

# "Go, Trabi, Go!": Reflections on a Car and Its Symbolization over Time

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**SUMMARY** When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, a small boxy car made of fiberglass and pressed cotton captured the imaginations of Germans East and West. Long the object of affection and frustration in East Germany, the Trabi quickly came to be a key symbol not only of the German Democratic Republic but also of socialist inefficiency and backwardness. In the mid 1990s, however, the Trabi reemerged as an evocative symbol of Eastern German distinctiveness and postsocialist nostalgia. A central figure in the "argument of images" surrounding the politics of German re-unification, then, the Trabi has moved from the jokebooks of 1989 to a new status as the "cult automobile" of the late 1990s. Drawing on James Fernandez's theory of images and symbolization over time, I trace the symbolic formation of the Trabi before, during, and after re-unification.

This is an article about a little car made of fiberglass and pressed cotton that is sometimes called a "Saxon Porsche," "racing cardboard" (*Rennpappe*), or an "asphalt bubble" (*Asphaltblase*). Although these images alone might benefit from some an-trope-ological analysis, that is not my intent here. Instead, I am interested in the "changing symbolism over time" of the East German Trabant, or Trabi, and what its place in an "argument of images" (Fernandez 1986) can tell us about the politics of memory and German re-unification more generally.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on James Fernandez's more recent work on the symbolic *longue durée* (e.g., 1990), as well as his well-known contributions to metaphor theory and studies of expressive culture, my focus here is on a certain symbolic conjuncture, over a shorter time span beginning with the fall of the Berlin Wall and leading up to the present. I am interested, in other words (Fernandez's, actually), in the "conditions that make practical artifacts into evocative symbols with some historic resonance. . . the historical problem of how things become resonant, pass into history and out of it, and go through phases in doing so" (1990:95). The Trabi's resonance as a symbol and emblem of identity is linked to and makes manifest certain large-scale social and political processes, I argue, and its transformation and revitalization over time reveals much about the internal dynamics of post-Wall Germany. More specifically, the Trabi's place in the recent *Ostalgie* (nostalgia for the east) boom not only represents particular cultural practices of re-membering (and forgetting), but also reflects a certain "politics of significance" (Herzfeld 1997) surrounding the production of memory in the new Germany: discourses that dismiss certain practices as "mere" *Ostalgie* or "cult-like" while valorizing others as legitimate forms of nostalgia and commemoration. I am thus interested as well in the politics of this distinction and how it both reflects and constitutes ongoing struggles over the meanings and effects of 1989—all of which, I believe, can be explored by tracing the symbolism of a little car over time.<sup>2</sup>

## "Trabitions"

In order to understand the multiple meanings of the Trabi as a symbol after the fall of the Wall, it is important to note its practical and symbolic place in social and economic life under socialist rule. Produced in the city of Zwickau, the Trabi, with its two-stroke motorcycle-size engine, oily-blue exhaust, and distinctive splutter, remained largely unchanged in its boxy form and pug-nose design until the last car rolled off the production line in 1991. The Trabi thus embodied the lack of product innovation and consumer choice seen by many to be the principal distinction—more than any political difference—between the socialist East and capitalist West. As one woman told me when I asked her to describe East-West differences, "We saw on western TV that every year they [West Germans] had a new model of car, while our Trabi remained the same." Or, as another young man joked, "We always used to say that Marxism could have worked if it hadn't been for cars."

In the GDR, the Trabi was a highly prized luxury possession. East Germans often waited 15 years and paid the equivalent of two annual salaries to obtain one; some even sold their valuable place on the waiting list. Secondhand Trabis were usually more expensive than new cars because they could be obtained right away, and people spent much time and energy hunting for and hoarding new and used Trabi parts (Figure 1). Furthermore, a shortage of Trabi mechanics throughout East Germany placed the Trabi repairman in an important position within the barter economy of the GDR. "You always remembered the Trabi repairman's birthday," one woman told me, smiling, "and we usually tried to bring him homemade sausage after we had slaughtered." The Trabi thus occupied a critical place in and represented an important aspect of everyday life in a socialist "economy of shortages": a second economy in which social relations and access to goods and services were based upon connections, barter, and bribes.



