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Chapter Seven
Club Cola and Co.: Ostalgie, Material Culture and Identity

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On August 31, 2000, exactly ten years after the German Democratic Republic (GDR) had officially ceased to exist, *Die Welt*, one of Germany's national newspapers, announced nostalgia causes rising popularity of Eastern [German] products (Wolber 4)[1]. The newspaper article goes on to comment on the products and brands particular to the former East Germany that enjoyed a surge in popularity. A surprising fact, given the well-known scenario ten years earlier when access to the desirable hard Western currency, and thus access to Western consumer goods was a major reason for speeding up the monetary union, and thus the political union of both German states. The consequences of the currency union are known well enough: built on entirely different economic and political parameters, the planned economy of the GDR was in no way ready to face the competition of its capitalist counterpart in the West and almost instantly imploded, wiping out entire industries and leading to widespread unemployment. Perhaps the first and, in some ways, also the most visible change was the vanishing of once familiar products, brands, manufacturers names, packages, and the entire communication design of the GDR from the store shelves as the vast majority of these products did not stand any chance against their more sophisticated and more attractively marketed new competitors from the West. The change in products available also signalled one of the profound initial changes in the everyday experience shared by all East Germans as consumers of products. East Germans experienced this radical change as a sudden overturning, literally overnight, of their situation as consumers. During the weekend preceding the monetary union on July 1, 1990, not only the shop windows but entire shops were completely cleared

of GDR goods following a closing-down sale: these were replaced by Western goods (Nick 80). And yet, despite having ended up in the dustbin of history, like the rest of the GDR, these seemingly substandard and dowdy GDR products have made an astonishing comeback. Once familiar names, such as Florena Soap, Komet Foods, and even the once notorious Rondo Coffee have reappeared in the stores thanks to a healthy customer demand. In particular some brands of drinks, such as the once ubiquitous Club Cola or Vita Cola, or Rotkäppchen Champagne (Little Red Riding Hood Champagne) have even been elevated to cult status among the young: Eastern Products have suddenly become cool. But not only are small, independent companies trying to capitalize on this trend, even major manufacturers such as Henkel with its entry line of Spee laundry detergents, give a clear indication of the economic and cultural scale of this development. In addition to the renaissance of actual products, there are also a growing number of novelty and souvenir items, such as T-shirts, card-games and postcards that bear logos and pictures of brands and products that did not survive the transition, such as the Trabant, East Germany's subcompact car.[2] This obvious paradox, namely the resurgence of a part of the GDR's everyday culture that seems to coincide with the rapid disappearance of the physical remnants of the GDR, has brought on its own cultural phenomenon: *Ostalgie*, seemingly, the longing for the GDR. What makes the phenomenon of *Ostalgie* different from other more common types of nostalgia such as the longing for the simple pleasures of the country life, is the relative historical proximity of the GDR (Ostalgie set in barely a decade after its demise), as well as the obvious contradiction of the longing for a state that during its existence most of its citizens did not particularly like or downright despised. Most glaring is the paradox with respect to the longing for GDR's material culture, in particular its consumer products. Before the *Wende*, in fact, exactly the reverse was the case: Western products that were either bought for hard currency at the Intershop or received as presents from relatives and friends in the West, were commonly savoured and revered.[3] Western goods were not only considered to be of better quality, but more importantly, also provided their owners with an instant rise in status that put them above those who lacked such contacts and who had to rely entirely on domestic products. Most visible in private residences was the fairly unique practice of openly displaying everyday products of Western origin, instead of storing them in cupboards, away from public view. Most common packages such as beer or soft drink cans were given pride of place in the living room, thus demonstrating the occupant's status by indicating that s/he had access to these rare and desirable goods.[4] Considering the recent fascination with Eastern brands and products, what, one may ask, has prompted this seemingly radical reevaluation of East German past and

its physical remnants? Is this a simple reversal of a cultural practice born largely as a result of the Eastern disillusionment with the united Germany during the last decade? Is the essence of *Ostalgie* simply the desire to create the fantasy of a defunct system—and hence only an expression of the denial of the new reality—by surrounding oneself with the paraphernalia of yesteryears? Or is the phenomenon of *Ostalgie* a telling cultural issue that has as much to do with the history of East Germany as with the present of the united Germany?

The objective of this article is to examine the transformation of artifacts of East German material culture into a repository of memories and its resignification from products of everyday life into sites of potential resistance. This paper will explore *Ostalgie* as a unique form of nostalgia, and will discuss in particular specific products as sites of remembering. Following the theoretical discussion of nostalgia, I shall claim that *Ostalgie* is less an obsession with the past than an embattled site of memory and of the legitimacy of this memory. Consumption, then, will be read equally as a form of discourse, following language specific rules. By claiming ownership to the memory of the specific rules of consumption in the GDR's planned economy, residents of the New Federal States can, if they wish, create a distinct discourse community on the grounds of other fundamental rules that applied to consumption, that is the successful shopping experience (or its opposite) under socialism, as opposed to the values and strategies of consumer capitalism. Hence, nostalgia for these old and now seemingly useless rules provides the community that remembers them not only with a register of once crucial knowledge, but more importantly, with a firm identity based on a common discourse that includes all those who once shared this knowledge, namely all those who once were consumers in a planned economy. In addition, despite the already mentioned lack of any practical use of this knowledge, I also claim that the act of remembering itself is a political act: by remembering the social practices of the GDR, here exemplified in its material culture, its proponents challenge the supposed and frequently unquestioned superiority of Western style consumer capitalism that has swept away the planned economy of the GDR, its brands, and its entire discourse. One proviso here is, however, that despite a legitimate counter cultural impulse, all this is played out in the capitalist marketplace. Thus, *Ostalgie* and its current fascination with the material culture of East Germany is as much a comment on the East German past, as it is on the German present.

