

“East Germany Lives!”: An Encounter with Rural Graffiti

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This essay undertakes a provisional interpretation of spray-painted writing on a dilapidated rural bus shelter that I encountered in 2010 while investigating cultural practices that evoke and invoke the East German past in contemporary Germany. The graffiti, which reads “DDR lebt!” (“East Germany lives!”), appeared in large red letters and was accompanied by the shape of a heart (see Figure 1). The bus shelter with its adornment captures the ambivalence that characterizes the place that the former socialist nation takes in the German imagination and thus offers itself as an opening in the interrogation of how East Germany is remembered and historicized today. Here, I propose interpretive possibilities for the themes to which the graffiti allude. Drawing on Slavoj Žižek and Svetlana Boym, I point to the limitations of applying the construct of nostalgia to practices that appear to appraise positively Germany’s socialist era. A consideration of the graffiti’s form, its immediate environment, as well as its broader cultural context direct attention towards more diverse understandings of the past in the contemporary moment. Moreover, Walter Benjamin’s dialectical image emerges as alternative possibility for thinking about how cultural practices intervene in unconventional, unpredictable, and contradictory ways as they connect what has been to the present.



Figure 1

Memory Contests and Nostalgia

Given the exuberance of the graffiti, *Ostalgie* (nostalgia for the East) offers itself as an approach for the interpretation and appraisal of the phrase on the bus shelter on a socio-cultural level. Broadly, *Ostalgie* entails a preoccupation with unique facets of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). It consists of such diverse articulations as the popularity of consumer goods that mimic those that were available in the GDR, television variety programs exploring the nation's oddities, and the founding of amateur museums dedicated to East German everyday life. In milder forms, dominant discourses dismiss the phenomenon as the symptom of lacking historical awareness. More conservative responses portray *Ostalgie* as a dangerous expression of a desire to recreate the GDR, and with it, an oppressive regime. In contrast, scholarly analyses frequently place the origin of *Ostalgie* in a collective sense of loss and dislocation that resulted from the unequal merging of two cultures (e.g., Berdahl, Betts, Cooke). These works explore the ways in which *Ostalgie* entails counter-hegemonic practices that give voice to aspects of the East German past that dominant discourses fail or refuse to address. Slavoj Žižek interprets *Ostalgie* more broadly as mourning for political possibility, defining it as “longing, not so much for the communist past, for what actually went on under communism, but, rather, for what *might have happened* there, for the missed opportunity of another Germany” (23-24).

Svetlana Boym theorizes the phenomenon in the post-socialist context beyond Germany, distinguishing between restorative and reflective nostalgia by differentiating their relationship to temporality. The former invokes the present and future, while the latter lingers in the past.

Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on nostos [homecoming] and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in algia [pain], in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance [...]. Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstruction of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time. (41)

Despite the complexities that scholars have introduced into interpretations of *Ostalgie*, in everyday speech and some academic work, the notion retains the sense of a regressive emotional state. For example, in a historical tracing of bourgeois culture that includes the East German era, Castillo describes *Ostalgie* as the “romantic rediscovery of [communist] consumer culture” and “false memory” (767-68). Thus, although much theorizing on the many multifaceted characteristics of *Ostalgie* extends beyond romanticization, the phenomenon is inextricably tied to its more narrow and conventional meaning, even in the scholarly realm. Consequently, its use confines interpretive possibilities. While at first glance the “DDR lebt!” graffiti seems to express a positive sentiment, theorizing it as an articulation of *Ostalgie* deemphasizes the message's reference not so much to loss than to what remains. Moreover, the framework accounts inadequately for the contradictions and ambivalence of the writing, which emerge from its immediate environmental context.

The Writing on the Wall: The Scene and its Audience

In the introduction, I translated the capital letters in the “DDR lebt!” graffiti as the acronym for the *Deutsche Demokratische Republik*, which in English is the German Democratic Republic, or East Germany. However, this interpretation is disputable, for the definitive article “die” (“the”) that would have to be present to form a grammatically correct phrase is absent. As it stands, the text could refer to a person, such as in “Elvis lives!,” despite the missing periods between the capital letters. While the lacking article stands as the source of some uncertainty and gives rise to the sneaking suspicion that the author formulated an idiosyncratic message rather than invoking East Germany, its location suggests otherwise. The positioning of the large letters on the left side of the wall of the shelter that faces a major road implies that it is directed at an audience, one that consists of the countless occupants of the vehicles that drive along the *Bundesstraße 2* in an north-easterly direction, a few kilometres northeast of the Saxon city of Leipzig. By spray-painting the wall, the author appropriated a blank canvas in a public space, one that could conceivably have been the site of an advertisement. Just like this genre of communication, the writing challenges readers to decode its message, a process that relies on the assumption that even if polysemic, its subject is decipherable by most.

