

# Expressions of Experience and Experiences of Expression: Museum Re-Presentations of GDR History

DAAPHNE BERDAHL

*Department of Anthropology  
University of Minnesota  
215 Ford Hall  
Minneapolis, MN 55455*

**SUMMARY** *This article interrogates the production of historical memory in the former GDR. It addresses the politics of memory and museum representations in terms of the ongoing complex and often contradictory struggles over the production of knowledge about the East German past, the contexts of this production, and the ways in which the struggles themselves shed light upon larger social and political processes within reunified Germany more generally. I am concerned with the politics of memory-making and the various domains in which memory is constructed and deployed. I also consider the cultural implications and effects of such memory-making practices. [Keywords: memory, identity, museums, representation, Germany]*

## Introduction

In the heart of Leipzig's downtown, on the main street of the city's pedestrian zone, stands a statue called "The Step of the Century." Completed in the mid-1980s by the renowned East German artist Wolfgang Mattheuer and erected here at this location in 1999, the larger-than-life figure's right hand is extended in the Nazi salute while its left hand is clenched in a worker's fist; it steps forward, half dressed and half in military uniform, with its head hidden and barely visible, into an unknown future (Figure 1). Like many works of art, the statue has been subject to a range of interpretations. Mattheuer has described it as relating to his interest in "the significant tension between conformity and protest, between yes and no, which stimulates and sharpens our vision of the future"; others have read it as an "allegory of totalitarianism" or a "thought-image [*Denkbild*] for the eternal conflict between good and evil."<sup>1</sup> In the GDR, the sculpture was awarded a national prize for depicting the "clash during this century between fascism/Nazism on the one side and Leninism/Stalinism on the other."<sup>2</sup> Yet the statue's placement in front of the Leipzig Forum of Contemporary History (*Zeitgeschichtliches Forum Leipzig*) in honor of the museum's opening in 1999 has invested it with yet another meaning—now the dominant interpretation—reflecting the museum's mission of portraying the "history of resistance and opposition in the GDR" and its underlying agenda of "comparative dictatorship studies." According to the museum



**Figure 1.**

**The statue called “The Step of the Century,” completed in the mid-1980s by the renowned East German artist Wolfgang Mattheuer.**

director, the statue (one of his exhibit favorites) “demonstrates the German people’s step away from two dictatorships.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, this or a similar explanation is frequently part of museum tours as well as Leipzig city tours. In its new context within the cultural landscape of reunited Germany, then, the “Step of the Century” is read as symbolizing the new Germany’s step *out* of the last century, leaving behind its troubled pasts of Nazism and socialism. I begin with this image, for it illuminates and contextualizes several issues surrounding the politics of memory and museum representations that I address in this article: the ongoing complex and often contradictory struggles over the production of knowledge about the East German past, the contexts of this production, and the ways in which the struggles themselves shed light upon larger social and political processes within reunified Germany more generally.

The question of the relationship to and representation of the GDR past gained immediate relevance after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and has been the subject of significant popular as well as scholarly discussion and debate ever since.<sup>4</sup> I am interested here not just in the politics of memory-making, but also in the various domains in which memory is constructed and deployed, and in the cultural implications and effects of such memory-making practices. My aim here, then, is to interrogate the production of historical memory in the former GDR, and I do so by comparing two cases of the “museumification” of GDR

history: the state-sponsored and officially sanctioned Forum of Contemporary History in Leipzig, and a local association's collection and exhibition of GDR material culture.