The second part of this chapter discusses the significance of *Ostalgie* in the context of theoretical approaches to nostalgia in order to provide a theoretical foundation for my reading of the cultural and social relevance of the material culture of the GDR. The third part will discuss the significance

of material culture of this particular form of nostalgia. Following current scholarship in material culture and consumption studies, I propose to read consumption as a form of language that as a distinct sign system follows specific rules that in turn allow us to document its cultural valences and ultimately make visible its ideological and political nature .The fourth and the last part will discuss specific examples of GDR products. A central aspect of this discussion will be the relationship between the consumers and the material aspects of their products. A reevaluation of these GDR products after the unification and a discussion on their subversive potential in Western consumer capitalism will conclude this project.

I

Considerable insight into the cultural relevance of such mundane tasks as shopping and brand selection has been gained in the field of material culture and consumption studies. In particular the connection between the objects of material culture, its artefacts, and their varying interpretations in different cultural contexts have been of interest to practitioners of material culture studies. In particular the complexity and often contradictory nature of material culture can reveal the various meanings and messages that are embedded in its products. Reading the language of material culture enables us to determine the valences of its products as texts of everyday experiences (Brummett 51). By applying Saussure's concept of structural linguistics to material culture, Jean Baudrillard emphasizes a consumer product's Asign exchange value . . . a theory of objects . . . based upon . . . social presentations and significations (*Critique* 29–30). Countering empiricist notions that seek to determine a product's value simply by its use value, and Marxist approaches that mainly focus on the labour involved in its production, Baudrillard's approach centers on a product's social exchange value that is constantly under negotiation. In fact, according to Baudrillard, products, like linguistic morphemes, are inherently devoid of meaning. It is only by the ordering concept of consumption (such as that of language's grammar) that products are endowed with meaning in a materialist society: Consumption is a system which secures the ordering of signs and the integration of the group: it is therefore both a morality (a system of ideological values) and a communication system (*Consumer Society* 78). Taking the concept of capitalist consumption as a sign system one step further, Baudrillard then posits that it can be read as a social determinant: The circulation, purchase, sale appropriation of differentiated goods as signs objects today constitute our language—a code by which the entire society communicates and converses (*Consumer Society* 80).

It is precisely the inherently ambiguous nature of consumption as a communication system that accounts for a product's rapidly changing social value that can be affected by a myriad of factors, often entirely dissociated from the product *per se*, such as being the wrong colour or brand, or being associated with the wrong target group that suddenly make it uncool. Interestingly, the social value of a specific product can vary between different cultures, despite the efforts of a global economy to homogenize the world's tastes and predilections (which makes obvious marketing sense). The slippages within the system of consumption, however, show up as obvious contradictions that are part of material culture and consumption. In particular examinations of the way in which the products of Western capitalism are read by other cultures serves to illustrate this point. Daniel Miller has investigated the contradictions of a more and more homogenous global consumerism frequently embraced by many diverse ethnic and social communities that at the same time attempt to negotiate their very own, specific use of the blessings of Western consumerism, thus revealing the inherent contradictions in the cultural construction of mass products:

> Estonians, Trinidadians and Filipinas all seek to lay claim to what may be regarded as the modernity and style of Coca Cola or Marlboro cigarettes, but in all three cases they have developed a mechanism for disaggregating the qualities that they see as evil or at least inauthentic to themselves . . . This emphasis upon material culture seems to offer important insights into the ability of groups to use variable objectifications available in a range of commodities to create a much more subtle and discriminatory process of incorporation and rejection than that allowed for in simple models of Americanization or globalisation. (18)

There may well be parallels to the way East Germans viewed what seemed the Western miracle of consumption before they had a chance to experience it first hand on an everyday basis. Never without a deeply political significance, especially in the days of the GDR, Western products, as demonstrated by the above mentioned displays in East German Intershops and people's living rooms, were deeply symbolic for a way of life that seemed tantalisingly close, thanks to Western TV commercials, and yet utterly unattainable for the average GDR citizen. These displays also highlight the inherently unstable relationship between product, social value and its cultural usage. As Arjun Appadurai demonstrates in a similar example, when ethnic products of everyday use, such as baskets or blankets, are taken out of their familiar context and placed as folk art in the living rooms of Westerners, these seemingly mundane objects automatically rise in status (28–29). In this context, Appadurai's emphasis on the cultural reuse of goods is central in understanding the significance of the recreated material

culture of *Ostalgie*. These products and brands, despite their manufacturers efforts to create articles authentic to their Socialist predecessors, are by virtue of their changed social conditions endowed with a radically different meaning compared to those sold in the GDR. As such, consumption, along with its social and cultural context, is one of the prime determining factors of modern societies. Viewed from this angle, consumption as a form of discourse provides its own encoded language that in turn is a social regulative: it is therefore both a morality (a system of ideological values) and a communication system, a structure of exchange (Miller, *Consumer Society* 78). Hence, the complexity of meanings embedded in material culture and consumption defies simplistic binaries of local and global or Socialist and Capitalist material culture, pointing instead to an underlying and highly diverse and changing set of norm and values.

