as part of a discourse of fundamental material difference and an environment of Wessi hostility towards Osis that prompted a reactive valorization of Eastern material culture.

Galapagos Islands of the Design World: Politically Judged Consumer Goods

Bertsch and Hedler, through their analysis of East German materials and design, paint the GDR and its residents as uncivilized and anachronistically stuck in the past. An early section heading proclaims the GDR the “Galapagos Islands of the design world”, as if human progress never touched its borders, maintaining “an unspoiled naivety”¹⁰. This oddly anthropological language implies a fundamental difference between East and West, in which West Germany plays civilized, educated observer of the wild and savage East. There is a singular brand of condescension in Bertsch and Hedler’s tone when they declare Eastern consumer goods “by virtue of their flaws, touchingly human”¹¹. The perceived dichotomy between Eastern uncivilization and Western civilization is clear throughout their work; on page 7, they claim that the socialist economy “unwittingly preserved fossils of articles which, twenty to thirty years ago, were near and dear to us—in an era when marketing and sophisticated advertising were less important”. Here, Eastern designers are “unwitting” and unsophisticated, operating in an age that

⁹ Jeffrey J. Anderson, “The Federal Republic at Twenty: Of Blind Spots and Peripheral Visions,” *German Politics & Society* 28, no. 2 (June 30, 2010): 17–33, doi:10.3167/gps.2010.280202.

¹⁰ Georg C. Bertsch and Ernst. Hedler, *SED: Schönes Einheits Design = Stunning Eastern Design = Savoir Eviter Le Design* (Köln: Taschen, 1994), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/004078687>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12

Westerners have long since left behind. It is up to the (Western) reader, then, to “embark on a lightning archaeological excursion into the world of consumer goods before this distinctive quality is submerged”¹², to use their own intellectual and progressive nature to save Eastern design from its obsolescence. In its most condemning, the text contrasts Eastern design with the “spectacular dynamism” of its Western analogs, placing it in a “time-warp zone in which product forms, now obsolescent in the West, could continue to mutate in some frozen limbo”¹³. By this analysis, East Germans produced a design which reflected a fundamental anachronism, a mirroring in the past that limited their consumer lifestyle to a fraction of what it could be in the advanced West. Bertsch and Hedler, by comparing East German design to their own and deeming it less advanced, imply that East Germany and its citizens are also less advanced.

Aside from being uncivilized, Bertsch and Hedler present Eastern design as backwards and unnatural. The title of their book appears in three languages, English, French, and German, to emulate the experience of a museum exhibit, each language maintaining the SED acronym (*Stunning Eastern Design* in English, *Savoir Eviter le Design* in French). The French title is particularly incriminating, sending a clear message about the content within: *How to Avoid Design*. In their minds, Eastern products are so unnatural as to not even fully be design. The text itself reveals this judgment:

[Eastern products] provoke a feeling of discomfort. We are unsure what to make of them. Initially, they appear shabby with their uninspiring, geometrical, basic form. Whereas Western video cameras or photographic equipment seem to have the suggestive sexuality and asymmetry of freshly-kneaded dough, East German appliances are prosaic and angular, as if they had been designed on the kitchen table instead of the drawing board. Touching the objects only heightens this sense of discomfort.¹⁴

This writing directly implies that where Western design (and by implied extension, life) is natural, alluring, and lovable, its Eastern counterparts are unnatural, repulsive, and overwhelmingly mundane. Furthermore, their use of words like “discomfort” and “suggestive sexuality” go a step beyond what is appropriate in a discussion of camera design, suggesting that the authors view design deficiency in the East as indicative of a deeper human deficiency. The authors mirror this attitude throughout their text: design is referred to as “stunningly

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 27

¹⁴ Ibid., 9

incompetent”, “brittle”, “rubbery”, “primitive”, “cheap”, “geometrical”, and “uninspiring”. They cite product names as absurd and redundant, such as when they decry the cigarette brand name “Juwel” as “unimaginative and inappropriate” seemingly without reason. “Imuna” tampons and “fine net” brand tights prompt the cutting response, “Redundancy rules!”¹⁵ Discussions of the backward or unnatural nature of Eastern design take on an overly condescending and condemning tone, pushing into the realm of cultural rather than artistic judgment.

The book’s most political judgment cast onto Eastern design is that design apparently reflects the inherent corruption of the GDR’s political system. The malicious pun on SED reveals that Bertsch and Hedler connect design ineptitude with political ineptitude (and their determination to maintain that pun across three languages reveals the depth of that sentiment). Eastern products are easily recognizable as inferior; those few products that are not are designed for international technological markets, not for the Germans who produced them.¹⁶ Furthermore, according to them, design in the GDR was meant to mold individuals into perfect, uniform cogs in the socialist system. The GDR’s favored pared-down, functional aesthetic was a conscious choice designed to reduce consumer difference and producer competition, creating a generation of enlightened socialist citizens.¹⁷ Bertsch and Hedler find a great deal of fault with the preferred medium of the GDR, plastic. In their eyes, an excessive use of plastic belies a “distorted” “absence of intrinsic identity”, a drive to increase citizen anonymity and blur inherent identity with state-manufactured identity.¹⁸ By their analysis, use of a versatile, moldable material necessarily means a disingenuous attempt to mold Germans into pawns of the state. Functional simplicity or material pragmatism do not cross their minds: the only reason that Eastern design could favor simplicity and versatile materials is socialist corruption.