My discussion is indebted to a large and burgeoning scholarship on museums, a field in which Edward Bruner has been an exemplary pioneer (Bruner 1993, 1994, 2005). Much of this work has viewed museums as critical sites for the convergence of social, cultural, and political forces: as arenas for the production of national identity, national citizens, and national "culture" (Dodd 1986; Duncan 1995); as objects of the tourist gaze (Urry 1990); as part of new disciplines of power (Bennett 1995); as spaces of cultural representation and contestation (Bruner 1993; Gable and Handler 1997; Karp and Lavine 1991; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Stocking 1985). Yet as anthropologists Eric Gable and Richard Handler (1997) have pointed out, "most research on museums has proceeded by ignoring much of what happens in them." Stressing the advantages of an ethnographic approach to museum studies, Bruner has similarly argued, "This privileging of the specific leads to a consideration of the complexity of forces and multiplicity of voices and meanings at work. Audiences are not passive recipients of received wisdom and official views; the challenge is to understand the interpretations of the audience in particular instances" (Bruner 2005:128).

Drawing on ongoing ethnographic fieldwork conducted since 2001 in the city of Leipzig, this article explores discourses and practices surrounding two radically different representations of GDR history. Both contrasting cases, I argue, reflect ongoing contestations over the meanings of the GDR past as well as the significant power imbalances in which such struggles occur.

### **Repression and Resistance: The Zeitgeschichtliches Forum Leipzig (ZGF)**

The Leipzig Forum of Contemporary History (ZGF) is the sole satellite branch of the House of History (*Haus der Geschichte*) in Bonn, a project initiated by Helmut Kohl in 1982 with a conservative and hence controversial agenda that culminated in the opening of the museum in Bonn eight years later.<sup>5</sup> The ZGF is commonly described as the eastern counterpart to the Bonn original. It was opened with great fanfare in a ceremony attended by Chancellor Schroeder on October 9, 1999, the tenth anniversary of what is widely believed to be the "turning point" in the peaceful demonstrations of 1989 in Leipzig.<sup>6</sup> The city was selected as the site for the museum because of its role in this history.

As an institution, the ZGF describes itself as a "place of living remembrance." It thus strives to be more than a museum; it is also a memorial and a gathering place for lectures, discussions, and conferences. Indeed, the institution makes a very valuable contribution in this sense to intellectual life and historical work in Leipzig and beyond. Because the explicit focus of the museum is on "the history of resistance and opposition during the dictatorship of the Soviet occupation zone and the GDR," it commemorates a critical element of the East German experience as well as the earth-shattering events of 1989. Underlying this focus on repression and resistance is a scholarly interest in and commitment to what is sometimes called "comparative dictatorship studies"—a belief in the historical comparability of the Nazi and socialist regimes, with the latter described in the exhibit catalogue as the "second German dictatorship."<sup>7</sup>

These ideological underpinnings are evident throughout the chronologically organized exhibit, where stories and images of suffering, repression, and state violence are foregrounded alongside a narrative of resistance and opposition. Guided tours—frequently given by university students too young to have many memories of the GDR—often privilege the most gruesome or sensational installations, highlighting for visitors a sequential horror of socialist abuses. In addition to key events in political and economic history, exhibits contain several installations on political prisoners as well as the fortification of the inter-German border in the 1950s and the building of the Berlin Wall. An entire room, complete with a wall of video footage and a Soviet “division canon,” is dedicated to the uprising on June 17, 1953, while another section focuses on the biographies of political dissidents and the work of oppositional peace and environmental groups. Displays representing GDR consumer culture and material scarcity are sandwiched between depictions of successful escapes and an exhibit devoted to the Stasi (State Security Police) that includes cases of files, surveillance equipment, and paraphernalia (containing, among other items, several odor specimens of regime opponents in canning jars<sup>8</sup> as well as actual Stasi surveillance videos; there also is a van with a restructured interior to accommodate political prisoners without being recognizable as such on the outside). The narrative culminates in a triumphalist portrayal of 1989, the largest exhibit area in the museum, containing protest demonstration banners, a section of the Berlin Wall, the iconic Trabant car, and other artifacts of that eventful period. The last area of exhibit focuses on post-Wall eastern Germany, with displays on building booms, unemployment, and violence against foreigners that call specific attention to contemporary social issues and economic concerns but also risk naturalizing them in the larger context of the museums’ teleological narrative.

