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# CONSUMPTION IN EAST GERMANY

## The Seduction and Betrayal of Things

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### *Abstract*

In this article the author focuses upon the feelings and expectations that pertained to Western material objects in East Germany, both before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Before these things were actually there, most East Germans seemed to have high hopes with regard to a life surrounded by this material-consumptive abundance. But now that the East German material world is completely Westernized, most people express severe doubts and distinctly ambivalent feelings with regard to the material changes that have occurred in their country. By analysing the history of (the ideology surrounding) material culture in East Germany, characterized by an enormous gap between attractive promises on the one hand and a harsh everyday reality on the other, Veenis asserts that the material world on the other side of the Wall seemed to be the ultimate realization of all those beautiful sounding socialist promises. Within a socialist ideology, material development was the most important anchorpoint for far-reaching promises, which – taken together – boiled down to the idea that in the wake of (material) growth, amelioration and success, it would eventually be possible to realize a completely harmonious state of being. And because of their beautiful appearance, the sense of harmony and prosperity, the wonderful fragrance, the shining colours and the deep gleam that exuded from them, Western consumer-goods were attractive in an almost irresistible sensuous-aesthetic way. By emphasizing the sensuous characteristics of objects, Veenis uses the East German situation to further extend Daniel Miller and Colin Campbell's ideas with regard to the present-day place and role of consumption and the power of attraction of things in general.

*Key Words* ◆ consumption ◆ East Germany ◆ material culture

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In the attempt to cope with . . . alienation . . . men and women longed for a new wholeness in their lives; . . . in times of rapid change a hunger for totality came to the fore – the yearning for a fully furnished house. (Mosse, 1987: 11)

It did not last long, but for some weeks the inhabitants of East Germany must have thought that they were in seventh heaven. That was in the autumn of 1989 when the Berlin Wall came tumbling down. When people talk about those days, there is something in their eyes which reflects the hopes and tensions they must then have experienced. From that moment on, not only the surrounding world, but also their own private lives would become different: more free and democratic, but especially more comfortable, wealthier and richer. That is what they thought. That is what they hoped for. And in most stories people tell about those days, it is clear that their expectations largely pertained to the material and consumption changes which people hoped for and which, as is well known, indeed came about.

Walking around in Rudolstadt, a village of about 30,000 inhabitants in Thüringen where I stayed for 15 months in 1993 and 1994 to do field-work,<sup>1</sup> one can only be amazed when looking at the changes that have taken place since the fall of the Wall. The large municipal hall at the main square has just been renovated and its appearance is grander than it ever was before. The former state hotel next to it is also newly renovated. At the time of the GDR, one of the Intershops of Rudolstadt was situated here.<sup>2</sup> Especially meant to entice Westerners to spend their hard currency, this was the place where West German visitors tried to spend the amount of money per day they were obliged to change into *Ostmark*.<sup>3</sup> In the meantime the Intershops, of course, have disappeared. Their function as Western consumer-paradise has become completely superfluous now that everything is for sale in East Germany as well: from computer hardware to fresh basil and from gold-decorated cocktail glasses to the newest designs of Opel, Renault and Volkswagen. The dream has come true: nowadays, East Germans can buy all those beautiful things which in former days they could only dream about.

And they do; especially during market-days. From all over the city women come to the main square to do their shopping and while they buy their favourite Dutch cheese and exotic fruits, they cast covetous eyes on the market-stalls where all kinds of clothes and shoddy things are exposed. It is the kind of merchandise that is sold at markets all over Europe: decorated pots and vases, balls with rotating plastic flowers, and expensive-looking tea-sets decorated with pastoral scenes. Most of the clothes that are for sale here can be categorized as cheap-but-expensive-looking. For a small amount of money one can buy real patent leather shoes here, or soft-fluffy jerseys with golden stitched flowers.

When there is no market, the square mainly functions as a car park.

Many expensive-looking cars are parked here, especially in front of the little pub 'The Tuchmacherhaus': Mercedes Benzs, BMWs and several four-wheel drive vehicles with striking spoilers and coloured rims. 'The Tuchmacherhaus' is well known for its clientele; this is the place where most of the town's *Möchtegerns* ('would-be's) meet: all those who like to show that they have 'reached something', that they 'are somebody'. Expensively dressed, often in collar-and-tie, they enter, seemingly glowing with self-confidence, the keys of their car tinkling in their hands. They usually park their cars in front of the door and when they cross the threshold of the pub, they press the little remote control button in the key of the car: a little light flashes and all doors and windows are closed at once. The bunch of keys is demonstratively put down on the bar. And there they lie, next to each other: the shining stars of Mercedes and the flashlights of Opel.

Most conversations in this place deal with social status and success. The visitors tell each other with whom they have drunk Moët et Chandon last week, what they consider to be the best way to consume Rémy Martin, what expensive hotels they have visited during their last business-trips and – oh! when one of the visitors happens to be searching for a new home, one of the estate agents happens to have something very interesting for sale.

Among the regular visitors of this place there are some *Wessis*,<sup>4</sup> but although the local visitors do not mind drinking with them, their popularity is unstable. *Wessis* are like the Deutsche Mark and all beautiful things that are now for sale everywhere: God and Devil at the same time; condemned because of the cursed attractiveness that stems from them. It is a power of attraction which nobody can resist. But alas, so much has changed with their arrival, that even the visitors of the Tuchmacherhaus miss the old days. They explain that although then there was almost nothing for sale and although the few Western things that people possessed were really cherished as precious little treasures,<sup>5</sup> in a way those days were better. No one possessed more than anyone else and material possessions simply could not assume as much importance as they do today. And therefore, the relations between people in those days were much warmer, more intense and somehow more 'real', but today, as the saying goes, '*hast du was, bist du was*' ('if you have something, you are somebody'). Material possessions and status, that is all that counts. The more someone possesses, the more worth people attach to him. And while they complain about these developments, the inebriated visitors of the Tuchmacherhaus order another round: long live the warm atmosphere of fraternization that comes with drinking together. It reminds them faintly of the old days, when people still had time for each other.

They may be a bit extreme, the visitors of the little pub at the marketplace. But in a somewhat enlarged form, they nevertheless represent

some of the themes that are highly topical in East Germany nowadays. Because no matter whether they have 'lost' or 'won' by the collapse of the communist regime in their country, no matter if the *Wende* has brought them success or the contrary, most East Germans whom I met seemed to agree about one point: all those beautiful things which are now for sale everywhere may have been extremely meaningful before they were available, but their arrival has brought about a series of developments which everybody equally condemns. No matter whom one asks, when the question relates to consumption or the material changes in their country, people usually come up with the same kind of story.

Nowadays, people's personal value and identity is almost reduced to the (amount of) possessions they are able to display and everybody is constantly striving for more. It is no exaggeration to conclude that material objects are driving people apart. Since the *Wende*, the socio-economic differentiation between people has strongly increased and this is particularly visible when one looks at the kind of things people can afford. But apart from the fact that material possessions represent the growing socio-economic differences in East Germany, material abundance also results in strong feelings of mutual rivalry among people who are in a comparable socio-economic position. Women who used to help each other to acquire scarce goods now make each other green with envy, competing about who for instance has the most beautiful and expensive baby clothes. People try as hard as possible to impress each other, and in this process material objects play a role both treacherous and alienating.

They are the beautiful masks behind which people have learned to hide their true feelings and humanity. One has to be tough these days in order to be successful; ruthless and selfish. Stand up for yourself! Sell yourself! Those are the main lessons which young children have to learn now that social life is largely organized according to the slogan '*hast du was, bist du was*'. And in the arena of competition, which East German society nowadays is, material possessions play an important and vital role: by dressing well, driving an expensive car and constantly showing off what they possess, people seduce others (and, if they are not careful, also themselves) into believing in their excellence. And this is the only thing that counts in today's social rat race.

East German society has changed fundamentally since the fall of the Wall and the ubiquity of these changes has resulted in deep feelings of insecurity and estrangement. These feelings are not only expressed through, and strengthened by, the material-consumptive changes that have taken place in this country, but they are also actively stimulated by the material-consumptive transformation of society as such. And it is clear that the material-consumptive changes are more than just a symbol

of the all-embracing socio-economic, cultural and ideological metamorphosis of East Germany, which has resulted in such deep feelings of frustration, estrangement and nostalgia. 'The Material' is one of the main spindles within the large-scale (political, ideological, socio-economic and cultural) transformations, in which East Germans have recently found themselves; it is both a symbol of people's feelings of confusion and estrangement, and actively contributes to them.

And although nobody approves of this development, almost everybody participates and this has strong emotionally and socially estranging consequences for almost all concerned. For no matter how hard people try to relativize, mock and ridicule it, everyday East German practice clearly shows that people associate outward appearances and material possessions on the one hand, with individual worth and personality on the other. But what in fact is a personality or 'own identity' worth, which one can buy and exchange for about 3000 DM?<sup>6</sup>

Yet, this is exactly what the inhabitants of East Germany are collectively doing: their whole existence has to be furnished anew and everything that reminds them of the old days is thrown away. Every time when the refuse lorry comes by, the pavements are overflowing with bedrooms and kitchens; waiting for the dustmen to pick them up in order to grind them until there is nothing left but a bit of dust. A whole way of life is thrown away and at the same time the anger, anxiety and doubts about this can be found everywhere in East Germany. The material-consuming affluence in which the country is immersed is both a source of strong desire and extreme disappointment.