II

It is in particular the highly contested sphere of memory and nostalgia that forms the subtext for an understanding of *Ostalgie* since the norms and values—in particular with regards to commerce and consumption of East Germany—were frequently fundamentally different from those of the West. Thus, remembering these differences has become an integral part of East Germans in their search for their place in a changed society. In particular the issue of nostalgia, as indicated in the compound noun *Ostalgie*, plays a significant role in these acts of remembering. According to Ulbrich and Kämper, the word *Ostalgie* was first used by the stand-up comic Bernd Lutz Lange (111). The word's two compounds, *Ost* (east) and *Nostalgie* (nostalgia), denote this specific version of nostalgia that is firmly rooted in the East German experience. Despite its variety of uses and definitions, *Ostalgie* usually refers to the continuity or discontinuity of a specific identity associated with the other Germany (Keßler 101–103). Like many other forms of nostalgia, *Ostalgie* describes a sense of loss, while at the same time bestowing on an individual a sense of worth derived from his/her association with the past despite an adversity that may be currently experienced (Davis 34). In essence, nostalgia is an emotionally and socially meaningful strategy to make the present seem far less frightening and more assimilable than it would otherwise appear (36). In his examination of nostalgia, Davis emphasizes the notion of an idealized, highly selective view of the past in order to construe the appearance of a less threatening present that is frequently as inaccurate as the view of the past. Since nostalgia was historically[5] perceived as a physical condition, and later as an emotional affliction, it has always been seen in pathological terms, and hence dismissed as the symptom of a sick body and later of an addled mind. Although discredited as a

historically inaccurate and invalid perspective on the past, the nostalgic view back in time can be read as an important register of the present and essentially as a democratic expression. In particular those whose official history has been marginalized, silenced, or has never been deemed worthy of official recognition find in nostalgic memories the only repository of their past. Not without coincidence has nostalgia been linked with the beginnings of mass culture in the mid-nineteenth century, when it reached its peak of popularity in Europe, particularly the salon culture of educated urban dwellers and landowners amongst whom it was a ritual commemoration of lost youth (Boym 16). The historical time is crucial here since the rapid pace of industrialization and technological development made people yearn for a simpler past in the midst of rapidly vanishing traditions that had no space in the scientifically dominated discourse of progress. As Pierre Nora suggests, a consequence of this yearning is the emergence of fundamental contradictions between history and memory:

> History . . . is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present . . . in so far as it is effective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suits it; it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic. (8)

From this premise Nora develops his notion of memory sites, or *lieux de mémoire* that signify a time of crisis when an immense and intimate fund of memory disappears surviving only as a reconstituted object (12). These moments of crisis are then equally an expression of anxieties about the present or the future as they are attempts to preserve the past and the meaning given to all forms of witnesses, even those usually deemed insignificant (13). Hence, Nora emphasises in particular material objects as one of the *lieux de mémoire*. Modern memory . . . relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image. . . . The less memory is experienced from the inside the more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs (13). However, Nora issues a caveat: even though materiality is crucial in the personal memory, it can only become a memory site if it is invested with the imagination and knowledge of the remembering individual (19).

Ostalgie is a perfect example to highlight these characteristic traits of nostalgia. Despite its often inaccurate and highly selective treatment of history, *Ostalgie* is nevertheless a reliable register of the fallout of these changes. Like nostalgia, *Ostalgie* is a personal reaction to what official history describes as impersonal historical developments. In particular it becomes symptomatic of the type of drastic changes that leave large parts of

the population dislocated and experiencing a profound sense of loss that leads them to question the validity of their previous lives and their very identities. As an expression of the resistance to this loss, nostalgia can also be seen as a profoundly democratic expression. At this point history becomes memory and is reclaimed by the individual: the passage from memory to history has required every social group to redefine its identity through the revitalization of its own history. Frequently, this remembering is the only form of history available to disenfranchised groups whose past is not deemed important enough to be part of official history. Thus, *Ostalgie* as a very specific form of history is the visible expression of the transformation of the GDR into the New Federal States and of the erasure of the GDR from German history. Thomas Ahbe highlights this loss of identity that is so closely tied to the official dismissal of the achievements of East Germans, leading to the loss of their place in German history:

> *Ostalgie*, of course is closely linked to the ruptures which the East Germans experienced collectively. . . . Not surprisingly, a discourse of stigmatization against the different Eastern culture and experience as well as its agents—namely the East Germans—became commonplace. Thus, not only did the people of the East lose its illusions. It also lost its authority as a people who could say that it was *the* people. . . . The people of revolutionaries became a bunch of nostalgic fools.[6] (Ahbe)

