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Successful icons of failed time: Rethinking post-communist nostalgia

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Abstract

Under what cultural conditions can the relics of symbolically polluted time re-emerge as its purified signifiers and culturally successful icons within new circumstances? What does it mean when people articulate 'nostalgic' commitments to social reality they have themselves recently jettisoned? Drawing on the ideas of the iconic turn and American cultural sociology, the article offers a new framework for understanding post-communist nostalgia. Specifically, it provides a comparative reinterpretation of the phenomenon of so-called *Ostalgie* as manifest in the streetscapes of Berlin and its counterpart in Warsaw. One of the key arguments holds that 'nostalgic' icons are successful because they play the cultural role of mnemonic bridges *to* rather than tokens of longing *for* the failed communist past. In this capacity they forge a communal sense of continuity in the liquid times of systemic transformation. As such, the article contributes to broader debates about meanings of material objects and urban space in relation to collective memory destabilized by liminal temporality.

Keywords

collective memory, icon, liminality, nostalgia, Ostalgie, post-communism, streetscape, transition

> Imposing form on a period of time is what beauty demands, but so does memory.
> For what is formless cannot be grasped, or committed to memory.
>
> (Kundera, 1995: 38)

1 Introduction: Between reality and utopia

The anti-communist revolutions of 1989 left few sociological parameters unchanged. Their significance was often likened to 1789 in France (Drechsel, 2010: 13). It engendered 'arguably the most significant political transformation of the second half of the twentieth century' (Jay, 2003: xvi).

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But if the motivations and magnitude of change were palpable, the directions and prospects opened up by the revolution remained opaque for quite some time. It was 'the transition from failed Communism to an amorphous and still-unsettled something else' (Jay, 2003: xvi). 'Post-communism' meant 'enormous uncertainty' (Bunce and Csanadi, 1993: 272). Hence people dwelt on grandiose terms such as 'return to Europe' or 'return to reality' (Hawkes, 1990: 11). Only this much seemed certain: transformation represented macro-liminality, a rite of passage from the profane qualities of 'Eastern' Communism to the sacred values of 'Western' order. This collective sentiment was understandable given the bleak reality of the ossified Soviet bloc, whose societies were comparatively exhausted and craved release from an all too obvious political cul-de-sac. In the GDR, as if to insult an already injured country, Erich Honecker continued to say until the end that 'neither ox nor donkey will stop the progress of socialism' (cited in Hildebrandt, 2003: 88). He was right: his own people would stop it. As the regime imploded and the re-unification of Germany materialized within a year, Germans eagerly 'agreed to consign a failed "socialist experiment" to the dustbin of history' (Cooke, 2005: vii). Poles were committed to do the same. This vision was epitomized by Tadeusz Mazowiecki's insistence that we draw a 'thick line' between the past and the present and 'bring Poland back into the stream of human progress' (Kennedy, 1999: 295).

Yet before long, social scientists began to notice the distinctly unrealistic component of this epochal 'return to reality'. They discerned 'heavily utopian' tendencies, especially with regard to capitalism (McDonald, 1993: 203) and democracy, whose natural link to the free market was assumed (Streissler, 1991: 200). As the first years of transformation passed, it was becoming clear that 'impossibly high hopes [were] placed in free market economies' (Streissler 1991: 201). 'The citizens of the New Europe nursed many illusions after the breakthrough of 1989' (Lesniakowska, 2008: 31). Like every utopian belief, this one was prone to transmogrify into disenchanted chagrin when confronted with mundane, protracted birth pangs of the new order it aspired to. Given the extraordinary pragmatism of the 'velvet' revolutions, the coming of various utopian moods may have appeared unlikely. Yet such moods were neither illogical nor unparalleled. They certainly would not astonish scholars well-versed in history and cultural anthropology. As some of the most prominent among them noted, 'every revolution needs social energies, which only broadly exaggerated expectations can mobilize, and in every revolution these hopes must be disproportionately great in relation to the outcome; every revolution thus creates a great mass of disappointments' (Kolakowski, 1990: 222).

The revolutions of 1989 were no different. The transformations they instigated were bound to be arduous. 'The road to rediscovering liberalism' quickly turned out to be 'bumpy' (Kovacs, 1991: 2). In fact, to some they turned out so derailing that they informed conspicuous efforts to resignify the revolutionary distribution of the sacred and profane that seemed taken for granted only a few years earlier. This condition was understood by historians as 'succumbing to the anomie that is always attributed to those suffering from the early stages of harsh capitalism' (Stern, 2006: 479). As early as the winter of 1991 some economists warned: 'Perceived failure in achievement is near certainty because aspiration levels are excessive ... It is more than likely that the next wave of sentiment will be a wave of massive disappointment' (Streissler, 1991: 201). In the GDR the process of growing scepticism toward new conditions was further exacerbated by what many described as the 'colonization' of the East by the West. The division of Germany created a comparative context from which, upon the Fall of the Wall, the East emerged as the impoverished 'loser' (Hensel, 2004: 71). The transitional unification presented it as the unequivocal and thus disconcerting or even 'humiliating' fact (Stern, 2006: 470).

In other countries of the region that precise dynamic was obviously missing, but its cultural equivalents existed there too. In all of them, the first phases of transformation were more like cleaning Augean stables than anything else. They meant being confronted not only with the first temples of Western capitalism but also with pervasive 'Leninist legacies', as well as with the fact that these legacies could not simply be wished away in one fell swoop (Jowitt, 1992). They were 'part and parcel of the existential experience and determined memories, affinities, loyalties and identities' (Tismaneanu, 1999: 231). Not realizing this on the part of some reformers and citizens was yet another symptom of post-revolutionary utopianism. As the post-revolutionary disenchantment settled in, the worry about distinct psychological

issues was thematized. Historians noted the possibility that the East Germans might 'harbor a sense of loss and resentment' when confronted with transformations, regardless of economic performance (Stern, 2006: 470).

All these apprehensions proved prescient. Collective feelings of disappointment, loss or even resentment surfaced and took on a life of their own. By the mid-1990s such countries as Poland or Hungary saw the former communists enter parliaments in democratic elections. In the GDR the communists managed to retain support of some constituencies in Berlin and elsewhere. These political tendencies were coeval with what appeared to be a rising tide of reminiscing about the communist reality jettisoned only several years earlier. One may have felt entitled to connect all these phenomena and conclude:

> Within only a few years disillusionment was replacing high expectations ... The first signs of what was called *Ostalgie* appeared – nostalgia for familiar, shabby GDR. The older generation began to cleanse its memory of the oppressive aspects of the GDR and remember gratefully the parochial privacy, slowness and predictability of its 'socialist' life. (Stern, 2006: 479)

In short, a link was being established between capitalist transitional hardships and communist nostalgic commitments. Just as the loathing of Communism occasioned utopian infatuation with free society, so the subsequent dispelling of some liberal theories in transitional practice seemed to inspire the rise of nostalgia. In the GDR the very playfulness of the word *Ostalgie*, the German portmanteau that literally means 'nostalgia for the east', could stand for the phenomenon's authenticity and strength. Its iconic representations contributed to the making of 'post-communism' as a distinct 'cultural condition' (Erjavec, 2003), a kind of genuine cultural 'post-condition' (Marcus and Fischer, 1999: xxvi). It quickly expanded semantically and was thematized in civil campaigns, commemoration practices, conspicuous movies, oft-visited websites, best-selling books and TV shows that attracted millions of viewers (Cooke, 2005: 141). Yet, foregrounding the link between nostalgia and the hardships of transformation is not sociologically sufficient. To be sure, the link is plausible. But it is not causally exclusive. The socio-economic situation must not be credited with being the singular or most important determinant of various phenomena covered by the term 'post-communist nostalgia'. For one thing, such a perspective is unable to solve the underlying paradox, that is, why would people respond to perceived transitional failures by longing for the failed reality they had just fled from.

