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The Making of the Consumer

Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World

**Edited by
Frank Trentmann**

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From Stigma to Cult
Changing Meanings in East German Consumer Culture
Ina Merkel

It is astonishing: an enraptured outcry travelled through East Germany when the hazelnut-filled chocolate bar Bambina (thought to be lost) appeared again on supermarket shelves. Shortly thereafter a prominent actor wistfully remembered the Trabant: 'It smelled terrible, was loud and uncomfortable, but one loved it, what else could one have loved'.¹ The company Rondo (the only coffee production company in the GDR) is in profit again, the cigarette brands F6 and Cabinet have gained cult status and in East German bars and kiosks one can buy Club-Cola, which leaves a furry residue in one's mouth. The symbols of a ridiculed, meagre, easily disposable culture of consumption have today become the starting point of happy remembrance. And as if this were not enough, young girls buy blue T-shirts with the socialist emblem of the Ernst-Thälmann-Pioneers, and on the streets young men walk about with the script Interflug (a GDR-airline) emblazoned on their chests. The ice-skating star Katarina Witt poses in a blouse of the socialist youth organization FDJ for the magazine *Super-Illu*, and next to her a colleague from the West is dressed in a brown tracksuit of the former army sports team.

Company logos and advertising slogans, even the symbols of political culture, are wantonly incorporated into fashion and everyday aesthetics. The GDR – which became defunct as a 'society of shortage',² failing in the competition of social systems – celebrates its resurrection as, of all things, a brand (see Figure 9). The commercialisation of the GDR past reached a new peak in the summer of 2003 in nostalgic retro-shows in public as well as commercial television programmes. In public discourse this phenomenon has become known as *Ostalgie* (Ostalgia).³

Ostalgia takes its pictures, images and symbols, its signs of remembrance, mainly from the field of consumption – as is customary in every wave of nostalgia – but also from political culture. The everyday world of the GDR and the objects people lived with more or less casually received their symbolic character retrospectively. This happened in such a way that people today are able to gain a belated distinction and new admiration. Ostalgia is, in the first instance, a politics of identity.

Ostalgia is embedded in a discursive field. On the surface it concerns the negotiation of cultural hegemony between West and East Germans. The change in political



Figure 9 Young Girls Wearing GDR Symbols, 2003

Note: From left: 'Mondos' = condom, 'Held der Arbeit' = hero of labour, JP = Junge Pioniere (youth organization), GDR emblem, 'Interflug' = GDR airline.

Source: Andre Kowalski, *Super-Illu + RTL Sonderheft*, No. 1 (2003), p. 6.

systems, which involved a transfer of institutions and elites from West to East Germany as well as a Western-dominated process of economic transformation, has been publicly discussed in ethnic terms: 'The West Germans vs. the East Germans'.⁴ Consumer culture is especially suited for this discursive negotiation, since it had always been a highly politicized sphere in the competition between systems – which the GDR lost. Hence the label a 'society of scarcity' or *Mangelgesellschaft*.

The comparison with the Western world of consumption offered a decisive opportunity for the voting out of the system, both in the exodus and the elections of 1990. After 1989 the whole world of Eastern objects was thrown away and treated as waste. There has never been a more radical devaluation of everyday life in history and to a great extent it was driven by people living in the GDR. Why is it that now the GDR is fondly, even euphorically remembered with regard to consumption? How can we explain that the symbols of the system – initially associated with terms like a state of injustice, (welfare) dictatorship and command economy – came to be reabsorbed so easily? Why do new generations use the design, brands and slogans of the product culture of the GDR in the expression of their everyday aesthetics? How can this change of interpretation from stigma to cult, or what Wolfgang Engler has called the shift from the notion of scandal to the notion of festivity,⁵ be explained?

Objects of consumption are energized with meanings that lie beyond the immediate process of consumption (purchase, use, design). A polysemic repertoire of consuming signs emerges that is used in different contexts of interpretation. The same objects can be invoked as representations of a political system as well as signs of everyday life. Such signs and symbols are principal forms for negotiating fundamental questions about the value systems of the two parts of Germany, that is questions about repression and freedom, individuality and community, distinction and equality. The discourse of consumption therefore functions as proxy for debates surrounding the problems of reunification, the transformation of East German society and the rapprochement or polarisation of the two German cultures. Like no other, consumption is a particularly rich sphere for this symbolic discourse, because it is immediately connected to the experience of individuals and issues of maintaining one's life as well as designing one's lifestyle.

This chapter explores the transformation of people's relationships to material objects since the collapse of the GDR at three discursive levels. At first desired and loved, objects were later hated, rejected, hidden or forgotten. Or they were ridiculed and scorned, but then rediscovered in the trash bin, pitied, exoticized and raised to the level of cult object. The cycle from purchase, use, disposal and reappropriation has been energized and accelerated in a previously unknown fashion since the collapse of the socialist system. It has resulted in a simultaneity of conflicting practices. These reflect individual experiences with East German cultures of consumption, biographical ruptures after reunification, new opportunities and the first encounters with a foreign land.

At a second level, this chapter concerns the public speaking and handling of GDR cultures of consumption, their consumers, practices and objects. The dominant discourse has seen a significant interpretative change from scandalizing or stigmatizing objects to that of incorporating them into museums and festivals. Ethnic representations, the use of irony and commercialisation can be identified as three discursive counter-movements in this process. The different politics of identity that have emerged, however, cannot be reduced to clearly defined social positions such as class, generation or milieu. There are discursive alliances between West German Christian Democracy and East German dissidents in the dominant discourse, while cultural counter-movements bring together Western participants in Ostalgia with youth subcultures, East German pensioners, artists and entrepreneurs. We are therefore dealing with situational forms of behaviour. East Germans share a collective experience of the collapse of the socialist regime and reunification, but they occupy a range of different positions and interpretations. A third level concerns the re-establishment of old GDR brands after reunification in a market setting. Depending on target groups and their positioning in regional or European contexts, marketing strategies appealed to modern lifestyles or to a sense of solidarity and patriotism.