Essentially, the end of the GDR also meant that individual biographies were disrupted and previous experiences under the old socialist system were considered worthless. The official discourse furthermore confirms this refusal of a recognition of a separate GDR identity. This leads to a taboo to touch anything connected with the GDR; it is deemed that East Germans have nothing to bring to the new, united Germany (ibid). Ahbe highlights the fallacy of this assumption by claiming that identities are shaped around a continuum of personal experiences and expressed in what he terms narratives of the self. As these experiences are, however, highly suspicious, or downright discredited in the official discourse of German history, many East Germans turn to the material culture of the GDR as their own *lieux de mémoire: Ostalgie* is a practice of the layperson (ibid.)[7]. Given the complex meanings and messages retained in material culture, it is thus no surprise that one of the predominant features of *Ostalgie* is its reliance on objects. Since the history of the GDR is still fraught with numerous anxieties that frequently result in the inability to sustain a neutral and unemotional discussion of this recent chapter in East German history, the focus on material culture makes sense. On the face of it, the products of everyday life seem innocuous enough and the often very personal memories surrounding these are on the surface deeply apolitical moments of individual acts of

remembering. As such, the products of material culture are not fraught with nearly as many anxieties as other aspects of life in the GDR, such as culture or politics. The undeniable moral failure of the dictatorial regime and the GDR as well as the resulting grave violations of the rights of its citizens foreclose, at least for the foreseeable future, an unemotional engagement with the East German past and the reality of everyday life. In addition, the focus on the material culture of the GDR can also be seen as a form of resistance to the physical erasure of everything that is connected with the GDR. In 1990, the year of the monetary union, the East Germans produced 19.1 million tons of rubbish. It was 1.2 tons per capita; almost three times the rubbish disposed of in the West. The GDR was thrown on the rubbish heap (Ahbe).[8] Today, there are very few material witnesses of the GDR as a state. Even geographical points that once held a deep significance for East and West Germans, such as border crossings are virtually unrecognizable. The *Bahnhof Friedrichstrasse*, the point of entry into (and exit from) East Berlin does not even have a plaque that remembers the infamous door that once lead from one world into another.

It comes perhaps as no surprise that the first and only official enterprise to preserve the history of the GDR, the *Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR* (DoK) in Eisenhüttenstadt in its changing exhibitions focuses primarily on the material culture of the GDR. Acutely aware of the anxieties surrounding representations of GDR history, the *Dokumentationszentrum* attempted to provide a more balanced picture of the GDR, a picture that not only reflects its spectacular aspects, well publicised by the media, but also the quiet aspects of its public and private life with all its contradictions. And the material witnesses collected by the *Zentrum* are the medium of choice to accomplish this:

> No matter whether the objects appear as the results of planned, political acts, or as their opposite, what we are now used to calling the niche culture, political and social processes are reflected in the objects of everyday use and an intensive observation of the country. . . . This process did not stop with the events of 1989/90, but continued not solely restricted to the media favourites *Treuhand* and *Stasi*. The exhibition relies on the communication initiated by the displayed everyday objects to counter the narrowing of the debate surrounding the GDR. (Ludwig, Sensibilität 9)[9]

Ludwig's view indicates the still very problematic position of official institutions such as the *Dokumentationszentrum* whose approach in dealing with GDR history was commendable. Although the political dimension of the material culture of the GDR is definitely acknowledged, the personal dimension of social memory is still the main perspective of this enterprise. Despite the collections' reliance on individual experience and the spontaneous

discussions the artefacts stimulate, Ludwig distances this enterprise from everything that could give it a nostalgic appeal; the publicly debated collective, romantic yearning for a supposedly better past, commonly described by the term *Ostalgie*, did not happen (9).[10] Despite this disclaimer, the official collection in Eisenhüttenstadt is a *lieu de mémoire* as described by Nora since its material witnesses are not merely collected, stored, and archived, but the *Zentrum*'s extremely successful emphasis on communication reinforces the role of the imagination of the viewer who imbues the material artifacts with significance. The task of remembering makes everyone his [*sic*] own historian (Nora 15).

III

To appreciate the significance of the otherness of the GDR's socialist material culture it is necessary to delineate its differences from capitalist consumer culture and its products. The history of marketing and branding under capitalism is a useful foil to illustrate these differences and the consequences of the different social and economic conditions on the actual products in terms of their appearance, quality, and perception. Western consumers, as a rule, tend to distinguish between various products of the same kind, such as breakfast cereals for instance, first and foremost by their brand name. This is apparent when one takes a closer look at the packaging of most Western products where the brand name usually dominates the layout. Differentiation of products based on content is usually secondary. Many of today's quality products can rely on a firm brand identity that strongly relies on intangible qualities such as reputation and image—the all important cool factor. To appreciate the significance of product identities, one has to be aware of the care that goes into engineering the appropriate brand identity of today's products.[11] Well-known household names such as Quaker Oats, Kraft Dinner, or Sunlight detergents may suffice to illustrate this point. One of the reasons that branding has become such a significant force in marketing is that established products can often trade on their high recognition value based on their history. Naomi Klein attributes the rise of the branded product identity to the rise of mechanization and the mass production of goods that has had a strong impact on the way in which they were sold to the customers. While shopkeepers had previously simply scooped bulk foods for their customers, the new industrially produced goods needed to be packaged to be shipped to stores and kept on their shelves. Apart from protecting the product, the package almost immediately took on a second function of displaying the manufacturer's name, lending the product an instant identity: what made early branding efforts different from more straightforward salesmanship was that the market was now being

flooded with uniform, mass-produced products that were virtually indistinguishable from one another (6). Many of these early products are still around today and are the staples of today's consumer culture. In an early nostalgic attempt to hide the new, mass-produced nature of these products and to invoke the previous age of local production and direct sales, the labels on these packages were decidedly sentimental, harking back to an idyllic time and acting, as such, as the interface between the shopkeeper and the product in order to invoke the nostalgic notions of familiarity and folksiness in an effort to counteract the new and unsettling anonymity of packaged goods (6). For the capitalist consumer society this means that a network of knowledge about product identities has been in existence since the early days of mass-produced products.