Like many contemporary museums, the ZGF exhibits draw upon multiple media to invite active visitor participation and engagement. Audio stations, touch screens, video monitors, and interactive hands-on displays abound as part of the Haus der Geschichte’s larger objective of enabling visitors to “experience history.” This play with the senses surrounds visitors with images and sounds that can operate on many levels, sometimes eliciting emotional, even visceral reactions. Upon entering the exhibit area on the Berlin Wall, for example, one is confronted with videos of attempted escapes, with people screaming, hanging out of windows, or being mangled by barbed wire. The reverberations of tank rumblings and screeching provides the audio background for the June 17 uprising. With the exception of dissident songwriter Wolf Biermann’s music, in fact, one’s auditory experience of the museum is dominated by the sounds of bullets being fired, churches being blown up, and human cries. Taken together, these acoustic enhancements are carefully selected to conform to the museum’s emphasis on repression and resistance, a narrative described by museum directors and employees as “the Concept.”<sup>9</sup>

This narrative Concept is stressed repeatedly in the rigorous screening of museum guides. “You must agree with and stand by our Concept,” one university student was reportedly told firmly during her second round of interviews for a tour guide position. She was not offered the job after expressing reservations about her ability and willingness to comply with the strict guidelines. Indeed, the narrative of repression and resistance not only dominates the

museum Concept, but it can also be internalized and reproduced in personal accounts during guided tours. I was told, for example, of a visit to the museum by a group of local historians interested in initiating a conversation about representational practices at the exhibit. "Throughout the tour our guide grew increasingly excited and extreme," one of them recalled, "and when we came to the [Stasi van], she claimed that she had sat as a prisoner inside. I thought to myself: 'Wow! That is really awful.' But then a member of our group exclaimed, 'No, Angelika, you sat in the communist party's (SED) district management office!' She turned bright red and just left."

Pressure to adhere to the museum Concept is reportedly felt very strongly by museum employees, allegedly creating an occasional atmosphere of fear and suspicion in the workplace. Most museum employees only wanted to speak off the record, for example. I was especially alarmed to hear about rumors of wiretapping employee phone conversations.

Rumors and suspicion aside, it seems to me that a more vexing issue is at stake here. While the museum's literature and staff are careful to point out that the focal point of the museum is "dictatorship and resistance" rather than "the history of the GDR," as the sole branch of the Haus der Geschichte national museum in the East (the "little brother" of the Haus der Geschichte in Bonn—a description that invoked the diminutive term used in referring to "brothers and sisters in the East") and the only federally organized and funded museum dedicated exclusively to the GDR, the effect of this emphasis is to re-present GDR history in these terms. Media accounts of the museum's opening heralded it as an "exhibit and information center" that provides "a broad overview of the GDR and the division of Germany."<sup>10</sup> More specifically, the museum was applauded at its opening for its contribution to "the history of democracy in Germany"<sup>11</sup> and for demonstrating the "civil courage" of eastern Germans during the fall of 1989, an "unparalleled enrichment of German history."<sup>12</sup> In his speech at the opening ceremony, Chancellor Schröder asked "not to be misunderstood" when he said that one could be "pleased to be a German today . . . to be proud of the realization of democracy."<sup>13</sup>

This adamant, indeed dogmatic, privileging of resistance at the museum has as its subtext, it seems to me, the haunted past of the "first German dictatorship" and the question of German guilt. Conceptually and discursively linking the two regimes through the rhetoric of "a second German dictatorship" (a discourse in which comparability may be equated with commensurability, even if that is not its intended effect), the director of the Leipzig Forum writes in the exhibit catalogue:

We have placed special emphasis on biographical approaches; it was however, clear that the isolated examples of bravery under the dictatorship stand for the courage of hundreds of thousands of other resisting East Germans. [Eckert 2001]