The post-communist nostalgia is not merely a private emotion or political reaction. It is a collective feeling in the Durkheimian sense. It has totemic manifestations ensconced in the material fabric of society, especially in cities. Because the majority of scientific explanations are insensitive to cultural codes of icons and cities that have their own logic (Löw, 2008), they fail to recognize the multiple existential meanings of post-communist nostalgia that comprise its paradoxical nature (Berdahl et al., 2003: 1). Within these traditional frameworks the economic and the symbolic tend to get conflated, and so does the life-world with the system. The present study seeks to amend the confusion. There is no denying at all that the perceived socio-economic adversities informed people's visions of a communist past, a transitional present and a capitalist future in relation to one another. Yet these aspects do not exhaust the meaning of systemic social change. The dominant focus on post-communist politics can neither gauge regional variability nor plumb the symbolic depth of non-rational cultural phenomena such as utopianism or nostalgia. Thus, when it comes to the latter, a need for an 'anthropology of post-socialism' becomes pressing (Berdahl et al., 2003), as well as the necessity to 'redirect our focus outside the institutional boundaries of the state' (Özyürek 2006: 22).

Alas, these pleas have not been systematically heeded. Even if social scientists preoccupied with transition shun reductionism and admit contingency, they still tend to conduct their research along the frequently travelled road of the so-called 'social origins of political memorial landscapes' (Jordan, 2006: 1). The problem is that neither the commemorative nor the political thoroughly covers a given collectivity's relation with the past. The two are easier to gauge sociologically and more amenable to ideological deconstruction because their intentionality seems plain. But what about other, less readily

classifiable expressions of nostalgia? The domination of 'politics of memory' as the academic focus speaks volumes about limitations of a sociological imagination presuming that 'socio-economic origins' and 'political causes' can be substituted for 'cultural meanings'. I argue that the latter always mediate the former, and therefore the formal questions of nostalgic signification within the civil sphere in Alexander's sense must be added to the relevant sociological agenda (Alexander, 2006). Such questions can be couched and answered in a new parlance able to critically address existing discourses.

2 Lost in transition? Discourses on nostalgia

To the extent that these questions have been explicitly thematized, they have not, of course, been left completely unanswered. More culturally sensitive explanations emerged. Although quickly on everybody's lips, or perhaps precisely due to this fact, post-communist nostalgia has become a kind of sociological black box amenable to academic evocation but somewhat short of analytic purchase. Emerging experts on the topic observed that despite repeated efforts, little progress has been made in determining post-communist nostalgia's 'deeper significance' (Boym, 2001: 351). Others have gone even further by claiming that 'it is debatable whether such a thing exists and if it does, what is its nature?' (Ugresic, 1996). Two decades after the revolution sociologists have little doubt that it does exist, as they detect its 'new forms' (Bonstein, 2009: 1), yet no definitive understanding exists. Reviewing these interpretive efforts is significant because they are not merely relevant scientific reference points but symbolic regimes within which nostalgic commitments are articulated.

2.1 Social deficiency approach

This approach is associated with the political scientific explanations mentioned before. For example, German political scientists suggested that *Ostalgie* is primarily connected to persisting, defensive ideological attachments of the older and sheer vogue among the younger generations facilitated by denial and historical ignorance, respectively. Klaus Schroeder refered to deficiencies of the German political and educational institutions as he tried to identify *Ostalgie's* origins (*Deutsche Welle*, 29 September 2008). Others intimated that the key to understanding nostalgia was even simpler: 'People, who lived for forty years under the regime they loathed, have invented a new past and forget the oppression and the tedium of the days they used to hate' (Burnett, 2007: 30). These studies deserve attention because they emphasize the agentic role of 'memorial entrepreneurs' and selective memory of their insecure constituencies. They belong to a sizable body of literature concerned with the *politics of memory*, especially in the urban context (e.g. Huyssen, 2003; Jordan, 2006). This literature points to vital problems at 'the intersection of state ideology and everyday life'. However, by focusing on political deficiencies and ideological conditions, they are prone to gloss over deeper cultural dimensions of the phenomenon. While they can be indispensable in elucidating motives of state-sponsored memorials, or discussing controversial publicity of such initiatives as the Stasi-themed bar *Zur Firma*, they will have difficulties explaining the popularity of similar but low key objects bereft of political connotations among educated, more self-reflective audiences. That is to say, this body of literature insufficiently analyses the actual, variegated material manifestations of *Ostalgie*.

2.2 Failed utopia approach

Some attempts to come up with a more semiotically oriented, culture-sensitive understanding can be found in cultural studies. For example, from the vantage point of Susan Buck-Morss' (2000) analysis of communist iconography the 'nostalgic' commitments on the part of younger, well-educated audiences appear to be about 'salvaging the transcendent moment to which communist dreamworld gave material expression' (Buck-Morss, 2000: 236). In this approach, the meaning of nostalgic commitments stems from suddenness of the bankruptcy of communist mythology, not from the inertial powers of its social

legacies. Nostalgia could thus be considered a kind of conscious, intellectual sympathy for the historic underdog, instead of a form of sentimentalized ignorance. Other studies in this vein see the phenomenon as a collective response to the passing of the modern mass utopia that deserves at least its 'requiem', if not renaissance (Scribner, 2005: 3). They offer a vantage point from which nostalgia resembles a rite of passage, the ritualistic quality of radical transformation usually overlooked by social scientific perspectives. This stance would remind us that if the grand liminality of post-communism meant embracing the new, then by the same token it involved a symbolic farewell to the old.

While intellectually plausible and aesthetically sensitive, the failed utopia account conflates the sense of loss of the *communist* historical life-world with the utopian *socialist* dreamworld. The very fact that Buck-Morss discusses the Soviet period of Eastern Europe in terms of 'utopia' and 'socialism' at all, not 'state communism', reveals her own ideological engagement rather than empirical and theoretical dedication. Thus Buck-Morss' interpretation is said to epitomize the distorted understanding of Eastern communist experience based on cherry-picking that fits the author's allegiance to 'unreconstructed Marxism' (Vanstiphout, 2001; McNamara, 2009). Needless to say, the conclusions derived from such a perspective can hardly be credible. Although her diagnosis may be adequate with regard to certain parts of a intelligentsia to be found in what Buck-Morss calls 'the East and West', it does not provide us with the tools for understanding post-communist nostalgia's specificity in local contexts, in places like Berlin or Warsaw, where the communist reality was lived, challenged and eventually jettisoned.