In contrast to Western consumer capitalism, which could rely on the continuity of its product culture, the planned economy of the GDR did not have this history to build on. The earliest economic reforms in the Soviet Occupational Zone (SBZ) lead to the breaking up of large companies that had discredited themselves by supporting the Nazi regime (Kaminski 21). From this starting point one consequence of this change was that certain aspects of the material culture of the GDR faced its own zero hour. One can distinguish three distinct stages in the development of East Germany's material culture initiated by significant policy changes and reflected in the GDR's history of marketing and advertising. However, this process of transformation was far from consistent. Some products thus reflect the discontinuities of these various policy changes while others retained some very peculiar continuities since they were forgotten by these same changes, and continued to exist as fossilized remnants of previous ideological and historical conditions (Giersch 82–84). The first stage, starting with the foundation of the GDR in 1948 represents a random collection of more or less functional remnants of the industry of the German Reich, found within the boundaries of the new state. Goods produced by these companies that were still frequently under private ownership became the mainstay of the early East German economy, supplying a selection of goods from prewar times. In a parallel move, many of these companies relocated into the capitalist Western sectors and established themselves once more. Thus, until the building of the Wall, one could for a while purchase the same products made in the GDR, in the Federal Republic as well. However, problems with this divided status started early: many of the old owners who had moved their companies to the West won lawsuits that banned their Eastern counterparts from using the old established brands, which then had to be abandoned in the East. In addition, many companies that produced important goods simply did not exist in the East, which meant that these products had to be literally reinvented. Again, using the established brand-name was out

of the question. Thus, practically overnight, entire brands and product identities had to be given up and substitutes had to be quickly invented. Many of these substitutes from the early days were to accompany the GDR until its end in 1990 (Giersch 76–77). To this era of improvisation much can be traced to what is typical about GDR products, such as their agricultural background, their lack of image, and their homeliness, in short, elements that demonstrate the classic features of their GDR origins: rough around the edges, hard to handle, somehow old fashioned [that] yet in a very personal, utterly inexplicable way engendered love–hate relationships (Ulbrich, *Lexikon* 105).[12] A typical example is the manufacturer of films and cameras. Agfa, for instance, had to rename its Eastern equivalent as ORWO, after the company owners moved to Munich in West Germany, taking the rights to the brand-name with them. ORWO, a well known Eastern brand of film—and later audiotapes—is typical of the *ad hoc* creations that characterized many of the new brands on the Eastern market. An abbreviation for Original Wolfen, the new name makes specific reference to the place of manufacture, the town of Wolfen near Halle (Ulbrich, *Lexikon* 75–76). However, these creations were not entirely randomly thought up, as the example of Bino illustrates. Bino was a substitute for Maggi, a well established liquid seasoning used mainly in soups and sauces and sold in the characteristic bottles that are still used today.[13] Other than the old Agfa works, the Maggi factory was located in Singen, West Germany, and thus Maggi was simply unavailable on the Eastern market. To make up for this lack in the product range, Bino was introduced to replace the Western product. The creation of Bino perhaps exemplifies the contradictions surrounding GDR brands. One the one hand, the name Bino, an abbreviation for Bitterfeld Nord, shows its ideological indebtedness by making a reference to the collective process involved in the creation of the new product (Tippach-Schneider, Bino 140), one the other hand, however, the new products had to compete against the brand recognition of its well-established predecessors and thus attempts were made to create alternatives that were phonetically similar to the lost brand-names. In addition, the package design was frequently similar to that of the original. The Bino bottle that incorporated the long neck design of the Maggi bottle is a case in point (140). Although many of the substitutes reached the quality standards of the originals, they had to fight an uphill battle to shed their image as substitutes or poor relations of the originals: many customers simply disqualified a product because it was manufactured in the East. The otherness of many of the products of the GDR, born out of political and economic necessity, as well as their attempts to establish their independent brand identities while at the same time trying to imitate their Western

equivalent was to remain their most distinguishing characteristic during their production and was to become once again significant in their *ostalgic* reincarnations.

In the early 1960s the situation changed dramatically. With the building of the Wall, the market of the GDR became effectively sealed off from the West. With the new political focus now turned to the GDR and the other Eastern Block countries, implicit or explicit competition with the West ceased to be a priority. Products were supposed to lose their substitute character and new political and aesthetic guidelines were issued to underscore the significance of the product culture of the GDR as documented by the affected packaging and product advertising. Largely gone was the old, prewar design, to be replaced by new socialist requirements.[14] Product adverting was soon coupled with a political message that not only emphasized the product, but also drew attention to the working conditions of the workers who made its production possible in the first place:

> Our aim is to inform about the company collective, about production brigades, about the leading managers, the eminent scientists, engineers, and workers, about the position of the company within the national economy, about the developments of suggestions, about the company's social and cultural programmes. (Tippach-Schneider, *Messemännchen* 12–13)[15]

A second, perhaps more immediately visible, consequence was that the GDR products and their communication design were radically changed. Gone was the homely, Norman Rockwell–style of imagery that characterized so many ads and product labels in the 1950s. The new aesthetics drew on the formalist tradition that frequently dispensed images and reduced them to geometrical elements. It is this type of design that emphasized function over pure aesthetics that is today most well known as the typical GDR design. Guidelines published in 1964 emphasize that package designs which reflect the contents and advertise it, are possible. If the packaging reflects the laws of our socialist aesthetics, then they will be pleasing to the eye of the consumer (Giersch 84). However, as mentioned before, none of these changes in direction were applied consistently and many products sporting the new socialist aesthetics could be found side by side with remnants from the previous periods, such as the liquid seasoning Bino.