These three discursive levels stand in dialogue with each other, sometimes addressing each other, sometimes moving in opposite directions. What they share is a pejorative view of Ostalgia whenever strategies of remembrance carry a positive sense of the GDR. The label Ostalgia is reserved for the strategic mobilisation of the East German past designed to add positive cultural value to East German life. Within these politics of identity it is not possible to see any clear positive reflection on the political system of the GDR. Rather, distinct aspects of East German life, cultural particularities, social structures and even political practices are remembered and represented in distance, opposition or resistance to the former political system. Ostalgia, in other words, is not nostalgia in the literal sense. Instead of a nostalgic culture of remembrance, it is about East Germans insisting on their specific identity. Thus they declare themselves implicitly as an oppressed, even 'colonial', part of German culture. Ostalgia is ascriptive and serves the labelling of the identity politics of East Germans. It is a term that classifies certain strategies by East Germans in the lifeworld as backward looking and inadequate,⁶ ranging from the cultural critique of the process of transformation to West German hegemony in all aspects of economics and political and academic life.

Metamorphoses of Relations to Objects: The Trabant⁷

The Trabant has been particularly suited for the symbolic appropriation of East German objects and offers a case study of the multiple changes of meanings attached to the GDR in general,⁸ and to consumer culture in particular. After the worst shortages of the post-war era had passed, the dream of the average East German centred on a car of one's own. Resulting from a mixture of enthusiasm for technology, the fantasy of wealth and the wish to service the needs of the population, the GDR aimed at the production of a small car. Because of a lack of raw materials, Duraplast was invented for the chassis – the origin of the nickname 'Rennpappe'⁹ (racing cardboard).

In GDR times the range of cars was very limited. There was the home-produced Wartburg, also a two-stroke engine and various cars from other socialist countries, such as the Skoda, Dacia, Polski-Fiat and Lada in even more limited numbers. The Trabant was and remained the most prominent car on the streets, its design staying the same over a long period of time. It was a typical, small car with simple technological functions. It was robust, easily repaired by the owners themselves, easy to care for and in the pale colours typical of the time. As the waiting time for a car increased – between the 1960s and the end of the 1980s it had increased to 14 years – the car had to be constantly cared for. On the used-car market, five-year-old cars were still selling for the original price and even more.

This may have been acceptable in the 1950s and 1960s, because for many people a car only then became affordable, but owing to the expansion of wealth in the 1970s the status of the car was downgraded from luxury to that of an object of

everyday life. Demand now heavily exceeded supply. Under these circumstances one was happy to be able to have a car at all. Dissatisfaction with the old-fashioned, not very efficient, slow, loud and uncomfortable car was reflected in loving, ironic comments: *Kugelporsche* (ball Porsche), *Hutschachtel* (hatbox), *Karton de Blamage* (embarrassment box). In short, people had little choice. Use value exceeded the value of social distinction. When the Wall came down, masses of GDR citizens drove across the border in Trabants, where West Germans laughed at the cars, viewed them as curiosities and were annoyed because of the smell they made. The masses of single identical cars, full of people in faded jeans, queuing in front of banks to collect their welcome money and then rushing to the discount supermarket Aldi, caused negative associations in the West: here they come, the poor brothers and sisters.

The Trabant became the symbol for the ambivalence of the fall of the Wall. At the same time as the peaceful revolution was being celebrated, the devaluation of the GDR continued, a process partly driven by GDR citizens themselves. The Trabant became a stigma, the people who drove them an enigma, an amazing race of drivers: what, you waited for years just to get a car like this? No sooner was the West German mark there than Trabants were abandoned by the roadside in large numbers, given away or sold for a symbolic mark. Many had only one thing on their minds, to get rid of the Trabant as quickly as possible and never to have to drive one again. This process of devaluation, from everyday object to waste and worthlessness, was fast and steady. After only a few years Trabants had almost completely disappeared from the streets.

Interestingly, already by 1991 the Trabant had become the subject for a successful movie. A Trabant by the name of Schorsch was the main character in *Go, Trabi, go!*,¹⁰ a road movie in which a family drives all the way from Saxony to Rome after the fall of the Wall. The car of the simple man, with the possibility of erecting a tent for three people on the roof, cheap, often broken, slow but practical, was looked upon with astonishment – a phenomenon. All the characteristics of reunification are there in the movie, though in a rather atypical fashion for the time. It allowed East Germans a liberating, rehabilitating but also a valedictory laugh. The very short time, only one month, between abandoning Trabis in droves and its symbolic revaluation in a movie is symptomatic for the process of reunification; things happened abruptly and simultaneously and people behaved in seemingly contradictory manners.

Only three years after reunification a huge advertisement at Tegel (Berlin) airport proclaimed 'Rent a Trabant!' in English. The sign signalled a change in interpretation. The company was marketing a 'lost' feeling. Rarity made the Trabant again desirable, but not for everybody. The English slogan is not only funny; it points to the target audience, foreigners, West Germans and the young, people who had never had to drive it. Distinction stemmed from rarity. Nowadays there are Trabant-safaris through the Märkische Schweiz and Ostalgia tours through Mecklenburg in a Trabant. Driving through the streets in one is as sensational as a veteran car show.



Figure 10 Trabi as Advertising Medium, 2004

Source: Ina Merkel, Berlin, 2004.

In the following years the Trabant was used for art and advertisements (see Figure 10). People changed it into a convertible or just kept it in a shed, to forget it or hoping for its resurrection as a valuable oldie. Almost simultaneously with its disappearance, it became a cult object (in the private sphere) and museum piece (in the public sphere).

From rubbish to exhibition piece to cult status – this is the normal metamorphosis of objects in modern consumer societies, when they are no longer used in everyday life. Normally there are decades between these phases. The uniqueness of the collapse of the GDR is that this process happened at an unbelievable pace and all at once. While the last hardy Trabant drivers were still fighting for their next MOT, they could already see the car in a museum. Such objects did not lose their value slowly and steadily; they became rubbish and immediately reached the museum stage.¹¹ A current part of life was suddenly consigned to the past. This is, however, a prerequisite to qualify as ‘old’ and thus to gain ‘nostalgic beauty’, that is, to stimulate a historical conscience.¹² Those who conserved objects thus afterwards appeared as ‘saviours’ – not only of a lost product culture but of their identity.

These saved objects offer continuity in the process of transformation. They convey identity and familiarity. In this context the notion of something being East

German serves as a counter-identity, acting against the characteristics claimed by the outside; that is, they are put forth instrumentally. After the aestheticizing of the object, one can see a new, more performative revaluation. The Trabant is assigned a modern experience value. Youngsters from East as well as from West Germany now use it again, not for reasons of distinction but to experience a retrospective sense of collectiveness and common interest.