Charity Scribner's work entitled 'Requiem for Communism' seems more cautious against this background. Its focus on the 'aesthetic responses to the socialist crisis' is more sustained. She importantly distinguishes the awareness that something is *missing* now from melancholy *longing* for the lost then (Scribner, 2003: 3). As we shall see, such insight is compatible with the iconological perspective advocated here, in particular with its insistence on icons as quotes of the past life-world that link it to the present everyday life. However, Scribner very quickly admits that '*Requiem for communism* examines works which convey the currents of *mourning* and melancholia stirring both sides of Europe today', and selects post-communist material that 'most forcefully registers the politics of memory' (2005: 9). This is confusing and reconstitutes the already well-explored social scientific genre instead of constructing a new one. Like Buck-Morss' work, it is original in terms of methods (interpreting aesthetic/ized artefacts), but sticks to the political issues and tends to reproduce conventional, unreconstructed blanket binaries such as 'first and second world' that supposedly overlap with the West and East of Europe, respectively (2003: 14–15). Scribner's professed effort to examine the understudied 'juncture between history and culture' is laudable, but it does not draw on a systematic theory of the latter that would fully unravel the key paradoxes of the former exemplified by post-communist nostalgia.

2.3 Culture industry approach

Realizing the broad appeal of nostalgia and the need to shift the emphasis from social causes to cultural meanings, some cultural scholars showed that as far as reminiscing about the GDR's life-world is concerned, it often means ironic playing and 're-exoticization' of its communist culture (Cooke, 2005). Rather than trying to retrieve empathetically the past of East Germans, many 'products of *Ostalgie*' are just that, the output of a culture industry that entertains, distils, exoticizes and eventually makes money from the 'strangeness of a world that no longer exists' (Cooke, 2005: 151).

Similar processes, although of different degree, were detected in Poland. Ewa Domanska (2008) points out the carnivalesque character of visual practices associated with nostalgia for communism and thematizes primarily commercial 'domestication of the past'. This paradigm can certainly aid our understanding of how it is possible for Hungarians to couple Budapest's communist sightseeing with local wine culture and advertise it as 'The Tipsy Lenin Tour', or why Poles set up and frequent communism-themed bars called 'Propaganda'. It helps capture the logics of the proclivity to develop a playful, almost flirtatious relation with symbols of a jettisoned reality that would never have been possible in public when the rules of that reality were still enforced.

However, emphasizing the ironic mode of tending to the rejected past leaves sincere but apolitical phenomena unexplained. Moreover, underscoring the carnivalesque conventions at the expense of other genres serves an old Marxist vision of the historical life of symbols, one in which these symbolic entities are believed to appear 'first as tragedy and then as farse' (Domanska, 2008: 170). An alleged theoretical usefulness of Althusser is overtly asserted here (Domanska, 2008: 186), a suggestion that ignores the authoritative, devastating critique of the thinker's credibility (cf. Judt, 2008: 106–15).

As the spiral of commercialization unfolds and recently unimaginable things excite the masses by the very possibility of their comical re-enactment, nostalgia's cultural clout seems relatively ephemeral, constructed more for market purposes than instrumentalized for political ones. From this perspective, both Easterners and Westerners, the producers and consumers of the nostalgic cultural forms may simply derive profit and entertainment, respectively, from the acts of savvy historical travesty. This move away from politics toward culture and business means a focus on the *commodification of memory*. Yet, despite critical merits of its sociological realism, it assumes a considerable degree of detached irony and self-conscious distance on the part of both promoters and consumers of the repackaged communist icons. This, however, is not always the case. As I shall show, there are sincere and non-profit articulations of nostalgia that elude this explanatory grid.

Another problem of this perspective is that while it skilfully recognizes that the re-exoticization of communism can work efficiently as both domestication of the past and vehicle of present trade, it does not admit that its model may be more adequate with regard to foreign consumers than to local constituencies. It does not differentiate between various forms of commitments commonly labelled as 'nostalgic' either. What exactly is the difference between the popularity of communist era streetlights in Germany, and preservation and transformation of a former communist party jet into a hotel by Dutch businessman Ben Thijssen?[1] What is the difference between a Stasi-themed bar whose owner collects the communist paraphernalia and chooses for its motto the slogan of the GDR's secret police, 'Come to us, or we will come to you' (Riciputi, 2008: 2), and Klub der Republik, another GDR-themed bar replete with authentic design of the era? How does the usage of Soviet iconography by the promoters of the German music festival 'Fusion' differ from the promotion of pop-music of the communist era entitled 'Evergreens from grey reality Poland' by the Polish gallery in Berlin? Above all, the culture industry approach presumes rather than explains the very cultural forces that make successful 'commodification of East exoticism' possible in the first place. This is a perfect example of the conceptual black box problem.

2.4 Strain approach

There is at least one prominent interpretation that seems to probe deeper than any other. Its sophistication requires greater attention. Svetlana Boym (2001) adopts a cultural and existential perspective predicated upon the recognition that post-communist nostalgia is an acute but not necessarily dysfunctional or ironic 'sense of displacement'. She focuses on culturally mediated states of post-revolutionary consciousness. Thus, her approach resembles what Geertz called the 'strain theory of ideology' (Geertz, 1973: 201). It differs from previous frames in that its emphasis shifts from institutional flaws, strategies of culture industry and political mourning towards a kind of post-communist existentialism. By defining nostalgia as a response to accelerated modern temporality Boym brilliantly deepens the understanding of transition. However, she does so at the expense of analytic precision and a sociological sense of detail. These are classical shortcomings of the strain approach that Geertz famously identified and criticized.

Specifically, nostalgia is defined in strong terms as an 'inevitable defense mechanism in a time of historical upheavals' (Boym, 2001: xiii–xiv). This qualification contrasts with, and is apparently oblivious to, what sociologists demonstrated, namely that 'a particular constellation of remembering and forgetting is by no means inevitable' (Jordan, 2006: 18).[2] In her otherwise well-grounded defiance of politics-obsessed, linear historiography and materialist social science Boym ignores some of their valuable findings.[3] Similarly, construing nostalgia as 'defence' is a rather narrow explanatory move. It reduces nostalgic consciousness to being 'lost in transition'. Boym attenuates this reduction by making

a valid distinction between 'restorative' and 'reflective' nostalgia (2001: xviii). She explains that the former idolizes *nostos*, i.e. angrily wants its lost home back because it is the repository of absolute truth, whereas the latter thrives on *algia*, i.e. longing itself informed by cultivation of doubt. She explicitly focuses on the latter, suggesting that it represents the only form of defending the past that deserves reconstruction because ultimately it is not really about the past but the present.[4] However, she does not fully account for the fact that both kinds are polar extremities. The distinction foregrounds two peculiar constituencies, one comprising pathetic or even dangerous reactionaries, and the other wistful sentimentalists, innocuous post-communist Hamlets. She does not consistently treat those types as ideal approximations that open the continuum of nostalgic commitments. Trying (too) hard to prevent the common and regrettable confusing of nostalgia with vulgar reactionism, Boym on her part conflates it with high brow secular meditation of possible historical worlds.