A Trend of Material Hostility

Schönes EinheitsDesign is part of a discourse of fundamental material difference, and an environment of Wessi hostility towards Osis. The overwhelmingly condescending tone of Bertsch and Hedler’s writing illustrates a common theme: that Wessis viewed Eastern design as indicative of a deeper ineptitude, one that could either be mocked or pitied and one that stood in sharp contrast to the dynamism and sophistication of the West. This book is not an isolated

¹⁵ Ibid., 9

¹⁶ Ibid., 12-13

¹⁷ Ibid., 21-23

¹⁸ Ibid., 25

incident of this sentiment; Wessi hostility towards Ossis was a pattern throughout Germany during unification. Many Wessis attacked economic aid measures, like the soli (solidarity) tax designed to help reconstruct the East, as being over-focused on the former GDR. They accused Easterners of causing undue strain on the German economy, and predicted that the East would not get “up to par” despite the extra money and would continue to drain the Western economy.¹⁹ For Wessis, the East was often nothing but a charity project. At a 2008 debate concerning the location of a potential monument to unification, a Westerner shouted out: “Ultimately, the West brought freedom to the East. Shouldn’t two-thirds of the monument be in the West and one-third in the East?”²⁰ Even in everyday interactions, East Germans felt and feel that they are treated with condescension, pre-judged as stuffy or complaining.²¹ Jana Hensel’s iconic 2004 memoir *Zonenkinder* illustrates how by a myriad of metrics—from fashion to relationships to national history—Ossis in the 1990s were treated as second-class, backwater, or irrelevant.²² *Schönes EinheitsDesign* demonstrates a trend of dismissive or openly hostile Wessi attitudes towards Ossis, which grew to weigh on East Germans during unification.

For Ossis, the prospect of integrating into such a hostile culture appeared less than ideal. The integration that they faced was in fact a Westernization, a “declaration of war on foreign [Eastern] substances and qualities”²³. Many academic descriptions of unification refer to the process not as integration, but as colonization or immigration, in which “East Germans left their home behind, landed in a strange country, a society they had not participated in shaping, that did not welcome them, and into which they had to make themselves fit”.²⁴ Even as late as 2007, 82% of older Germans from both sides of the Wall, and 67% of youth, felt that they had completely

¹⁹ Anderson, “The Federal Republic at Twenty.”

²⁰ SPIEGEL ONLINE Germany Hamburg, “Memorial Fatigue: Disunity in Berlin over Unity Monument,” *SPIEGEL ONLINE*, accessed November 27, 2016, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/memorial-fatigue-disunity-in-berlin-over-unity-monument-a-596173.html>.

²¹ Bernd Schwandt, “Teaching Communication to Students in East Germany: About Perceived Differences and Whether They Really Exist,” *Communication and Political Change*, n.d., 207–19.

²² Jana Hensel, *After the Wall: Confessions from an East German Childhood and the Life That Came Next* (Public Affairs, 2004).

²³ Joseph F. Jozwiak and Elisabeth Mermann, “‘The Wall in Our Minds?’ Colonization, Integration, and Nostalgia,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 39, no. 5 (October 2006): 780–95, doi:10.1111/j.0022-3840.2006.00305.x.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 781

separate identities from those on the other side.²⁵ It was this hostile environment, this wall in the head, that prompted the rise of Ostalgie as defensive reaction; Osis began to reactively make choices to highlight their Eastern-ness rather than hide it. Demand grew for old products made in the GDR, like Halloren chocolate and Mocca Fix Gold coffee, valorizing the very same material goods that were so disparaged by Wessis like Bertsch and Hedler. In discourse and in everyday interaction, Osis used nostalgia to counteract feelings of second-class citizenship, to feel as though they could still be at home in a reunified Germany.²⁶ It was a type of “cultural self-defense”, as was made clear in a speech by a founder of East Berlin’s “Save the *Ampelmännchen* Committee”: “If it’s truly a Reunification, they [Westerners] need to recognize that the East has something to contribute, too—perhaps not governments...but other things”.²⁷ Ostalgie phenomena like the “Save the Ampelmännchen Committee” focused on material goods, not governmental policy, in order to counteract Ossi preoccupation with the inferiority of Eastern material goods. In a society which would not accept or valorize their cultural past, Osis consciously brought past material goods into the present. As I will explain, these two actions—Wessi hostility to the Eastern material way of life, and Ossi defensive valorization of it—created a discourse of fundamental Ossi-Wessi difference that centered around material difference rather than political.

Film: *Goodbye, Lenin!*

In May of 2004, one of the most successful manifestations of Ostalgie was released in Germany: the film *Goodbye, Lenin!* directed by Wolfgang Becker.²⁸ It tells the fictional story of Alex, a young East German man whose dedicated Socialist mother falls into a coma and awakens after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Her doctor warns that any shock could cost her her life, so Alex spends every effort trying to make their lives look exactly as they did during the heyday of the

²⁵ “SPIEGEL Study: Germany Still Divided 18 Years After the Fall of the Wall - SPIEGEL ONLINE,” accessed November 27, 2016, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/spiegel-study-germany-still-divided-18-years-after-the-fall-of-the-wall-a-516472.html>.

²⁶ Jozwiak and Mermann, ““The Wall in Our Minds?””, 785

²⁷ Paul Betts, “The Twilight of the Idols: East German Memory and Material Culture,” *The Journal of Modern History* 72, no. 3 (2000): 731–65, doi:10.1086/316046. 743

²⁸ Two other notable films that are often labeled as Ostalgie are *Sonnenallee* and *Das Leben Der Anderen*, both from the 2000’s. *Sonnenallee* exhibits much of the same apolitical, coming-of-age traits as *Goodbye, Lenin!*, and as such fits my definition of Ostalgie. *Das Leben Der Anderen*, however, does not. The film takes a politically critical stance against the GDR, and has been referred to by its director as a non-Ostalgie counterpoint to *Goodbye, Lenin!*.

GDR, chasing down food labels, clothes, furniture, and cars from the old days. The film's popularity indicates that this story resonated with a large segment of the German population, especially older viewers. Many viewers especially enjoyed the attention given to Eastern products, bringing GDR-era foods and wearing old Eastern outfits to screenings: at a Warsaw screening, the production team was even chauffeured by a flock of Trabant, and greeted by a Lenin lookalike.²⁹ It outsold *Charlie's Angels* and *Terminator III* the year it came out,³⁰ and is regarded as one of the top 5 German films since 1945.³¹ It exemplifies the sentiment behind Ostalgie, demonstrating the reasons that the phenomenon became so widespread after unification.