Examples that highlight this contradiction are the East German Coca-Cola substitutes—Club-Cola and Vita-Cola. At first glance, given the politically sensitive nature of product development and branding in the GDR, it seems slightly puzzling that the powers in charge even permitted the

manufacture and marketing of a product that like no other is so symbolic for the cultural and political domination of US capitalism. As Miller points out, the signifying power of Coca-Cola is such that it becomes a meta-symbol. He claims the term Coca-Cola is one of three or four commodities that have obtained this status . . . The term Coca-Cola comes to stand, not just for a particular soft drink, but also for the problematic nature of commodities in general (Coca-Cola 170). However, for reasons unknown, when on October 14, 1954 the mineral water manufacturer and beer wholesaler Oskar Heinicke of Jena registered the name with the GDR patent office, his suggestion for a lemonade containing caffeine was warmly embraced.[16] Four years later, the Chemical Works Miltiz were able to supply the syrup base that, like Coca-Cola's ingenious system of franchising, could then be bottled locally by other independent manufacturers (Tweder, Stregel, Kurz 44–45). A particular ingredient was Ascorbic Acid (Vitamin C) that gave Vita-Cola its characteristic lemon taste. Vita-Cola, however, was not to remain the only Coke substitute in the GDR. After failed attempts to manufacture Coca-Cola as a joint venture in the GDR, another substitute for the original was needed, and in 1967 the brand Club-Cola was registered.[17] Again, reacting to the population's fondness of Coca-Cola, the new product attempted to overcome its substitute character by eliminating its lemon taste in an effort to emulate the quality of its American cousin while remaining entirely in East German hands. Again, the soft drink became a favourite with the consumers and its less sugary taste made it even more attractive to those who knew the original. In fact, the more palatable taste of Club-Cola was incidentally the direct result of scarce raw materials—its sugar content had been gradually reduced from 12 to 7 percent (47). An aftereffect of the popularity of Cola type drinks in the GDR was the proliferation of other smaller local brands that could bypass the cumbersome licencing process for the bigger brands, and names such as Quick-Cola, Disco-Cola, Inter-Cola, and the rather unfortunately named Prick-Cola started to appear (48–49). Although both Vita-Cola and Club-Cola became favourites, their widespread availability meant that they lacked the political associations with the West and were thus perceived as quite different from Coca-Cola that could only be purchased with hard, Western Currency. In Baudrillard's view of consumption as a communication system, the two colas, East and West, illustrate the fundamentally different significations of both products: although almost similar in taste, appearance, and packaging, Vita-Cola and Club-Cola had a radically different ideological and cultural valence as compared to the Western Coca-Cola. In fact, Coca-Cola was rarely consumed as a drink (only on special occasions) but was collected as a material witness of a world that was beyond the reach of most ordinary citizens of the GDR.

IV

With the monetary union of both German states, these status symbols of the other world suddenly became available to the ordinary citizen. A certain sales success was guaranteed simply because of their previously exclusive status. And predictably, among one of the first products to flood the Eastern market was the real Coca-Cola. While the soft drink's former status helped initial curiosity and ensured good sales in the East, its wide availability, obviously contrary to its perception, redefined its identity. In a radical resignification, it now became the everyday product as in the West, ceasing to be a symbol of unavailability. Predictably enough, lacking investment capital and distribution networks, the old *ersatz* colas that proliferated in the East did not stand a chance against the powerful competition form the West (Tweder, Stregel, Kurz 142). Who, after all, needs the substitute when s/he can get the original? And yet, in 1994, the East German company Thüringer Waldquell Mineralbrunnen reintroduced Vita-Cola. Some of the previously artificial ingredients were replaced by natural ones, but, most significantly, the characteristic lemon flavour, originally introduced to mask its lack of genuine ingredients, was retained, as was the design of its labels (Vita-Cola). In an almost complete reversal of events, the homegrown former substitute managed to replace the genuine Coca-Cola as a sales leader in Thuringia and held second place in the New Federal States (Vita-Cola).

Given the political significance of products from the West of being a metasymbol of Western consumer culture with all its ramifications may be part of the explanation why the product was rejected in a symbolic gesture when the residents of the New Federal States became disillusioned with their new economic system. And yet, I would claim that the continued success of genuine GDR brands such as Vita-Cola goes beyond a simple act of protest. The surprising success story of this product highlights Baudrillard notion of the sign exchange value (*Critique* 29) of products that are constantly under negotiation. In particular the radical resignification of Coca-Cola demonstrates the nature of this grammar of consumption. Ultimately devoid of a residual meaning, Coca-Cola and Vita-Cola have essentially changed places. This change in meaning is obviously symptomatic for the change in the morality system that surrounds both products. With the obvious social and economic upheaval in the New Federal States, an entire value system was lost and another, essentially that of the Federal Republic, had been substituted. The ensuing feelings of resentment when the price for the change had to be paid, with economic hardship of mass unemployment, are sufficiently well known. This new critical stance to everything that is highly symbolic is one of the reasons for the reinterpretation of the identities of many products. Interestingly, this critique of Coca-Cola is by no means an

isolated issue; it rather reflects a global resistance to mega brands that by their sheer size are simply seen as domineering:

> Coca-Cola may . . . be suffering for its dominance and confidence. As with McDonald's and Microsoft, resentment against ubiquitous American products better known for their marketing than their quality, long simmering on the margins of consumer society, has begun to spread. (Beckett)

One aspect of *Ostalgie* is thus that the current preoccupation with multinational brands is not specifically an East German issue; it does signal, however, that the new Federal States are firmly a part of the new global economy and are thus reacting to some of its developments. As in other societies, one of the prevalent forms of resistance to economic domination by foreign or transnational companies is the focus on smaller, local companies and their products. Thus, within the global arena, the reintroduction of local soft drinks in the GDR reflects this move away from the brand bullies, to use Klein's words[18]

> In addition to taking a stance against corporations that with their uniform selection of goods attempt to eradicate regional differences, the significance of the products surrounding *Ostalgie* goes beyond a mere protest; they respond to a specific concern of the residents of the New Federal States. As part of the rapidly disappearing material culture of the GDR, as well as representatives of a history that is largely ignored by official historiography, they form very distinct lieux de mémoire in Pierre Nora's sense. The reason is that these products signify a very specific corpus of knowledge that was necessary to be a successful consumer under the conditions of the GDR's planned economy. As previously pointed out, consumers in the GDR lacked many of the conveniences, such as branded identities, that their Western cousins could take for granted. Since brands are (strategically manipulated) signifiers for desirable qualities, they reduce the act of shopping to the simple memorization of a few desirable names or acronyms. Since many pre-war brands migrated with their owners into the West, Eastern consumers rarely had this luxury.[19] In addition, advertising and package design was—depending on the respective cultural and political developments—more or less severely limited in the GDR, consumers were again barred from this shortcut. A continuously unpredictable supply of goods, as well as erratic quality standards, demanded from consumers a much more intimate knowledge of their products than just the simple remembering of the right brand name. Hence, consumers had to develop an entire network of knowledge surrounding the selection, availability and treatment of their products for themselves. In the case of the cola type drinks discussed previously, this knowledge includes things such as knowing which store would stock the desirable soft drink at which particular time, which soft drinks better to avoid,[20] or which bottles to reject due to frequent quality problems with the fit of the sealing caps; some even went so far as to identify individual bottlers, printed on the

> product label, that seemed to have better quality standards than others. In short, the seemingly trivial act of purchasing soft drinks becomes a highly sophisticated task, involving intimate knowledge of the product, its packaging and distribution. The material product itself, then comes to stand for the knowledge that involves its purchase. As soft drinks discussed here are not an isolated case, but rather symptomatic for desirable goods in the GDR, one can conclude that a very specific form of social knowledge governed their consumption in the planned economy. Hence the former products come to embody a from of knowledge that was universally shared by everyone who consumed the GDR's products, which is its entire population, with perhaps the exception of the its highly privileged cadres. Since this knowledge is shared by almost every member of this society, the former residents of the GDR form a discourse community that defines itself by this knowledge—and distinguishes itself from the West Germans who are clearly outsiders to this discourse—thus validating its individual members by sharing these memories as a community. Our nostalgia for those aspects of our past that were . . . different becomes the basis for deepening our sentimental ties to others (Davis 43). Since the knowledge on how to be a successful consumer in a East Germany's planned economy is obsolete under the new consumer capitalism, it assumes a new currency as a *lieu de mémoire*. Now, a part of the communal memory, it facilitates the search for an East German identity. The objectives of this remembering are twofold: first, there is the desire to retain this knowledge, now that its factual usefulness has ceded; the moment of lieux de mémoire occurs at the same time that an immense and intimate fund of memory disappears (Nora 111–112). The second impetus behind the nostalgic recreation of the material culture of the past is political. Very much a personal response to discontinuities, it deliberately highlights the contradictions of the status quo by incorporating some of its elements in a synthesis of sorts into the present. As such we can understand the renaissance of products and brands of the GDR. Although they may retain their names, labels, some desirable characteristics, and frequently the communication design from the days of the GDR, these products are anything but GDR products. Their success would be more than doubtful without their adoption of Western quality standards. They do, however, by their sheer otherness and simply by beating the odds propose an alternative to the pervasiveness and slickness of Western consumerism. Their continued existence and rising popularity are not only testimony to their previous importance but also challenge views held by conservative business theoreticians, like Francis Fukuyama, who, in a strange reversal of the Marxist view of history, pronounced in 1989 the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution (4) supposedly brought about by the material blessings of neo liberalism. The way the material culture of East Germany has persisted and developed in the following decade has done little to validate Fukuyama's thesis. In retrospect, the resurgence of the material culture of this loser of history not only proves the existence of the contested GDR identity but also demonstrates the validity of experience and memory for the social and material construction of identities as underscored by Teresa de Lauretis's definition: Experience is the process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity

> is constructed. Through that process one places oneself or is placed in social reality and so perceives and comprehends as subjective (referring to, even originating in oneself) those relations material economic, and interpersonal which are in fact social, and, in a larger perspective, historical. (159)

If *Ostalgie* and its material culture are recognized and understood as remembered experience, as a part of German history, if they are viewed without the prejudices surrounding nostalgia, they can contribute to a more differentiated view of the German past and add some diversity to an increasingly uniform and branded landscape of material culture.