Finally, and ironically, the same literary sensibility that makes Boym aware of nostalgia's cultural depth inspires her to assert rather bombastically that the core meaning of post-communist nostalgia is 'the heroic refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time' (Boym, 2001: xv). However, there is evidence that certain important nostalgic commitments are often about something quite the reverse. Keeping her parlance intact but tempering its romantic militancy, one might say that these commitments visually articulate yielding to irreversibility of time. As I shall show, significant acts of nostalgia are more of a modest symbolic attempt to surrender to time than anything else. In other words, Boym's interpretive assets become liabilities when unchecked by systematic theory and sociological comparison. Her approach neither detects nor conceives of more relaxed but equally meaningful sides of nostalgia occupying various registers of the continuum stretching between the two kinds she recognizes. For example, she sees the East German Ampelmann as a key image of *Ostalgie* but devotes only one short paragraph to it which evocatively portrays the icon as the 'repressed' sign suddenly turned 'resistance fighter' and 'national hero' (Boym, 2001: 196). She acknowledges its cultural function as 'a perfect screen for nostalgic critical projections' but fails to recognize its plainer, affirmative status of a 'symbolic frame against which to match the myriad "unfamiliar somethings"that are produced by transformation' (Geertz, 1973: 220). 'Matching', not 'defending' or 'refusing', is the keyword here. Boym's own explicit nostalgic commitment informed by progressive epistemologies of the collective memory studies incapacitates her otherwise refined perspective to deliver a disinterested analysis. This makes her prone to err not only on the analytic but also on the humane side. While she hyperbolizes the reflective nostalgia as 'heroic', she would probably denounce its other forms as ignorant and dishonest, or dismiss them as infantile, kitschy or simply insignificant. While especially an ideological denial deserves moral condemnation, there is more to nostalgia as a cultural whole than meets even a sophisticated Benjaminian eye.

All these reservations are precisely what Geertz's critique of the strain theory would predict. Here Boym is a paradigmatic 'deft analyst' of 'emotive resonance' of things, yet one who does so without explicit, systematic understanding of a cultural logic behind 'the autonomous process of symbolic formulation' (Geertz, 1973: 207), and succumbs to existentialist presumptuousness. Indeed, like Buck-Morss, Boym delivers an imaginative but impressionistic picture, not one cognizant of scientific purchase of Durkheimian totemism or Parsonian theory of culture on which researchers like Geertz drew explicitly to capture the gist of a cultural phenomenon (Geertz, 1973: 254).

3 Toward an iconological alternative

In one way or another the discourses briefly reviewed above either objectify nostalgia's output value as direct results of social situations whereby the relative autonomy of culture is dissolved (change within the life-world directly reflects causal power of change within the system) or subjectify its input value in excessively negative terms (transition confuses, humiliates, falsifies or displaces people's self-image). None provides full-fledged tools for a 'scientific phenomenology of culture' (Geertz, 1973: 364). What can be done to straddle these scientific worlds and supplement them with a new frame?

First, it is vital that we approach nostalgia with a recognition of people as 'self-completing animals' (Geertz, 1973: 218), which will enable us to understand their cultural commitments as acts of imposing tangible form on collective feelings, a *sine qua non* of self-completion. Second, objects and images need to be approached as constitutive, not epiphenomenal of nostalgia. This, in turn, requires focusing more on the unobtrusive cultural measures of nostalgia, and linking them to a wider, systematic cultural theory (Emmison and Smith, 2000: 149). Hitherto anthropologists of post-socialism prioritized people's narratives (Ten Dyke, 2001). The very fact that many nostalgic commitments are associated with iconic articulations emplaced in public spaces begs for an explanation. I argue that certain things have iconic appeal because they enable people to fix social values, so as to meaningfully experience both change and continuity. This may be called a 'fiction of security' (Entrikin, 2007) or a 'virtual formalization' of strong but elusive feelings arising out of experience (Schorske, 1981: 311). Regardless of specific parlance, this stance holds that in so far as post-communist nostalgia means non-profit sampling and sincere quoting of the past cultural forms, it concretizes the extent of biographically useful and culturally acceptable continuity of communist modernity.

The crux of this theorization is not new. Durkheim demonstrated that 'collective feelings become conscious of themselves only by settling upon external objects' (Durkheim, 1995: 421). Hence the social proclivity to 'consecrate things' (1995: 215). In his view, objects, especially humanly shaped aesthetic entities and emblems, do not simply reflect mental states of their producers. They crystallize them and render them less diffuse. They enchant by giving concrete form to always abstract consciousness. Totemic structures that Durkheim focused on are paradigmatic anchoring devices of this kind; not passive carriers of meaning, but active media. He suggested that they remain operative in modern societies too. For this reason the ground-breaking ethnographies of contemporary material culture looked at objects' 'social lives' (Appadurai), 'cultural biographies' (Kopytoff) and asked what they 'want' (Mitchell). Parallel sociological studies found that not only 'commemorative objects' but 'cultural objects in general are shared significance embodied in form' (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, 1991: 379). Semiologists of the urban noted not only that we live in 'times of the signs' but also the paradoxical 'persistence' of the traditional material media despite the explosion of electronic communication (Sadin, 2007: 25). Jeffrey Alexander's cultural theory of iconicity has contributed to these literatures, insisting that 'everyday experience is iconic which means that self, reason, morality, and society are continuously defined in aesthetic, deeply experiential ways' (Alexander, 2008: 790). Looking at seemingly mundane, visual expressions of post-communist nostalgia as iconic totems rather than fetishistic commodities or instruments of defence enables us to see this deep dynamic more clearly.

I argue that when combined with parallel developments in contemporary American sociology, this neo-Durkheimian framework acquires additional strengths. One insight of special analytic purchase is that people 'build different types of bridges – physical, iconic, discursive – in an effort to connect the past and the present', and that therefore revivals, relics, souvenirs play a role in helping 'coagulate essentially non-contiguous patches of history into a single, seemingly continuous experiential stream' (Zerubavel, 2003: 7 ff.). Knowing that these 'bonds between people and icons prove especially compelling in times of uncomprehended change' (Costonis, 1989: 49), we arrive at a powerful vantage point.

But I would like to emphasize that the present model does not link nostalgia exclusively to the discomfort of *rapidly* imposed, revolutionary non-contiguity. There is evidence that it is enough if social change is 'comprehensive, fundamental, and unexpected' to create a context in which nostalgia as cultural continuity machine would gain social significance and cultural amplification (Sztompka, 2004: 159). Such changes may or may not be 'traumatic'. The precise meaning and scope of such qualification with regard to Central Europe after 1989 is debatable. But it is incontrovertible that revolutionary changes were indeed unexpected and holistic, whereby they questioned people's dormant assumptions. To make this stance still more applicable to the present case it is useful to view symbolic representations as 'cultural links' playing a 'decisive role' in the processes of 'adjudicating between international models of knowledge (often claiming universalism) and the local needs' (Molnar, 2005: 131). This frame derived from a study of Eastern European architectural debates under communism provides an

Table 1. The received vs. iconological categories

Received approaches	Iconological approach
Defensive reaction to the present	Selective affirmation of the past
Imagining the past as it could have been	Connecting actual past and present
Rituals of the vanishing present	Performative quoting of the past
Connected to rapidity of revolution	Connected to its unexpectedness
Commemoration of lost utopian dreamworld	Tending to the lost life-world
Inevitability	Contingency
Ideas-oriented since images *reflect*	Style-oriented since surfaces *project*
Heroic refusal to surrender to the loss of the past	Non-heroic acceptance
'Politics of memory'	'Poetics of memory'
Nostalgia as modernity's alter ego	Modernity as background representation

explanatory scheme adaptable to the present work, for the post-communist nostalgia was also coded by its subjects as the gesture of quoting Soviet-style regionalism in currently hegemonic, democratic and thus ostensibly more 'real' capitalist universalism. This scheme of reconciling 'different measures of being modern' has recently been put at the very core of the definition of nostalgia (Özyürek, 2006: 19). From this perspective post-communist nostalgia can be approached as a bottom-up tactic of adjudicating between past local modernization projects and present supranational ones, i.e. forging yet another form of meaningful contiguity. I identify this dynamic as underlying important expressions of nostalgia in Central Europe. In the hands of Özyürek it assumes additional usefulness in that she explicitly uses modernity in the plural. While she says she favours Boym's conception of nostalgia as modernity's alter ego, her own framework nevertheless allows for more supple interpretation of nostalgia whereby its multiple, post-utopian, pragmatic, mundane forms are explored. The neo-Durkheimian iconology gleans further conclusions from it, and makes it possible to see modernity as a background representation, not as the condition of possibility of nostalgia. In this way it avoids the serious problem Boym is oblivious of, namely that the liminal rebellion against linear 'history' which she presents as quintessentially modern was actually the defining feature of the pre-modern or archaic cultures (Eliade, 1991: 36). The table heuristically positions my frame vis-à-vis others.