Material, Not Political, Dissent

Goodbye, Lenin! builds on the aforementioned discourse of Ossi-Wessi material difference that was established in the early years of unification. Much of the plot is fueled by characters' interactions with packaging and advertisements. Alex shapes his relationships with his mother, sister and girlfriend by changing their relationships with the GDR aesthetic—he forces his sister to drive a Trabant, and frustrates his girlfriend by devoting more time and attention to her Spreewald pickle jar than to her as a person. He invents off-the-wall stories and even produces false newscasts to explain away the ominous Coca-Cola sign that his ailing mother caught sight of outside her window. He would rather create a web of lies to preserve the way things looked before unification (significantly, Alex does not find any of his mother's favored food products, but instead serves her Western foods inside packaging from Eastern foods) than accept that unification has made Eastern material culture obsolete.

Alex is so attached to the aesthetic of the GDR because, similarly to *Schönes EinheitsDesign*, *Goodbye, Lenin!* portrays Ossi-Wessi difference as contingent upon material difference. For example, the East is presented as constructive and creative, while the West is destructive and consumptive. Alex views his father, who escaped to the West early in Alex's childhood (presumably to "screw his brains out" with a Western woman), as irresponsible and gluttonous before the two actually meet. In a fantasy, Alex imagines him as overweight, lounging in front of a glitzy pool, hedonistically cramming an inordinate amount of Burger King

²⁹ "'Goodbye, Lenin'; Hello, Wolfgang Becker | IndieWire," accessed December 1, 2016, <http://www.indiewire.com/2004/08/goodbye-lenin-hello-wolfgang-becker-78737/>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ "'Goodbye, Lenin'; Hello, Wolfgang Becker | IndieWire."

into his mouth. This image is representative of how Alex sees Westerners: obsessed with consuming, separate from the more simple and wholesome East. As another example of the stereotype of the destructive West, almost every single one of the Eastern characters experiences the fall of the Wall as a fall from grace. Alex's sister studied economics before unification, but gives up her studies for a Burger King job and unwed motherhood; Alex himself goes from hopeful cosmonaut to satellite TV installer; famous cosmonaut Sigmund Jähn is reduced to driving cabs; the principal of a local school goes on a grief-ridden bender; Alex and his neighbors seem to be constantly foraging through the trash to get by. Perhaps the most poignant expression of the complete polarization between conceptions of East and West comes at the end of the movie, in a dialogue between Alex and his father's Western children: when they ask him where he is from, he responds, "A different country".³² When Alex preserves old pickle jars and digs up discarded furniture and clothes, he is attempting to maintain his wholesome, constructive idea of the East in the face of ever-encroaching Westernizing unification.

Though *Goodbye, Lenin!* presented much opportunity for political commentary, its production team chose to avoid that part of the story. Before his mother's heart attack, Alex is apathetic about the government, almost but not quite to the point of disapproval. The film does engage with political tension and violence, but only to a minimal degree. Alex participates in an October rally to bring down the Berlin wall, but is quite indifferent about the ordeal. He dispassionately eats a snack the whole time, using the rally mostly as a space to talk to a pretty girl, not to change the course of history. His mother does have a heart attack during that scene, which leads to her prolonged coma. The heart attack is brought about by seeing her son a victim of gratuitous police violence, conflicting with the positive images she had of the government. However, that is the only real engagement with politics that the film indulges in. Alex describes the fall of the Berlin Wall as nothing more than a creative and unique "rubbish collection",³³ not once addressing positive or negative political meanings behind the action.

Aside from this minimal engagement with violence, the GDR is not presented in the film as a political criminal. Quite the opposite—it is spoken about like a stand-in parental figure. Alex's mother has an almost romantic relationship with the state: "Our mother was married to our socialist Fatherland. As this relation was not a sexual one, there was a lot of vigor and energy

³² Wolfgang Becker, *Goodbye, Lenin!*, Drama, Romance, (2004).

³³ Ibid.

left for us kids and the socialist daily routine”. She indeed spends a prodigious amount of energy on the betterment of and participation in her country, gaining a community reputation as an excellent citizen petition writer. As the plot progresses, the characters who interact with her make it clear that she comes to symbolize every positive idea they associated with the GDR (creativity, warmth, community), with one neighbor saying: “It’s so nice to talk to your mother. It’s just like living in the past”.³⁴ The role of the mother and of the GDR become somewhat indistinct, as Alex’s mother begins to personify all positive aspects of life in that state.

There are also overarching themes of childhood and hope in the film that lend a positive tone to discussions of the GDR. For example, space exploration is a recurring motif, from Alex’s aspirations to be a cosmonaut and satellite TV career, to voice-overs that bring space metaphors into the plot (during her coma, Alex’s mother “circled like a satellite around the events happening on our little planet in our even smaller Republic”).³⁵ For one, this motif has resonance within a Cold War context, alluding to Space Race aspirations of success against the West. Primarily, however, the constant discussion of space symbolizes Alex’s childhood hopes that occurred within the GDR. In a world where he could be a cosmonaut instead of a satellite TV installer, the stars were literally within reach. Given enough hard work and technological development, exploration and discovery of new frontiers were always possible in the GDR—at least, that is how Alex remembered it. In his final false news broadcast, Alex even casts cosmonaut Sigmund Jähn as the new president of the GDR. The space motif also intersected with the recurring motif of the *Sandmännchen* cartoon, a beloved children’s television show. Near the end of the film, Alex watches an episode with his father’s children in which the Sandmännchen goes to space, and the three discuss whether the character is a Western astronaut or an Eastern cosmonaut. The Sandman was chosen by the production team as a symbol of one small Eastern victory: the cartoon existed on both sides of the wall, and after unification, the Eastern style of animation was adopted across Germany because it was more widely loved.³⁶ The cosmos motif is meant to depict a successful, hopeful narrative of the GDR and its citizens, in contrast to the story of corruption and inefficiency that sources like *Schönes EinheitsDesign* presented.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