'It's all a fraud', the old man snapped at me, when I was interviewing him at the Christmas market in Rudolstadt. And he added: 'it is already the third time that they have betrayed us!' I had asked him about the recent material changes in his country, and in the midst of the material abundance and the sweet flavours of burnt sugar and fritters, his answer sounded disenchantingly bitter. All those beautiful things by which we were surrounded turned out to be nothing but a 'fraud'. And yet, after our conversation had come to an end, the disapproving words which he had just uttered almost seemed forgotten, as the man went on doing what most of his fellow townsmen did at the Rudolstädter market: he walked away, looking for another beautiful Christmas present for one of his beloved ones.

The material changes in East Germany have brought about a strange combination of feelings and experiences. Desire and disappointment go hand in hand, and although most people ardently long for ever more things, they nevertheless experience the equation of personal worth with material possessions as an extremely estranging development. It is a combination of feelings, which on the one hand strongly reminds one of Campbell's famous dictum that 'all real consumption is a disillusioning

experience' (Campbell, 1987: 89). According to him, this disappointment is related to the fact that consumption is really the expression of a romantic longing: 'individuals day-dream about possible pleasurable experiences and scenarios . . . which are improved versions of the reality they know . . . improved . . . to the point of near-perfection' (Campbell, 1997: 39).

In an attempt to realize their day-dreams, people attach them to particular goods and this helps us to understand, so Campbell's argument goes, why the acquisition of material objects is disappointing: there is always a gap 'between the real and the imagined' which 'can never actually be closed' (1997: 38). And although this gap subsequently is the source of a new material-consuming desire, consumption itself is always a slightly disillusioning experience (Campbell, 1987: 86).

On the other hand, one could take the East German disappointment about things to be an expression of what Daniel Miller calls 'the alienatory consequences of mass consumer culture' (Miller, 1987: 209). According to Miller, alienation is a necessary phase in the developmental process in which people use objects in their striving for 'self-production' (1987: 210). In short, Miller's argument is that people identify with certain objects,<sup>7</sup> but since they thereby objectify themselves, they experience a feeling of alienation. This alienatory feeling is negated through consumption. And since, at least according to Miller's thesis, the object 'adds' something to the subject, the individual is one step further in his own subjective development. According to Miller material objects – although temporarily alienating – play an active and eventually positive, identity-constitutive role in the process of human self-development.

Identification, alienation, continuous longing and strong disillusionment: with regard to the material developments in East Germany, these feelings and experiences are all very easy to grasp. But although it seems obvious to interpret the present-day situation in East Germany as an exemplary illustration of the complex relation between humans and objects, as described by Miller and/or Campbell, the man I met at the Christmas market in Rudolstadt made it clear to me that, if I really wanted to understand what is going on in East Germany these days, I would first have to find out what kind of expectations pertained to the material world which had sparkled so brightly on the other side of the Wall.

'Fraud', the man called it, when he explained to me how he felt: 'deceived, for the third time'. And with these words, he made clear that there was an extreme discrepancy between the expectations with regard to Western affluence and its reality. By associating the present-day 'fraud' and 'betrayal' of things with the 'fraud' and 'betrayal' of former times (the catastrophes of both national-socialism and socialism), he also seemed to suggest that East German expectations with regard to Western consumer-goods had been nourished by older expectations, by older promises and older pledges. His words made clear that the highly

ambivalent feelings towards material objects could only be understood by taking into account the turbulent East German history.

It is a history that, as even the most superficial analysis will reveal, is characterized by a succession of major ideals, which time and again led to nothing but failure. After the national-socialist ideology and promises had dominated all of (East) German life for more than a decade, they were replaced by an equally dominant and all-embracing ideological promise, which was also meant to control every aspect of people's private lives.

And the longer I lived in the highly tense atmosphere of this country, the stronger became my impression that the high expectations which so many East Germans had about Western material goods, both pertained to a promise which was central to (East German) socialist ideology, and also (be it in a less explicit and pointed way) underlay the ambivalent and contradictory ways – as described by Campbell and Miller – in which people relate to material objects more generally. It is a 'promise', in which the striving for more, for better, for (personal) growth and development is held out as a means to reach some Thing – that is: a more definite, more permanent, more stable, more solid state of being. It is the promise that, by striving forward, we will eventually reach what under socialist rule was called the 'true appropriation of human nature' (Pracht, 1978: 22) or the 'happiness of a fully realized life' (Pracht, 1978: 85), and what cultural anthropologists might call the development of our 'Identities', or 'the subjective consciousness of Belonging' (Touraine, 1995: 139).

When we relate the East German case – especially before, but in a more ambivalent way also after the demise of the Berlin Wall – to the theoretical discussions about the relation between people and objects, I think it shows us that the contradictory role of material objects does not stem from the potential to 'develop identities' (Miller, 1987) with the help of objects, or to 'realize dreams, with all the disappointing consequences this involves' (Campbell, 1987); but rather from 'the dream to Realize, or to Have an Identity'. It is a distinctly modernist dream, pushed to its outer limits by socialist ideology and rule: the dream that, if only we try hard enough, if only we keep on striving for better, for more, or for whatever future goal we define worth striving for, some Thing will await us there; something more solid, more stable and more quiet than the turmoil of our never-ending searching and striving. It is a dream that promises to solve what Georges Bataille has called the 'fundamental problem' (1991: 131) underlying the modern bourgeois world, both in its Calvinist and capitalist form, and in its anti-(bourgeois-)form of socialism. Phrased as a question: 'How can man find himself – or regain himself – seeing that the action to which the search commits him in one way or another is precisely what estranges him from himself?' (1991)



What Bataille describes here is the internal contradictory striving for the development of a Self, which, by means of the developmental process as such, is by implication never as solid and complete as the term 'Self' (and the feelings and expectations that surround it) seems to imply. And I think that the feelings of disappointment and bitterness, which are so widespread in East Germany these days, largely pertain to these contradictory strivings and desires: the desire to develop oneself and to become (someone) on the one hand, and the desire to be (someone) and to have an identity on the other.

And I think that East German frustration is not just caused by the fact that a whole way of life (including the most personal notions and feelings) has recently turned out to be relative, variable and liable to external influences. What makes this development especially painful is the experience (that the inhabitants of this country are for the first time confronted with) of what one could call the 'post-modern condition'. The relativity of the notion 'personal identity' may be child's play for (post-modern) anthropologists,<sup>8</sup> it is quite a different experience for credulous East Germans. All the more so because they must have expected the contrary, when they looked at the other side of the Wall. The beautiful material world they saw there, with its harmonious aesthetic compositions and its tangible, soft and sensuous characteristics, somehow seemed to be the concrete realization and the ultimate fulfilment of all the beautiful-sounding but never-realized (socialist) promises about the Golden Future, in which we would all have a fully developed Self, while living in complete harmony with each other. And as the socialist message time and again made clear, this socialist Heaven on Earth would eventually come true, one day, if only we tried hard enough to live up to the beautiful socialist rules and ideals.

As I will show next, socialist Utopia promised to bring about a fully harmonious situation, in which complete self-fulfilment would go hand in hand with mutual solidarity. And since this promise was from the outset attached to, and associated with, concrete material growth, amelioration and progress, it is no wonder that the inhabitants of East Germany somehow 'thought' that the shining brightness on the other side of the Wall was nothing more and nothing less than the ultimate realization of the beautiful sounding socialist promises about 'Progress . . . and the further development of humanity' (Dornheim, 1966: 120), and the 'happiness of a fully realized life' (Pracht, 1978: 85).

## INDUSTRIAL FANTASIES

'Nothing more will grow here. An entire nation stopped existing . . . Hitler killed German identity at its roots by stealing and soiling all national myths . . . murdering their language' (Kaes, 1989: 65). This is a

description of the situation in Germany after the Second World War. Apart from the terrifying material and physical damage which the war caused, many commentators of the post-war period agree that Germany had above all lost itself. All orientation, everything that used to bring about a sense of self-confidence or hold had disappeared: stained and destroyed as it was by national-socialism. Dagerman described it well: 'Germany is frozen to the dregs' (1947: 111), and another chronicler chooses an equally destructive element as metaphor for the postwar German situation: 'everything and even more was burned, carbonized, and the forest, the beautiful German forest, was silent' (Geissler, 1961: 159). The silent forest as a symbol of the destroyed German self-confidence and self-esteem. Silence. Fire. Ice. They are all metaphoric attempts to make clear that this nation has lost everything, but in the last instance, particularly itself. In a cynical way Geissler describes how many Germans try to find a new hold, in order not to fall into what he calls *The Immense Nothing* (1961: 8). Deeply disappointed, Geissler shows where his countrymen find this new hold: in the need for material progress. In the necessity to rebuild the country, to clear the debris, to make the houses livable again and, in addition to this, through obtaining ever better, newer and more consumer goods.

