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East German museums of everyday history as depots for the nostalgic object

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### Destroying/Recovering the Object

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and especially in the latter half of the 1990s, a specific type of museum kept materialising all over the former German Democratic Republic. These museums of Alltagsgeschichte, or 'everyday history', made it their mission to provide a record of GDR history by salvaging and protecting its consumer objects from destruction. In Jonathan Bach's 2017 book *What Remains*, he lists around 23 such museums, while conceding that there are most likely more.<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin (2002) referred to a collection of artefacts as a way for the collector to counter the 'dispersion of the world' (H4a,1, p. 211), that is, a way of preserving meaning by preventing the objects from ending up on the 'scrapheap' of history – a fate that threatened to befall artefacts kept in museums on a literal as well as symbolic level. This text centres on two such East German museums dedicated to the storage and display of everyday items produced between 1949 and 1989, looking at the 'detritus of the previous era's everyday life' (Nadkarni and Shevchenko, 2004, p. 500) and the gesture of saving objects from destruction, of exhibiting them only to potentially discard them once more. I visited these museums in 2011 and 2014 and the following analysis is based on my visits, as well as promotional and educational material provided by the museums on location and via their websites. My own motivation for the visits was a combination of personal and professional curiosity. Nine years old at the time of the fall of the Wall, I had spent most of my life in post-unification Germany, perpetually intrigued by the contrast between many first-person accounts of life in the GDR, usually by members of my parents' generation, and the public discourse of GDR history which was assuming hegemonic form in the new Germany. Even before attending the specific museum sites discussed here, I had been to a number of related, smaller exhibitions, as well as to the Zeitgeschichtliches Forum in Leipzig, and had been struck by how the focus for many visitors was on interacting affectionately and humorously with the exhibited consumer objects of the GDR, rather than a more solemn response to the systematic injustices perpetrated by the regime to which the exhibition paid some secondary attention.

Nostalgia as a 'structure of feeling' (Tannock, 1995) frequently relies on material artefacts, in which the relationships to these physical remains of the past as they are

embodied and contained in GDR museums form the text's focus and anchor its conceptualisation of nostalgia. The aim is to place nostalgia theory in dialogue with psychoanalytic concepts that can meaningfully enhance its theoretical remit, extending the discussion to include historical transitions and losses and how they are embodied in certain material practices and public gestures. The loss that is being discussed is both universal, in that it concerns the past; and specific, in that it results from the demise of a country and societal order that 'literally vanished from the political map' (Betts, 2000, p. 734). As a result, the subsequent fate of the German Democratic Republic changed and frequently intensified any attachment one may have experienced to it, enabling this sense of 'refinding' objects that were believed to have been lost, or were temporarily forgotten, and subsequently endowing them with value that is both personal and quasi-historical. What this discussion seeks to highlight is not only the importance of everyday objects in historical transitions, but also of the public sites that house them. At the same time, I make no distinction here between the 'adequate' and 'inadequate', 'productive' or 'regressive' use of objects, or potentially pathological outcomes. Instead, what is offered is a reflection on the historical and communal use-values of artefacts, and how the museum spaces discussed here highlight the difference, or become an expression thereof. This also means that the notion of object transcends distinctions between inner and outer, or material and psychic reality, as demonstrated by the importance of encounters with such 'objects' later in life, where they may send ripples back to the past, such as to one's childhood or the community's past life. A psychosocial 'reading' of sites and artefacts looks to them in order to examine the kind of 'work' they do, or how they invite or seek to set in motion certain (psychic) processes, while inhibiting others. The function of, or possible relationship with, the objects of the German Democratic Republic is dependent on the context in which they are embedded – not only away from the homes they were originally intended for or to be a part of, but also in terms of their framing in their sites of display. However, it is important to highlight that, unlike a box nested within a series of ever-larger boxes, the notion of context is porous. Hence, while this discussion speaks of museums as a contextual environment, along with references to the museum locations and the larger context of contemporary German discourses of GDR history and trends in museology, these are not treated as separate entities but as working in conjunction to enable the relations discussed here.

While a perceived shrinking of the present, coupled with a breakdown of future-orientated narratives, perhaps mandates a turn to the past, expressed for example in the turning over of much of Europe to the 'memory complex' (Macdonald, 2013), I do not seek to contribute to the already vast body of scholarship in memory studies. Instead, the role of museum sites in reproducing specific emotions – frequently referred to as 'nostalgic' – is examined. The two museums discussed here are in precarious

financial situations and peripheral locations, meaning that the type of communion they provide with the objects on display is also a response to the general status and value of these artefacts in reunified Germany. For comparison, reference will also be made to a number of other museums of GDR material culture throughout the text. Structurally, the article moves from theoretical considerations to the objects, and then the museum spaces that house them, before concluding on a more theoretical note. As I argue, while over time the curiosity value of the objects displayed in these museums may increase for non-East German visitors, for former citizens of the GDR a pilgrimage to these sites may represent a further parting move from the past as it gradually declines in importance. Before a discussion of the psychosocial dynamics of these spaces in the second half of the article, the next section contextualises these museums vis-a-vis nostalgia theory, and Ostalgie more specifically.