Though they could have highlighted political or economic critiques of the GDR, the creators of *Goodbye, Lenin!* made the choice to emphasize the warmth, love, and idealist spirit that citizens felt in that country. For Alex, the most important GDR—not necessarily the real GDR, but perhaps the one constructed in the memories of its citizens—is emotional, not political. Alex is connected to his mother’s GDR-fueled warmth, not to Erich Honecker or the command economy. The concluding lines of the film, spoken by “president” Jähn himself, drive this point home: “Socialism [in the GDR] means reaching out to others, and living with others. Not just to dream about a better world, but to make the world a better place.”³⁷ Socialism here is not about means of production or party politics, but about sentiment and community cohesion. Wolfgang Becker himself confirmed that “*Goodbye, Lenin!* is not about politics; it’s about life in a totalitarian system; it’s about kisses, kids, parents, all the important things of life”.³⁸ The film is not about socialism, but about life within socialism. As a wildly successful manifestation of Ostalgie, the film echoes popular sentiment in this regard. A *Der Spiegel* interview with citizens about Ostalgie demonstrates: “In those days, we didn’t have any money...but since there was nothing to buy, it didn’t matter”; “Society was a lot closer then. You actually talked to people when you went shopping for groceries.”³⁹ Participants in Ostalgie do not concern themselves with politics or economics, perhaps because to do so would be too painful, but perhaps because it is not what defined their experience as citizens of the GDR. In an interview about his film, Wolfgang Becker explained:

Some of the Western media gets it wrong and think[s], ‘Now they want the old Socialism back,’ which is stupid. It’s not about politics, it’s about people sharing similar memories. No West German or American has ever experienced anything like [unification], when your everyday culture suddenly stops overnight and is replaced by something else. After some time, you remember the old stuff, and there’s a kind of nostalgia...You think back on the life you lived under Socialist circumstances.⁴⁰

³⁷ “‘Goodbye, Lenin’; Hello, Wolfgang Becker | IndieWire.”

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ “The Trabant Toots Its Horn: A Rattletrap East German Icon Has Its Day Again - SPIEGEL ONLINE,” accessed November 27, 2016, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/the-trabant-toots-its-horn-a-rattletrap-east-german-icon-has-its-day-again-a-489125.html>.

⁴⁰ “‘Goodbye, Lenin’; Hello, Wolfgang Becker | IndieWire.”

Manifestations of Ostalgie like *Goodbye, Lenin!* are not political, nor are they trying to be. Instead of valorizing the political system of Socialism, Ostalgie valorizes life itself as it existed within that system. It is not a movement of political dissent, but of cultural memory.

Commodities: Trabants

A crucial factor in understanding the role of Ostalgie in Germany is understanding its commodification, perhaps exemplified best by the Trabant car. From 1957 to 1991, the car was manufactured at a state-supervised factory in Zwickau.⁴¹ Before the fall of the Wall, they garnered a widespread reputation for poor quality. The cars only had two-stroke engines, and were ten times more pollutive than Western cars. In fact, they were designed to not go fast specifically to keep pollution levels in check.⁴² The cars were quite expensive and required a long wait period to attain—at one point, there were forty-three times as many people on the waiting list than owned a Trabant.⁴³ This high opportunity cost was a conscious policy choice meant to disincentivize East Germans from buying too many, as the SED deemed automobiles a “false need”. They also used the income from actual cars sold to cover costs for other subsidies, like those for food, and increased the bureaucratic structure surrounding the buying experience in order to provide jobs. In reality, however, the long waiting line encouraged many citizens to sign up for a car and just wait ten or so years to see if they had saved enough money to pay, a tendency which placed inordinate strain on the system.⁴⁴

Discourse of Dissatisfaction: The Trabant in the GDR and Unification

These inefficiencies did not escape the notice of East German citizens. Trabants (or Trabis, as they were sometimes-affectionately called) were ubiquitous, but became a symbol of corruption and inefficiency. The amount of Trabants produced in the GDR was far greater than the amount of cars that was ever available to East Germans, even taking into account imported cars from further East: the vast majority of Trabants that citizens manufactured were exported to

⁴¹ “Voiture Symbole de La RDA, La Trabant Ressuscite En Version électrique - 17/08/2009 - Ladepeche.fr,” accessed November 26, 2016, <http://www.ladepeche.fr/article/2009/08/17/655752-voiture-symbole-rda-trabant-ressuscite-version-electrique.html>.

⁴² Joe Moran, “November in Berlin: The End of the Everyday,” *History Workshop Journal*, no. 57 (2004): 216–34.

⁴³ Jonathan R. Zatlin, “The Vehicle of Desire: The Trabant, the Warburg, and the End of the GDR,” *German History* 15, no. 3 (1997): 358–80.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

other Eastern countries.⁴⁵ Shortages encouraged a thriving black market, which ironically created the social divisions that the command economy attempted to eliminate: only people with lots of cash, often those with Western relatives, could afford a black market car. To make matters worse, party members often kept the best cars (and other products of the command economy) for themselves, and East Germans were dangerously aware of this.⁴⁶ Citizens writing petitions employed a harshly critical tone when discussing “the automobile problem”: “It really is not in the spirit of the human being as the centre of socialist society when I have to save up for years for a Trabant and then cannot use my car for more than a year because of a shortage of spare parts!”; “How furious do you think I am about these conditions? When you read in the socialist press ‘maximal satisfaction of the needs of the people and so on’ ...it makes me feel sick”.⁴⁷ One citizen even went so far as to demand that the person responsible for pricing a spare part be brought to court.⁴⁸ Not only were there crippling shortages in the automobile industry, but there was a keen awareness of the injustice of those shortages among the East German populace.