'Consumers. We are a nation of consumers. Ties and conformism, shirts and non-conformism, we have consumers for everything. The only thing that counts, is that everything – shirts or conformism – is for sale.' Thus a disappointed Heinrich Böll wrote in 1960 (cited in Buruma 1994: 63).<sup>9</sup> A lot has been said, written and discussed about the 'German identity' which since the war increasingly came to be defined and experienced in consumptive terms.<sup>10</sup> The discussions and writings about this topic mainly concern the western part of the country. It is probably less well known that in East Germany 'the material' also became the main hold and means of orientation, albeit in a completely different way than in West Germany.<sup>11</sup>

From the outset, the material reconstruction of the GDR was one of the main anchorages of the socialist Utopia that was meant to give a new form, direction and meaning to East German lives. The new life that was established here was praised for bringing 'the gift of a new people . . . the spiritual flourishing of millions of working people' (Herting, 1968: 902). It was a 'blessing' that it was finally possible to start 'building up a humanistic culture' in this country; that the 'progressive forces' in this country were finally able to develop 'the soul of a liberated people', full of 'respect and self respect' (Uhlitzsch, 1966: 67); and that it was finally possible to realize the 'true appropriation of human essence by and for the people' (Pracht, 1978: 22). What was at stake here was the 'full and conscious return of human being to itself, as a social, that is human, essence' (1978: 22) and the socialist aim was to realize in this country a

'cradle of peace, humanity, security and safety' (*Volkswacht*, 12/9/89), a 'true community of human beings' (Meuschel, 1992: 192), in which it would be possible to 'freely develop the individual at the service of the community of the people' (1992: 78).

This is the bright and shining promise, as it was depicted in children's books, newspapers, journals and on (political) flyers and placards. Look at the illustrations of completely modernized cities, immense engineering works, large metal tubes on sunny construction-sites, where workers are jovially eating their meals during lunchtime! Look at the smile on the ruddy face of the working-class woman, who wipes the sweat off her forehead, and look at the contented labourer, who pushes the plough deep into the furrow, while encouraging his horse to still better performances. They all exemplify the same promise: the future is going to be better, we shall achieve our goals! And they also show where happiness was to be expected: in the combination of mutual solidarity and fellowship on the one hand and a technological, industrial improvement of the material circumstances on the other. This is what those slanting, upward-moving lines in economic charts are all about, when they culminate in round twinkling balls at the end of the horizon, or disappear into the universe, into space. Always further they go, approaching a goal that is imperceptible. They look like reproductions of biblical fantasies, placed in an earthly, industrialized context.

And although it is not always clear what exactly these pictures promise, maybe that is precisely what they try to convey: a deliberate vagueness. Maybe the most important message is the idea, the suggestion that stems from them; the suggestion of growth, of progress, of development into eternity. It is the suggestion of technological-material progress as a means of realizing, not only material-economic prosperity as such, but also 'the true appropriation of human essence by and for the people'. And it is this relationship (between material change and improvement and more far-reaching (mental) growth and amelioration) that was the main backbone of East German socialist historical-materialist thinking and ideology. In East Germany, the material resurrection of the country was unambiguously related to the striving for a 'Utopian future' (Borneman, 1992: 120).

## A BATTLE AGAINST KITSCH

The interesting thing about the history of socialist ideology in the GDR is that the socialist promise of a golden future was not just attached to the material basis of society (the means and modes of production) as such, but also to concrete material objects. Within the GDR, the design of the material world was dictated by an outspokenly ideological conviction that it was possible to give life a progressive sense, content and meaning, by rearranging its material structure. As for instance the

popular women's magazine *Kultur im Heim* (Culture at Home) makes clear: it is important to pay social and public attention to the design and organization of even the most private material affairs, because:

If our living-room is nothing other than the passive representation of subjective characteristics, images and tastes, we wouldn't have to pay public attention to it; it would be a matter of mere private concern. But its important constitutive meaning for the development of human nature ('des menschlichen Wesens'), for the richer expression of socialist reality-coherences, and its fundamental function within social psychology, make the composition of the living-room a public issue concerning the 'res publica'. (KiH, 1977(4): 34)

Time and again, the editors of the journal made it clear that the inhabitants of socialist East Germany ought to have a different relationship towards their material surroundings; their taste concerning things ought to be different from the inhabitants of bourgeois societies. 'Everything that was made within the GDR, was in fact made against the West', an East German designer told me. Every time she designed an object, she had to explain what an object with the same function looked like in the West, why that was reprehensible and in what (enlightening) way her own design was superior. The so-called romantic frills and supposedly ancient motives which were so popular in the West were 'not wanted in the GDR' she told me. And in the same vein, another designer explained:

When we designed a glass, we always proceeded from the question of what a glass should be able to do and what its function was, namely: stand straight, be stable and contain liquid. Furthermore, people had to be able to drink from it. And on the basis of these requirements we conceptualized a form. Whereas in the West, they seemed to do it the other way around.

Practical, functional and rational: it fully corresponds to the picture of communism as it is sketched by the sociologist Bauman: 'communism was thoroughly modern in its passionate conviction that good society can only be a society carefully designed, rationally managed and thoroughly industrialized' (1991: 266).

Daily life in the socialist GDR was organized according to 'fundamentally secular and scientific' (Borneman, 1992: 162) principles,<sup>12</sup> and these particularly concerned the material organization of society. Very generally speaking, one could say that East German material culture was as functional, practical and rational as possible. And even at the end of the 1980s, women's magazines, material culture and design journals bulged with incitements towards 'Sachlichkeit' (succinctness), 'Zweckmäßigkeit' (purposiveness), 'Notwendigkeit' (necessity), 'Minimalgestaltung' (minimal-composition) and 'das Wesentliche' (the essential), to which designers, producers and consumers had to restrict themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Although it is impossible (within the limited scope of this article) to do justice to the many changes and more subtle differentiations that characterize the history of design and material culture in the GDR, it is important to know that the principles listed here were not uncontested. On the contrary: from the very beginning up until the ultimate breakdown of the GDR, there was a battle going on between East German designers, producers, politicians and consumers about the question of what (somewhat ironically speaking) 'a socialist coffee-cup' (Hirdina, 1988: 155) should look like. And although this battle was eventually won by the protagonists of a functionalist perspective on material culture and design, this does not mean that the East German material world looked as immaculately functionalist as one would expect. Many East German producers and politicians had a taste different from the functionalist and modernist style that was so characteristic in East German designer-discourse, and they frequently succeeded in adding adornments, reintroducing flowered decorations or different elements of (what was called) *kitsch*, to the modernist plans, ideas and products presented by designers.

But in spite of these 'disturbing' influences, one can nevertheless conclude that the East German material world was extremely monotonous and distinctly functionalist. Everything that was made in the GDR bore the same functionalist family-resemblances: rectangularity, straightness and rationality. The main reason for this was that functionalist principles to a large extent coincided with economic requirements. It is no coincidence that the East German designer Heinz Hirdina concludes his standard work on East German design with the observation: 'despised by self-conceited people, and renounced as outmoded by those who want to show how fashionable they are, functionalism always manages to survive in factories and construction sites' (1988: 255).

Functionalist principles about the (social-educational) importance of *zeitgemäß*, honest and 'true' present-day, industrial and mass-produced forms and products, turned out to be outspokenly practical as well – that is, economic and cheap – because a straight, rectangular table is of course much easier, cheaper and faster to produce than a table with rounded edges or curved adornments. And both for ideological and economical reasons, East German material culture discourse and practice turned out to be one vast struggle against material 'styles of the past' (KiH, 1973[5]) and 'ornamental desires' (KiH, 1980[3]: 41). It was a struggle against material objects whose power of attraction was condemned as distinctly superficial and banal.

All those Western objects 'adorned with horrible brass-ware, all those wildly dangling lamps . . . those undulating lines and swarming meanders on table – and book-covers' (KiH, 1982[3]: 31); and all those new, industrially-made objects that were made to look old: they were all equally 'unnatural, meaningless, overloaded, unpractical and profuse'

(KiH, 1969[1]: 49); they were all criticized for being 'mushy, untruthful, unreal, counterfeit, bad plagiarism, functionless and falsified' (KiH, 1966[4]: 22). According to East German designers, editors, salesmen and producers, those objects aimed to 'deceive the consumer' (KiH, 1977[2]: 3) and the desire to possess them is expressive of a sad form of 'primitive thinking', a 'deformation of the aesthetic consciousness', from which socialist people needed to be 'freed' (KiH, 1968[6]: 4) as soon as possible. The hollow and vacuous power of attraction of these objects had to be unmasked and people had to learn that these things just didn't fit in with actual society and way of life.