In short, what clearly distinguishes a cultural sociological approach even from the congenial strands of the received frameworks is that it is rigorously concerned with epistemology rather than the ontology or politics of social phenomena, i.e. it makes its inferences about social reality from examination of how and under what conditions the symbolic representations are made (Alexander, 2003: 92). Hence, I suggest that we treat nostalgia as a cultural dimension rather than a social state. Moreover, it stresses that the nostalgic bridging of temporally distinct realities cannot dispense with seemingly mundane, visual surfaces of public space or reduce them to commodities. It is precisely the visual forms of 'numinous' urban places (Geertz, 1983) that make temporal contiguity 'readable' to humans (Schlögel, 2003). Instead of trying to determine whether or not the post-communist nostalgics 'are really' nostalgic and whether this is right or wrong, I follow Wolf Lepenies in his approach to melancholy and focus on 'what it means' when people 'articulate "nostalgic" commitments' and turn their signifiers into cultural tropes (Lepenies, 1998: 7). Thus, I indicate how certain iconic objects in urban centres can constitute social audiences, i.e. how seemingly negligible elements of a past life-world enchant subjects beyond influence normally accorded to them.

This examination is empirically guided by a typological operationalization of post-communist nostalgia comprising three social acts: (1) material preservation of traces of a former life-world; (2) their cultural recycling; (3) symbolic canonization of the everyday imagery of the 'ancien regime'. These acts proved neither strictly local, i.e. limited to the former GDR where nostalgia appeared powerful, nor ephemeral, i.e. related to the transient crazes. They were detected in Poland (Bryl-Roman, 2009), in Lithuania where the Soviet symbols were banned in 2008 (Kloss, 2009), and in the Balkans (Ugresic,

1996). There is evidence that ‘a wave of nostalgia is washing across the East’ (Burnett, 2007: 30), and more than two decades after the revolutions, when the new order is well entrenched, ‘nostalgia’ shows no signs of abatement. Germany remains its core, where the elements of style prevalent in the communist era are ‘eminently worth preserving’ and ‘it is more than okay to have a sentimental attachment to it’ (Paulick, 2004).

4 Empirical discussion: ‘Nostalgic’ semiotics of liminal streetscapes

The life-worlds of the communist time in Central Europe were semiotic universes in their own right despite relative material poverty and notorious drabness. They had their iconic identity, aesthetics, haptics and pragmatics that are still being cultivated. There is a plethora of nostalgically contextualized objects and sites that epitomize it.[5] Time and space prohibit compiling an exhaustive list, let alone offering thick reconstructions of multiple cases. Yet a few comparative examples suffice to buttress the key points.

Fritz Stern reported that once, in Berlin, a leader of Neues Forum said to him, sighing: ‘Didn’t we bring *anything* to this new country? Was there *nothing* that deserves recognition?’ (2006: 479). A young witness to transition addressed the same issue when she observed: ‘For us there has never been transition, only breaks with the past’ (Hensel, 2004: 164). These are significant articulations underlying nostalgia, because they indicate directly that what is at stake is an enfeebled sense of continuity, not necessarily any kind of longing for the past. Let us look at cultural facts which illustrate this and prove that there are multiple *somethings* whose struggle for recognition has been won.

One of the recent indicators of a tending to the recent past in Poland includes an Internet game for Facebook users called ‘People’s Republic of Poland under magnifying glass. Everyday life in the country 1944–1989’. The game has its own profile that is tellingly categorized as an ‘educational’ project, and has been advertised at high visibility Internet sites in 2010 with the following rhetoric: ‘With us history cannot be boring. This game allows you to know the taste of the years that we fortunately have already left behind.’ Note the adverbial emphasis ‘fortunately’ and a historical ambition. Participants gained extra points if they submitted pictures of traces of communist era from their own neighbourhood. There were over 2000 active players. Another recent sign of cultural vindication of the communist era is an exhibition that opened in 2011 in the National Museum in Warsaw entitled ‘We want to be modern. Polish Design 1955–1968’.

Yet, the more striking and enduring nostalgic commitments that deliver positive answers to the poignant questions of Stern’s interlocutor are those realized in the public space of Berlin and Warsaw where it is hard to establish them and dificult to sustain due to structural constraints. For example, popularity of ‘communist’ bars is one of the most conspicuous and long-lasting nostalgic phenomena of this kind. In Berlin ‘the party crowd is flocking to the capital’s hip havens of sputnik chic, with the 1960s venues such as Café Moskau and Kino Kosmos enjoying unprecedented popularity’ (Paulick, 2004). Kaffe Burger on Torstrasse run by German poet Bert Pappenfuss-Gorek was reopened in 1999 after a two-decade-long hiatus, with only marginally altered décor. Klub der Republik café, whose name is a pun on the GDR parliament building demolished in 2008, *Palast der Republik*, is another instance of a succesful initiative of this kind. As one of the websites devoted to it states, ‘club owners scavenged for left over bits of prime GDR furnishings. The light and other interior elements are all appropriately East German, yet the club owners managed to create a non-kitschy environment where unlike in the GDR times your neighbor isn’t reporting to the Stasi how many drinks you’ve consumed’. Berlin is full of similar locales. An authentically designed hostel named *Ostel*, located in a typical communist building near Ostbahnhof, or a store promoting ‘East European design’ called ‘Redspective’ are conspicuous features of the city’s streetscapes.

The same phenomena can easily be registered in Warsaw and other cities of Poland. Bars whose success in the fiercly competitive entertainment market is predicated chiefly on the ‘nostalgic’ narrative propped by original objects of the era and occasional communist-style parties are not uncommon and

popular among various groups (Gross, 2006: 3). Interestingly, in Warsaw successful bars of this kind derive their names from mundane objects that once were integral parts of communist *Lebenswelt*. Many of them are located in eastern, less prestigious parts of the city absorbing its less obviously capitalist, rougher feel. They also use original typography, make references to old signs, and are filled with communist era incunabula, for example 'Saturator' (soda street stand) or 'Sklad Butelek' (bottle warehouse). The description of 'Saturator' café by its proprietors promotes the place emphasizing that a 'Polish-communist, Berlin-like atmosphere is blended with high art and modernity'. The *New York Times* reporter Michael Gross confirmed that these communist-style bars-ridden neighbourhoods are to Warsaw what the locales of Prenzlauerberg and Friedrichshein have been to Berlin, i.e. 'authentic' and 'atmospheric' signs of recent history.