If “DDR” stands for East Germany, a country that ceased to exist nearly one quarter of a century ago, the graffiti’s declarative statement asks after how it continues to live. Whatever the intended meaning of the words, the heart, the exclamation mark, and the red color of the paint connote love or even passion. However, their background stands in stark contrast to this signification. The graffiti appears on a dilapidated bus shelter, with crumbling plaster and holes for windows, a structure that may be demolished soon or collapse on its own. It looks much like what some argue was the state of the GDR at the time of its demise. The juxtaposition of exuberant affection and ruin produce a playfully ironic statement, yet one whose meaning remains unfixed. While in form it appears whimsical and ephemeral, the scene is also suggestive of deeper significance, even if unclear.

In addition to the *in situ* sources of meaning, intertextuality can be considered in the process of interpretation. For example, the graffiti bears a striking resemblance to the “I ♥ NY” slogan that so many cities and sites across the globe have mimicked, including Germany’s capital Berlin. It is also reminiscent of the ubiquitous “Frodo lives!” graffiti that appeared in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s as symbol of the contemporary counterculture, which is based on a character in J. R. R. Tolkien’s novels (Caputi 11). This cultural meme captured anti-establishment sentiments, including opposition to the Vietnam War. Like the “Frodo lives!” graffiti, the significance of the “DDR lebt!” figure can be identified as social commentary. For example, it may stand as a provocation directed at its readers to consider how East Germany continues to be present in contemporary Germany and the implications of these presences. This possibility of meaning at the socio-cultural level is connected in part to the figure’s relationship to place and time.

Sources of Meaning: Out-of-place and Time

The site of the graffiti signifies transition and impermanence, imbuing the “DDR lebt” figure with an out-of-time and out-of-place quality, which extends beyond it facing a major road and being affixed to a bus shelter. Although graffiti is part of the rural landscape across the globe, especially on such structures as bridges crossing motorways and concrete wall barriers, the phenomenon is generally associated with urban and suburban areas. “DDR lebt!” appears in a bucolic setting from which no human dwelling is visible. This location suggests an unpopulated location, despite the presence of a bus stop with a current timetable and litter strewn about. The contrast of being in the ‘middle of nowhere’ and the bold message that seems to ask viewers to decipher it commands attention from those who encounter it.

Temporal discontinuities further provoke curiosity about its meaning and interpretive possibilities. In addition to the obvious fact that the GDR is no longer ‘alive,’ the medium of the message produces the sense of being out-of-time. Even though people of all ages engage in the practice, graffiti writing is generally understood to be the domain of youth subculture. Thus, the person who created the “DDR lebt!” figure is likely to be younger than thirty and therefore would have no living memory of East Germany. Here, the question about how the author can reference this un-lived past arises. Transgenerational memory, which involves the transference of experiential and private rather than official memories from parents to their children, is one possibility for interpreting the presence of this knowledge.

This subject of how young eastern Germans conceptualize the socialist past has been an intensely debated subject in the German media. For example, in 2009, a headline in Germany’s largest weekly magazine and barometer of dominant ideas, *Der Spiegel*, read “Heimweh nach der Diktatur” (Homesick for the Dictatorship). It carried the subtitle “The obscuring of East Germany has reached new heights. Today, the young and more advantaged too oppose the representation of their old home country as an unlawful state” (my translation). Its author, Bonstein, reports that in 2009, twenty years after the Fall of the Wall, 57% of eastern Germans believed that the GDR had more good than bad sides. Moreover, 49% of the participants believed that there were a few problems but that it was possible to live a good life there. Bonstein supplements these statistics with quotes from young people who grew up in the regions of former East Germany and who, despite academic and financial success, express dissatisfaction with life in today’s Germany. For example, a thirty year-old business school graduate who was born in East Germany states “Most GDR citizens had a good life. [...] I certainly do not think that it is better here.” Others offer general critiques of capitalism, especially inequality, and point to the dishonesty of politicians, increase in crime and unemployment rates, a lack of social cohesion, a reduction in social welfare, as well as western cultural hegemony.