**Figure 1**  
Trabi life support. Photo by Daphne Berdahl.

As a luxury object, the Trabi occupied a distinctive place in GDR social life as well. Parties were held to celebrate its arrival, and washing it could be a regular family activity. Eastern Germans often developed a highly sophisticated sense of sound in relation to their automobiles. In the former East German border village where I did fieldwork, not only could people recognize the difference between a Trabi, Wartburg, or a Lada (the principal automobile choices in the GDR), but they could also make distinctions among them and thus identify individual cars. Furthermore, the sound of a spluttering Trabant, which could be heard from afar, would give most villagers enough time to make it to a window, peer behind lace curtains, and ascertain, as well as comment on, its driver and passengers. People throughout the GDR filled their Trabis with various knick-knacks, stroked and coaxed them lovingly (there was a particular way of talking to a Trabi), and devoted much time and money to the upkeep of this notoriously unreliable car. Owners learned to improvise basic repairs with highly coveted and hoarded Trabi components or with everyday items (women's stockings were a favorite ersatz part), and it was not uncommon for mechanics to perform dazzling feats of Trabi transplant or amputation surgery ("out of two make one") (Darnton 1991). As Slavenka Drakulic (1991) has written of domestic living spaces in socialist societies, Trabi interiors had a "strange ability" to divide, multiply, and contract upon demand. Seats would be removed to fill up the car with the latest hoarding purchase (*Hamsterkauf*) of scarce goods or to accommodate more family members on a long drive, and special pup tents could be mounted on the roof for camping vacations. The object of both affection and scorn in the GDR, East Germans sometimes used a special word—*hasslieben* (love-hate)—in referring to their car (see also Darnton's 1991 endearing discussion of the Trabi).

### "Trabulations"

With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Trabi was, as Fernandez has written of symbol formation and transformation more generally, "removed from its normal routine and associations" (1990:99). In the days following November 9, West Germans lined border crossings all along the inter-German border to greet Trabis and their occupants; the verb *Trabiklopfen* (Trabi-patting/slapping) stems from this period and alludes to the act of patting or slapping the roof of a Trabi as a gesture of welcome. Indeed, images of Trabis crossing the once impermeable border into an atmosphere of what Victor Turner called spontaneous *communitas* proliferated in the national and international media as the car quickly came to be hailed as a symbol of new-found freedom and mobility; its distinctive fuel mix of gas and oil produced what some media accounts called "the smell of freedom" (Figure 2). The Trabi was celebrated as the "car of the year" and was even given favorable and (fairly generous) reviews in automobile magazines.<sup>3</sup> A major national newspaper (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*) even compared the Trabant with the Porsche Carrera, praising both as "useful as getaway cars" but noting that the Trabi had twice the Carrera's trunk space (Chua-Eoan 1990). The association of the Trabi with the GDR and the fall of the Wall was so widespread, in fact, that the car had a starring role in the first major motion picture about German re-unification, a 1991 comedy entitled *Go, Trabi, Go!* that filled movie theaters throughout Germany.

The Trabant also quickly became a key symbol of socialist inefficiency, industrial backwardness, and inferiority. Its two-stroke engine contrasted sharply with the fast West German Mercedes, Porsches, and BMWs as it took a distant third place behind old VW's and Opels in the class warfare of the German Autobahn. Indeed, as Robert Darnton observed, the contrast in cars could not help but



Figure 2

Trabi metamorphosis: The car as symbol of post-Wall freedom, mobility, and consciousness in a Berlin Wall mural, 1992. Photo by Daphne Berdahl.

embody "the two Germanys: one super-modern, hard-driving, serious, and fast; the other archaic, inefficient, absurd, and slow, but with a lot of heart" (Darnton 1991:155). The Trabi thus became a central metaphor in an argument of images about the "failures" of socialism and "triumphs" of capitalism. Socialism failed, in other words, because of its inability, quite literally, "to deliver the goods." In a discourse that linked "democratization" to the freedom to consume, the transitions of 1989 were not about demands for political or human rights, but for consumer rights (e.g., Bauman 1992; Borneman 1991; Drakulic 1991). The widespread use of the Trabi image (and often the actual car) in post-Wall advertising both reflected and constituted this discourse of a consumer democracy (Figure 3); it also was part of a more general production of new citizen consumers in the former GDR (Berdahl n.d.).

After the fall of the Wall, Trabi jokes—long a tradition in the GDR—became a national pastime in West Germany.<sup>4</sup> Although largely affectionate, some of these reflected projections of socialist backwardness and technological inferiority:

"How many workers does it take to make a Trabi?