When the Trabant is invoked in Ostalgia shows as a sign of remembrance, it is not about past and present usage but about the way of life of East Germans in Germany today. The Trabant is transformed into a symbol of the collapse of the GDR and the subsequent process of transformation. Fifteen years after reunification East Germany has no car production of its own. In the Wartburg town of Eisenach, Opel has an assembly plant, and in Leipzig BMW is building a new production site. However, these are essentially extended workbenches from the West, which are often the only jobs available in the region. When viewers are then reminded in TV shows of the long wait to acquire a Trabant, it is in the first place not an association with shortage but with social security and continuity. In GDR times not only could one be certain of getting a car in twelve to fourteen years time and that it would probably look exactly like that of one’s parents, but one was also certain of still having a job and probably the same one at that.

The Trabant became a symbol for social security and state care, creating a picture of a community of solidarity; people were there for each other because they had the same social interests and they all lived under similar social conditions. From a Western point of view it was a state-regulated life, an ordered collectivity. At the same time, the Trabant is a symbol for the liberation from those conditions that were perceived as restrictive. At the East-side gallery (a piece of the remaining Wall with pictures painted on the East Berlin side) a Trabant is shown breaking through the Wall (see Figure 11).

For some it is a symbol of self-liberation, for others the path to Western democracy and freedom. As a symbol, the Trabant thus stands in the midst of a cultural contestation between rival interpretations of an ambivalent past and a problematic present. It stands for the devaluation of East Germans within German society, as well as for the fight against this. The Trabant may have had a particularly pronounced symbolic polyvalence, but much of the changing engagement with it can be found elsewhere. Especially for high-quality industrial commodities, use value exceeded that of a value of social distinction. This was partly the result of a utopian socialist project; objects were made to last, not to serve social distinction. In a society aiming at social equality, little consideration was given to status distinction. Except for a small number of well-designed commodities that today can be admired in design museums, industrial products often looked cheap, pragmatic, raw and unsophisticated. Early on, the desires of East German consumers turned West.

In the GDR the benchmark of desire was the product world of the West. Western products were more colourful, more modern and cheaper. One did not have to queue

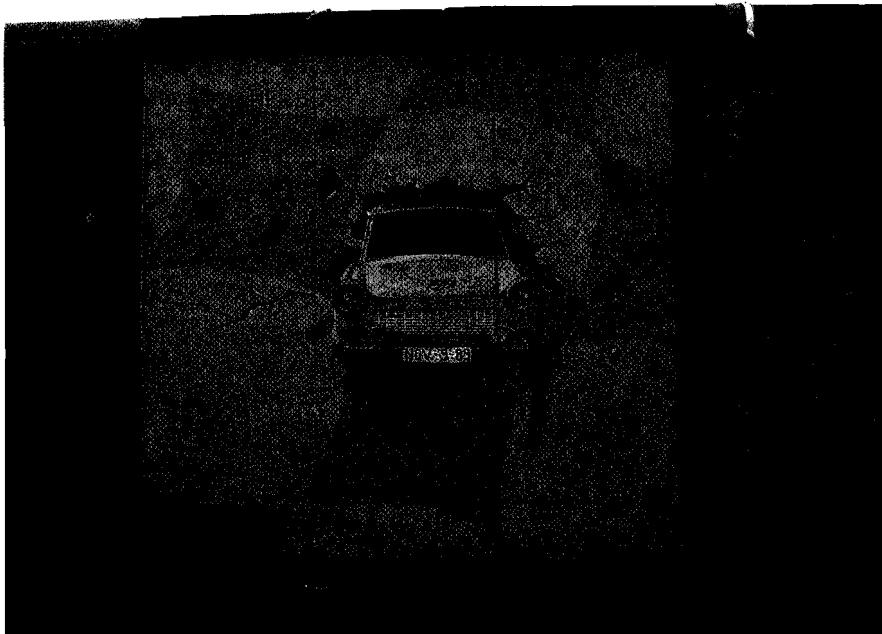


Figure 11 Graffiti Painted at the Berlin Wall, the So-Called East-Side Gallery, 2004

Source: Ina Merkel, Berlin, 2004.

for these things but could decide in freedom according to one's wallet (GDR citizens were pulled into the West in large numbers).¹³ Desire did not stem from shortage or need – there was enough to eat and drink and enough clothing in the GDR – but from a cultural yearning for affluence. It was a question of taste, of everyday aesthetics and an altered interpretation of value, which has been aptly described by Gerhard Schulze as a change to an *Erlebnisgesellschaft*, a society of adventure and emotional experience. 'If the mark doesn't come to us, we shall go to it' was one of the sayings of the legendary Monday demonstrations in Leipzig. The self-deprecation was logical, but it was not necessarily promoted in the West. West Germans found East Germans uncomfortable. They mocked their unruly consumerism, their need to catch up and their lack of restraint. East Germans appeared to West Germans as lower class and as having very little distinction. Interestingly, the picture of the ubiquitous desire for bananas demonstrated this better than the picture of the car.¹⁴

With the onset of the currency union in 1990, a complete change of material culture began, East against West. Overnight the stores were completely restocked with West products, GDR products disappearing from the shelves. Private households got rid of their clothing, furniture and everyday objects and swapped them for products of Western provenance. Cars were given away or simply left at the roadside. GDR

objects had lost their value. This meant the end for many companies whose markets collapsed overnight. As one commentator observed:

Sometimes happily, sometimes with sadness, almost everything was thrown away, those things which the people had lived with for years and which carried their memories. Attached to the new world of objects were no intelligible life signs. The institutions and their rules inherent in these objects held nothing familiar for them and they carried no memories either good or bad. Everything that was new in the East came from another world. Invisible for the East Germans, it was primed with the world of experiences of other generations, who lived in another country.¹⁵

It was not until years later that GDR citizens realized that when they discarded their belongings, they had also rid themselves of their memories and biographies.

Counter-movements

The self-deprecation of East Germans as well as their stigmatization by West Germans created counter-movements early on. The older generations especially refused to be part of consigning their lifeworld to the rubbish bin. They practised restraint; after all, these objects had cost a lot of money (industrial products were very expensive), a lot of energy and time (the waiting, looking for these things or making them yourself). Preserving and collecting, however, are inconspicuous, private forms of consumption.