Trabants also became a symbol of limited mobility in a country in which border control was a heated issue. The car’s design exhibited a remarkable lack of change across the decades. Only three models, “Standard”, “Special Request”, and “Deluxe”, were available, the differences between them consisting of different-colored roofs or headrests. The most original model in regular rotation was a clunky, jeep-like convertible known as the “Tramp”.⁴⁹ The two-stroke engine and rickety plastic body only worsened its reputation as a non-mobile car.⁵⁰ The Trabi was a car that literally could not cross borders, a characteristic that became blended into its cultural meaning during its time in the GDR.

East Germans were not hesitant to compare the Trabant to what they saw as the superior cars of the West. East Germany had the greatest number and variety of cars in Eastern Europe (consisting of GDR-made cars like Trabants and Wartburgs, but also other imported Eastern cars like the Russian Volga), with about 48% of households owning cars in 1988. However, this

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 360

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 376-377

⁴⁹ Moran, “November in Berlin.”

⁵⁰ Ibid.

number placed the GDR far behind the FRG, in which 70% of households owned cars.⁵¹ A survey of popular views of the economy in June of 1989 revealed that “the quantity and quality of consumer goods in the GDR...’is increasingly becoming the basic criterion for the assessment of the attractiveness of socialism in comparison to capitalism”.⁵² Citizens complained that the Volkswagen Golfs of their neighbors across the Wall were outstripping their unwieldy Trabis, and sent countless citizen’s petitions to their government, which responded curtly that food subsidies were more important than flashy cars.⁵³ This widespread disapproval of the state-produced car turned the Trabant into a crucial problem to be dealt with. That same 1989 popular survey warned that political stability was contingent upon the resolution of this issue, that “many citizens...view the solution of the ‘automobile problem’ as a measure of the success of the GDR’s economic policies”.⁵⁴ The Trabant had very few fans during the heyday of the GDR, and the discontent that it inspired posed a tangible threat to the country’s stability.

The Mark of Cain: Trabants During Unification

During unification, negative conceptions of the Trabant took on a more sinister tone. In 1989, a model with a Volkswagen engine was produced, but it was not very successful and even then, the body of the car did not change.⁵⁵ Once an important commodity and status symbol, the cars completely lost their value without the protection of the state. Production at the Zwickau factory completely ceased in 1991.⁵⁶ Germans abandoned Trabants en masse in the streets or traded them for something more valuable, like cigarettes.⁵⁷ In 1993, a magazine article proclaimed that “driving a Wartburg or a Trabant, the two dinosaurs from the bad old days, is the equivalent of the mark of Cain for upwardly mobile Osis”, once again revealing a judgement on the character of Osis based on the material goods they used.⁵⁸ Trabants maintained their abysmal reputations for the first few years of unification, as citizens rejected them in favor of better-functioning Western cars.

⁵¹ Zatlin, “The Vehicle of Desire: The Trabant, the Warburg, and the End of the GDR.”, 362.

⁵² Ibid., 359.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 359

⁵⁵ Moran, “November in Berlin.”

⁵⁶ “Voiture Symbole de La RDA, La Trabant Ressuscite En Version électrique - 17/08/2009 - Ladepeche.fr.”

⁵⁷ Moran, “November in Berlin.”

⁵⁸ THOMAS H. IRWIN, “BRINGING JUSTICE TO THE WILD EAST: RECONSTRUCTION IN THE FORMER GDR,” *ABA Journal* 79, no. 4 (1993): 58–62.

Trabants also became a symbol of the Ossi-Wessi discourse of difference. Jokes about the cars were common even before unification and throughout the GDR, but took on new, sometimes hostile overtones when Wessis used them against Ossis in reunified Germany.⁵⁹ The cars were referred to as the “command economy on wheels” or the “cardboard car” (the latter because the plastic bodies of earlier models were strengthened with compressed brown paper).⁶⁰ A scene in *Go, Trabi, Go*, a popular 1991 film about a Saxon family who takes their old Trabi nicknamed “Georgie” on a cross-Europe road trip, features a Wessi tow driver who tells 118 jokes about the car (“How do you double the value of a Trabi?” “Fill it with petrol”) to the chagrin of the family.⁶¹ Even as late as 2007, a *Der Spiegel* article claimed that Trabis have “more in common with a lawn mower than a modern car”.⁶² This discourse fueled a Wessi superiority complex of sorts, which Ossis were all too aware of. In *Go, Trabi, Go*, the family faces incessant denigration from Wessis who liken poor Georgie to a biscuit box and a toy car who pales in comparison to a BMW. However, each hurtful joke inspires them to achieve their goal of taking Georgie to Rome. Likewise, initial Wessi condescension towards Trabants and their owners inspired a wave of retaliatory appreciation. Ossis were determined not to let “the smooth Mercedes society” make “our whole existence, our dreams and our identity, laughable”.⁶³ Rather than leaving behind their slow Trabants in the dust, Ostalgie Germans began to celebrate them as remnants of their past lives.

From the Ashes: The Trabant as Post-Unification Ostalgie

Despite this hostile discourse of difference surrounding the Trabant and its owners, as unification progressed, Ostalgie participants transformed the car from a symbol of failure to something hip, authentic, and worthy of preservation. As early as 1990, when Germans were abandoning their Trabis in the streets, artists were reclaiming their parts to make sculptures and

⁵⁹ Berdahl, “‘(N)Ostalgie’ for the Present.”, 208.

⁶⁰ Moran, “November in Berlin.”