### Nostalgia and Its Objects

Nostalgia is frequently seen as an attempt to recover an idealised version of the lost object(s), in order to arrest time and to potentially ward off the recognition that the relationship with the object was far more ambivalent than admitted. In its reliance on affect and the visceral, it has therefore often been dismissed as a mechanism that cannot adequately represent or make sense of the past. What is mourned in an experience of loss is not only the object itself, but also the fantasies or possibilities associated with it, so that 'the questions of what it is that has been lost, and of whether that loss is best understood as located in the past or the present, continue to remain open' (Radstone, 2007, p. 147). In retrospect, this can lead to an idealisation of the object and to a repression of the ambivalences that characterised the initial object-relation. The emancipatory potential of nostalgia is usually assumed to be metabolised into solipsistic reflection through a conversion of 'social change into private affect' (p. 114). This repression of a more ambivalent relationship is a feature that seems admissible, and even positive, in individual instantiations of nostalgia – in this capacity, it has even been feted as health-promoting; for example, Constantine Sedikides has written extensively on the benefits of nostalgia as a restitution or coping mechanism (see Sedikides and Wildschut, 2018; Zhou et al., 2008; Routledge et al., 2012). In his work with colleagues, the creation of a kind of 'nostalgic repository', of positive sensations associated with the past, can create a feeling of belonging or affiliation that can lead to a sense of continuity and, from this position, greater optimism about the future – a necessarily personal focus that differs from the potential for a future-orientated nostalgia discussed later. While the focus of Sedikides' work is on personal transitions and trajectories, the intersection and entanglement of the public and the personal can be problematic when it comes to historical processes that are contested; after all, the idea that 'the personal is political' can similarly be applied to memories of

the past. In Raoul Girardet's (1986) rendering of the term in his work on political myths, legitimate grievances with the present are instrumentalised in order to idealise the past, thus making individuals backward-looking in a way that potentially works into the hands of conservative social forces. Yet, in an alternative reading, nostalgia can serve as a form of political critique, as it seeks to salvage from the past its 'hidden, non-realised potentials', so that 'the authentic future is the repetition/retrieval of this past, not of the past as it was, but of those elements in the past which the past itself, in its reality, betrayed' (Ziz'ek, 2008, p. 141, emphasis in original).

The phenomenon of East Germans seemingly engaging in mass nostalgia about the GDR gained enough attention for it to be granted its own name: Ostalgie, an amalgamation of Osten [east] and Nostalgie [nostalgia]. Although an East German comedian initially coined the term, it has subsequently been employed in serious analyses of the phenomenon (Ahbe, 2001). It was the international acclaim gained by films such as Leander Haussmann's *Sonnenallee* (1999) and Wolfgang Becker's *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003) which is often cited as a crucial factor in having enabled a more light-hearted approach to the GDR to truly cross over into mainstream entertainment. The year of the latter's success, a number of TV shows attempted to capitalise on this positive attention. While previous television programmes had mainly sought to educate the public about the GDR regime's oppressive dimension, shows such as *The Ostalgie Show*, *Die Ultimate Ost-Show* and the *DDR Show* devoted most of their airtime to fashion, popular entertainment and consumer items produced in the GDR. One journalist's summary of the shows illustrates their preoccupation with consumer culture:

[...] Let the obligatory Trabbi roll across the screen every now and then; the whole thing is to be accompanied by hits from the East German charts; West Germans need to be made to guess the most common abbreviations of GDR-speak, and keep showing "original footage from back in the day". Add a pinch of Ostalgie and mix it with Spreewald gherkins, FKK holidays and FDJ summer camps – and there you have it, the Ost-Show is complete! (Kranzlin, 2003)<sup>1</sup>

Ostensibly, these shows aimed to perpetuate a more positive vision of the GDR by presenting it as a place that can be looked back upon with fond humour. In response, critics pointed to what they saw as a lack of critical engagement with GDR history. The sudden ubiquity of objects such as reproductions of the Ampelma"nnchen, the East German pedestrian traffic light symbols, as emblems of a process of commodification and 'cutesification' of the past, was seen as incommensurable with the GDR regime's record of human rights violations that had led some historians to classify it as an Unrechtsstaat, a state with a systematic absence of the rule of law (Schro"der, 2009). The conclusion many drew from the programmes' success is that Ostalgie is nothing but

a repetition compulsion, whose employment of various fetish objects represented a refusal to remember the regime's unsavory aspects, and should therefore be dismissed altogether.