The privileged narrative here, then, is ultimately one of redemption: a new official history for the new Germany. The national director of the Haus der Geschichte, Hermann Schäfer, gestured toward this nationalizing project in describing the mission of the Leipzig ZGF:

We want to break what the opinion research institutes have diagnosed as the wall of silence between east and west—break it by means of exhibitions, events and

publications produced and sponsored by the new museum in Leipzig, in order to find a historical conception common to all Germans.<sup>14</sup>

Despite favorable ratings in museum visitor surveys (highly touted in the exhibit catalogue<sup>15</sup>), local reactions do not reveal that efforts to forge this “common historical conception” have been successful. In informal conversations as well as during interviews on other subjects, I often heard the ZGF described as a “victor’s history.” “It is purely propaganda from the western side,” a man in his forties working for the Chamber of Commerce angrily explained. “It disgusts me just when I see the themes portrayed there: ‘church in socialism,’ ‘resistance,’ ‘opposition.’ All of this is a very western perspective.” Outside the workplace, one of the most historically sophisticated of the ZGF tour guides agreed: “The museum conveys to visitors the impression that this is the history of the GDR, but it isn’t. It is designed with a western view of GDR history. Many visitors from the East cannot find themselves here.” An East German historian similarly suggested: “Actually I think it is kind of cute. . . . People in the GDR learned how to read things critically. I hope they apply those skills to this exhibit.”

Another common local reaction—uttered in rage by some while exiting the exhibit area<sup>16</sup> and by others as a simple fact in subsequent conversations outside the museum—is: “That is not how I experienced the GDR!” “Sure there were people who were imprisoned or who were spied upon,” one local merchant told me, “but that was not my experience. I’m sorry, but that was just not my experience.” When I asked an artist in her late thirties about the emphasis on dictatorship and resistance exemplified by the Stasi van and border shootings, she answered:

[In GDR times] you spent your days looking for the one detergent that was hard to get that didn’t give your kids a rash. And then because you wanted your little ones to have some vitamins, you bought carrots, cleaned them, pressed them together with some apples, because that was how you could get juice. And when there was juice in the store, you took a box to the store and stood in line so that you could go for a while without having to press your own [juice]. That was daily life in the GDR.

The social and political context for these reactions is a much more general devaluation of East German histories since reunification. As I have written about elsewhere (Berdahl 1999), such practices have included the selling of East German factories to western companies (occasionally for next to nothing); the discrediting of the GDR educational system, particularly the *Abwicklung*<sup>17</sup> (restructuring) of the universities; the renaming of schools, streets, and other public buildings; the trial of Berlin border guards that for many East Germans represented a different sort of victors’ justice; debates over what to do with and about East Germany’s Stasi heritage that have often compared the GDR to the Third Reich; and discourses that ridiculed the backwardness of East German industry and consumer goods while ignoring the political and economic contexts that may have produced it. Although generated and experienced differently in form and content, such practices have generally been grouped together in eastern German discourses of oppositional solidarity against western hegemony—of which the ZGF has come to be viewed by many as an emblem.

### Bearing Witness: The Ostalgie Project

Since the mid-1990s a range of institutional and individual practices have emerged as part of a counter-narrative to such hegemonic memory-making and devaluations of the GDR. Commonly referred to as “Ostalgie” (nostalgia for the East), the production of counter-memories and identities has taken many forms: self-described “nostalgia cafes” that are decorated with artifacts from the socialist period and serve “traditional” GDR fare; dance parties (“Ostivals” or “Ostalgie Nights”) featuring East German rock music and, occasionally, a double of Erich Honecker; numerous publications and trivia games recalling life in the GDR; supermarkets, mail-order Web sites, and an annual “OstPro” trade show fair that specialize in East German products. The 1999 release and box-office success of two “Ostalgie films” (*Sonnenallee* and *Helden Wie Wir*) marked the emergence of Ostalgie as a truly mass cultural phenomenon. More recently, the critically acclaimed and top-grossing 2002 film, “Goodbye Lenin,” unleashed a new wave of Ostalgie, including a flurry of “Ostshows,” featuring curiosities of life in the GDR, on at least five major German television networks.