Alongside those who threw things away appeared the first collectors, who picked up the things that had just been thrown away or who consciously bought typical GDR products. They were not concerned with the value of the objects but wanted the pale packaging that remained from the 1960s, or the funny names that these objects carried, such as *Tempolinsen*. These collectors (especially young West Germans but also East Germans) who fished out these curiosities and strange objects with an unwavering instinct were the protagonists of a counter-movement, which could be described as original Ostalgia. The saviours of a lost culture, they formed the basis for the real nostalgia: the wallowing in the disappeared.

As soon as everything had been thrown away, the remaining objects acquired rarity value. The saving of poor packaging or old-fashioned designs after the products had been devalued had something touching. The corpse had been robbed, now one could grieve over it. Particularly because of the seriousness with which many products promised useful value, they were seen as friendly ironic representatives of a different, admittedly rather strange world. The purity of *Tempolinsen*, *Mitropa*-cutlery or *ATA* brought the alternative social concept of socialism more to the fore than any political rhetoric had ever been able to. Suddenly, GDR products reincorporated the utopia from a different (better) world; since it had just fallen apart, it was now only possible to approach this utopia in an ironic way. At the first private East parties, little private

altars were created in apartments with strange combinations of Lenin sculptures, a coffee cup from the Palace of the Republic, children's soap and medals. A distanced and mocking but caring affinity to the products of the East was nourished, a form of intellectual Ostalgia.

This ironic reinterpretation rehabilitated objects. They were ritually removed from everyday life and accorded cult status. It became fashionable to wander through flea markets looking for curiosities. The GDR now represented a collectors' terrain with rarity value. Objects increased in value quickly, particularly for those who had never lived in the GDR. They were easily incorporated into distinctive civilian and youth-oriented lifestyles. Suddenly it was cool to drive through the streets on a Schwalbe moped.¹⁶ In a private context the cult association served the stylized development of individuality. Old objects have become such rarities that their possession provides distinction.

Table 1 Metamorphoses of Relations to GDR Consumer Goods

<i>Time</i>	<i>Dominant practices</i>	<i>Counter-movements</i>
GDR period	Use value Waiting, searching, procuring	Distinction value Unloved, profane, desire for Western goods
Reunification, 1989–1991	Devaluation, disposal/waste	Conservation, biographical value
Transformation, since 1992	Indifference, rot, forgetting	Preserving, collecting, rediscovering, exoticizing, cult, Western Ostalgia, irony, performative qualities

The metamorphoses of meanings are not yet complete. The GDR's world of consumption appears in ever-new varieties to the eyes of the astonished public. But are these possibilities of interpretation really that new and original? Notwithstanding the speed and simultaneity of the interpretive process, why define it with a specific term, such as Ostalgia?

Struggle for Recognition: The Invention of a Community for all East Germans

The term Ostalgia carries an ethnic undertone that points to the continuing existence of a separate East German culture. Initially its continuation was noted with astonishment; now it has become accepted. It was assumed that socialism had not left a deep mental and cultural imprint, but rather that the nation had established

long-lasting legacies. If viewed in a strictly political context, this initial expectation is understandable. Once the perspective shifts to everyday culture, however, significant differences emerge that transcend a simple contrast between regimes of plenty and scarcity. In consumption, in particular, different cultural value systems come into contact and conflict concerning different expectations of leading a life and organizing everyday practices. If the West is associated with choice, fashion, comfort and convenience, positive values in the East are associated with social security, equality and social justice. The latter concerns not only a secure job, but also informed consumption: expectations of low rents and low costs of transport and childcare, holiday provision, culture and education as well as subsidized utilities, food and children's clothing.

In the course of economic transformation in the 1990s, unemployment jumped to almost 25 per cent. Savings were mostly exhausted and it had been difficult to build up equity in the East. The recent debate about 'shrinking cities' reflects not only declining birth rates and rising migration to the West, but also the rapid impoverishment of large sections of Eastern communities. One outlet for this enormous potential for conflict is the battle over meanings and recognition attached to the East German past.

The contestation of the place and meanings of East German consumer culture has been characterized by several cultural developments:

1. *Stigmatization*: The product culture of the GDR is devalued as cheap, old-fashioned and profane. A mockingly sarcastic book that appeared in 1990, *SED-Schönes Einheits Design* by Georg C. Bertsch and Ernst Hedler, gives such examples as 'scratchy razors', the 'worker in his broken and stinking Trabant', 'porous and softened dustbin liners', 'fossils' that were 'good and cheap' twenty to thirty years earlier in West Germany. The authors wanted to create an 'archaeology of world brands'.¹⁷ They photographed abnormal window displays of old flowers, piled up cans and political solutions, packaging, plasticine eggcups, razors and hair rollers. 'We are bewildered by these objects; we do not know really how to handle them. We find them shabby ... if one touches them the bewilderment grows'.¹⁸ The repulsiveness could hardly be hidden. 'The products that developed "over there" have a banal identity, not really developed, rather improvised, but at the same time they have a humane identity precisely because they are not perfect'.¹⁹ The GDR is exposed as ridiculous.

2. *Museum Representation and Scandalization*: In the immediate wake of reunification the first exhibitions of the GDR started. The posters of the legendary demonstration of 4 November 1989 in Berlin were collected by eager co-workers and only days later exhibited in the foyer of the historical museum. Through their exhibition, objects acquired new meanings well beyond their use value. In the case of the GDR these meanings emanated from a political East–West discourse. The exhibition of objects 'from above' through state-supported museums, such as the German Historical Museum, takes its patterns of meaning mostly from the

political system.²⁰ Wolfgang Engler has noted a 'scandalization of the GDR', that is, a political interpretation of everyday life in terms of Stasi, command economy and repression. This meaning pervaded the exhibition of GDR objects as 'rubbish'. In early exhibits of GDR history, objects were shown just as they had been pulled out from the rubbish: dirty, damaged, worn and wrinkled.²¹

3. *Denial, Indignation*: Scandalisation triggered a protective instinct among those who themselves had just thrown objects away. This was not the way that the act of disposal had been meant. The 'battle of pictures' (*Bilderstreit*) in Weimar in 1999 captured the sense of public indignation. Here a mass of pictures had been hung along trucking tarpaulin in a multi-purpose hall. West German politicians, civil servants and businessmen were attacked as 'colonizers'.