Two factors specific to the GDR amplified the powers of such nostalgic objects. The relative scarcity of consumer goods in the German Democratic Republic, coupled with utopian fantasies of abundance in the West, endowed these goods with almost magical properties. They retained this unique aura even after the disappearance of the GDR. Indeed, this vanishing of their country of origin has made them doubly precious, especially with the irretrievability of their counterparts. The past is always out of bounds, but through these historic developments the verdict appears to take on a more absolute quality. Such a belief in the totemic power of objects, which some observers have likened to the purported 'cargo cult' in Melanesia, has at times resulted in a 'reverse cargo cult' as an expression of the disappointment experienced after the mythical West failed to live up to its promises. For example, the social and economic hardships experienced by Russians in the 1990s subsequently led to the conviction that social reality in Western Europe and the US was equally dire, but that its problems were better concealed owing to PR mechanisms employed by their governments and large corporations. This laid the foundation for instantiations of the kind of 'political nostalgia' discussed earlier, whereby a current regime instrumentalises positive recollections of the Soviet Union to justify its authoritarian tendencies, thus contextualising Oushakine's concern that nostalgia can lead to a kind of withdrawal from social and political engagement in the present (Oushakine, 2000).

While not necessarily equating the trend in positive recollections of the GDR with the 'inability to mourn' of post-war Germany (Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich, 1975), critics of Ostalgie nevertheless emphasised nostalgics' yearning for a 'narcissistic illusion for a missing gratification or a deflection from current unpleasant circumstances' (Nikelly, 2004, p. 184) and accused East Germans of engaging in a 'selective amnesia' (Cooke, 2005, p. 8) in relation to their collective past that could at worst obstruct the process towards Germany's 'inner unification' (p. 320). However, while the abovementioned shows' success was as short-lived as any scandal they may have attracted, it is possible to draw a more nuanced conclusion from their presentation of what was noteworthy about 40 years of GDR history. The shows' attempts at 're-exoticising the normal' could also be seen to reinforce a hierarchy in which the GDR was seen as inferior, laughable even, thereby stripping the regime of any positive, emancipatory potential it might have had by filtering it 'through the prism of present-day consumer values' (p. 163). Indeed, the idea that nostalgia is necessarily preoccupied with everyday objects is not without consequence for its reception and subsequent categorisation by the public. By labelling certain processes and experiences as 'nostalgic', they can be treated as escapist

ventures and thus kept separate from concerns of the present. This has two implications: first, in Maya Nadkarni's words, we 'need to interrogate Western investments in post-socialist nostalgia, be it in the East European subject as excessively nostalgic and therefore pathological, or in the nostalgia for Cold War discourses' (Nadkarni, 2010, p. 206). Devoting attention to the phenomenon of Ostalgie risks overstating its role in the lives of East Germans, or misunderstanding its function, while simultaneously and retroactively serving to produce a different West Germany. Paraphrasing Žižek, Nadkarni argues that the Cold War constructed a West seemingly deserving of the utopian fantasies invested in it from the other side of the Iron Curtain, and an Eastern European gaze staring back full of love. Second, and as alluded to previously, most representations of Ostalgie contain if not a pathologising tendency, then a degree of trivialisation. Dominic Boyer (2010) observes the trend in the public sphere of reunited Germany to 'delegitimize as "nostalgic" those East German voices that seek greater discussion of inequalities and legacies of the unification process' (p. 21). By forging a tie between post-socialist nostalgia and everyday objects, the phenomenon is depoliticised and the mourning it entails remains confined to the realm of personal, even sentimental recollection. However, a more general nostalgia for artefacts of the past is of course an affliction shared by many individuals born into consumer capitalism, where these artefacts can serve as identificatory tools, and conversations about which foster a kind of temporary sense of kinship with others, as well as containing the more typical nostalgic tendencies to associate the past with a better, simple time. In Germany, for example, one can thus justifiably speak of a 'Westalgie' in some instances (Arnold-de Simine, 2013, p. 176).