When you prefer a candle-holder or salt-sprinkler that seems to be directly derived from grandmother's days, then please be consistent and . . . unscrew the safety fuses, hold two pine-chips of about 40 centimeters long between your teeth, and use this precursory 'pocket-lantern' while running your household. (KiH, 1965[3]: 27)

The message that East German journals and magazines time and again tried to impress upon their readers runs something like: 'Former days and former things were different! And we just don't want to go back to them; would you? Don't you know that all those so-called "romantic-looking" old things are in fact nothing but the silent testimonies of the life of the poor and exploited?' And in order to inform people about the 'true nature' of the things that they thought were beautiful, journals and magazines dedicated numerous articles to the historical background of these objects. Because only when they learned to think carefully about what they saw would East Germans be able to correct their 'immature' (KiH, 1968[5]) taste-preferences:

empirical perception alone is not enough to penetrate reality to such an extent, that the essential truth of the entire historical movement and development . . . are the result. One needs a higher level of thinking, which is unattainable without a scientifically founded world-view. (Schmidt, 1966: 1436)

'You don't know what you see!', East Germans were told. Because if they knew what they saw, their taste would be different; then it would be in line with present-day modes and means of (industrial) production, with modern times and modernist taste-preferences.

These convictions formed the basis for a material culture that looked distinctly rectilinear, rather severe and puritan. East German couches, easy-chairs, side-tables and dining-areas were all equally straight and no matter where one looks (in design-journals, popular women's magazines, journals for furniture producers or catalogues of East German material culture and design), the pictures all look alike: they show a material world that first and foremost looked extremely simple, uniform and straight.

Whereas the whole of East German life was fitted in a materialistic ideology, the importance of material objects was at the same time neutralized, in the ongoing efforts to educate people's taste in a more rational, practical and economic direction.

But no matter how forcefully material goods were framed in beautiful educational intentions, their quality left much to be desired. Since timber was scarce,<sup>14</sup> it was imitated in many different ways and most furniture was made from a mixture of saw-dust and glue, which was then covered with plastic foil with a motif of wood on it. And constrained by the increasing scarcity of materials, the East German production motto became 'produce more from less', that is to say (East German joke): 'do you know how to make more pasta out of less flour? Increase the holes in the macaroni!' Hard couches, bending staples and the need to use ten matches to light a candle: that was the material reality of the GDR. But it all took place within the frame of highly justified ideals. Even as late as 1987, the journal *Kultur im Heim* urges its readers that 'Crammed decorations or the use of ornamental elements out of the past estrange industrially produced objects . . . Good industrial forms are instead associated with simplicity, straightness of form and proportion'. It is like listening to a strict but patient mother, talking to her children. And at the end of the article the author sighs, just like a mother after a long day during which her children kept on eating out of the sugar basin, despite her repeated warnings that this is bad for their teeth: 'To inform people's individual taste and aesthetic perception is a laborious teaching-process.'

The promotion of functionalist material culture was a civilizing-process against 'the sentimental appeal of the "nice" little things of life' (Bertsch and Hedler, 1990: 19), against the 'fancy tea-pots, bread baskets decorated with christmas-trees, napkin-rings depicting cyclamens' (Bertsch and Hedler, 1990: 19), that kept on dominating West German material supplies.<sup>15</sup>

This is fully in line with the socialist salvation fantasies, in which material progress and striving forward was only useful within the context of the 'wonderful promises of modernity' (Bauman, 1991: 266) and in which every possible connection with the past was taboo: 'it did not trust history to find the way to the millennium. Neither was it prepared to wait till history proved this mistrust wrong. Its war-cry was: "Kingdom of Reason - now!"' (Bauman, 1991: 266).

The past was closed off, salvation was only to be expected in forward-striving movements and the future was the only goal. It must have been an extremely confusing means of orientation for those living in East Germany, given the way in which the socialist promise was realized. Decay and rust, greyness and cracked walls arose where material progress was preached. And although the official East German media

kept on proclaiming the same success stories (things are going better, they will ameliorate even further, we are about to reach our goals), for most people it was evident that the contrary was true. It is not necessary to describe them in detail: the shattered roads, the decomposed inner towns, the dreary *Plattenbau* quarters and the paintless, grey and shabby-looking consumer goods, that seem to come straight from the 1950s.

On the basis of that, one would expect East Germans to be only cynical and distrustful vis-a-vis the materialist salvation-ideology that was poured over them. And although they certainly did not believe in the war-cries about their national material 'expressions, that are honest, life-embracing and truthful' (KiH, 1977[4]: 34), it is at the same time clear that daily life in the GDR turned out to be distinctly materialistic. And although materialist ideology was not able to realize its promises at all, 'the material' turned out to be one of the most important guidelines and themes in the everyday life of most East Germans.

This was partly due to the central regulation and continuous scarcity of consumer-goods, which practically forced people to spend an enormous amount of time, attention and energy on the acquisition of basic material goods. But apart from that, in East Germany consumption was a far more encompassing activity than it was in the western part of the country. Here, consumption also entailed social and cultural aspects. Most East Germans were part of social networks in which material exchange, transactions and rumours played an important role. Colleagues helped each other with the acquisition of scarce goods and everybody was always looking out for anything that might be on sale somewhere and for queues (a sign that something scarce, that is, valuable, was for sale). 'The material' therefore included much more than material things as such; it was a social network, a web of meanings, clues, rumours, the right interpretation of meaningful signs and the development of the right social skills.

And as such, part of the socialist message about mutual equality, solidarity and concern, could find its daily confirmation and concrete form in people's continuous striving for material satisfaction. To stand in line for someone else is also to show concern for each other. As Borneman points out:

people used th(e) romantic emplotment provided by the state to integrate their own experiences into a meaningful and coherent narrative . . . By socialism they appeal to a working-together, a unity of purpose in a relatively egalitarian group, and a strong sense of belonging to an empirical community. (Borneman, 1992: 120)

Maybe even more so than in West Germany, in the GDR 'the material' could develop into one of the most meaningful symbols of The Good Life



and (future) Happiness Together. Objects become the symbols of the aim of Forward Together!

And especially because all beautiful socialist promises about the Good Life were not kept and because the central meaning of the material sphere of life as one of the main sources of self-realization was frustrated almost daily by the necessity to queue for everything and to be bawled at when one dared to ask for unattainable goods like toasters or tights, things could become targets of largely unspecified, but extremely high hopes and expectations. When a well-known West German historian was permitted to do research in the GDR in 1987, he was shocked when he was confronted with the importance people attached to consumption:

The critique on supplies turned out to be a dominant theme in almost every interview. . . . The criticisms about this [were] extremely stereotyped and they usually concentrated on the supply of consumer goods . . . The critique on supplies [seemed to be] an officially licensed valve and, at the same time, an expression of a deep consensus with the system's economic standards of value . . . The 'economism'[,] this . . . very understandable reduction of the fullness of life to the straightforward material, had become a *lingua franca* in the GDR, into which all feelings were translated. (Niethammer et al., 1991: 39)

The material had become a condensation into which all feelings and strivings were translated: things as a source of success and of failure, as goal and means, as social cohesion and individual aspiration, as source of happiness and of misfortune. But internally, it was first and foremost an ongoing source of frustration<sup>16</sup> because the gap between the beautiful words in the official reports and material reality widened every month.

## FLOWERED COUCHES AND OTHER FANTASIES

Looking back over the 40 years of the GDR, it is evident that this state was one large corruption of its own promises. Wherever one looked, at whatever aspect of life, nothing was what it was said to be and at a certain moment people no longer knew what was real and what was not. And the gap between the beautiful stories in the papers and everyday reality became larger each year. This was especially true with regard to the material conditions of life. Under supposedly progressive, materialist conditions, people had to be satisfied with imitation, fraud and lower quality. And although even things faintly associated with capitalism were suspect (if not actually forbidden), one of the main reasons why internal scarcities were ever increasing was that as many products as possible were exported to the West in exchange for hard currency.

After the national-socialist failure, which had promised progress and ended in a total breakdown, it was the second time that the people had

to experience a promise of (material) progress ending in decay and crumbling concrete. And where mutual solidarity was the device for progress, the atmosphere was increasingly characterized by mistrust and fear. But the promises did not stop. Like a machine-gun the progressive messages were printed in journals and newspapers, loudly circulated at mass meetings, at work, at school or in the universities. And of course: the never-ending proclamations about progress and the over-production of the five-year plans were not really taken seriously; it was evident to everyone that there was no ground to believe them. But no matter how much reality deviated from the official discourse, one can imagine that the main ingredients of the socialist salvation fantasies (relatively vague ideals with regard to 'development' and 'growth' on the one hand and 'fraternization' and 'being part of a larger whole' on the other) remained attractive and fed the 'eternal promise of a better future' (Maaz, 1991: 11). In line with this, one can imagine that the enormous gap between word and reality brought about a confusion, comparable with what Christa Wolf describes as 'the severest damage' of her Nazi upbringing: 'the lifelong consequences of the belief, nursed during childhood, that one day the world would be perfect' (Wolf, 1990: 233).