The examples like these could be multiplied. Sometimes their 'nostalgic' quality is subtle and requires full immersion in the local culture. But there are objects and places whose role of iconic bridges is explicitly stated. For example, the aforementioned cinema Kosmos on prominent communist Karl-Marx Allee, formerly Stalin Allee, is distinguished by a plaque that reads: 'The main hall has been preserved as a protected "relic" of the old cinema and still radiates its sixties' aura.' The 1950s buildings standing nearby, although often derided, are now protected by law, and in addition to usual signs distinguishing them as such, they feature plaques of monument designation that demand respect. Prominent artists, such as photographer Frank Thiel, elevate such places to the status of art by their own works and words. The artists are, in turn, recognized not just as those who document the traces of the past but those who confirm their meaning of cultural value. Their work 'sustains in various ways objects' gerund-like status of becoming' and presents 'deliberately wrought visual poetry disguised as plain prosaic fact' (Hobbs, 2007: 27–29). There are other prominent cases of nostalgic iconic commitments in which the role of cultural entrepreneurs has catalysed whole civil initiatives. For example, cultural careers of the communist street lights, so-called Ampelmännchen from East Germany and urban signage in Poland, can serve as perfect cases in point. It is worth spending a bit more time on those expressions of nostalgia, as they epitomize its cultural dynamic emphasized by the present framework.

The famous East German pedestrian signs feature the standing red and walking green human figures wearing hats. Once purely mundane signs, 'Ampelmännchen are now famous iconic figures' (Cooke, 2005: 150). They are used as cover image of choice for German re-unification debates (e.g. *GEO* journal's October 2010 issue), commemoration events (e.g. *Bild*'s ad for 2008 reunification anniversary), and sociological books (e.g. Thurn, 2007). The design became a 'nationwide superstar' (Rusch, 2009: 130). What accounts for this success?

There are several factors that must be taken into account. First, unexpectedly for the citizens,[6] soon after 1990 the lights began to vanish from public space as they were being successively replaced due to a top-down attempt to standardize the traffic lights across the whole reunified country. It was a symptom of 'seeing like a state' on the part of reunified Germany (Scott, 1998). Much like other aspects of the unification, the West German vision initially overwhelmed almost all public acts of seeing. Thus, the disappearance of Ampelmännchen became an iconic representation of the paternalistic aspect of incorporation (Stern, 2006: 501), what some felt to be simply an annexation (Anschluss) (Rusch, 2009: 124). Some cultural theorists were not surprised by it, because they recognized that the visual erasure of the recent past constituted a kind of representational imperative of transition (De Leeuw, 1999: 65). For local inhabitants, however, the development was astonishing, at least in certain aspects, as it had conspicuous visual effects, both in media and public design. As Paul Cooke writes, 'one of the most unambiguous examples of unification as a western takeover' was the fact that 'the eastern television frequencies were given to western stations', so that 'it became commonplace to describe the former GDR as a "media colony"' (2005: 152). This trope of visual colonization has been widely employed not only to describe the specificity of visual changes launched during the transition but also to criticize the proclivity of Western planners to bury previous streetscapes under the 'new old' architecture and universalized 'hackneyed icons' (De Leeuw, 1999: 63).

Second, because the communist street lights worked just fine and could easily have been left intact in the process of reorganization of public space, their disappearing was commonly felt as unwarranted.

When it turned out that they would not be spared, it was legitimate to frame this visual change not in terms of the necessity of unification but as an example of unexpected, top-down standardization that the East Germans didn't anticipate. The decision to get rid of the old lights was the nodal point at which things could have gone otherwise. Had the lights been left alone, perhaps they would never have constituted a recyclable iconic resource of the bygone past.[7] Instead, when their 'endangered' status was publicly exposed, a series of solidarity campaigns in favour of them was launched.

Third, the whole issue gained momentum when it was publicized by the West German graphic designer, Markus Heckhausen, who helped 'rediscover' the lights and drew attention to their expressive attractiveness, unique form and 'retro value'. His attention meant the attention of a designer, and thus it elevated the sign to the status of something beautiful, not just practical or cute. The fact that Heckhausen had initially experienced difficulties finding the lights in the early 1990s in Berlin shows that they had indeed been quickly turned into 'relics' of the past. He needed to contact the producers in order to get them. This factored into the possibility of coding the signs as 'rescued' from unnecessary obliteration. Because Ampelmännchen themselves were simply apolitical (Rusch, 2009: 131) and had 'no inherent cultural symbolism' (Boym, 2001: 196), it was possible to embrace them anew and construct them as pure iconic bridges to the symbolically polluted past. As such, the sign became an acceptable link to the past life-world that constituted the background of people's lives, whether they liked it or not.

Before long the old communist design was not only 'preserved' but culturally recycled and assimilated nationwide. It was prolifically introduced to the Western districts of Berlin and even to some West German cities. As one might expect, there is an Ampelmann Café in Berlin that adopted the icon as its brand. The icon is now used in countless contexts, such as for example on the cover of the CD entitled 'Berlin. Soundtrack of the City', yet this time with a slight graphic alteration – instead of the hat, the red Ampelmann wears headphones. Its graphic form inhabits many cultural spaces in Berlin. The commercial applications should not distract us from the sources of their symbolic power.

The 'communist' form of the lights proved unique in that it departed from the generic, universal design. As Karl Peglau, the German designer who invented it pointed out, the Ampelmännchen have an 'almost indescribable aura of human snugness and warmth'.[8] Moreover, the remarkable iconic simplicity of the sign matched its mundane, unadulterated social embedment. Hence, it has been experienced as expressive and humane. In the liminal context of transition it could sensually correspond with two intensive but diffuse collective feelings: a perceived sense of loosening the human relations and continuity under new reality, and a compulsion to reiterate that 'not everything was grey in the East!' (Rusch, 2009: 122).[9] Post-communist nostalgia is a symbolic commitment to pulling visual quotes from the past which are able to offset that cultural trope. Direct evidence of it can be found in Warsaw streetscapes, too: for example, the pink grafitti image of the iconic communist era car 'Syrena' accompanied by the statement: 'I am not colorless; I am simply modest and inconspicuous.'[10]

Perhaps most importantly, Ampelmännchen can be, as Peglau pointed out, approached as pieces of 'honest historical identification'. Their pictorial quality makes them efficient iconic quotes that retain 'the right to represent a positive aspect of the failed modern order'. Daniel Meuren expressed similar sensibilities in 'Spiegel' when he wrote that Ampelmännchen unite 'beauty with efficiency, charm with utility, sociability with fulfilment of duties'.[11] This welding of material affordances of the object is the crucial feature of this icon for two reasons. First, it connects usually separated aspects of materiality. Second, its colourfulness (surface attractiveness) and usefulness (social practicality) evoke precisely these cultural tropes that the capitalist modernity promotes and the communist one failed to deliver. Given its apolitical identity, the icon constitutes a perfectly quotable visual *punctum* of the largely symbolically polluted communist cultural landscape. As an icon of *Ostalgie*, it is one of the master quotes of what some called failed *Ost-modernity*–eastern modernism. Success of Ampelmännchen meant commitment to culturally sustainable and culture-sustaining parts of the local life-world. Preserving this sign and elevating it to the status of icon crystallized the ways in which East Germans not only tried to resist capitalism and affirm communism, but simply developed a sense of continuity between the two. Such

binaries as own/foreign, common/rare, fresh/vintage, generic/unique, faceless/familiar underpinned this cultural process.