Notes

1. Nostalgie beflügelt Absatz von Ost-Produkten. All translations are my own.
2. For commercially available reproductions of GDR items, see, e.g., the following websites: http://www.mondosarts.de and http://kost-the-ost.de.
3. See in particular the collection of articles in Härtel and Kabus's *Das Westpaket.*
4. That this practice of displaying Western packages has been the object of Western satire demonstrates the large cultural gaps that existed between Eastern and Western consumer culture. See, e.g., Max Gold's column Quitten für die Menschen zwischen Emden und Zittau (160), originally published in February 1991 in the satirical magazine *Titanic.*
5. On the history of nostalgia see in particular Starobinski.
6. Da nimmt es auch nicht weiter Wunder, dass es einen manifesten Stigmatisierungsdiskurs gegenüber der anders gearteten Ostkultur und-erfahrung und natürlich deren Trägern, den Ostdeutschen, gibt. So verlor das Ostvolk nicht nur seine Illusionen. Es verlor auch sein Prestige als Volk, das . . . von sich sagen konnte, dass es das Volk sei . . . Aus dem Volk der Revolutionäre wurde ein Haufen undankbarer Nostalgiker.
7. Ostalgie ist eine Praxis von Laien.
8. 1990, im Jahr der Währungsunion, produzierten die Ostdeutschen 19.1 Millionen Tonnen Müll. Pro Kopf warem das 1.2 Tonnen, fast das Dreifache dessen, was im gleichen Jahr im Westen anfiel. Die DDR wurde in den Müll geschmissen.
9. Gleich, ob die Objekte als Ergebnisse planvollen politischen Handels erscheinen oder als ihr Gegenbild, das wir Nischenkultur zu nennen uns gewöhnt haben, politische und gesellschaftliche Prozesse schlagen sich in den Alltagsobjekten und in einer intensiven Beobachtung des Landes nieder . . . . Dieser Prozess fand mit den Ereignissen von 1989/90 nicht sein Ende, sondern setzte sich fort, wenn auch nicht beschränkt auf die mediengerechten Themen Treuhand und Stasi, fort. Die Ausstellung baut, gerade um der Verengung der Debatte um die DDR zu begegnen, auf Kommunikation, auf das durch die alltäglichen Objekte angeregte Gespräch.
10. Die in der öffentlichen Debatte durch den Begriff Ostalgie nahegelegte kollektive verklärende Rückbesinnung auf ein vorgeblich besseres Vorher fand in der Ausstellung keine Bestätigung.
11. On branding in consumer capitalism see esp. the first chapter of Klein's study.

12. . . . warteten mit den klassischen Merkmalen ihrer DDR-Heimat auf: grobschlächting, schwer zu handhaben, irgendwie altmodisch und auf eine sehr persönliche Weise gehaßliebt.
13. For a history of early food extracts and seasonings, such as Maggi see Grimm, pp. 50–52, who quotes a jingle for Maggi written by Frank Wedekind.
14. These guidelines were notoriously vague, but stipulated that all newly designed packages had to be submitted to the committee for packaging of the GDR. This committee then approved the design if the appearance of the product reflects the regulations of our socialist aesthetics, it will give the customer aesthetic pleasure and enjoyment (Giersch 84).
15. Es wird informiert über das betriebliche Kollektiv, über die Produktionsbrigaden, über die die Leitungskräfte, über hervorragende Wissenschaftler, Konstrukteure und Arbeiter, über die Stellung des Betriebes in der Volkswirtschaft und in der internationalen Wirtschaft, über den Entwicklungsstand der Neuererbewegung, über betriebliche und kulturelle Einrichtungen.
16. This is all the more puzzling when seen in the light of the lasting official resistance to another American icon, the Levis Jeans. For one of the best descriptions of the sigificance of jeans in the early 1970s see Ulrich Plenzdorf's *Die Neuen Leiden des Jungen Werthers.*
17. Following the lead of the Soviet Union, Coke's main competitor, Pepsi-Cola was manufactured under license in the GDR from between 1977 and 1980. Due to the high price, of 1 M, twice the price of Club-Cola, the joint venture was abandoned (Stregel, Tweder, pp. 54–55).
18. The same phenomenon can also be observed in Russia where Coca-Cola has to face a massive loss of its market share and attempts to jump on the bandwagon by manufacturing soft drink concoctions known from the Soviet period: In a reverse of the cultural imperialism of Coca-Cola's aggressive invasion of Russia in the early 1990s, the firm has been forced to make concessions to local demand . . . Last month's announcement of a move into nostalgic Soviet era drinks marks the business's latest attempt to squeeze a profit out of Russian consumers who are increasingly apathetic toward coke itself (Gentleman).
19. A notable exception here is the Florena brand of cosmetics that was well respected in the GDR and continues its success today (Florena).
20. Here the example of the rather unfortunate apple-peppermint juice mix comes to mind: an emergency development in 1977 when the manufacturer did not receive its allotment of lemons that had to be bought with hard currency (Tweder, Stregel, Kurz 51).