Two: One folds and one pastes."

Other jokes focused on the Trabi's speed and power, particularly compared to West German cars:

"What has happened if a Trabi doesn't go when the light turns green?

It has gotten stuck in gum."

With the fall of the Wall and currency union, the market value of Trabis plummeted as easterners flocked to secondhand car dealers in the West—a particularly



Figure 3

Trabi goes to market: Billboard following reunification offers inclusion. The slogan "Test the Best" is a play on the "Test the West" cigarette billboards that proliferated throughout East Germany after re-unification. Photo by Daphne Berdahl.

painful situation for people who had purchased one shortly before November 1989. The following jokes reflect this trend:

"How do you double the value of a Trabi?

Fill it up with gas."

"[Customer:] I need a pair of windshield wipers for my Trabi.

[Salesperson:] That seems like a fair exchange."

The monetary devaluations of the Trabi, however, were symptomatic (and symbolic) of a more general and often systematic devaluation of the East German past by dominant West German legal and discursive practices, which includes the selling of East German factories to western companies, occasionally for next to nothing; the discrediting of the GDR educational system, particularly the *Abwicklung* of the universities,<sup>5</sup> the renaming of schools, streets, and other public buildings; the trial of Berlin border guards that for many eastern Germans represented a sort of victors' justice; debates over what to do with and about East Germany's Stasi (state security police) heritage, debates that often compared the GDR to the Third Reich; and to return to the Trabi's place in an argument of images again, discourses that ridiculed the backwardness of East Germany while ignoring the social and historical contexts that may have produced it.<sup>6</sup> As the eastern German psychotherapist Hans Joachim Maaz remarked, "People here saved for half a lifetime for a spluttering Trabant. Then along comes the smooth Mercedes society and makes our whole existence, our dreams and our identity, laughable" (in McElvoy 1992:219) (Figure 4).



Figure 4

Skeletal Trabi as symbol of socialism's fate and failures: The devalued car as trash, overrun, quite literally, by the refuse of Western consumer goods. Photo by Andreas Kämper. Used by permission of Rowohlt Verlag, Berlin.

As relations between East and West Germans grew increasingly antagonistic, the Trabi was ridiculed in hostile jokes and everyday interactions. West Germans living in border regions complained about the smelly polluting exhaust, endless streams of Trabi traffic jams, and the lack of parking spaces at local shopping centers. Indeed, the Trabi also became associated with the "consuming frenzy" of the *Ossis* (eastern Germans) as cars full of western goods purchased with newly acquired Deutschmarks filled the streets of western border towns. Demonstrating how symbols not only reflect but also influence attitudes and behavior, Trabis were reportedly set on fire, their tires were slashed, dog feces were spread on windshields, and angry messages ("Go Home Osis!") were left under wipers.

#### "Retrabitulations"

Not surprisingly, the Trabi has also been useful in fighting back. In an ongoing and evolving argument of images, it has been deployed in contesting western projections of the GDR and its former citizens as inferior and in asserting an identity as eastern Germans, or "Ossis." This first came to my attention in a "revelatory incident" (Fernandez 1986) during fieldwork in 1991, when friends chose to drive their Trabi instead of their western Opel to a dinner with West German relatives, thus consciously highlighting, indeed magnifying, the distinctions between them. "We took the Trabi," they proudly told me, "and parked it next to their 68,000 DM Mercedes." Similarly, a group of men decided to drink East German beer after it had been nearly taboo to serve it socially; women resumed buying the eastern German laundry detergent *Spee*.

By the mid 1990s, however, such tactics of symbolic resistance had become widespread, routinized cultural practice throughout eastern Germany, generally referred to as Ostalgie (nostalgia for the east). This "GDR revival" has taken many forms: a self-described "nostalgia café" called "The Wallflower" (*Mauerblümchen*) that is decorated with artifacts from the socialist period and serves "traditional" GDR fare; dance parties ("Ostivals" or "Ostalgie Nights") featuring East German rock music, a double of Erich Honecker, and, occasionally, a Trabi or two ("two-stroke techno parties"); numerous publications and trivia games recalling life in the GDR; supermarkets and an annual "OstPro" trade fair that specializes in East German products, including one store whose name seems to reflect a now common sentiment: "Back to the Future." Demand for products through an "Ossi mail order" (*OssiVersand*) website that opened in 1998 far exceeded supply, and the recent release and phenomenal box-office success of two "Ostalgie films" (*Sonnenallee* and *Helden Wie Wir*) marks the culmination of Ostalgie as a truly mass cultural phenomenon.