⁶¹ Other notable jokes from this scene: “What’s the difference between chewing gum and a Trabi?” “None. Step on either and it sticks to your shoe”; “A Trabi ends up in a ditch right next to a cow pat. The cow pat asks, ‘What are you?’ ‘I’m a car,’ says the Trabi. Then the cow pat says, ‘If you’re a car, then I’m a pizza’”

⁶² “The Trabant Toots Its Horn: A Rattletrap East German Icon Has Its Day Again - SPIEGEL ONLINE.”

⁶³ Berdahl, “‘(N)Ostalgie’ for the Present.”, 196.

street art.⁶⁴ Hip cafés and bars turned Trabi parts into furniture to add an air of ironic authenticity to their image.⁶⁵ The Trabi became an internationally beloved icon of German history—a famous sculpture of a Trabi with legs instead of wheels continues to draw a great number of tourists to the German embassy in Prague.⁶⁶ Berlin even protected the Trabi as a national icon and tourist attraction by relaxing low-emission automobile standards just for them, so people can continue to drive them within the city limits.⁶⁷ A 2009 proposal for a Trabant with an electric engine won a “Living Unity” award at a national design contest, “proclaimed as an ambassador for a coexistence in the East and West on the...twentieth anniversary of German Unification”.⁶⁸ Reactions to this proposal were varied, showing the wide range of opinions towards Trabants and their owners. One particularly caustic critic proclaimed that the Trabant, “symbol of crap cars world-wide”, would drive a knife into the electric car industry before it ever got a chance to grow. Tellingly, this author took his critique a step further and projected automobile inferiority onto cultural inferiority: “we’ve always thought if a Trabant owner considers [an idea] innovation, the concept itself is as good as dead”.⁶⁹ Proponents of the new car, however, saw the possibility of an electric Trabant as a poignant symbol of unification, with Eastern character meeting Western technology. Its designers argued, “small, robust, sympathetic and full of symbolism: no car is so closely linked to German history as the Trabant...Even today, hardly any other historical car arouses so much interest and emotions”.⁷⁰ For participants in Ostalgie, the Trabant transcended any connotations of inefficiency or corruption, instead becoming a representation of everything East German.

⁶⁴ Moran, “November in Berlin.”

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ “Radio Prague - Tourist Requests Lead to Symbolic Trabant on Legs Being Moved Forward in German Embassy Garden,” accessed November 30, 2016, <http://www.radio.cz/en/section/curraffrs/tourist-requests-lead-to-symbolic-trabant-on-legs-being-moved-forward-in-german-embassy-garden>.

⁶⁷ “Endangered Species: East German Trabants Heading for Extinction - SPIEGEL ONLINE.”

⁶⁸ “Trabant nT - Home,” accessed November 26, 2016, <http://www.trabant-nt.de/324/de/home.aspx>. Note that the official site of the “new Trabant” nT has yet to be updated since the publicity storm surrounding the proposal, and as of 2016, the car has not been developed beyond a prototype.

⁶⁹ Ben Wojdyla, “New Trabant Determined To Kill Electric Car Industry Before It Starts,” accessed November 26, 2016, <http://jalopnik.com/5360647/new-trabant-determined-to-kill-electric-car-industry-before-it-starts>.

⁷⁰ “Trabant nT - Home.”

Within an Ostalgie context, Trabants became symbolic of the warmth, unity, and community that Easterners remembered from their lives in the GDR. A citizen at a 2007 Trabant owner meeting in Zwickau described her feelings on the matter: “we treasured things in those days. The Trabant was a symbol: You had your family, you had your house, you even had a car”.⁷¹ As early as 1991, *Go Trabi Go* showed a Trabi shedding its symbolic mantle of inefficiency and corruption and taking on new meaning, representing what it means to be a true German family. At the beginning of the film, the family is dysfunctional at best, but the challenges that their Trabi puts them through brings them together by the end of the film. Furthermore, “Georgie” is repeatedly anthropomorphized, made into one of the family. Sympathetic mechanics treat Georgie like a surgical patient (“A car is only human, right?”), and when it appears that Georgie has finally met his demise, the patriarch of the family launches a heartfelt speech: “You [the daughter] were conceived in Georgie, picked up from the hospital in Georgie, Georgie was our best man”. The car became more than just a relic of the socialist past, instead symbolizing the tight community and warmth that participants connected with life in the GDR. Trabants as part of Ostalgie were something to be preserved at all costs, a symbol of unity and Eastern humanity that faced extinction in a reunified Germany.

Trabants as Commodified Ostalgie

Unlike the previously examined book and film, Trabants illustrate a key aspect of the Ostalgie movement: commodification. Much of Ostalgie is manifested in things one can buy, like food or cars. This commodification raises questions of participation and motivation. For one, not only Ossis participate in this commodified Ostalgie. As previously discussed, Trabants are a significant tourist attraction, and hold their symbolic meaning abroad. Tourist shops throughout Germany sell keychains, models, and t-shirts proudly displaying the car.⁷² The International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C. hosts an annual Trabant parade with a “Trabant stuffing contest” in which participants “see if you can fit into the tiny spaces like those escaping from East Berlin did”.⁷³ Cross-European owner meetings and Trabant displays have occurred from Zwickau to

⁷¹ “The Trabant Toots Its Horn: A Rattletrap East German Icon Has Its Day Again - SPIEGEL ONLINE.”

⁷² Moran, “November in Berlin.”

⁷³ “Tenth Annual Parade of Trabants · Calendar · International Spy Museum,” accessed November 26, 2016, <http://www.spymuseum.org/calendar/detail/tenth-annual-parade-of-trabants/2016-11-05/>.

Paris.⁷⁴ Notably, Trabi Tours are becoming quite popular, in which ticket buyers can experience Germany and its history via city tours in authentic Trabants. About ten percent of Berlin's registered Trabants belong to Trabi Safari, a company offering such tours (and which benefits from the legislation relaxing auto emission standards for Trabants).⁷⁵ Here, Trabants become a commodity not necessarily for those who grew up in the GDR, but outsiders who want to learn more about life in that state. Even outside of tourism, Trabants hold a nearly universal symbolic appeal today. Owner and enthusiast forums boast members who are Osis, Wessis, and foreigners alike.⁷⁶ Trabants' shift from command-economy relic to commodity ushered in a new layer of meaning, a global representation of Easternness.