What I want to focus on here, however, is a specific example of a counter-narrative to the official histories and memories represented by the ZGF, a collection of East German “everyday objects” by a local nonprofit organization. The collection reflects the privileging of material culture in eastern German historical memory (Betts 2000), the most extensive and sophisticated example of which is the Museum for East German Everyday Life Culture in Eisenhüttenstadt, a truly professional undertaking; its mission entails the “museumification of the world of GDR objects as an active and mutual communication that allows for reflective thought in a period of individual and often painful reorientation” (Ludwig 1996; Ludwig and Kuhn 1997a, 1997b). The “Zeitzeugen Ostalgie” project (Ostalgie Witnesses to History), however, is representative of more widespread practices of collecting, cataloging, and displaying “GDR everyday life.” Voluntary associations dedicated to the documentation and preservation of “GDR everyday life,” for example, allocate responsibilities among members for collecting everything—from East German packaging materials to work brigade medals. Numerous makeshift museums, galleries, and displays in community centers or people’s homes similarly contain various objects of the vanished state.<sup>18</sup>

The “Zeitzeugen Ostalgie” collection is the product of government-subsidized make-work jobs (Arbeitsbeschaffungsmaßnahmen, or ABM); the purpose of the organization of which it is a part (whose name is “Neue Arbeit—Wurzeln”) is to generate jobs in the “second labor market,” a term referring to the government-subsidized domain of employment. People employed as ABM do not consider themselves to be working in a “real job,” as the man who picked me up from the train station explained immediately after introducing himself: “I am working in the second labor market,” he said. “In capitalism there is a first labor market, but somehow there is still also a second one.” As Angela Jancius has pointed out in her intriguing study of unemployment in the former GDR, workers employed in the second labor market perceive themselves as engaged in “useful but not productive labor” (Jancius 2002).

By any measure, the work of the three ABM staff employed at the “Zeitzeugen Ostalgie” project has been a labor of love. With no experience or

training in exhibition design, they have painstakingly assembled a collection of GDR artifacts from the 1960s, 70s, and 80s ranging from food packaging to electronics to household furniture. In former classrooms of a vacated school building, the exhibit is comprised of reconstructed domestic living spaces as well as thematic clusters of particular items. A living room features a typical GDR upholstered sofa, side chairs on silver casters, coffee table, and wall unit displaying characteristic decorative objects (Figure 2); a kitchen is full of aluminum cooking pans and utensils, plastic kitchen gadgets and dinnerware, obsolescent appliances, and East German foodstuffs. The display items elicit what the exhibit organizers describe as an “Aha effect,” a reaction that connects personal biographies to collective memory as visitors recognize and tell stories about familiar but forgotten cultural objects. These East German things are particularly effective *lieux de memoir* for what Paul Betts has insightfully termed their “aesthetics of sameness. . . . That is, the very lack of product innovation and repackaging assured that these objects—however privately experienced and remembered—would function as transgenerational markers of East German culture and identity” (Betts 2000). A warehouse of discarded used furniture for low-income families, the vast majority of which are GDR products, occupies an adjacent room; a separate ABM project of the Neue Arbeit Wurzen, these items represent for many not only the throwaway mentality of today’s consumer society but also the dustbin of history to which the GDR and its products have been relegated, and from which the relics of Ostalgie have been culled.

The idea for the project came to one of the organization directors one day upon hearing what schoolchildren were learning about the GDR in class.



Figure 2.