### Magical Objects, Transitional Fetishes

The doubly transitional state experienced through the passage of time with its accompanying losses, and the transformations brought about by regime change, have led to the application of the notion of the transitional object and/or transitional space to transitional and 'post-transitional' societies such as Russia (Oushakine, 2000, 2007), South Africa (Worby and Ally, 2013; Long, 2011) and East Germany (see Brock and Truscott, 2012, for a comparison of the two contexts). Some disagreement appears to be centred on the question of whether, under these conditions, the object can aid transition, or whether, by 'arresting development' (Oushakine, 2000), it in fact makes the disjuncture between then and now more palpable. As with any parallel, these comparisons can prove enlightening when they draw attention to structural similarities. Alternatively, they can lead to oversimplification, when the focus on commonalities leads one to disregard all that separates such disparate contexts, as can be the case whenever expanding the sphere of the transitional object from infancy to adulthood and entire societies. In fact, the charge to be brought here is that this comparison might

imply a double regression, whereby the fantasised return to an earlier, more comforting stage of development that the transitional object may enable could also be read as a wish to restore the pre-transitional state of affairs.

Daniel Miller (1998) highlights how one's attachment to objects is also a natural consequence of the time one has spent alongside them: 'An artefact has its own longevity which then comes to play a role [...] some of our keepsakes grow a patina of affinity because of the time we have held them' (p. 487). As previously mentioned, the relative scarcity of consumer goods in the GDR meant that many objects became doubly treasured possessions. Often given special status at the time, their presence and function in the person's life means they are later imbued with further positive memories. They were then subsequently 'sealed off' from becoming the subject of further projections with the end of the GDR. With the influx of Western goods after 1989, even those items that were not thrown away or replaced entirely were temporarily discarded, to be retrieved or rediscovered later on. Nadkarni and Shevchenko (2004) argue that this near-fetishisation of the lost objects of the former Eastern bloc is actually based on the 'magical and transformative capacity' (p. 495) which at the time was bestowed upon even more elusive – or indeed entirely absent – Western consumer goods. In this reading, the 'magical thinking' that coalesces around nostalgic objects is equated with the conceptual use of the fetish in psychoanalysis, that is, as a displacement of desire and fantasy onto alternative objects through a form of disavowal of its inherent impossibility. For Winnicott (1971/2005), fetishism is also one of the possible resolutions of transitional phenomena (p. 12).

In reality, the end of the GDR entailed not only a 'loss of relationships, of material and social practices, of an identity' (Brock and Truscott, 2012, p. 319), but also the loss of a utopia of complete abundance such as was believed to exist in the West. 'As a result', Nadkarni and Shevchenko (2004) state, 'once disparaged items of socialist mass production have acquired the authenticity that Western products are now perceived to lack. They are now embraced as vehicles of the once-utopian dreams and desires for the idealised West, and as silent witnesses of an era in which consumer abundance was imagined as universally available' (p. 495). The quasi-historic value that the objects obtained with the end of the GDR exists alongside the fantasmatic value of the artefacts, which become containers for an endless array of fantasies, and, thus, repositories of positive affect. They create a sense of continuity in personal histories, but by controlling the narrative that is inscribed into them, they are also delivered from the ambivalences of history. They are thus rarely reintroduced into the fabric of history, but 'hoarded', stowed away and thus hidden from many possibilities of historical reevaluation.



At the same time, this does not mean that their preservation can be equated with 'laying them to rest'. Charity Scribner (2003), referencing Maurice Halbwachs, contrasts the dynamic nature of memory with that of history as 'a monument that calcifies lived experience' (p. 37). The traditional history museum here becomes 'a place for cultures to die, more a cancer ward than an obstetrics unit' (p. 37). The next section discusses how these artefacts can provide an asylum for discarded objects, thereby allowing 'communities to hold certain objects collectively in mind and hence to expand the symbolic capacity of a shared culture' (Frogget and Trustram, 2014) – the symbolic capacity enabling resistance to the command to forget, and instead to perform the reenactment of a parting on one's own terms.

### Abundance Versus Scarcity: The Two Museum Sites

So then these people looked back in order to regain hope, certainty, and the confidence they had lost in the meantime. Unfortunately, the things one would have liked to hold on to were gone.

– Wolfgang Kotte

I had previously conducted research on the phenomenon of Ostalgie and whether one could speak of a specifically East German way of remembering (and forgetting) the past that was especially fixated upon everyday objects. This involved interviewing my East Germany participants about how they recalled their life in the GDR, as well as encouraging them to bring along GDR objects still in their possession – a request that was usually met with great enthusiasm. Artefacts retrieved for the interviews included things like a stuffed toy, a comic book, a children's suitcase, a First of May flag, a Young Pioneers' cap,<sup>2</sup> the GDR constitution, and several GDR passports and other forms of identification that indicated membership of certain professional bodies no longer in existence. One 56-year old participant, remarkably, brought along two large shopping bags full of not only the more typical photographs, IDs and diplomas, but also items such as tickets for public transport, shopping receipts, school report cards, menus and numerous small items, such as a plastic tomato knife. When asked what these objects represented for her and why she had retained them, the participant explained that these stood for '40 years of history' and that she referred to them to remind herself 'what things cost' and 'how they were'. She described the sensation of contemplating and talking about these objects as 'delicious', demonstrating the visceral pleasures of handling such nostalgic objects. This may be a rare case of a kind of hoarding of *aides-mémoire*, so that one could treat such stockpiling of objects as a personal idiosyncrasy, but these actions are seemingly legitimated by the 'future absence' of these objects, and the historical verdict on them.