4. *Museum Representation from below/an Ironic Turn*: Since the middle of the 1990s there have been some attempts to describe the GDR from the perspective of everyday life.²² In particular the Documentation Centre of Everyday Culture of the GDR in Eisenhüttenstadt has contributed cultural-historical exhibitions that seek to connect lifeworld and system via personal biographies. The exhibition 'Wunderwirtschaft' (miracle economy) in Berlin in 1996 played with Western as well as Eastern clichés of GDR consumer culture. A 'room of 1,000 little things', for example, showed hundreds of aluminium household goods hanging from the ceiling. Here was an irony of scarcity as well as of the production policy of the GDR, where big industries like shipbuilding were obliged to produce meat mincers. An Intershop was represented as a dark room, where blinking light chains led the visitor into the Holy of Holies: a small carousel of goods behind glass, showing brandy, cigarettes and nylon stockings. The room carried the scent of the West, a combination of coffee, washing powder and orange peel that was replaced on a weekly basis.

5. *Aesthetic Appropriation*: At the time of writing [2004] a new trend can be observed: the GDR product world is being aestheticized in select design exhibitions. In a new wave of collecting and representation the objects are carefully cleaned, placed behind glass and illuminated with spotlights. They are rescued from anonymity, from the namelessness and the mass product and instead placed in the biographical context of their inventors and designers. Visitors learn about the conflicts of the period, about production figures and the use of objects. They press their faces close to the exhibits, and one can overhear how they proudly tell their grandchildren that once they possessed an identical object.

6. *Commercialisation*: Once the remembrance of objects had become popular, marketing strategies became linked to the museum-representation of the GDR. Objects first appeared fleetingly in second-hand markets, then in bars and restaurants and finally on the T-shirt. By now, signs and symbols of political as well as consumer culture have become a regular part of modern experience. Games appeared in which participants had to run away from the Stasi, queue for a flat or collect stickers for best performance. Personal ID cards and boxes with survival kit appeared for sale, all with an ironic touch.

The label Ostalgia not only provides a distinct East German culture with sentimentality or irony against the interpretive power of West German culture, it is also an aggressively used market niche, a tough commercial process. Most significantly, Ostalgia is a post-modern game with changing identities on offer. The phenomenon of Ostalgia is no longer about a regime of shortage but about the logic of superfluity, that is, about consumers who assemble their worlds of consumption from the many different objects and styles on offer, creating styles and aesthetics in different ways, in which the objects, stars and even political symbols of the lost GDR can be placed without any problems.

7. *Becoming a Festival*: If the above discursive developments point to a gradually more differentiated engagement with the GDR, the so-called Ostalgia television shows move in the opposite direction. Different strands and meanings are mixed together: a little bit of scandal (Stasi or doping), a spoonful of indignation by the little man, a dose of resistance, rounded off with a pinch of state welfare. Thrown together, the effect is that of suggesting a shared sense of community amongst all East Germans. The East shows represent the provisional climax of the new wave of Ostalgia, as public and commercial television achieved unexpectedly high viewing figures in 2003. Ostalgia shows follow the same pattern as any other retro-show of the 1950s, 1960s or 1970s; past times are remembered fondly, sometimes with self-irony, sometimes with melancholy. Objects of everyday life function as prompts for remembrance, objects that today come across as ludicrous, poor or unexpectedly trendy; or forgotten stars are brought back from oblivion, most of them now fat and old but still hopping around merrily. The props, the music and the clothing of the presenters are chosen to match the occasion. For older viewers the pleasure of seeing former stars again dominates (along with a little malicious delight that the years have not passed unnoticed). For younger viewers there is the surprise that one wore such ugly things in those days, or that one already had such trendy stuff then. Producers and viewers have come to an agreement to see the past from its funny side. After all, it is the period of one's youth that is remembered – celebrated as innocent, free and beautiful.

Retro and Ostalgia shows give a similar kind of pleasure – with one crucial difference – and it was about this that the press wrote with such fulsome and hasty indignation: the contested past of the GDR could not simply be transfigured in such a way. As a result of heated debate, political events began to be incorporated in Ostalgia shows. A victim of Stasi persecution, who was forced into prostitution, told the story of her recruitment from behind an opaque glass wall using a distorted voice. A refugee showed the audience her pullover, which got caught on the wall when she was trying to flee. Camp prisoners, election forgers and dissenters appeared. Doping, the young pioneers and censorship were some of the topics talked about and these were really not funny. Whilst it is relatively easy to incorporate a sentimental touch into a programme, it is considerably more complicated to incorporate political indignation. Viewers, however, understood that it was necessary to show an act

of political correctness. They listened as intently to Berghofer, the former mayor of Dresden, who disputed his involvement with the Stasi in a credible way, while admitting to having taken part in the forgeries at the community elections in 1989, as they did to Rainer Eppelmann, the dissident pastor, who was instrumental in exposing them. In the mutual applause that followed, a strange unanimity developed amongst the audience.

In the shows created by West German producers with the help of East German editors and presenters, a number of typical thought patterns appeared that have become rooted in the memories of East and West Germans since reunification. In the six episodes alone of the *mdr* show 'Ein Kessel GDR', the following objects became triggers for elaborate chains of association. The triangular bathing trunks for men, small, tight and with white stripes, became the symbolic means to discuss the subject of nudism or FKK, a form of popular culture and alternative holiday. In another sequence a highly polished white Wartburg convertible gave way to the comparatively humble Trabant. In that particular episode the general topic was waiting times, bartering and the problem of getting hold of spare parts. A stall with southern fruits, grown by an amateur gardener in a self-built greenhouse, displayed the slogan: 'Necessity is the mother of invention'. Piles of parcels from the West illustrated the topic of relatives living in the West, status distinctions and Intershop. The display of a pram led from the topic of support for families with many children, to community care of children and, finally, to the pioneer organizations.

Embedded in all these topics was an underlying reference to austerity and shortage. Previously a matter of scandal, it was now about a display of cultural practices, their evolution, of inventiveness, improvisation and bartering, which illustrated the principles of solidarity. The message was: people learnt to get by with very little. In hindsight this regime of shortage is now even positively compared to the West and its culture of superfluity. Money, apparently, was not a consideration. The people of the GDR present themselves as consumers who had their own, if peculiar and often resistant, ways of coping with organized shortage. The difficult business of everyday life was mastered with humour. In this new media narrative it was from this position that the citizens of the GDR were able to distance themselves from the political system, and that gave them the strength to eventually disempower the system in a peaceful way. Consumer culture, then, is assigned a political interpretation: a slowly erupting volcano, ready to destroy the government of the GDR.