And especially because the golden promises of socialism were to a large extent connected to the striving for material progress, the paradise of the prosperous West seemed to realize all the empty East German proclamations:

That the East German neuroses were rooted in society was evident . . . But life in the West, the life we so strongly longed for, would that also have its shortcomings? . . . For many of us, everything that happened behind the invincible Wall, was expanded to extremely magnified forms, it was the perfect soil for paradisiacal fantasies and projections. (Maaz, 1991: 190)

The West was 'a place of fantasies and projections' (Simon, 1995: 60) and for many inhabitants of the GDR it looked as if all postponed promises about 'Forward Together', which were not realized in their own country but nevertheless remained attractive, were realized on the other side of the Wall. This clearly comes to the fore in the words of the East German psychologist Annette Simon, when she describes the ecstatic feelings of many East Germans when the Berlin Wall fell. Her words can be read as a description of what it means to finally 'be oneself' again, 'to find oneself again': 'in an euphoric way, for one moment, they felt whole again. The benign feeling when object- and personality-cleavage are abolished: reality and desire were one' (Simon, 1995: 15). And Christa Wolf describes something comparable: 'for a couple of weeks, they were really whom they had hoped they could be' ('einige Wochen lang waren sie wirklich die, die sie sein könnten', 1994: 45). Reality at last seemed to fit with the promise, the striving, the fantasy. Here, on the other side

of the Wall, all the possibilities for finally fulfilling the promises which East Germans had only heard about until now, seemed to be present. And for many people, the material prosperity was the concrete starting point for these self-realization fantasies.<sup>17</sup>

In the days and weeks after the opening [of the Berlin Wall] East Germans gorged themselves on the symbolic goods of West German nationness. . . . They flocked to the shopping centers and stores in a consumptive orgy . . . and they sought those items that most define the West German self. (Borneman, 1992: 321)

The fact that Western objects especially were an important means to get acquainted with the Western world, is, of course firstly to do with the fact that, both in the GDR as in the FRG, the material was a knot linking several wishes and ideals with regard to progress and self-realization. But since the striving for material possessions in East Germany had always taken place within a social framework ('if you find something for me, I will organize something for you'), most East Germans could not imagine that the new situation would give rise to strong social differentiation. The mutual competition over objects (who possesses the most; how can I use my material appearance in such a way that my presentation is as impressive as possible in order to achieve something and to score optimum on society's battlefield) and all the other problems which had been relatively unknown in the GDR, now stand out clearly since the *Wende* with regard to material possessions. They were largely covered up by a common sharing of scarcity, a common complaint about a government failing to supply enough goods, and a seemingly common striving for more. And the few Western things that people owned were so rare and so special, that they had never had the chance to be regarded as normal articles of use. A Western biscuit-tin or pen was first and foremost Western and could never, therefore, become a normal tin or pen.

Of course, many East Germans received *Westpakete* from their West German families, but the East German author Thomas Rosenlöcher makes clear that for East Germans the content of such a parcel was much more than the sum of the objects which it contained: 'An inner lightning, which even proceeds from the pudding powder' (1992: 9). And many inhabitants of Rudolstadt told me that even the empty soft drink and beer cans from insignificant West German brands were exhibited as precious little hoards in a cabinet in the living-room. Western objects, and a life with these things especially, was so unattainable that people were unable to imagine how it would be. And maybe they did not even want to, as the East German psychiatrist Maaz suggests.

According to Maaz, the 'lost Paradise' of Western prosperity offered some 'hold' to people; the hold with the help of which they could keep on believing in the ultimate realization, the materialization of all

promises. 'Contrary to Ulbrichts "pseudo-Germany" with pseudo products, the Real, the True, the Authentic was established in the West' (Diesener and Gries, 1992: 61). And Rosenlöcher describes the difference between his West German uncle and 'us', by means of the different ways in which they (were able to) deal(t) with Western objects, with the Real Thing: 'The difference between him and us [was] that when he gave us bananas, he meant bananas, whereas we gratefully accepted the lantern-slides of another life' (Rosenlöcher, 1992: 10). This quotation makes clear that for the inhabitants of the GDR Western things were never 'just things'; they were The Real Thing. 'We didn't know what life in the West was really like, we only saw the pictures and we thought that that was reality', a young woman said disappointedly.

That the pictures were beautiful is obvious. But the question is what the inhabitants of East Germany saw when they looked at those pictures. And how did they interpret what they saw? Or: what is The Real Thing, seen through East German eyes? Let me try to look through East German eyes and describe to you a living-room, as it is pictured on one of the 65 handbills which I received every month in my mailbox in Rudolstadt. Look how it entices and flaunts (see Figure 1).

That couch, so soft and inviting as it stands there, with its rich motif full of flowers. Looking at it, one only wants to sink into it and be comforted by its softness. It is probably an expensive couch and yet it is not severe at all. On the contrary: with its soft material, its rounded back and pastel coloured flowers, the couch looks very soft, cozy and secure. And the same combination of prosperity and comfort is visible in the paintings with which the walls are decorated: two ducks, stylish and comfortable, diving together, a horse in a grassy pasture and two dogs, greeting each other under an extremely dull sky; whatever the weather, they shelter and comfort each other. The domesticity reflected in the plants and flowers on the mahogany side-tables is timeless, and the same goes for the crackling fire in the fireplace. The chinaware dogs, dreaming and staring into the flames, complete the picture.

Although there is no gold or silver to be seen, the whole picture shines; it glistens both with prosperity, with 'having achieved something in life' and with a cozy and safe form of domesticity. Centuries old motifs, no modern influence whatsoever, and at the same time it is clear that the people who live here have reached something, they have really come forward in life. The whole picture represents a successful striving forward, while at the same time preserving existing traditions and roots. It is the realization of everything that one would want to achieve in life. With its wealth and richness it not only symbolizes progress in its purest form, but – different from the harsh situation in the GDR – it is also clear that the progress that is pictured here is Real. And what is more: this form of progress does not give rise to feelings of disruption or

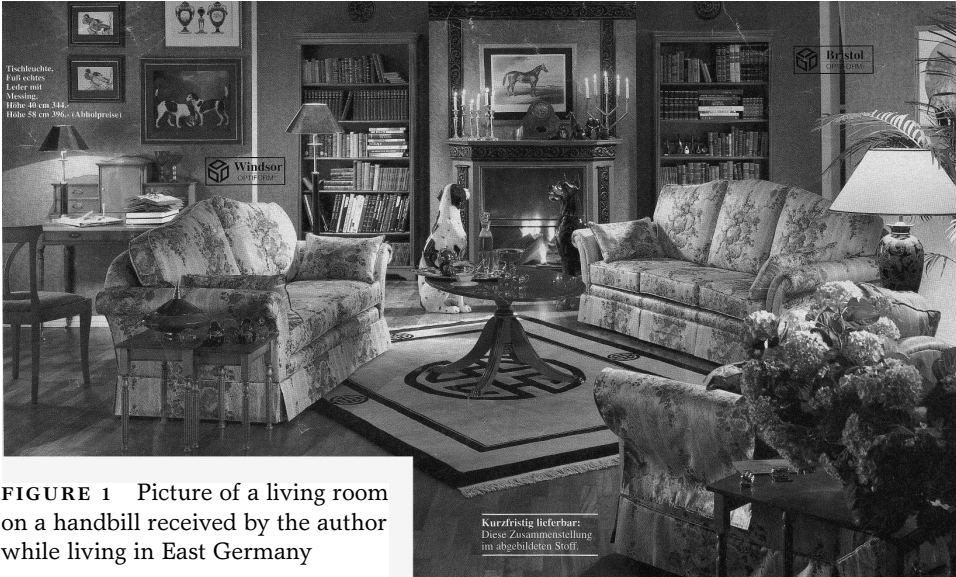


FIGURE 1 Picture of a living room on a handbill received by the author while living in East Germany

estrangement. On the contrary: here, progress leads precisely to safety, security and warmth. The picture 'illuminate[s] the contradictory forces and needs that inspire and torment us: our desire to be rooted in a stable and coherent personal and social past, and our insatiable desire for growth' (Berman, 1983: 35). This picture makes clear that progress does not demand a rupture with the past, as was proclaimed in East Germany. Here, progressive aspirations have found an ultimate destination of safety and warmth. And in this sense, the living-room in the handbill is more than a real and permanent home; it is the Lost Paradise which Maaz referred to.

### MATERIAL OBJECTS AS HEILE WELT<sup>18</sup>

To a certain extent, the appearance and aesthetic features of objects differ by country and, in a way, objects can uncover the collective dreams and fantasies that many inhabitants of a certain society share. I do not think that it is a coincidence that the objects that show a combination of prosperity and comfort are especially popular in East Germany nowadays. In spite of the never-ending struggle of well-intentioned East German designers to liberate people of their inclination towards 'imitation antiques . . . enveloped by the dust of the past' (KiH, 1968[1]: 19), those so-called progressive, modernistic East German objects not only were qualitatively less good, but all attempts to take away the desire for old-fashioned, classical material forms were in vain.

East Germans remained desirous of classic-looking, nostalgic objects; of objects decorated with flowers, landscapes and natural prospects; 'the landscapes of our past, and our emotional links with those lost worlds' (Berman, 1983: 35). It is as if those material objects were meant to counterbalance the proclaimed – and, since it was never realized, continuously corrupted – movement forward. Especially in material culture people seemed to desire and look for objects that recall far-off days, traditions and, in the words of the East German designer Letsch: 'a *heile Welt*, a protected life . . . situated beyond real daily life, in an idealized past' (Letsch, 1983: 90).<sup>19</sup>

It is as if material objects, with their supposed timeless motifs, provided the roots and (hypothetic) origin that were renounced for the sake of the anticipated modernist welfare. A welfare that mainly gave rise to an alienating experience as it was not realized at all and only brought rust and decay, despite the fact that progress was proclaimed. From an East German perspective, Western material culture must have appeared to be the symbol of their 'longing for totality, accompanied by a strong urge to appropriate immutabilities: the landscape, national traditions, history and even the sky. All of these . . . introducing some of the sacred into individual lives' (Mosse, 1980: 12).