As the list of museums provided at the beginning of this article indicates, the museums of GDR Alltagsgeschichte are merely two of many such private collections dispersed all over East Germany, usually in small towns, with collections that vary in size. They can thus be said to represent a larger public gesture or trend in German history. The creation of these museums follows a more general, European trend (Macdonald, 2013), as well as a more specifically German turn towards Alltagsgeschichte, that is, an interest in micro-history or history from below, focusing on the interrelation between the ordinary, quotidian and macro- or larger historical forces (Arnold-de Simine, 2013; Bach, 2017). Their aims are treated – both explicitly and less overtly – as in contrast to sites such as the more commercial, entertainment-focused exposition of the DDR Museum in central Berlin, and the more didactic Zeitgeschichtliches Forum in Leipzig.<sup>3</sup> In Anne Winkler's (2014) taxonomy of German history museums, these two museums distinctly fall in the latter category:

One focuses on how the elements of dictatorship shaped all aspects of quotidian life, dividing citizens into perpetrators, victims, and consenters. This interpretive mode reflects and reinforces broader dominant discourses on East Germany as they operate in today's united Germany, which legitimate the contemporary order. The other, which marginal and amateur practices define, brackets political structure by foregrounding quotidian and domestic life, implicitly suggesting that East Germans negotiated the socialist system rather than simply being controlled by it. (p. 102)

As detailed in accounts like Arnold-de Simine's, by focusing on everyday life, certain GDR museums in the latter category were soon seen to be 'trivialising' GDR history rather than focusing on the dictatorial aspects of the regime (Arnold-de Simine, 2013).

The first museum considered here is the Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur<sup>4</sup> in Eisenhüttenstadt, over 100 km east of Berlin, right on the Polish border. The town was founded in 1950 as a socialist model city, built next to the steel mill after which it was named. Between 1953 and 1961 it was renamed Stalinstadt, changing its name back to Eisenhüttenstadt as part of destalinisation. The city centre is a well-preserved and comprehensive representation of 1950s socialist architecture where, incidentally, many of the streets have retained their original names, such as Karl-Marx-Strasse or KarlLiebknecht-Strasse. Since its apex in the late 1980s, the town's population has almost halved, so that many shop fronts are now empty and a series of housing blocks from the 1970s were demolished as it was deemed to make little economic sense to refurbish dwellings for an absent population. Indeed, the town's streets were virtually empty during my visit in early 2014. The Dokumentationszentrum itself was created in 1993, representing the older of the two museums discussed here. Its building formerly housed a kindergarten and to this day prominently features along its staircase stained glass windows depicting children of different races holding hands, symbolic of the

socialist ideal of a brotherhood of the people. The re-purposing of the kindergarten as a museum due to the town's own lack of children is also symbolic of the death of the kind of community that brought forth these buildings. The museum's founder, Andreas Ludwig, initially secured federal funds to open what was then called Offenes Depot [open depot] (see Scribner, 2003). In one interpretation, this designation signals that the Centre could be considered the objects' terminus. Indeed, the collection was started with objects that had been donated rather than specifically purchased. The curators recorded donors' accounts of their relationship to these objects, though Ludwig was at first reluctant to utilise these narratives in the exhibitions, so as not to overly personalise them and thus detract from the objects themselves (Arnold-de Simine, 2013). The collection currently consists of over 170,000 original GDR items, but most of the collection is not on display on the museum's two exhibition floors. Instead, the floors contain a small core collection as well as temporary exhibitions on themes such as 'Living and Housing in the GDR in the 1950s and 1960s', 'Kept Things: The life of an East-Berlin secretary' and 'Sich Ausruhen – Leisure and Vacation'. When I visited the museum in 2014, the theme of its temporary exhibition was 'Alles aus Plaste' [all things plastic], with bright household objects such as egg cups and buckets taking up the vitrines, often displayed in all of the colour variations in which they were originally produced.