ABM staff working on the “Zeitzeugen Ostalgie” project have created an exhibit comprised of reconstructed domestic living spaces as well as thematic clusters of particular items. Here a living room features a typical GDR upholstered sofa, side chairs on silver casters, coffee table, and wall unit displaying characteristic decorative objects.



I was interested in what the kids were learning about the GDR then, in the year 1997 or 1998. [My young relative] told me that there was nothing to eat, that people couldn't buy anything. Everything was dark and grey. . . . And people weren't allowed to laugh and weren't able to laugh. . . . And I thought to myself, this can't be true. So we brainstormed about how to turn this into an ABM project. . . . what was daily life really like?

As we walked through the exhibit, my hosts repeatedly stressed that they did not want to "glorify the GDR," that this was intended as a completely "apolitical exhibit." As evidence of this, they cited their "strategic decision" not to include political memorabilia like pins, medals, uniforms, or FDJ scarves. In the kitchen area they described showing schoolchildren how juice was pressed, how fruits and vegetables were preserved "because you couldn't just go to the store and buy everything." The quaintness of socialist design was particularly highlighted in the electronics room, featuring, among other things, a square phonograph record (Figure 3). "We chose the name 'historical witnesses,'" one of the directors explained when I asked about the project title, "because we didn't want to write simply 'objects of utility' [*Gebrauchsgegenstände*] but also because these [things] really are witnesses."

But to what, we may ask, do these objects bear witness? Part of the answer to this question may lie in the comments and impressions of visitors left behind in the guestbook, which overwhelmingly revealed that the exhibit was far from "apolitical." Some examples:

One can appreciate the meticulous effort and thoughtfulness that went into this [exhibit], but the strong ideological one-sidedness is very disturbing.

Very nice . . . it recalls memories, above all how the prices remained stable for years.



**Figure 3.**  
The "Zeitzeugen Ostalgie" project exhibits the quaintness of socialist design, particularly highlighted in the electronics room, featuring, among other things, a square phonograph record.

Remember this? We used to cook with it. And this we used to wash with. The shampoo wasn't bad either . . . but it was only available under the table.

Because this is also a part of my life, I was very happy to see this exhibit.

Many thanks for taking on the important task of collecting and preserving things from a distant epoch. One shouldn't think of this in terms of *Ostalgie*, but as a piece of identity preserved.

What emerges in these comments—as in many other practices of *Ostalgie*—is a sense of a highly complicated relationship between personal histories, disadvantage, dispossession, the betrayal of promises, and the social worlds of production and consumption. As I have argued elsewhere about *Ostalgie* more generally (Berdahl 1999), such practices must be seen in the context of feelings of profound displacement and disillusionment following reunification, reflected in the popular saying that we have “emigrated without leaving home.” As one university student said to me in a conversation about the subject in the spring of 2001:

Everything simply disappeared. When you leave your past behind, you can normally go home again, look at it—at your *Heimat* and so forth. But in this case everything just disappeared.

The focus on East German things may also recall an identity as producers that has been lost in this transition. In a society where productive labor was a key aspect of state ideology and where the workplace was a central site for social life, the high incidence of unemployment throughout eastern Germany today has undermined profoundly many individuals' sense of self and identity. It is no accident, then, that a collection emphasizing the products of East German labor emerged in the context of the “second labor market,” where feelings of disillusionment, devalued selves, and betrayal often prevail. It seems to me that there is something strikingly poignant in this self-validating effort to recall and preserve a distinctive and honorable past, in this work created for and performed by those considered “unemployable” in the “first labor market.” One of the project participants told me:

I was born in 1961. Those whole years I was a child, youth, adult—school, studies, work. It is a part of my life. The predominant part of my life. This *Ostalgie* is for me also a piece of my own life, my own identity. . . . Those were formative years, that's how I would see it.