This probably was the fantasy that seemed to find its concrete realization in the outer appearance of Western material objects. These things represented a form of wholeness, which Christa Wolf describes as the desire 'to be truly the one, one could be' (1994: 45); an organic wholeness of ahead and rooted at the same time. Progressively moving forward we build up something, and as a reward we retreat on our flowered couch that surrounds us softly and from which we overlook a timeless paradise full of flowers, animals, rural prospects and weathered – but richly polished, shining – wood. '*Die eigenen vier Wände*'<sup>20</sup> (Selle, 1993) as a safe home, where one displays and feels achievement. *Die eigenen vier Wände* as the expression of forwards and rootedness, of Becoming and Being at the same time; this really is paradise.

That was the fantasy, the dream. But with their arrival, Western objects did not make the dream come true. On the contrary: they are jointly held responsible for another experience in which 'all that is solid melts into air' (Berman, 1983). Because instead of well-being and rootedness, they bring mutual detachment. And instead of self-realization, many people increasingly feel estranged and lost. These feelings of estrangement are not caused by the arrival of the Western material goods as such. But as I pointed out before, within the overall confusing and bewildering developments that have taken place in East Germany since the fall of the Wall, material goods are much more than an extremely meaningful symbol. More than anything else, they represent capitalism with all its devastating effects, whereas at the same time they play an

active, stimulating role in (what is felt to be) the process of social disintegration that takes place in East Germany.

One can recognize this phenomenon as the alienating phase preceding the 'process of consumption by means of which goods and services . . . are recast as inalienable cultural material' (Miller, 1987: 17), or (with Campbell) one can consider 'all real consumption . . . a disillusioning experience' (Campbell, 1987: 89), 'since the gap between the real and the imagined can never actually be closed' (Campbell, 1997: 38). But the question that I think ought to underlie all interpretations, is: why objects? Why are objects especially appropriate as a starting-point for (day-)dreams and fantasies? And why also is it with the aid of objects that people engage in a process of self-realization, with all the progressive-identificatory and alienating consequences it entails? No matter what one asserts about objects, no matter whether one recognizes them as active or as passive, as static or as processual; the question that has not been dealt with in most theoretical perspectives with regard to material culture, is: why objects? And I think that part of the answer to this question presents itself when we look at East Germany's past and present. I think, in other words, that the East German case might clarify something, that in a more general way plays a role in the relation between people and objects.

### REALITY AS ARTIFICE

When one has to describe what is going on in East Germany today, the word that directly comes to mind is 'alienation'. After first the national-socialists and then the socialists had tried to give (East) German life a radically new form, sense and meaning, East German life has recently been completely demolished again, to be rebuilt according to an approved West German model. And this development is attended by a basic feeling of doubt with regard to the question 'who are we anyway?'

'Alienation follows alienation', was the bitter comment of Christa Wolf (1994: 46) when everything she used to orientate herself, everything that had formerly been her daily life, changed from one day to another. This not only pertains to practical things such as traffic lights, rules of the road and the system with regard to the separation of waste, but also to the more meaningful aspects of life. Because no matter how people personally related to them, virtually *all* existing (social, cultural, mental, but also emotional and psychic) direction-signs have changed since the *Wende*; they have all been adjusted to the West German example. Rules and regulations for such divergent topics as military service, depression, abortion, sexual disposition and class-differences have changed. In the old days, attracting attention to one's personal capacities was not really encouraged, but nowadays it is not only

possible, but also necessary to upgrade oneself. Contrary to the old days, one now has to choose one's own profession, taking into account the (formerly unknown, nowadays very real) possibility of unemployment. And whereas formerly it was better to present oneself in a somewhat modest and undemanding way, nowadays it is better to be as self-assertive and self-confident as possible.

And in the midst of all these changes, Christa Wolf asks herself if she still knows who she actually is: 'Me? Who was that? Which one of the multiple creatures do "I" consist of?' (1991: 57). Worded differently, these are feelings which one can record everywhere in East Germany. 'We have lost ourselves', people say. Or they almost protectively speak about the 'fractures in our biographies'. The East German psychiatrist Joachim Maaz asks himself 'Where do I belong? What do I want to do? What am I supposed to do? I have to change, but how and in what direction?' (1991: 177).<sup>21</sup>

These questions all express deep despair and doubt; despair and doubt about a life which, when looking back, almost inclines people to wonder if it was really theirs; a life which makes people almost wonder whether they still remained the same in the midst of all changes that have occurred. The present-day situation in East Germany could be described as one in which people are confronted with 'the postmodern condition'. It is a confrontation with the experience that nothing 'Is' and that, on the contrary, everything is variable, relative and artificial. And the fact that the tensions and anxieties with regard to this can be recorded on every East German street corner makes it clear that this is felt to be an extremely painful and confusing confrontation. It is a confrontation about which Michael Taussig has recently formulated an intriguing question. 'With good reason', so his argument starts,

postmodernism has relentlessly instructed us that reality is artifice. Yet, so it seems to me, not enough surprise has been expressed as to how we nevertheless get on with living, pretending . . . that we live facts, not fictions. (Taussig, 1993: xv)

With this sentence Taussig draws our attention to the fact that, no matter how true it may be, the conclusion that 'reality is artifice' is unlivable.

Who can survive in the full consciousness of his own relativity? It is an issue which is very topical in East Germany and it is clear, even for outsiders, how impossible it is for people to live with this realization. But at the same time, it is also visible how people nevertheless succeed to do so: they search for a hold; they search for something that helps them to (temporarily) experience that they still are Somebody. They search for a hold in order to feel that their Existence Is Something which also exists, independent of the changing social circumstances in which they – time and again – find themselves.<sup>22</sup> They search for the experience of really



Being Somebody; for ontological certainty. And while a growing number of East Germans seem to find this within (political) extremist groups and circles, less-threatening possibilities abound as well; the local book-shop in Rudolstadt, for instance, always had some new-age publications in its shop-window and there are many East Germans who seem to find a comparable sense of certainty in a form of nostalgia for the old socialist days, 'when we were still One People' – as the popular saying has it (this is actually a widespread phenomenon in East Germany and even has a name: *Ostalgie*).

But I think that apart from these phenomena, more or less typical for East Germany, we can also detect a more general 'solution' to the problem of 'cultural estrangement' (Van de Port, 1998: 3), which is so omnipresent in East Germany today. Because I think that, against their own better judgement, East Germans also try to find a new hold in material things. It may be an unsatisfactory choice, but nevertheless; 'hast du was, bist du was' ('you are somebody if you have something'). After all, what provides a better grip than objects, objects in which one recognizes one's ideal self in a 'material, substantial and tangible' (Van Beek, 1996: 17) form?

## THE MATERIAL AS MATTER OF FACT

For a long time, social scientists have studied material objects mainly as the reflection of attitudes, norms, values, mentalities and identities of a people. On the other hand there was the classical Marxist interpretation of the growing importance of consumer goods in present-day, industrialized societies, as being characteristic of people's alienation and false consciousness. Miller's work (1987) gave an important impulse to the development of a new theoretical conception of the role of material goods in present-day societies. Searching for a non-reductionist perspective on the relation between people and things, Miller developed a processual perspective in which people use the material world which surrounds them in order to develop their identities. Miller emphasizes the fact that neither people nor objects essentially Are Something; both are constantly Becoming and they develop each other, in a dialectical relationship in which they constantly define each other anew.

The process in which this development takes place is positively valued by Miller, and he particularly emphasizes the identificatory potential of goods. The feelings of alienation, which Miller recognizes as being part of this process, are not extensively analysed by him. According to him, alienation is only a temporary phase, which can be overcome by consumption. It is also striking that in his thinking the phase that precedes the phase of alienation is not really distinguished or identified. He seems to take for granted that people find certain objects attractive and

worth buying, but the questions as to why this is so and what role specific objects play in this process of personal self-realization are not really dealt with.

Yet the only way in which I can give some concrete form to his abstract ideas about objects as constitutive of people's identities is by imagining that people recognize Something (definite, fixed and thereby easily appropriable) in objects, with which they want (or are able) to identify themselves. In my view, people recognize (an aspect of) their (ideal, future) identity in material objects and this is only possible when they perceive objects as having some essential quality. As Gosewijn Van Beek has observed correctly, the dialectical process between people and things can only take place on account of the fact that, in our perception, things are 'truly autonomous', 'fundamental' (1996: 13) and essential. For the people who buy them, material objects with their fixed, permanent and material form do not embody a phase in a developmental process, but they represent the contrary: something solid and stable:

[T]he cultural object and subject constitute each other and thus are not reducible to fundamental properties or qualities, but this can only be so if they are culturally perceived . . . to have precisely the qualities our processual understanding says they don't have. (Van Beek, 1996: 13)

And by appropriating these (supposed) 'fundamental properties and qualities' by means of consumption, I think that people not only try to develop (as described by Miller) their 'own identity'; they first and foremost try to find it. By appropriating it in a material form, people, as it were, try to fix and materialize their identity.