Bonstein, citing an historian and a political scientist, dismisses these viewpoints as misguided, concluding that despite many comments concerning the present, they appraise the past incorrectly, the motivation for which is a form of saving face. She writes: “The trivialization of dictatorship is accepted as the price for maintaining one’s sense of self-worth” (my translation). This dismissive explanation strips eastern Germans, young and old, of the ability to reflect critically upon the past. Moreover, simply categorizing historical consciousness into false and correct undermines possibilities for thinking about what has been and its relationship to the present in complex ways. The exclamation “DDR lives!” offers a way out of this reductive framework by provoking questions on *how* the past continues to live and remains part of the present. Beyond the written words, theorizing the immediate context of the graffiti and the moment of its encounter provide further avenues for investigations into how historical consciousness articulates itself and with what effect.

The Power of the Ruin

Returning to the material characteristics of the graffiti calls for a consideration of the dilapidated bus shelter on which it appears. The structure as ruinous remainder of the past affords the bus shelter certain powers. Functioning at the “intersection between institutionalized and private memory, between the forgotten and retained, visible and invisible” (Pye 3) ruins have the capacity to evoke the hidden or lost past and alter perception (Hetherington 17). According to Alaida Assmann this power derives from their operation as trace. For her, “[t]races fundamentally open up a different entry point into the past than texts because they integrate the non-linguistic articulations of a past culture—the ruins and relicts, the fragments and shards, as well as the residues of oral tradition” (106). Put more succinctly, Assmann argues that in ruins we find the “traces of an uncoded life” (107; my translation). They allow us to see the past through lenses that other material culture cannot offer. While the conceptualization of the bus shelter as ruin thus points to the mechanism by which the “DDR lebt!” graffiti may elicit an evocative link between past and present, the figure and its background are not simply a ruin. Rather, the contrasts that define the scene and the character of the writing itself create conditions for bringing forth an affective response.

Walter Benjamin’s concept of the dialectical image sheds some light on this process. In his *Arcades Project*, he applies the method of montage as a means for producing historical intelligibility. Benjamin proposed that the juxtaposition of the debris of history has the capacity to generate dialectical images, or sudden realizations. “The dialectical image,” he argues, “is an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash. What has been is to be held fast—as an image flashing up in the now of its recognizability” (473 [N9,7]). These images do not simply establish relationships between the past and present, or even reciprocally illuminate one another, but rather bring together dialectically the ‘then’ and the ‘now.’ Benjamin writes:

It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For a while the relation

of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. (462 [N2a,3])

The dialectical image consists of seeing something that could not be seen before; elements that have been there all along are suddenly connected, culminating in a recognizable form and thus generating insight into the aggregate of past, present, and future.

In the case of the “DDR lebt!” graffiti, the contrast of the ruinous bus shelter and the bold writing, supported by juxtapositions that arise from its emplacement, produce a message that neither component holds independently; something new emerges through their combining. Important here is that multiple and even contradictory readings are possible. Some viewers may understand the figure as a sarcastic statement on the lamentable remainders of the socialist past, the ruins that refuse to disappear. Others may read it as celebration of aspects of life in East Germany that continue to be present, yet in a way that makes room for ironies and contradictions. In a cultural landscape where discussions about East Germany often take the form of nostalgic reveling or sweeping rejection, this simultaneity stands as an example of the possibilities for complicating the stories that circulate about the past.

Susanne Ledanff proposes that some literary works and journalistic writing that critically interrogate both nostalgia for the east and west have the capacity to counteract clichés and stereotypes about East Germany. This essay has considered graffiti, a marginal cultural practice, and has argued that it too can elicit thinking about the past in ways that disrupt conventional understandings. Including this type of practice in explorations into expressions of complex historical consciousness significantly widens the field of inquiry. Rather than considering how cultural producers, such as authors of fiction and journalists, produce the past, this approach asks about what ordinary people do. It constructs questions about how the past lives on in practices of everyday life, which can include the songs that those who grew up in East Germany teach their children and grandchildren, the recipes they pass on to subsequent generations, and the stories they tell about how they negotiated life in an oppressive system. Importantly, with such a focus, orientation moves from the futile attempt to understand the past as it was toward what the past means from the vantage point of the present.

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