This narrative serves a basic pattern of nostalgia. It was not necessarily better then – it is not about making pictures of a perfect world – but it was more exciting. It was a world full of challenges; people may have been poor, but they were happy. It is a reconstruction that aims at recognition, from West Germans as much as from one's own children – recognition for being disciplined and hard working and at the same time resistant, able to cope with shortages and being creative. These are qualities which, according to this view, are missing from the later generation. It is also claimed that a distinct form of individuation took place in the context of a fate-

ridden community. Emphasis is placed on the great joy people experienced when receiving something for which they had waited for a long time – a satisfaction felt to be missing since the collapse of the Wall.

The ability to enjoy at a time of shortage has been the second topic of the Ostalgia shows. People remember the well-known but long-lost taste of coffee and chocolate, of tasty sausages and hot mustard, of sweet wines and gherkins – a taste that mattered little at that time of scarcity. Then people were keen to pursue the taste of the big wide world. Even Western yoghurt was bought at an Intershop when extra foreign currency was available. A bar of Western chocolate beat the peculiar cocoa-biscuit-mix by miles. By contrast, in the Ostalgia shows celebrities now happily eat Nudossi, the Nutella of the East, by the spoonful. In these shows, taste creates a collective identity for all East Germans.

Through the continuing cultural contestation of the GDR, a peculiar national character is invented, marked by genuineness, equality and justice: the noble savage. Unspoilt by any commercialisation, the East German here maintains a pure, original hedonism (the poor man can still be happy), genuine morality and free sexuality, social solidarity and the ability to improvise. It echoes the myth of the noble savage with patterns of infantilism.²³

To reinforce this sentimental representation, old East German pop songs are played again, with the audience humming along enthusiastically. Sometimes the mood resembles that of older folklore programmes; members of the audience discreetly wipe a tear from the corner of their eye or clap along with the music. There is growing pride in regional stars, even though they never succeeded in conquering the big wide world and still only possess a certain provincial charm. In 'Kessel Bunes' – the original GDR show – the highlight had always been a Western star, a memory repressed in the recent Ostalgia shows.

Sporting celebrities, singers, actors and even politicians are presented as typical people in the GDR. They present themselves as if they shared everyday life with their audience (irrespective of their minor or considerable privileges). We learn that even actors had to wait fourteen years for a car, had to change West German marks at the Intershop, had problems with their children's teachers and even had to queue to buy oranges.

What is this cultural representation and repackaging all about, what does it have to do with life in the GDR? Images from the past are always projections of the present. Beyond good and evil, a community of East Germans is invented that transcends social and generational and above all political differences. Yet this picture of everyday life is not apolitical, far from it. Presenting oneself as a consumer in relation to the socialist regime is a new positioning act that provides people with a favourable or at least a sceptical and resistant image of their past. This works because protagonists, like viewers, practise a great deal of self-victimisation throughout an Ostalgia show – being spied upon, controlled and restricted in their perspectives and possibilities. In this way, recognition is called in from the West, the main addressee

Table 2 Public Discourses about the GDR

<i>Time</i>	<i>Dominant discourse</i>	<i>Counter-discourses</i>
Reunification	Euphoria: heroes of the velvet revolution	Astonishment, outrage: greedy masses
1990s	Stigmatization, scandalization (cheap, poor, Stasi, doping)	Resistance and indignation ('It was not so bad, after all')
	Incorporation into museums (from above); living under dictatorship, between resistance and adaptation	Incorporation into exhibitions (from below); biographies, irony
Post-2000	Commercialization: flea markets, antiques, T-Shirts	Aesthetic appropriation; design, art, literature
	Becoming a festival: (East parties, East TV shows)	

of these shows and the target of countless jokes below the belt.²⁴ The people of the East present themselves as a marginalized group fighting for recognition from society, that is the West German population. Ostalgia shows reflect a ten-year-old politics of recognition centring on an appreciation of personal life stories and the achievements inscribed in these.

Marketing Strategies

Since reunification the industrial sector of the GDR has been more or less dissolved or closed down. De-industrialisation particularly concerns the East German consumer goods industry. Thanks to the shift towards Western brands, the East German market for consumer goods broke down rapidly, even without the help of the *Treuhand*. Before the currency reform GDR products were simply discarded. Only a few products survived; one of these is Florena (modelled on Nivea). Few products survived from the textile, fashion and furniture industries or household durable sector. It is rare to find today a new refrigerator or cooker, bicycle or camera produced in the GDR. It has almost been forgotten that the GDR was once a highly developed industrial country. What is left are mostly processed foods and spirits, cigarettes, chocolate, coffee and alcoholic drinks. The spectrum of products might suggest we are looking at an underdeveloped country. If cars and stereos, fridges and furniture disappeared silently, the return of food products and spirits was greeted with euphoria. Suddenly GDR coffee (Rondo) was bought again, and East German consumers began to speak highly of 'Spreewälder Gurken' and 'Hallorenkugeln'. When Bambina was sold again, former young Pioneers sobbed in each other's arms. Resurrection came with a new outfit; packaging was restyled, glowing in brilliant

new colours. Nevertheless, most products failed to find their way into supermarkets in West Germany.

The marketing of Eastern products has adopted two opposed strategies: a regional versus a European route. The first is explicitly targeting the East German regional market and advertises an East German spirit of life that appeals to ideas of solidarity, patriotism and community. Here the principal signs are landscape, history and culture, almost eternal values that bracket any reference to the former GDR. For years, for example, representation and advertising avoided the image of the East Berlin telecom tower; only its rediscovery by a rock band has made it culturally acceptable once more. Yet, only certain products lend themselves to this form of regionalisation. If aiming to capture the broader German or European market, an appeal to specific aspects of East German culture is less successful. In this case, consumer goods that have been produced in East Germany pursue a strategy of silence about their origin; to be seen as an East German product would amount to self-stigmatisation. Hence, advertising strategies have opted here for conventional images of modernity, adventure and youth. Significantly, East German consumers do not mind this act of self-denial. On the contrary, the establishment of Eastern products in Western markets is celebrated as a form of shared success.