A cultural biography of the communist-era Polish neons exhibits structural parallels. Initial decay of the neon urban signage was noticed by the designer, Ilona Karwinska, who brought media attention to them and can be credited with inspiring others to follow her. As in the case of Ampelmännchen, the neons were marginalized by the dynamic expansion of new visual forms. As in Germany, the rampant spread of a new 'capitalist' visual public taste (or lack thereof) was noted, especially by the Western visitors, who even spoke about 'aesthetic pollution' caused by new advertisement practices (Scruton, 2004). In the 1990s, the dynamism of this process was partly aided by Poland's 'traditional, strong pro-Western attitude and even fetishization of the West' (Sztompka, 2004: 176). Karwinska recalls that she 'very early became aware that the neons were disappearing at a frightening rate'. In the commentary to the first exhibition of the neons in the British gallery 'Capital Culture' Karwinska noted: 'the individuality of the East is being buried under the Golden Arches and other ubiquitous free market symbols'.[12]

Yet the impulse to materially preserve and promote the neons was not occasioned only by this context. It had a purely aesthetic origin as well, one of partly foreign, not just 'indigenous', provenance. As Karwinska acknowledged, her interest was stimulated by a 'well-known graphic designer from England' (cf. Migacz, 2009), who 'knows every typeface there is in the world' and still admitted that 'he had never seen anything like that before' (cf. Migacz, 2009). Subsequently, Karwinska discovered that the neons 'were custom made with a particular vernacular or sensitivity to local communities and buildings. Because of this, they became highly visible landmarks with a very local aesthetic. They were in turn embraced as part of the social fabric – unlike capitalist advertising which is only loyal to a specific brand or product'. Having worked systematically on the photographic and physical preservation of the neons of the communist era the artist produced a remarkable collection of images and actual artefacts. The collection was entitled 'Polish Neon. Cold War Typography and Design–Warsaw 1950s Onwards' and was first exhibited in London in May 2008. Later, it was shown in Warsaw itself, in the most prominent space of communist architecture – the Palace of Culture and Science. Both exhibitions were successful. The *British Journal of Photography* noted 'theatrical signage' from Warsaw and '*Icon*' magazine called the communist Warsaw's typography 'characterful'. The gallery description emphasized that 'the photographic images have both an aesthetic beauty and provide an insight into a period of history that is rapidly being subsumed by the rush to join the West'.

This artistic thematization of neons from Warsaw's streetscapes articulated clearly their inherent aesthetic value and citational quality rather than any commercial potential. Karwinska emphasizes: 'My neon documentation project is not a commercial enterprise, but a culturally relevant one.' What can such a thing mean? As a higher profile media event, the exhibiting of the neons gave momentum to existing but underrepresented tendencies of preservation of communism's material heritage. Various civil initiatives in Warsaw and other Polish cities like Łódź, Katowice and Wrocław were undertaken to preserve and promote the old urban design.[13] Karwinska admits that 'there is now a growing number of people actively involved in the preservation of these neons throughout Poland', and adds that 'many neon signs are being brought back to life or rebuilt entirely' (Karwinska, 2010). Indeed, this phenomenon coalesces with the reappropriation of the remaining communist time architecture for new social purposes. For example, a former urban train station building has recently been turned into a café and its original neon name 'Warszawa Powisle' preserved. The apartments in the 1950s buildings designed in so-called socialist realist style now sell quickly and for high prices (Polak, 2009: 20), and public opprobrium follows situations when architectural details from that period are jeopardized by modernization plans (Urzykowski, 2010).

Preservation of neons in other cities shows how a culturally amplified iconic signal can crystallize collective feelings and channel civil energy. It not only aesthetically and intellectually validated preservation initiatives, but inspired acts of cultural recycling that are in turn conducive to canonization of the style. The latter process is additionally confirmed by the fact that a Calvin Klein store in Warsaw utilized

a retro neon signage. It thus semiotically conforms to the streetscape in which the store is ensconced, and which is a flagship site of Warsaw's communist architecture. Karwinska lauds this development: 'It is pleasing to see in central parts of Warsaw that western brands are now sympathetically choosing neon to fit the local vernacular such as Calvin Klein, Toshiba, Coca-Cola.' It is indeed a remarkable success, given that even to some Warsaw guide writers, the very name *neon* seems 'anachronistic' (Budrewicz, 2008: 43).

Importantly, all these actions were costly rather than truly profitable, stemming from historical and aesthetic rather than commercial or ideological motives. As Karwinska admits: 'I see my project as a documentation process and not as personally nostalgic or sentimental journey. However, I believe I have developed a sense of responsibility to these neons as historic objects.' The framed acts of preservation of the neons respond to the imperatives that transcend economic, political, ideological or palliative considerations. When post-communist cities begin to invest in acts of preservation and inhabitants revivify initially abandoned design, it is plausible that a creative sense of connectedness to the parts of past *Lebenswelt* is at stake, not any restoration of or longing for its whole. It is an example of successfully identifying acceptable iconic heritage of the local modernity. The creation of the fully fledged Neon Museum in Warsaw in 2010 endorses this interpretation, especially in light of the museum's stated mission: 'Preservation and protection of the neons that – once a symbol of modernity – are nowadays quickly marginalized in the name of modernity.'[14] Such institutionalization is a significant step towards completing the cycle of preservation and canonization of the icons of the past. Similar initiatives were undertaken and their leaders emphasized: 'Lots have changed in the collective consciousness of Poles since such ideas were first conceived; now it is not a time for creating re-enactments or cemeteries because today nostalgia is not the most important' (Brzezinska, 2010).

The remaining neons of Warsaw do not tap into any ideological or farcical symbolic repertoire. They neither ironize communist utopian fantasies nor romanticize Soviet style reality. They do not re-imagine the former life-world as it could have been, nor do they serve their fans as instruments of resistance. Instead, iconic 'relics' of the past constitute bridges between the past and present life-worlds for the sake of local modernity's succession. Such artefacts forge what Geertz calls 'symbolic resources' for the process of meaningfully linking the inexorably receding past and accelerated present.

Interestingly, in the communist era Warsaw neonizing meant not only advertising but inexpensive illumination of streetscapes. One state-owned company had full monopoly to 'neonize' the city. As Karwinska explains, the installation of neons was overseen by a chief Graphic Designer whose job it was to approve all new signs before their implementation. This complex and lengthy bureaucratic process meant that it would often take two or three years to finalize any project (Karwinska, 2009). Quite literally, then, the communist Polish towns owed their modern glow to the neons. Each appearance of a new neon was a kind of public event. Nowadays they form a quotable reminder that the communist past was not completely 'grey, drab and dirty' after all, as many believed (Hawkes, 1990: 7). Neither (re)-exoticization, nor (post)utopian sentiments, nor defensive (re)action perfectly captures the iconization of those signs. Instead, preserving them means sampling the 'sensual culture' of the past (Howes, 2005), whose so perpetuated continuity can make people feel that there is something phenomenologically constant despite all the changes. Of course, their specific meaning vary and refer to different clusters of embodied experiences. Some connect to the 'obviously' sacred memory of pleasures of one's youthful life (Chmurzynski, 2008: 6); others to omnipresent, profane reality of queue, a communist (per)version of delayed gratification that now becomes a communist icon on its own.[15] Each imposes form on time, as Milan Kundera would say.