Within Germany as well, commodified Ostalgie is not demographically limited to Germans who experienced the GDR firsthand. Many Ostalgie commodities are marketed more towards hip, affluent urban dwellers rather than rural Easterners. For example, the web store for official Ampelmännchen products features well-designed, trendy objects alongside spirit wear for gentrified Berlin neighborhoods like Prenzlauer Berg and Mitte.⁷⁷ Paul Betts suggests that when Wessis accept commodified Ostalgie, it is representative of so-called imperialist nostalgia for something that their culture has destroyed.⁷⁸ Demographics of age reveal a wide distribution of Ostalgie participants as well. During the peak years of Ostalgie (about 2007-2010), the majority of participants were not 35-40 year olds who came of age in the GDR, but their children, the generation below them.⁷⁹ A 2003 article eloquently explained that "When you take a younger generation that doesn't know and mix it with an aging generation that doesn't want to forget, it makes for a powerful combination".⁸⁰ Young Osis were combining their parents' fond memories of unity and economic prosperity from the GDR with their own experiences of second-class citizenship, and using those feelings to valorize cultural symbols of the GDR like Trabants. After 2010, however, this tendency became more diffuse. Few popular articles were written

⁷⁴ "The Trabant Toots Its Horn: A Rattletrap East German Icon Has Its Day Again - SPIEGEL ONLINE."

⁷⁵ "Endangered Species: East German Trabants Heading for Extinction - SPIEGEL ONLINE."

⁷⁶ "IFA Club - Home," accessed November 28, 2016, <http://www.ifaclub.co.uk/home.php>.

⁷⁷ "AMPELMANN Webshop – Discover the Products with the Red and Green Ampelmännchen from Berlin," accessed November 4, 2016, http://ampelmannshop.com/en_GB.

⁷⁸ Betts, "The Twilight of the Idols."

⁷⁹ "Homesick for a Dictatorship: Majority of Eastern Germans Feel Life Better under Communism - SPIEGEL ONLINE."

⁸⁰ Zeitchik, "German Ostalgie."

about Ostalgie past 2010. When Stefan Wolle, a historian at a museum dedicated to showing artifacts from the GDR, played Stasi clips for students in 2014, “‘Even the most precocious students suddenly go very quiet,’ Wolle says, adding that he is glad the wave of Ostalgie and its ideology seems to be past its peak”.⁸¹ When Ostalgie is commodified, it ceases to belong only to those who experienced the GDR firsthand, suggesting that the motivation is more of a cultural opposition than anything connected to politics.

Even if demographic participation in commodified Ostalgie is somewhat diffuse, the motivation behind participation remains stable: participants want to pay homage to their own or cultural memories of the GDR. An example of this emotional motivation is found in *Go, Trabi, Go*'s marked avoidance of politics. Similarly to *Goodbye, Lenin!*, the plot offers ample opportunity for criticism of the Socialist state or the command economy. However, the film engages with politics even less than *Goodbye, Lenin!*. The closest thing to political commentary is a conversation at a car shop: “[we could get Trabant parts from Zwickau] in the good old days.” “Good?” “Old.” For a film about a state-manufactured car, the state itself is mentioned surprisingly few times. Similarly, an owner of a grocery store specializing in GDR-era foods attributed his success to emotion, not belief in the superiority of old products or the command economy: people bought his products “out of disappointment, out of pride, out of definition and demarcation [from Western Germany], and finally, but very important, out of remembrance”.⁸² Economic ideology is decidedly not a factor in decisions to purchase Ostalgie goods, especially considering that the bulk of these products are not produced by Eastern firms, but by Western companies that absorbed Eastern industry after the fall of the Wall.⁸³ However, customers do not seem to mind. Silke Rüdiger, owner of another shop selling Ostalgie food and household products, “is quick to point out that neither she nor her clients are making a political statement. ‘When you eat a Halloren chocolate ball, it’s a childhood memory’”, not a testament to the economy that made it.⁸⁴ Trabant ownership, specifically, has become more of a hobby, an emotional investment, than a legitimate mode of everyday transportation. Many of the Trabants

⁸¹ Deutsche Welle (www.dw.com), “Ostalgie: Romanticizing the GDR | Germany | DW.COM | 03.10.2014,” *DW.COM*, accessed November 27, 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/ostalgie-romanticizing-the-gdr/a-17959366>.

⁸² Berdahl, “‘(N)Ostalgie’ for the Present.”, 200

⁸³ “The East Is Chic in Germany,” *Latimes*, accessed November 28, 2016, <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/oct/27/world/fg-commies27>.

⁸⁴ (www.dw.com), “Ostalgie.”

still in existence are in advanced states of decay, and with no more in production, ownership necessitates constant and dedicated upkeep.⁸⁵ Instead of a car that is used every day, today “Trabis are a link to the past, and even more, a small gesture of defiance against the prosperity and plush living standards of a reunified Germany”.⁸⁶ Like other manifestations of Ostalgie, commodities like Trabant are not representative of popular acceptance of the politics or economy of the GDR; rather, they represent a type of oppositional group memory in which the positive aspects of life in the GDR are honored.

Concluding Remarks: Why Ostalgie?

Though Ostalgie has had many manifestations in its time, the reasoning behind participation has remained: Ostalgie is emotional and cultural, not political. Though many Germans looked back on their time in the GDR positively, not many advocated for a return to a divided or socialist system. In a 2009 survey, 57% of Easterners said that they felt that life was better in the GDR, and 49% felt that “The GDR had more good sides than bad sides. There were some problems, but life was good there”. However, only 8% defended the GDR in its entirety or claimed that it was better than reunified Germany.⁸⁷ Though some Easterners and sympathizers made a conscious effort through Ostalgie to valorize their lives in the GDR, they did not attempt to argue that the government of the GDR was superior to that of reunified Germany. Most Easterners in fact had a general, qualified acceptance of life in the GDR, not a complete acceptance of the entire state.