East German Culture in the Contested Zone of Identity and Difference

In times when entire lifeworlds are being aestheticized, consumption becomes a principal site of cultural identity politics. Bought objects are covered with images and marks that go far beyond their use value. Thus it is not only about personal distinction, the pursuit of status or the creation of an individual lifestyle. Commodities are also expressions of belonging to or exclusion from a community. The choice of clothing and furniture, for or against the newest technology, a visit to the cinema, the pub or the opera, these are part of a search for a certain lifestyle, for a community of interpretation, a milieu or a subculture. Normally the positions are clear and confirmed through the aesthetics of everyday life. In modern societies the milieus are rarely any longer hierarchical, but rather develop along a horizontal mode. Occasionally, subcultural groups provoke disruptions, but these are short lived, and the established system quickly reasserts itself.²⁵

The reunification of Germany produced an altogether novel constellation for modern societies. Suddenly, an entire alien culture had to be integrated into a pre-existing structure. Inevitably, positions within society had to be rearranged. Significantly, the integration of GDR citizens did not proceed on a horizontal plane but on a vertical scale. West German society, where milieus had arranged themselves next to each other, now became preoccupied with devaluation and exclusion. The new East German arrival worked according to a different social logic. It was alien, an

unfamiliarity that was not recognized as an alternative rationality but as representing lesser value.

Social structures, for example, were different. After decades of dispossession, migration and ideological discrimination, bourgeois culture was hardly present any longer in the GDR. Wolfgang Engler has coined the concept 'arbeiterliche Gesellschaft' to capture this new populist, working-class habitus. A different scale of values existed, where success, career and wealth carried negative connotations. Moreover, East German society was in an inner state of turmoil that defied simple categories of analysis. The East Germany now joining the rest of Germany was one of change, transitory, limited and ambivalent.

When signs and meanings are constantly changing, instant, accurate recognition becomes ever more difficult. This is especially the case for individuals who change from one culture to another. Their state of not belonging is obvious and can quickly become a stigma. What applies to migration generally had distinct implications for East Germans. Rather than leaving for a foreign society, this society came to them. In addition, the encounter revealed an unexpected degree of unfamiliarity. In spite of the same roots and the same language, more than forty years of separate development had led to enormous cultural differences that, against all expectations, could not be overcome without difficulty. The resulting culture shock was something that was not supposed to happen. It became a taboo for both sides.

Alongside the experience of reunification with its emancipating effects ('Heldentadt' Leipzig), then, an experience of transformation developed, marked by an extensive devaluation of the lived past under the weight of West German cultural and institutional superiority. Feelings of superiority and strategies of devaluation, the mechanics of exclusion and the development of stigma found cultural expression. In the cynical jokes of satirical journals and in political discourse, East Germans were presented as poor brothers and sisters – underdeveloped, hopelessly old fashioned and uncivilized. Theories of modernization provided the blueprint for categories of difference. The developmental paradigm of 'catching up' appeared valid for East Germany in a model where Western industrial society was the universal norm of modernity.

This is not something that was exclusively imposed upon the East Germans from the outside. One of the most important triggers of reunification was the desire of GDR citizens to join modern global developments. Here was the start of the journey into the Western world. Even before reunification it was attractive to identify with a Western modernity and its encouragement to be mobile and flexible, the imperative of individuation and the plurality of ideas and values. Such cultural identification was facilitated partly by the GDR's own self-representation as a modern society where social structures had been transformed, partly through a shared imagined world made possible through film and kinship.

In everyday life the attraction of modernity was mediated through its associated values: freedom of choice of consumer goods, entertainment and lifestyles.

Throughout the process of reunification, GDR citizens showed a clear commitment to Western modernity. The simultaneous erosion of social security and full employment was not always anticipated. However, the paradigms of modern life in the West with its sentiment and situational arrangements cannot be located regionally or locally. Their attraction resulted from a lack of obligation, their fragmentary nature and a community created in a moment that might disappear just as fast as it had appeared.

The people of the GDR were and in part still are, engaged in a conflict of values which, we know today, they were not able to resolve. The socialist utopia promised equality, distributional justice, social security and strong community ties. Real existing capitalism promised freedom of election and opportunities of self-development. To put it simply, it was impossible to have both. Ostalgia is the mirror image of this conflict of values.

Alongside the encounter with bourgeois modernity, a fundamental structural transformation of the economy unfolded abruptly and at breakneck speed. A change of system and globalisation had to be mastered simultaneously. Entire phases of development and adjustment were jumped or taken in express mode. Some developments that were already visible in the East had not even started properly in the West. A social laboratory situation emerged, where one could observe reactions, try out new strategies and constantly change the order of testing – an open situation in which there were more questions than answers. East Germans had to integrate themselves into Western modernity under the disadvantageous conditions of de-industrialisation and migration. East German culture became shaped by the simultaneous experience of having to leave and of being left behind, of beginning a journey to a strange world and of staying, to be the last one remaining to turn off the light.

In their simultaneous longing for acceptance and for retaining difference, in their fight for recognition in a modern, self-confident, autonomous system, East Germans have followed very diverse strategies depending on income, age, educational level, sex, job situation and family status. Alongside unobtrusive adaptation or catching up with modernity, they developed strategies of distinction which found expression in regional identity and stubbornness. Some ignored the past and opted for a quick embrace of a Western European way of life, making themselves invisible as East Germans; others re-emphasized and valorized their East German identity.

In this way, fourteen years after reunification, a lively East German culture has developed within Germany that, on the one hand, shares basic values and possibilities of action with the whole of German society, but that, on the other hand, clearly differentiates itself from that society because of specific biographical experiences and mentalities, requiring its own patterns of reflection. It would be simplistic to speak of a GDR succession society. Rather it is a society in transition, living in a liminal phase of not-anymore but not-yet. The experience of reunification alone, that is the implosion of a system that until then had seemed omnipotent and the empowering experience of making politics (although it only lasted for a few weeks)

must have created distinct ways of coping with such fundamental changes. For those actively involved in this moment of empowerment, authority lost much of its former, permanent status and power. East Germans interpreted and responded in vastly different ways to the radical rearrangement of all social structures which called for a new positioning of the individual in a quickly changing social landscape and to the transvaluation of previously valid ideas and values attached to property, money, wealth, security, continuity, work and family. As an experience, however, it was obviously substantially different to that of continuity for West Germans.

Even in this East German part of German culture, East Germans are no longer among themselves. West Germans who moved East belong to it just as much as naturalized resident foreign workers from Vietnam, Poland or Mozambique, or students and experts from Europe, Turkish, Italian or Greek entrepreneurs, Russian Germans and returning refugees, a complex mix of people with no assigned space in the original construction of this East German partial identity. East Germans do not exist as a homogeneous group, but during the pursuit of recognition they inevitably appeared homogenized. The Ostalgia phenomenon is the cultural expression of such endeavours towards homogeneity, where the complex forms of assimilation and identity formation are reduced to a barely understandable obstinacy.