As a symbol of the former GDR, the Trabi image has been at the forefront of this Ostalgie trend. Trabis or Trabi parts decorate Ostalgie discos, bars, or cafés, and images of Trabis abound in Ostalgie games and books. More significant are Trabi fan clubs located throughout the former GDR that gather to exchange stories, memories, ideas, and spare parts.<sup>7</sup> Like many automobile clubs, discussions often focus on technical matters of Trabi repair and maintenance; unlike many such fan clubs, however, members are also often interested in creative reconfigurations and design (a cultural transformation, perhaps, of the "out of two make one" Trabi repair jobs under socialism), such as Trabis transformed into stretch limos, innovative and outlandish Trabi paint jobs, Trabis as race cars, Trabis as luxury vehicles ("Trabillacs," Figure 5). Now frequently described as a "cult automobile," the Trabi, as several accounts put it,<sup>8</sup> is the "ultimate object of Ostalgie." Very recently, two eastern German art students, stressing the car's status as a cult object" (*Neue Revue* 1999), built a "Trabi Stonehenge" as an advertisement for their "Trabi Shop."

As I have argued about Ostalgie more generally (Berdahl 1999), such practices must be seen in the context of feelings of profound displacement and disillusionment following re-unification, reflected in the popular saying that we have "emigrated without leaving home." Ostalgie can thus be an attempt to reclaim a kind of *Heimat* (home or homeland), albeit a romanticized and hazily glorified one (Huysen 1995). It is also a way of using available languages and images for constructing defiance, identity, value, and solidarity as eastern Germans. As one of the organizers of the *Ostpro Messe* (an annual trade fair for East German products) recently commented: "These are our old products. They are actually not so bad as is always asserted, and we are also not so bad as we are often depicted" (Waldmann 1999).

In this sense, Ostalgie is also about reclaiming a devalued self. Contrary to many interpretations and representations of this phenomenon in popular discourses, Ostalgie does not usually represent an identification with the GDR state or a desire to recover the old socialist political system. Instead, it can (among many other things) be an effort to affirm a sense of personal worth and dignity, to see one's past life and present self as meaningful and worthy in the context of a devalued and ridiculed past. Or, as one Trabi fan book put it, "Cars of paper need drivers of steel" (Kämper and Ulbrich 1995).

The revitalized Trabi is also symptomatic of what I have called "Ostalgie for the present" (transforming a phrase of Frederic Jameson's, see Berdahl 1999), that is, practices that both contest and affirm the new order of a market economy by expressing politicized identities in terms of product choices and



Figure 5

Trabi as cult automobile: A creative and ironic configuration of a luxury car. Photo by Andreas Kämper. Used by permission of Rowohlt Verlag, Berlin.

mass merchandizing. In other words, to paraphrase de Certeau, consumers of Ostalgie and drivers of Trabis may escape the dominant order without leaving it. Indeed, the "ironic awareness" (Fernandez 1986:268) that is contained in many of the Ostalgie practices—including Trabillacs, "two-stroke techno parties," and Trabi Cafés—may even reflect a certain consciousness of this.

The frequent description of the Trabi as a "cult automobile," however, echoes popular discourses about Ostalgie more generally as a "cult" phenomenon and raises important questions, I think, about the politics of labeling in postunification Germany. Descriptions and discussions of Ostalgie were featured prominently in many German, as well as American, accounts of the ten-year anniversary of 1989 and have been heightened by the recent release of the film *Sonnenallee*, a coming-of-age comedy about a group of teenagers living in the shadow of the Berlin Wall, on what would have been the 50th anniversary of the GDR (October 7); at its premiere, guests passed through a reconstructed border control checkpoint into the movie theater. In these recent popular discourses, Ostalgie is described, often with a certain degree of suspicion, as something that turns the GDR into a "cult object," "a joke," a phantasm. "There is a specter haunting Bonn and Berlin," concludes one article in the leading newsweekly, *Der Spiegel*, invoking the famous line of Marx's, "Only it is not socialism but the GDR that won't die" (*Der Spiegel* 1999:22–33). A review of the Ostalgie films in the leading weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* similarly commented (although this time invoking the language of postmodernism): "Now the [GDR] appears as a fake . . . the copy triumphs over the original. . . . Ten years after its demise, the GDR is living a second life as a cult object" (Peitz 1999).