Participants in Ostalgie valorize their lives in the GDR, which is less painful than digging up memories of the Stasi or facing Western (after unification, hegemonic) perceptions of the Stasi state. An anonymous citizen in a 2009 interview revealed that what he missed the most about the GDR was “that feeling of companionship and solidarity”, and that the command economy was “more like a hobby”. He was completely uninterested in whether or not he had a Stasi file, or what that file could reveal about him. He went on to say: “I’m better off today than I was before...but I am not more satisfied”.⁸⁸ He made it clear that though reunification may have

⁸⁵ “Endangered Species: East German Trabant Heading for Extinction - SPIEGEL ONLINE.”

⁸⁶ “The Trabant Toots Its Horn: A Rattletrap East German Icon Has Its Day Again - SPIEGEL ONLINE.”

⁸⁷ “Homesick for a Dictatorship: Majority of Eastern Germans Feel Life Better under Communism - SPIEGEL ONLINE.”

⁸⁸ Ibid.

brought about a better economic climate, a more just government, or more opportunity for Easterners, it also took away a mutual understanding between Germans, a sense of unity that socialism enabled. Ostalgic participants also argue that though the GDR was not better than reunified Germany, it was not all that much worse either. The same 2009 interviewee elaborated on this subject: “In the past there was the Stasi, and today, (German Interior Minister Wolfgang) Schäuble—or the GEZ (the fee collection center of Germany’s public broadcasting institution)—are collecting information about us”.⁸⁹ Wolfgang Becker, director of *Goodbye, Lenin!*, concurred: “People in the West expect people [from the Eastern Bloc] only to complain how terrible it was and how everyone had to suffer. But it wasn’t like that. It wasn’t a society where there was a Stasi guy behind each newspaper, or you were living in a dark prison.”⁹⁰ The injustices of the GDR were not eliminated with reunification, he argued—simply transformed. In fact, many Osis’ first experiences with societal ills like poverty and homelessness came after the Wall fell. Reunified Germany that viewed the GDR as criminal and unjust, but many Osis saw a reunified Germany that was no less so than their former home.

Ostalgic participants are for the most part preoccupied with material and consumer goods as markers of their former lives. Material goods in the GDR were long intertwined with national producer identity. The material aspect of East German socialism was strongly emphasized in party rhetoric, partly as a contrast to Western capitalism. As such, East Germans began to deeply identify with their role in the national framework as producers. A citizen’s job was a major source of social integration: they provided groups for socialization, they provided daycare and general stores, they even sometimes provided doctor’s offices or organized what might be a worker’s only field trip away from home.⁹¹ Employment and goods production was more than a source of wages in the GDR, it was a source of national belonging and social structure. One East German woman explained after the fall of the Wall, “Unemployment...is for our understanding the worst thing there is. We were all raised to be socialists, and we were taught that work is what separates humans from animals...to be without work is unthinkable for us”.⁹² Forty years of this ideology of production created East Germans who thought of themselves as socialist producers, not capitalist consumers. In a scene from *Goodbye, Lenin!*, a friend of Alex’s mother asks him:

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ “‘Goodbye, Lenin’; Hello, Wolfgang Becker | IndieWire.”

⁹¹ Berdahl, “‘(N)Ostalgie’ for the Present.”

⁹² Ibid., 199

“We were all valuable people [in the GDR], weren’t we?” Osis were thrust into West German capitalism from a social, political, and cultural system that placed significant emphasis on their identities as workers and producers. The socialism of the GDR, especially under Honecker, was one of the most consumer-focused systems of the Eastern bloc.⁹³ Reunification forced a group of people who had been raised to value their state-led production values as part of their national identity to be immersed in a capitalist culture in which producer identity was not nearly as crucial in founding national identity.

By the time of unification, the national identities of East Germans had grown so far apart from that of the West that people did not view themselves as common Germans anymore, but as separate countries, East and West. Westerners viewed the GDR from a distance and with a good deal of exoticism, accepting the notion that a unified German nation was only a short-lived occurrence.⁹⁴ Likewise, national identity in the GDR had been constructed in contrast to the West: “there the imperialist regime where people are alienated from each other, here the antifascist state that stresses community and the common good...the GDR increasingly developed a national pride: ‘We’re proud of what we’ve produced’”.⁹⁵ When the Berlin Wall fell and the two countries faced the prospect of unifying, these contradictory national identities grew quite strained. Stereotypes of East and West arose and became quite hostile, especially surrounding differences in material goods. Rather than valorize the politics of their former government, which many agreed were unjust and were rightly eliminated, Ostalgie participants chose to revalorize the everyday aspect of the GDR, which they found best expressed through the very Eastern consumer goods that Wessis mocked. By keeping the material culture of the GDR alive in the context of this new capitalistic host culture, Ostalgie participants concluded that the sentiment, ideology, and day-to-day warmth of life in the GDR was more important than politics. Ostalgie functioned as a quiet kind of cultural politic, rather than an overt one. By calling up the aspects of their past that they perceived as commendable, Ostalgie participants expressed a discontent with their present reality. To quote Immanuel Kant, “nostalgia does not represent the

⁹³ Betts, “The Twilight of the Idols.”

⁹⁴ Andreas Huyssen, “Nation, Race, and Immigration: German Identities After Unification,” *Discourse* 16, no. 3 (1994): 6–28.

⁹⁵ Jozwiak and Mermann, ““The Wall in Our Minds?”, 784

desire to return to the place where a person spent his childhood, but rather represents the desire to recapture childhood itself.”⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Enns, “The Politics of Ostalgie.”, 481