Ostalgia is part of a politics of recognition. It is directed firstly at the process of transformation and the hegemony of West German norms and values. Secondly, it responds to the process of globalisation that reinforced the marginalisation of a once-industrialized region. In the course of constructing an East German culture, former GDR citizens became conscious of how they had walked out on their own history, becoming spiritually homeless. Remembering the society left behind provides a point of orientation for the present. These patterns of remembrance provide a key for ongoing problems of communication. They simultaneously create distance and an emotional reconnection. The personal past is read in such a way that it allows individuals to orientate themselves in the world according to their specific way of life. It reflects a yearning for a collective identity, for *Heimat*, a home and community. East Germans have not lost *Heimat* as a place but as a secure orientation.

Notes

1. Jaeckie Schwarz in the ndr TV programme 'Ein Kessel GDR', September 2003.
2. There was not shortage as such; shortage and scarcity are relative terms. What is perceived as shortage differs from culture to culture, across class and time. The label 'society of shortage' acts as a combative term in East–West discourse; the cultural critique of consumerism or a society of abundance is simply ignored.

The West becomes a coloured layer, the GDR appears in black and white. The term 'society of shortage' also carries a misreading, that is, that shortage leads to frustration, greed, envy, parsimony and stinginess. But, arguably, it is at times of shortage that consumer behaviour reveals a potential for improvisation and enjoyment. The cultural practices in handling shortage are ambivalent and not solely concerned with restriction and moderation or the wise handling of resources.

3. The term Ostalgia was coined by a cabaret artist at the beginning of the 1990s.
4. Obviously, 'the West Germans' and 'the East Germans' do not exist. These are ascriptive categories. They are used in public discourse as signs of affirmation and to draw boundaries for inclusion and exclusion. Whereas East Germans, however, adopt or act out a collective identity in various contexts – as audience in Ostalgia shows, for example – West Germans emphasize instead the heterogeneity of social positions and the plurality of political opinions. In this chapter, therefore, 'East German' and 'West German' refer to commonly used discursive ascriptions.
5. So quoted in C. Dieckmann, 'Honnis heitere Welt. Das Unterhaltungsfernsehen verklärt die DDR', *Die Zeit*, 28 August 2003, No. 36.
6. T. Ahbe speaks of 'Laienpraxis' in 'Ostalgie als Selbstermächtigung: Zur produktiven Selbststabilisierung ostdeutscher Identität', *Deutschland Archiv*, 4 (1997), pp. 614–19.
7. The name for the GDR car. Most probably the name stemmed from the meaning of satellite (the moon as trabant of the earth), in connection with the socialist space exploration euphoria (1957 Sputnik). The basic meaning of 'Wahrig' is a warrior on foot, bodyguard, or someone dependent on someone else, a companion held in tutelage.
8. This case study is based mainly on systematic field observation since 1983, discourse analysis and interviews with about fifty East Germans from 1993 to 1997.
9. In 1954 the GDR council of ministers agreed to develop a car with the following properties: a small car with two main and two back seats, weighing no more than 600 kg, an average petrol consumption of 5.5 l/100 km, yearly production of 12,000 at a price of 4,000 marks. The development plan was set for 18 months. GDR citizens later said ironically that the instructions for building a *Trabant* were to build a roof over two spark plugs.
10. Unlike most other cars, *Trabants* received names – ours was called Charlie – perhaps because it was often the first car and turned into something like a member of the family, not so different from a pet.
11. This transition happened so smoothly partly because the designs of many commodities were from the 1950s and 1960s. While in West Germany there were retro-exhibitions of kidney-shaped tables, similar objects lived on in everyday life in East Germany.

12. H. Lübbe, *Der Fortschritt und das Museum: Über den Grund unseres Vergnügens an historischen Gegenständen* (London, 1982), p. 8.
13. Of course it was also about freedom (of travel), democracy and whatever else may be Western values, but consumption was definitely a strong motivation.
14. The unforgettable caricature in the satirical magazine *Titanic*: a dolled-up young East German girl is peeling a cucumber next to the text 'Gabi from the East in happiness – her first banana'.
15. D. Mühlberg, 'Vom langsamen Wandel der Erinnerung an die GDR', *Kultur-nation* (online journal), 1 (2003).
16. A moped built until 1989 following the same design as in the 1950s.
17. G.C. Bertsch and E. Hedler, *SED, Schönes Einheits Design* (Cologne, 1990), p. 7.
18. Bertsch and Hedler, *SED*, p. 9.
19. Bertsch and Hedler, *SED*, p. 12.
20. The exhibitions 'Auftragskunst', 1995, and 'Parteiauftrag: ein neues Deutschland. Bilder, Rituale und Symbole der früheren GDR', 1996/7.
21. The GDR section of a modern art exhibition in Weimar in 1999 developed into a genuine scandal. Masses of pictures were hung in a crowded fashion in a multi-functional hall crudely decorated in grey tarpaulin.
22. Partly in the DHM exhibition 'aufbau west und aufbau ost. Die Planstädte Wolfsburg und Eisenhüttenstadt', 1997; as a starting point in the exhibition of the documentation centre in Eisenhüttenstadt 'Tempolinsen und P2', 1995/6; and in the exhibition of the NGBK 'Wunderwirtschaft: GDR-Konsumkultur in den 60er Jahren', 1996, which was developed under my guidance by a student group at the Institute for European Ethnology.
23. An appeal to childhood tastes, like Schlagersüßtafel, Hallorenkugeln, Bambina, Negerküsse (the 'disgustingly' sweet GDR, as Katarina Witt put it), affirms the political innocence of everyday life. Diminutive terms such as *Ampelmännchen* or *Trabi*, or even a term like *Ossi*, invoke the innocence of childhood. With a childish naive belief in communist promises, the political sense of belonging then becomes acceptable.
24. The showmaster Gunther Emmerlich made a joke in the third episode of 'Ein Kessel GDR' on the 5 September 2003 on mdr. 'To say that all "wessis" are arrogant is the same as saying all Negroes are black', a comment that earned him wild applause and laughter.
25. See G. Schulze's discussion of the milieu in West Germany in the late 1980s, *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft: Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt, 1992).