The Dokumentationszentrum arranges most of its exhibited objects thematically, in which, by not integrating these into more comprehensive settings and displaying each as one of many, the focus shifts towards the culture of design and production of these artefacts. Asking how knowledge is re-produced in this kind of exhibition, Anne Winkler (2014) concludes that 'the exhibition seems to ask the artifacts to speak for themselves. [...] I would like to suggest that such an approach raises questions about the limits of the power of things, as well as the sources of meaning in contexts where it appears as though things have a voice' (p. 109). This implicit faith in the role of objects as mediators, instead of offering more explicitly educational initiatives for groups of visitors and school classes, has also been cited as one of the reasons the Dokumentationszentrum has experienced funding woes almost since its inception, never securing more than 9,000 visitors per year on average (Bederke, 2014). In 2012, it was put on a list of German cultural sites facing closure – a fate it marginally managed to avoid. It is currently receiving funding from a number of federal agencies, historical foundations and the city of Eisenhu"ttenstadt. As the sheer size of its collection has meant the objects held in storage are displayed in multiple versions, it has officially stopped acquiring or accepting new items and is planning to sell some of its collection to generate additional funds.

Multiple versions of the same object were also on display at the second site discussed here, the DDR Museum Zeitreise (GDR Timetravel Museum). Indeed, such an abundance of objects is a reverse of the scarcity that characterised GDR commodity culture, retroactively imbuing the past with a plenitude that was rarely present. This overabundance of objects can feel overwhelming, disorientating even, which means that in this second museum there is less scope to let the objects 'breathe'. The DDR Museum Zeitreise<sup>5</sup> opened as a private initiative in 2006, with the comparable aim of offering an insight into many facets of everyday life in the GDR. It was formerly situated in Radebeul, a small town outside of Dresden, but was forced to close in 2016 after a drawn-out process of insolvency due to rent arrears and unsuccessful applications for federal funding. The current discussion is based on the museum collection and site in its 2011 state and location. The issues that led to the closure were similar to those experienced by the first museum, namely a combination of declining visitor numbers and a lack or shortage of external funding. Some of the collection has since been re-purposed at a newly established, smaller museum in Dresden, which opened in January 2017 as Die Welt der DDR.<sup>6</sup> At the time, it was located in a disused large office building erected in the late 1970s – a site which, from the outside, did not have the obvious appearance of a museum or collection of artefacts open to visitors. Much of the museum's (now defunct) website highlighted the sheer size and completeness of its collection, with its permanent exhibition filling four floors extending to over 3,500 m<sup>1</sup> in total. As the epigraph at the beginning of this section indicates, the museum curators did not see their mission as explicitly didactic or educational, so that this category of museum can be described as 'compensatory in that it represents the past through the object world of East Germany' (Winkler, 2014, p. 119). The permanent exhibition touched upon virtually every aspect of life in the GDR, going as far as re-creating typical GDR settings such as classrooms, shops, post offices, living rooms and kitchens. Additionally, it featured a gift shop, a 70s-style restaurant and a large hall available for hire, as well as offering bus tours of the region in socialist-era buses.

Notwithstanding the differences in underlying conceptualisations, the initial impression upon visiting these two museums was therefore not dissimilar. Both museum sites were cheerful spaces, at no point creating the feeling of being haunted by abandoned objects. However, there was clearly something more retrograde, less prestigious and at the same time more familiar – 'heimisch' – about the Radebeul museum. This effect is even more amplified in the N'Ostalgie Museum, a third, new museum space to which I return at the end of this article. This effect may be related to the nature of the objects themselves, many of them bright, often made of plastic, and with a design that is suitably anachronistic. Indeed, this 'retro' feel explains some of the appeal these ordinary, yet exotic objects hold for Western visitors, or for those East Germans too young to have experienced them in their original setting. To some degree,

they serve the more voyeuristic impulses that are inherent to some instantiations of Ostalgie (Ludwig, 1994). This latter type of visitor's relationship to nostalgia is '[...] one of abstraction rather than materiality; historical citation rather than a metonymic slide into personal memory; ironic distance rather than longing. Those who practice such "post-modern" nostalgia are not interested in consuming a specific historical image or object, but rather the aura of "pastness" to be found...' (Nadkarni and Shevchenko, 2004, p. 503).

### Temporary Enchantments

Visitors seeking a kind of hyperreal experience (Eco, 1986) in a quasi-East German Disneyland could encounter it in different guises in both locations. This was assisted by the additional degree of displacement that the visitor might experience as both museums were located in small, somewhat peripheral East German towns. The DDR Museum Zeitreise, with its ambition to become an Erlebniswelt ['world of experience' or 'world of adventure'] and its faithful recreation of many common GDR backdrops, offered a particularly immersive experience, signalled by its entry tickets designed to look like one-day visas granting citizens of the FRG entry to the GDR. As most items in the collection were in excellent condition and meticulously arranged, this hyperreal setting could at times feel more authentic than the original referent – nothing was broken, dilapidated or makeshift in the way that it would have been in many homes at the time. The two archives of the everyday also seemed to argue that almost all GDR objects are worthy of preservation, no matter how insignificant or banal – anything from the ubiquitous plastic eggcups (Bach, 2017, p. 59) to tubes of toothpaste, boxes of dried peas or used bus tickets were on display. In some of the settings recreated for visitors, such as shops or offices, mannequins dressed in typical work clothes of the time completed the scene. In Radebeul, each room and even some of the corridors were filled to the ceiling with lovingly arranged GDR objects large and small, as if awaiting absent but long-awaited guests and customers – a reversal of the circumstances of the external world. Together with the limited amount of consumer goods available in the GDR, this means that most East Germans are likely to find their 'lost' objects. The sensation of this rediscovery is both anticipated – indeed perhaps motivates the visit for many East Germans – and surprising.