The social-scientific conclusion that 'identities' do not exist as established entities, but on the contrary are always changing, relative and artificial constructs, does not detract anything from the fact that – as the present-day situation in East Germany certainly makes clear – we do not want to experience 'our identities' as relative or as artificial constructs. On the contrary: we want them to be fixed, inalienable and essential. And the confrontation with the opposite is not only painful and extremely estranging, it is also 'a strong incentive to actually capture part of this world as inalienable possession in an effort to control . . . what is uncontrollable: one's identity in relation to the world' (Van Beek, 1996: 22).

Why is it that many times, when one feels depressed, disoriented or somehow disintegrated, the 'solution' seems to be to go to a shop and buy a new lipstick, a new pen, a watch or a book? In my view, buying things is an (inadequate) effort to (temporarily) experience that one *is*. It is an effort to experience that one has an identity. And seen in this light, it is understandable – as the East German situation clearly shows – that the consumption of highly desired goods does not overcome the alienatory feelings, but, on the contrary, feeds them. In my opinion,

alienation is not a temporary phase in a developmental process; it is a permanent and inherent part of consumption, which is much more than a means to satisfy our ongoing desire for better, for new, for fashion and for more. Consumption certainly is all that, and while buying, people certainly experience what Miller has called the progressive development of their identities. But on a less visible level, I think that the power of consumption also thrives on a desire which is more or less the opposite of this quest for development, and that is: the desire for fixedness and rest; the desire to Be, instead of to Become. And exactly because people expect to materialize and fix their identities with the aid of objects, the confrontation with the fact that this does not work is estranging.

Campbell has rightly emphasized that consumption is always a disillusioning experience. But unlike him, I am not inclined to think that the East German desire for goods is a 'non-specific desire' (Campbell, 1997: 39). I think that this actually is a quite specific desire; it is the desire to Have an Identity and to Be Somebody. It is a desire that (as the East German situation very pointedly makes clear) is constantly shattered and the question, therefore, is why people keep on searching for its satisfaction. Why do people keep on buying, in search of something which they know they will never really find?

According to Campbell this does not relate so much to the objects as such, but rather to an ever emerging desire for new and 'more perfect experiences' (1997: 47): 'products are desired less because of their character as material objects than because consumers anticipate their possession will bring pleasurable experiences' (1997: 39). In my view, however, this quotation artificially separates two aspects which are in fact strongly related. The pleasurable experiences which people expect from things are directly related to their character as material objects. The expectation about things is that something of their materiality, stability and wholeness passes on to the one who buys them and the expectation is that the object thereby contributes to the inalienability, stability and wholeness of the buyer. Yet although material things never live up to people's expectations because – their materiality and prosperous, cherishing appearances notwithstanding – objects bring about alienatory and competitive experiences as well, they nevertheless remain attractive. And I think that the 'deceptive power of attraction' of objects is related to their materiality; it is related to a promise that they seem to convey: to bring about the same experience of wholeness which their materiality embodies.

### **MATERIAL OBJECTS: THE SENSUAL EXPERIENCE OF WHOLENESS**

Always, when I tried to understand the eagerness to buy in East Germany, I thought of the woman who lived in the outskirts of Rudolstadt. Every

time I visited her, she complained about her lack of money; she never had anything to spend because her husband's salary was hardly enough to make ends meet. And then, one day, when I entered her flat, she almost stumbled over her words in her eagerness to tell me that she had just bought a vacuum cleaner. Contrary to her habits, she had welcomed the salesman who came to her door in order to sell her a vacuum cleaner for 900 DM. Oh, she knew very well that she did not need a new vacuum cleaner, but she just could not wait for it to arrive! It was such a beautiful vacuum cleaner! And the most wonderful quality of the thing was that it distributed a real perfume of fresh woods! Wherever the cleaner had been, the air would smell of pine-resin.

900 DM is not exactly a small amount. In her case it meant about 40 per cent of the monthly income she had at her disposal for the costs of living for herself, her husband and two children. Apparently, the piney smell was worth quite a lot to her. Or would it be a coincidence that the scent settled the matter for her? Would it be a coincidence that she was prepared to spend such a large amount of her income on something that she did not really need, but which smelled so good? I don't think so.<sup>23</sup> The vacuum cleaner with the piney fragrance draws our attention to a quality of material objects, that in most theories is hardly identified as such: the sensuousness of things. Things are not only part of an objectifying process; they are not only the starting-point in people's day-dreams. Things are first and foremost material and tangible, aesthetic and sensuous and exactly because of their multi-sensory qualities, they can bring about the promise of 'The Real Thing' and 'An Identity' in such a variety of physical ways, that, no matter what one rationally thinks about them and no matter what contrary experiences one has with them afterwards, it is hardly possible to relativize this experience.

Everyone who has missed a loved one for a long period of time knows what it means when one suddenly smells his (or her) fragrance, for instance in the clothes that he has recently worn. The power with which he suddenly seems to be there is incomparable with what happens during a telephone conversation or when reading his letters. In his scent, the whole person suddenly seems to be there; not just his words or thoughts, but the whole physical person and everything that makes him attractive, desirable and *him*. By means of smell, a whole atmosphere, person or situation comes to you in a very direct and unmediated way. And a comparable power of attraction proceeds from objects.

When one asks people in East Germany to describe the power of attraction of Western objects, it is striking how most attempts are hampered because of the difficulty to find words for aesthetic-physical experiences. In most descriptions, people try to represent how things from the West were 'somehow' softer, brighter, more colourful and cheerful and how their scent was better than that of East German things.

'A yellowish shine behind the counter' (Rosenlöcher, 1992: 7), 'those aromas and colours' (Simon, 1995: 60), 'everything that came from *drüben*,<sup>24</sup> had this new-ish scent which, as a flavour of faraway-ness, filled the banana-symbol' (Rosenlöcher, 1992: 9); the West as a 'sensuous-aesthetic' (Simon, 1995: 60) experience. The *Westpakete*,<sup>25</sup> with their 'far-away flavour' (Rosenlöcher, 1992: 9); the Intershops: 'those glossy caves', with their 'different flavour', and in general: 'this shine of progress' (Rosenlöcher, 1992: 10) that surrounded Western things.

And after having lived there for more than a year I can imagine that, conversely, there was the sensuous-aesthetic experience of the GDR, with its stony couches and chairs, its flaking plastic, its straight severity of form and its smell of brown coal. Here, colours were always paler and more grey than *drüben*, everything seemed more dreary and in a sensuous-aesthetic respect, one could describe the two Germanys as bright and refreshing on the one hand versus musty and stuffy on the other. It is no coincidence that during my first visit to East Germany I jokingly wrote that it would be a good idea to concentrate on flavours in my research; it is one of the most characteristic, most discerning and powerful channels of information in its associations.<sup>26</sup> It is almost impossible to describe the GDR without using sensory means, and in a report which was published in 1971 in the West German periodical 'the *Arbeitgeber*' (the employer), the readers of the magazine are told: 'one has to have seen, smelt, felt and tasted it . . . because it is unimaginable' (in Kleßmann and Wagner, 1993: 376).

Especially because of their flavour, their gloss and their colour, Western things seemed to be an all-embracing experience of The Real Thing; of How We Really Are; of Self-realization as feeling, as flavour, as colour and as sheen. And although East Germans have had every opportunity to experience the fact that objects fulfil their sensory-aesthetic radiation only to a certain extent and in a very ambiguous way, yet their power of attraction remains the same: they are so pretty, their appearance reminds them of all paradisiacal promises about prosperity and rootedness that have dominated East German lives for so long and to such an enormous extent. And then there is their flavour; that smell of fir-trees that comes from an extremely advanced vacuum cleaner. How wonderful it must be to come home after another day of hustling with colleagues and be surrounded by the fresh scent of fir-woods. Or the shine of a new car: competitive and boasting, of course, but besides that, also a blessing for the body to be surrounded by these chairs and to notice how this enormous weight starts to move with a little pressure from one's hand.

'Don't buy!' we say to ourselves when passing the shop-windows, but it is already too late. Our eyes come across a sweater with a flower motif, and before we have been able to think about it, the associations are there: soft, warm, cherishing and stylish at the same time. When I put it on, in

a sensuous way the sweater will give some of its appearance to me, the bearer; before I know it, I will be like the sweater: it will not only warm me up, but it becomes like me and I will become like the sweater.

. . . yes, that is what I want . . . that's how I want to be . . . if I wear that, I am like that: . . . soft, protected, guarded and cherished . . . rich, prosperous, with golden adornments . . . and at the same time: connected with nature, out of which these beautiful flowers spring . . . now and in eternity.

Things do something to people: not only in a social developmental process, not only as a representation and a starting-point for day-dreams, but also as a physical experience. And it is this aspect that makes them especially irresistible. With their sensuousness, things are able to convey the ideal of The Real in such a multitude of physical ways that the body aches for things; their warmth, flavour and shine bring about a physical experience of Being as fully and whole as they are. And even though it is clear that things in the end do not work that way, this rational insight will not help. People fall for things; for the sensuous-aesthetic promise they convey: Be like me.