The frequent reference to GDR consumer culture in the guestbook comments as well as in the exhibit tour and demonstration is also significant. The fact that East German things have become mnemonics must be viewed in relation to larger historical and political processes and contexts. The dominant narrative in the *Ostalgie* collection is not one of a repressive dictatorship, as at the ZGF, but of a regime that, quite literally, failed to deliver the goods. In this sense, the emphasis on quaint East German things and their scarcity under socialist rule—in explicit or implicit contrast to the plentiful supply of ever new and improved products in the West—affirms and perpetuates a narrative of “democratization” and national legitimacy in which access to consumer goods and consumer choice are defined as fundamental rights and democratic

expressions of individualism. Indeed, many observers have since suggested that the transitions of 1989 were not about demands for political or human rights, but for consumer rights.<sup>19</sup> As the historian Ina Merkel has observed: "The struggle between the systems did not take the form of armed conflict, but was rather shifted to the marketplace. And it was here, in the sphere of consumerism, that the battle was won" (Merkel 1998). In the context of this post-war relationship between political legitimacy and mass consumption, such re-presentations of the GDR not only contribute to the production of new (counter-) memories and histories; they contribute to the production of citizen-consumers as well (see Berdahl 2005).

### **Conclusion: Fashioning the Past**

To conclude, I turn to an event in which these various domains and practices of memory converged: a fashion show of East German clothing styles held at the Leipzig Forum of Contemporary History during the Leipzig "museum night," an evening for promoting city museums with special presentations, exhibits, and long opening hours. The master of ceremonies was an extremely animated local celebrity (and former SED Party member), Paul Fröhlich, whose energetic performance enlivened the packed house of onlookers. "Good evening, Ladies and Gentleman," he began. "Welcome to the *Zeitgeschichtes* Forum! . . . We would like to transport you this evening to the fashion and *Zeitgeist* of the GDR." While GDR tunes blasted over loudspeakers and period photos were projected onto a nearby screen, models strode down the runway outfitted in exemplary GDR fashion design (Figure 4). The running commentary of the host had the audience laughing and applauding at nearly every example, as Fröhlich drew upon a culturally shared knowledge of socialist products, cultural images, and party rhetoric. Full of irony, he brilliantly played with the history of socialist industrial design ("Here we have a multi-functional downhill and cross-country ski"), often explicitly fetishizing the objects on display: "Please look, with an eye for detail, at these buttons. Look at these, as one says today, 'cool'<sup>20</sup> buttons. These are simply erotic details from GDR designer times!" In another instance, he had the audience in stitches with a demonstration of the sexual eroticism of a GDR vacuum cleaner. (Hint: the vacuum cleaner bag inflates upright.)

The repeated references to GDR consumer culture required a shared and privileged knowledge that excluded any audience member who had not experienced socialism, creating a strong sense of solidarity among those "in the know." It would be easy, therefore, to categorize this performance as another instance or commodification of "Ostalgie." More than this, however, the show was also a playful appropriation and ironic parody of Ostalgie. In this context, East German things became "camp" rather than objects of nostalgic longing or counter-memory. Thus, although one of the ZGF historians described the show as not fitting into the Concept, suggesting to me that its presentation was a subversive act because it was an attempt by several staff members to address critiques of the ZGF by bringing in the "everyday" and because the museum director did not approve of the idea, in fact the mocking tone and the focus on the quaint, hopelessly backward and outdated GDR styles were quite in line with the institutional agenda of creating a "historical conception common to all



**Figure 4.**

**A fashion show of East German clothing styles held at the Leipzig Forum of Contemporary History during the Leipzig “museum night.” Models on the runway are outfitted “in exemplary GDR fashion design.”**

Germans.” Although it did not stress the museum’s focal point of dictatorship and resistance, the show not only underscored the relationship between national legitimacy and mass consumption, it also belittled and dismissed eastern German critiques of hegemonic memory-making contained in many Ostalgie practices. Indeed, poking fun at Ostalgie is fast becoming almost as profitable a cottage industry as Ostalgie itself. Lyrics to a 2001 Leipzig cabaret song, for example, reflect this satirizing sentiment:

Good federal republic citizens the Osis want to be  
 Yet they buy only eastern products on their department-store shopping sprees  
 Spee and Florena, Rotkäppchen and Fit<sup>21</sup>  
 How long will the Office for Constitutional Protections  
 put up with it?<sup>22</sup>

The parodies of Ostalgie contained in the fashion show and cabaret song signal one of the latest waves in the ongoing negotiation of memory in the former GDR. Indeed, together with the two cases of “museumification” I have discussed here, they reflect the multiple, fluid, shifting, complex, and often contradictory forms and domains of memory production—and consumption—in post-socialist eastern Germany. When viewed in this way, the work and the politics of

memory and museums can be a window onto larger political processes and landscapes of nation-building, identity formation, and belonging in a period of social change and discord.

## Notes

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1. BerlinOnline: Romantiker im Jahrhundertschritt: Der Maler und Grafiker Wolfgang Mattheuer wird heute 70. <[http://www.berlinonline.de/...ner\\_zeitung/archiv/1997/kultur/0002/](http://www.berlinonline.de/...ner_zeitung/archiv/1997/kultur/0002/)>

2. <<http://www.dhm.de/lemo/html/biografien/MattheuerWolfgang>>

3. In Express Online, see <<http://www.express.de/bonn/museen/1392214.html>>

4. See, e.g., Berdahl 1997; Betts 2000; Hermand and Silberman 2000; Ten Dyke 2001.

5. For a sophisticated discussion of the Bonn museum origins in the context of wider debates about the politics of German history and memory, see Maier 1988.

6. Leipzig, known as the "city of heroes," was where the Monday demonstrations of 1989 began. On October 9, over 70,000 citizens of the city took to the streets despite warnings of orders to police to shoot; the absence of violence on this date signaled that the demonstrations against the state could proceed peacefully, and participant demands and numbers grew after that.

7. Hanna Schissler (2001) has pointed to the dangers of perpetuating cold war narratives through such comparisons.

8. One of the many elaborate surveillance practices of the Stasi involved the collection of scent specimens of regime opponents in preserving jars for use with scent detection dogs.

9. This notion of the Concept is consistent with the Bonn museum's agenda and discourse as well (see Maier 1988).

10. *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, November 19, 1999, p. 5.

11. Rainer Eckert quoted in *Der Spiegel*, Nr. 41, p. 19, October 1999.

12. Associated Press World Stream—German. October 10, 1999.

13. In Christian Schmidt, "Leipzig: Die Siege rim Freudentaumel." *Junge Welt*, October 11, 1999. <<http://www.jungewelt.de>>

14. Schäfer quoted on Haus der Geshichte Web site, <<http://www.hdg.de/Final/eng/oage141.htm>>

15. Deutschland, Stiftung Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik 2001. *Einsichten: Diktatur und Widerstand in der DDR*. Leipzig: Reclam Verlag.

16. This was reported to me by an employee of the museum shop, located at the exit to the exhibits.

17. *Abwicklung*, meaning "to unwind" as well as "to liquidate," entailed the restructuring of East German universities through the dissolution departments and institutes, dismissal of East German faculty members (20 percent of professors and 60 percent of mid-level lecturers) and the appointment of West German academics and concomitant influx of West German research agendas (see Maier 1997).

18. See also Ten Dyke 2001.

19. See, e.g., Bauman 1992; Betts 2000; Borneman 1992; Drakulic 1991.

20. The play with words cannot be captured in translation here as the German term, "geil," draws on the different colloquial meanings of "cool" and "horny."

21. These are well-known brand names of East German products.

22. German:

Sie möchten gute Bundesbürger sein

Und kaufen in der Kaufhalle Ostprodukte ein

Spee und Florena, Rotkäppchen und Fit  
Wie Lange macht das der Verfassungschutz noch mit?

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