But what does it mean to speak of Ostalgie, and, more generally, representations of the GDR in this way? Like the "ostalgic" practices that they describe,



the discourses that depict *Ostalgie* as cult-like entail particular strategies of representation.<sup>9</sup> They are part of a politics of labeling that is located, in other words, in "specific contested histories" (Rofel 1999) and political projects. To call something "cult-like" evokes images of eccentricity, ephemerality, and irrationality. It designates whatever is being labeled as marginal. This may be part of a discursive strategy when the eastern German PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism—the renamed former Communist Party of East Germany) is accused, for example, of exploiting *Ostalgie* in its recent electoral success. Indeed, while criticisms of *Ostalgie* for eliding issues of complicity, responsibility, and accountability in relation to a burdened GDR past need to be taken seriously, and while distinctions need to be made among *Ostalgic* practices themselves (something I have attempted to do elsewhere [Berdahl 1999]), I would also suggest that dismissals and attempts to belittle *Ostalgie* as a cultural phenomenon in the former GDR may be viewed as part of a larger hegemonic project to devalue eastern German critiques of the politics and disappointments of re-unification.

The Trabi's move from the car of the year, to the jokebooks and junkyards of 1989, to the "cult automobile" of the late 1990s thus tells us much about the politics of identity and memory in united Germany. The car's "property of contrast" (Fernandez 1990:97) as an object, and the actions—indeed performances—that the Trabi enables have been part of boundary maintaining practices on both sides of the former East-West divide. Indeed, to conclude with another (although non-Trabi) joke, the revitalized Trabi reflects the transposition of a popular joke told shortly after the *Wende* (turning point) that revealed at that time much about boundary maintenance and power dynamics from the western side. Now the joke goes, "Wessi says to Ossi (recalling the slogans of 1989): We are one people! Ossi to Wessi: So are we."

## Notes

1. I have chosen the hyphenated terms, *re-unification* and *re-unified*, to refer to the union of the FRG and GDR on October 3, 1990. Although I am aware of the arguments pointing to the teleological and ideological implications of the term *re-unification*, as well as the fact that the territories united in 1990 do not represent Germany in an earlier state, I am also concerned that the omission of any term reflecting a previous union of this region as one country silences critical elements of Germany's past as well: the fact, for example, that Germany was divided in 1945 for a reason. My use of the hyphen is thus a sort of compromise, an effort to avoid the naturalizing connotations of *re-unification* while reflecting a sensitivity to certain histories of divisions and recent restorations.

2. I should also add at the outset that the idea for this paper is not my own. It stems from a lively conversation that took place nine years ago near the bike racks by Haskell Hall at the University of Chicago. Jim Fernandez and I had each just returned from relatively brief visits to a Germany still in the throes of immediate post-Wall euphoria, disorientation, and unease. During the course of our conversation he suggested writing, and perhaps coauthoring, a paper on the Trabi. It has taken me a while to get around to doing this, but, like much of Jim's other commentary and advice over the years, the idea stuck with me.

3. *Auto Zeitung* magazine gave the Trabi honorary top billing in its 1989 test results, for example, and a Trabi was included in the centerfold of *Autobild's* "Best Autos of 1989" (Chua-Eoan 1990:39).

4. On Trabi jokes see Brednich 1990 and Stein 1993.

5. *Abwicklung*, meaning "to unwind" as well as "to liquidate," entailed the restructuring of East German universities through the dissolution of departments and institutes, dismissal of East German faculty members (20 percent of professors and 60 percent of *Mittelbau* or intermediate ranks—Maier 1997:305), and the recruitment of West German academics and concomitant influx of West German research agendas.

6. Although generated and experienced differently in form and content (*Abwicklung* was viewed as an affront and degradation by eastern German academics, for example, whereas the toppling of socialist monuments and memorials was divisive and often done by GDR anticommunists), such practices have generally been grouped together in an eastern German discourse of oppositional solidarity against western hegemony.
7. Trabi fan clubs do exist in West Germany and elsewhere, although they are mostly concentrated in the former GDR.
8. I am drawing here on media representations and individual accounts.
9. See Rofel (1999) on nostalgic narratives in post-Mao China.

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