An encounter with a lost childhood object can create the uncanny sensation of being transported back, or rather, taken out of time, so that for a few brief instants past and present seem to coexist. As Freud explains in his eponymous 1919 work, the notion in German of the 'unheimlich' has its root in 'Heim' – the home or a deeply familiar place – but also 'heimlich', as in 'secretive' or 'deeply buried'. However, while there may be elements that recall 'that sense of helplessness sometimes experienced in dreams'

(Freud, 1919/1955), the way these museum scenes are reminiscent of one's former home is by and large not a ghostly sensation, or imbued with any sense of hauntedness.

The act of transferring objects to the museum is also a means of making a culture 'other' (Stewart, 1993, p. 142). In historical museums, this otherness is attributed to the past, creating a distancing effect that can be at turns liberating or alienating. However, in museums of 'everyday history' or *Alltagsgeschichte*, this trend of depersonalisation is somewhat reversed, so that what was once intimately tied to the home enters the public realm. By granting them a distinct place and site, located both in remote locations yet in or near the places of their former use, the everyday objects of the GDR re-establish a link to the past, thereby creating a kind of temporary enchantment. East Germans who visit these museums do so not because they wish to gain clarity about the representativeness of their experiences within the larger framework of German historiography, but to seek closeness to the artefacts. Though this may be at odds with the curators' intentions – especially in the case of the Dokumentationszentrum – it speaks of the seductive qualities of these lost objects. When I decided to make the journeys to both museums with my mother, I did so because I expected her to enjoy revisiting the artefacts of her past. Like many of her peers, she has many positive recollections of the GDR, without necessarily engaging in what would fall into the rubric of 'restorative nostalgia' in Svetlana Boym's taxonomy (Boym, 2001). The kind of conversations sparked by a visit to these sites is not critical, more closely resembling a state of revelry and providing a type of 'hallucinatory gratification' by blurring the boundaries between past and present. This sense of temporary enchantment was also expressed in the way that information panels were mainly ignored – instead my mother would resolutely walk up to certain objects and remember the context in which she or someone close to her might have used them. While I would generally – and in the name of 'research' – spend more time looking at information provided, I too was happy to bask in the aura of these objects, content at the time that these places exist and claim space for themselves.

In fact, the two sites had somewhat divergent motivations for establishing such archives of the everyday. Where one – the DDR Museum *Zeitreise* – clearly sought to evoke the kind of positive affect described here and to establish a sense of connectedness, the Dokumentationszentrum aims for a more contemplative experience in a space where what is to be considered the cultural heritage of the GDR is still being negotiated, thereby establishing the museum as a process rather than as a fixed, pre-determined site. Its founder, Andreas Ludwig (1994), sees the museum as located in a dialectical exchange between internal and external perspectives of the GDR. Seeking to facilitate East Germans' 'inner distancing' from the GDR (p. 1155), it hopes to avoid to a degree what he regards as the trappings of nostalgia in its two

incarnations of 'Eastern navel gazing [Selbstbespiegelung] and Western voyeurism' (p. 1155). The museum encourages academic research and cooperation, and makes specific reference to the discipline of Material Culture Studies. In contrast, the site in Radebeul focused on 'presenting objects, whose partially political background is already being taught, shown and discussed elsewhere. It is not about a representation of the GDR and its mechanisms of state repression, of which there are multiple existing instances'.<sup>7</sup> While the more didactic ambitions of the Dokumentationszentrum should be seen in the context of its foundation a mere three years after German reunification, as opposed to the Timetravel Museum's opening in 2006, the latter's more apolitical stance has to be noted, along with its emphasis on sensorial immersion. In Roberta Bartoletti's (2010) reading, this mediation aims to create an environment that provides 'something worth feeling' (p. 41), with feelings emerging as the 'most precious commodity' (p. 41) in the more recent instantiations of memory museums, with their sensory approaches to heritage and loss.<sup>8</sup>