5 Conclusion

The present study allows us to conclude that some conspicuous iconic signifiers of post-communist nostalgia escape the analytic grasp of many relevant explanations. Fulfilling the role of mnemonic bridges rather than tokens of longing for the failed communist past, they are the regular symbolizations

of continuity in the irregular times of transformation. They allow different incarnations of modernity to be concretely reconciled within a single urban fabric. As such they anchor temporal changes in a phenomenological way. They are 'cultural links' between the localized histories and the universalizing meanings. Such links provide a sense of connectedness and symbolic coexistence of various icons in a depoliticized way often needed by those 'exhausted by the excessive amount of history' (Ugresic, 1996).

As the opposite temporal arrows of transitional metamorphoses and public memory run into each other, the 'nostalgic' semiotic mitigates the resulting clash. The phenomena analysed here mean neither heroic nor pathetic longing *for* but rather savvy sampling *of* the past, a way of citing it 'without footnotes' (Ugresic, 1996). This difference requires rethinking nostalgia's meaning. At least two implications follow in this respect. First, the usage of the term in its strict etymological sense with reference to post-communism needs to be put in quotation marks, lest we misrepresent cultural meanings of actual practices often subsumed under this category. Second, expanding the standard definition is advisable. Existing typological qualifications do not suffice. Beyond idolizing, longing, missing or ironizing, there are other distinct modes of successful engagement with a failed past. Specific iconic acts of symbolic continuity tap into temporal meanings of vintage culture. Their power stems originally from emplaced poetics of the concrete life-world, not from the politics of an abstract system.

Despite differences in intensity and scale of the German and Polish nostalgic commitments analysed here, they evince similar cultural patterns. They differ in degree, not in kind. Their status of urban icons indicates that 'the city must remain a threshold from which we can go back and forth in remembering and reshaping the inner and outer limits of our existence' (De Leeuw, 1999: 67). It is true that such icons may be to history what kitsch is to art, as Charles Maier remarked. Yet this study demonstrates it is not always the case. The 'nostalgic' iconosphere is prone to be misconstrued as tasteless bric-à-brac or visualization of an intellectual dreamworld because it embodies a similar but ultimately deeper cultural trope of Merzbau – a constellation of aesthetic relics that proposes a durable order of visual signifiers redolent of the past life-world.

If these conclusions are right, then not only the traditional meaning of nostalgia but also of post-communism and modernity themselves may seriously be affected. 'Post-communism' is revealed to be not just an anomic phase of early capitalism, but a cultural 'site in which non-capitalist legacies transform the allegedly homogenizing tendencies of globalization', and thus partake in 'remaking modernity' (Adams et al., 2005: 66). To the extent that this inquiry corroborates Özyürek's frame, it shows that different modern societies retain the capacity for enchantment at the core of their identity in the numinous centres of their national life. As such it offers two qualifications of the modern condition. One, minimal, holds that at the liminal modern times even unlikely forms of collective enchantment are possible, if not symbolically indispensable. Another, maximal, posits that such potential for enchantment has never left modern societies and continues to shape collective life on a regular basis.

Notes

1. Thijsen bought an old Soviet plane for its scrap value of 25,000 euros. Prior to purchase, the plane had been used as a restaurant in the town on the former East/West German border. He has invested 635,000 dollars in turning it into a luxury hotel. However, the original cockpit has been left intact. Thijsen explains his investment saying that 'the Dutch like crazy sleeping accommodations' (*Spiegel*, 6 February 2009).
2. Similar points about contingency of transition to capitalism have been made by many scholars. A good overview of this scholarly shift from 'causality' and inevitability to contingency can be found in Emigh (2005: 369–378).
3. If the German transitional decisions at various levels had been made differently, they would have created other contexts for production and reception of the 'nostalgic' mood (Stern, 2006: 479). If the transitional negotiations in Poland and the rhetorical choices made by key actors there had been different, they could have filtered collective sentiments in other ways (Kennedy, 1999).

4. Boym claims that ‘one is nostalgic not for the past the way it was, but for the past the way it could have been’. She goes on asserting that ‘contemporary nostalgia is not so much about the past as about the vanishing present’ (2001: 351). Such insights are suggestive rather than conclusive, dissolving rather than illuminating the relation between past and present in strained human experience.
5. Some of them, like the Trabant car, are described as a ‘living legend’ (Freund, 2007), ‘socialism in motion’ (Pander, 2009), a ‘cult collector’s item’ (Cooke, 2005: 142). Numerous books concerning the visual side of everyday life during the communist era have been published (Uhlemann, 2006; Hauswald and Rathenow, 2008; Rusch, 2009). In Poland, a literary nostalgia reader ‘Nostalgia. Essays on Longing for Communism’ appeared in 2002. The country witnessed exhibitions devoted to communist everyday life (e.g. ‘Common Wealth,’ 2000), the mundane aspects of the first years of communism (e.g. ‘60 years ago in Warsaw,’ 2009) and original satirical art from the time between 1944 and 1989 (e.g. ‘Little Tastes and Smells of Communist Poland’, 2008). Collectioneering of ‘communist relics’ has reached the status of a ‘hobby’ in Poland (Domanska, 2008: 170), manifest in the popularity of professional websites and the relatively high prices of communist time artefacts at Internet auctions (Bryl-Roman, 2009).
6. The disappearing of the signs was not only rapid but unexpected. It is an underemphasized fact that the transition followed the revolutionary break craved for by almost all, but predicted by no one. If the sudden construction of the Wall in Berlin in 1961 astonished some observers, ‘the abrupt collapse of that structure came as an even greater surprise than its creation’ (Gaddis, 1997: 115). A German writer, Jana Hensel, recalls the anxious atmosphere of the time directly preceding the fall of the Wall in the following way: ‘the GDR couldn’t disappear. Not in a million years’ (Hensel, 2004: 3).
7. Even those emphasizing inevitability of nostalgic sentiments in post-revolutionary times suggest that it was not just an overdose of the previously unavailable treasures of the ‘West’, but disappearance of banalities of the ‘East’ that occasioned iconic ascendancy of mundane Ampelmann (see Boym, 2001: 196).
8. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ampelmännchen
9. An East German artist, Norbert Bisky, once tellingly remarked in the *Wall Street Journal*: ‘GDR was a grey country, with an occasional strange purple or pink stripe somewhere, because someone had gotten a plastic truck from a West German grandmother’ (cited in Burnett, 2007: 31).
10. Although not quite a legend like Trabant, Syrena has taken on some iconic qualities, making it on to the cover of a sociological book on ‘anthropology of everydayness’ (see Sulima, 2000).
11. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ampelmännchen
12. See: http://www.capitalculture.eu/artists/13.html
13. Around the time of Karwinska’s media breakthrough, a unique neon ‘Ursynow’, the name of one of Warsaw‘s biggest Soviet-style districts, attracted public attention. It survived intact on a local store roof. In 2009, the district authorities decided to purchase it and reinstall it on its headquarters. See: ‘Moj Ursynow.’ Available at: http://mojursynow.gazeta.pl/mojursynow/1,90636,6166667,Dzielnica_mowi_tak_w_sprawie_neonu_z_Megasamu.html
14. See: http://www.neonmuzeum.org/
15. When in 2009 a Polish Internet website launched a photo gallery entitled ‘The Relics of Communism’, the first image featured a queue. One of the Polish Internet stores promoting everyday design of the communist era is called ‘You were not standing here’. It is a direct pun on the reality of the queue. See: http://konflikty.wp.pl/gid,11194781,kat,,title,Relikty-PRL-u,galeria.html?ticaid=19f57 and http://www.pantuniestal.com/o-pantuniestal/o-nas/?lan=english

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