Things are the 'facts', which Taussig refers to: material, whole, sensuous and appropriable in such a variety of physical ways, that they make it clear that (be it only for a short period of time): This is me, I am what I buy: whole and united, one with myself. I am Me.<sup>27</sup>

In a country where every hope for a true and inalienable Self has time and again proven to be an illusion, there is nothing left but to dream about a 'Me':

but I, I promise you that, my love; I will find myself a new name . . . and that will be all right, because then I will have dreams again at night, dreams, that will gently help me to remember myself. (Wolf, 1994: 204)

Instead of dreaming about a real Me, one can also buy an experience that – in an imperfect and diverted way – temporarily reminds one of oneself. People buy things in order to seem one with the object they choose and as such, objects make us feel One; one, whole and indivisible.

Physical, aesthetic, at one with its sensuousness and its material wholeness, the sweater tells me:

Buy me, then You will Be Me  
Buy, then You Are  
*Hast du Was, Bist du Was.*

## Notes

I want to thank Gosewijn Van Beek, Birgir Meyer, Daniel Miller, Mattijs Van de Port, Bonno Thoden van Velzen and an anonymous reviewer for their stimulating and helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

1. The material on which this article is based was collected during fieldwork in Rudolstadt, from September 1993 until December 1994. Apart from observations of daily life in Rudolstadt, archive-research, as well as research on other (secondary) literature, I interviewed inhabitants of Rudolstadt, shopkeepers, (former) local politicians, designers and people who worked in various East German museums. The research, which is part of my PhD research, was supported by the Amsterdam School of Social Science Research.
2. Intershops were shops where Western things were sold in exchange for Western currency. They are an extremely interesting phenomenon, because East Germans were officially not allowed to possess Western money and Western objects were officially considered to be the hallmarks of an alien society and an estranging way of life. At the same time, East Germany produced many consumer goods that were exported to Western countries in exchange for hard currency. In these shops East Germans could thus buy certain products, which they themselves had produced, in exchange for money which they officially were not allowed to have, in a shop which they in fact were not allowed to visit and where some Stasi (social security) employees inevitably worked in order to keep an eye on the local visitors. I have seen several Stasi-documents, in which it is described how often couple B. visited the Intershop, what they bought and how much money they spent.
3. Western visitors who entered East Germany had to change a certain amount of money, at the official rates. It was never easy to spend this money and the Intershops were a solution to this problem. Although the prices for ordinary Western goods (ranging from chocolate and washing-powder to radios and television-sets) were much higher here, visitors at least had the opportunity to spend their good money on something other than (what they considered as) worthless East German things.
4. 'Wessi' and 'Ossi' are the pejorative terms for respectively West and East Germans.
5. Also see Diesener and Gries (1992), Borneman (1992: 143-4), Niemöller (1991), Moeller and Maaz (1991: 142-3) and Veenis (1997).
6. For an elaboration of this question, especially see Van Beek (1996).
7. This is my interpretation of Miller's ideas and I am not sure whether he would use the word 'identification' himself. In his book, Miller principally pays attention to the relation between people and things after the phase in which people feel alienated. Therefore everything that precedes this phase and the alienation itself are only dealt with in a rather abstract way. It is not quite clear what actually happens with (and within) a person when he sees something and notices that it evokes his desire. I will come back to this point later.
8. With regard to the relativity of 'the German identity', see Forsythe (1989).
9. Also see Borneman (1992: 314): 'prosperity, automobiles, and vacations abroad - the generative symbols of West Germanness'. And in their famous essay about the 'impossibility to mourn', A. and M. Mitscherlich write that 'these promises, that it would be possible to achieve an ideal . . . with the purchase of a new article, only deal with morality at the periphery' (1967: 205).
10. See, among others, Moeller and Maaz (1991), Buruma (1994: 63), Borneman (1992: 229) and Diesener and Gries (1992: 61).
11. Also see Veenis (1997), in which I extensively deal with the ideological differences between both Germanys, especially with regard to the material developments in both countries.

12. Also see Habermas who, in a letter written to Christa Wolf, writes that in the post-war history of both East and West Germany, there is a strong (but according to him just) taboo on all 'seductions of the archaic' (Wolf, 1994: 147). In the same letter Habermas pays attention to what he considers to be the worst consequence of the ruined and fraudulent defeat of socialism within the GDR: 'with its political rhetoric (this state has) misused progressive ideas for its legitimation; and through its inhuman praxis it has not only jeeringly repudiated them, but thereby also discredited them fully. I am afraid that these dialectics of invalidation will have more ruinous effects on the spiritual hygiene in Germany, than six generations of *anti-enlightened, anti-Semitic, false romantic, German-gushing obscurantism* have been able to bring about' (143-4). Note especially the (for 'right-thinking' Germans self-evident) relation between anti-enlightened and anti-semitic ideas, which is suggested here!
13. Although the picture about the material composition of daily life in the GDR is more complex and differentiated than I can describe here, terms like 'Sachlichkeit' and 'Minimalgestaltung' are nevertheless characteristic for the East German material world. See also Bertsch (1990), Halter (1991), John (1978), Kelm (1971), Kühne (1981), the volumes of the East German design journal *Form und Zweck*, the women's magazine *Kultur im Heim*, the advertising journal *Neue Werbung*, the journal of the furniture industry *Möbel und Wohnraum* and especially the pictures in the book of the East German designer Heinz Hirdina (1988).
14. Although all the woods in the country were cut down, the timber was exported to Western countries, in exchange for Western currency. The topic 'East German economic relations with capitalist countries' is extremely interesting, because it makes clear that the GDR was willing to deny its own idealist principles, in order to satisfy (at least to a certain extent) the internal material situation. Also see Kleßmann and Wagner (1993: 377).
15. For an elaboration of the role of socialist regimes as (supposed) civilizing forces, see also Mattijs Van de Port (1994).
16. Also see Gries (1991: 327).
17. I think that for many people the severest damage to life under (an ideologically 'supported') totalitarian dictatorship is perhaps not so much the deprivation of liberties, which they have to endure, but the fact that personal thoughts, strivings and desires are blended with, and (in an almost imperceptible way) corrupted and absorbed by, hollow ideological war-cries, that serve no other goal than the maintenance of totalitarian power as such.
18. The German expression 'heile Welt' can be translated as 'a world in which everything is all right', but one could argue that it is significant that there is a German term to express this, whereas there is no such English (or Dutch) expression.
19. This quotation is torn out of its context, because although the East German author writes about the desire for old-fashioned looking things, he asserts that these desires are characteristic of capitalist societies and that they do not exist in the GDR. Although he warns against 'specific problems' with regard to the longing for old objects, he reassures his readers: in as much as these wishes emerge in the GDR, they 'usually don't have anything to do with a hankering after a past *heile Welt*' (Letsch, 1983).
20. *Die eigenen vier Wände* is a German expression. Literally it means 'the four private walls', but its emotional connotation is much stronger. It refers to the home as the only place where one is private, safe, well.

It is an expression one can record everywhere in East Germany nowadays:



- 'everybody withdraws within *die eigenen vier Wände*'. There, people are said to look for the safety and well-being they so strongly miss outside. It is a development that was already apparent within the GDR (the GDR was called a *Nischengesellschaft*: niche-society) and contrary to what everybody expected, this development has only increased since the *Wende*. One could say that this development is characteristic of the feelings of insecurity and threat which have increased instead of diminished after the *Wende*.
21. Also see the dialogue between Maaz and his West German colleague Moeller (Moeller and Maaz, 1991, especially 150–2).
  22. 'Time and again' because, as the man at the Rudolstädter Christmas market made clear, it is the third time in half a century that people have experienced this. Nevertheless, there is one important difference between this experience and former ones. Because, contrary to both the situation during and after national-socialism and during socialist rule (when there was always a dictatorial state that could be blamed for estranging and disrupting any experiences whatsoever), the present-day situation is the first time that people are fully responsible for the (estranging, disrupting) feelings and developments they undergo.
  23. Of course, one can also interpret this example (and the way in which East Germans relate to the new material world that surrounds them in general) in terms of the attraction that stems from the *new-ness* of Western objects. One could then point out that Western objects are much more fashionable than those that were previously for sale here. It may sound as a contradiction (the desire for things as a search for solidity, versus a search for newness and fashion), but I don't see it as a contradiction. The interpretation I am presenting here is not meant to be exhaustive. There is much more to say about the ways in which East Germans relate to (Western) objects. In this article I merely want to present a possible line of interpretation, which has to be developed further and in more detail.
  24. Literally: 'from there', but usually meant to circumscribe (people, things, phenomena) from the other Germany.
  25. Literally: parcels from the West; people usually refer to the Christmas parcels that were annually sent from *hüben* to *drüben* and the other way around.
  26. Especially see the first book (1989[1913]) of the famous cycle of novels from Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, in which the author brilliantly shows how his youth-memories come back to him through the associations that arise from the flavour of a biscuit which he dipped in his tea.
  27. In the words of Van Beek: 'Material things rather than intangible essences surely must be privileged to ground the completeness of one's identity vis-a-vis a world that threatens us with the fluidity . . . of our person' (1996: 22).

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