### Separating From the Object: Returning to Nostalgia

The allure of consumer artefacts may take precedence over historical reflection, but it is not necessarily antithetical to it. Sensory experience and the memories it activates in proximity to the 'aura of the object' (Ludwig, 1994, p. 1152) are never outside the confines of history, and may in fact help to resolve the opposition between memory and history, and between lieux de me´moire – sites of memory – and the allegedly more unselfconscious milieux de me´moire (Nora, 1989). However, by accepting the premise that to contemplate objects can be to contemplate history, and thus to rehabilitate museums of everyday life from the potential accusation of being entirely apolitical, one also needs to concede that to engage in Ostalgie, the post-socialist nostalgia that is so intimately bound to objects, is a political endeavour. To see the mediation of consumer objects and personal effects as removed from the sphere of politics may be a reassuring notion, especially to its practitioners, but in fact socialist regimes frequently '[...] drew their legitimacy from the unwritten social contract through which the population retreated from the public involvement into private affairs and their own material concerns, receiving in exchange relative security and freedom from political harassment' (Nadkarni and Shevchenko, 2004, p. 511). The two authors treat the material sphere as inherently politicised and the resulting 'emphasis post-socialist discourses place upon consumption and consumer culture' (p. 511) as a case of wilful 'misrecognition'. The challenge these museums face is therefore one of drawing visitors away from their focus on specific, 'lost' objects, and into the context that produced them.

The two East German museums discussed here explicitly aimed to veer away from grand gestures and symbolic overdetermination. They continuously reference history,

albeit to varying degrees. Indeed, history and its ruptures provide the setting without which these spaces would be meaningless. At the same time, their purpose is not to impart new kinds of knowledge, unless one counts sensual experience, and a sense of being transported back, among them. The exhibited objects contain fragments of public as well as personal history, in which context is the remembrance of one's personal link that can allow for the body's inherent self-consciousness to take over. They thus represent the opposite of a culture of monuments, where 'the very monumentality of monuments might have undercut the monument's memorial effect, standing in for memory rather than provoking it' (Landsberg, 2004, p. 6). Scribner (2003), once more referencing Halbwachs, thus places the Dokumentationszentrum under the rubric of a 'depository of traditions' (p. 38) – a site where memory represents part of life, not an attempt to merely reconstruct 'what is no longer' (p. 38).

From the above it seems to emerge that nostalgic experiences are wholly positive and that its practitioners seek the proximity of nostalgic objects for these pleasant sensations. This, however, does not account for the 'algia', or pain, that makes up such an integral part of the concept. To go back to its original conceptualisation, nostalgia is a response to a prior loss and has thus at times been placed in conjunction with two other terms that also speak of loss and the subject's responses to it, namely mourning and melancholia (Freud, 1917/1957; Scribner, 2003; Brock and Truscott, 2012). In essence, the difference between the two latter is of a loss that is acknowledged and followed by the lengthy and painful process of 'working-through', that is, decathecting one's investments in the object; and a disavowal of this loss in melancholia, with the object being incorporated into the ego. The painful symptoms of melancholia, which may appear directed inward, are thus in fact directed at the object whose loss has not been acknowledged and which remains unconscious (for an application of these ideas to post-apartheid South Africa, see Truscott, 2011). Nostalgia, while subject to less theorisation in psychoanalytic terms, is seen to be lying inbetween the two. Awareness of the loss here often manifests itself gradually. The nostalgic is not always able to name the loss, but a clinging to objects and practices associated with nostalgia are seen as a panacea to its sting, transforming it into a sensation that becomes bittersweet. At the same time, some may see this reliance on artefacts as a symptom of a reluctance or inability to let go. The 'mnemonic objects' that the nostalgic holds on to become precious because they represent part of the self – to let go of them entirely would mean to not only relinquish the object, but to fully acknowledge one's severance from the past. At the same time, the nostalgic object 'is no longer operational, cannot be reintroduced into everyday life, does not work, and has been relinquished to the museum as an acknowledgment of this, both in practical and symbolic terms' (Brock and Truscott, 2012, p. 327).



In order to charter away from pathological territory, rather than dwell on the objects that serve as repositories of positive affect both in the museum and at home, it may serve one well to return to the individuals who seek them out or hold onto them. Those interested in the commodification of nostalgia tend to focus on their interaction with artefacts of the past, but tend to ignore the fact that these encounters are temporary. While retaining an emotional value through the chain of associations that they can evoke, these experiences are fleeting and contained. Indeed, the act of walking away from them can be seen as one way of acknowledging the reality of the loss and thus escaping the temporal loop of nostalgia. This would be in line with Slavoj Žižek's (2008) definition of the Ostalgie phenomenon, which he regards '[...] not as a real longing for the GDR, but the enactment of a real parting from it, the acquiring of a distance, detraumatization' (p. 64). An alternative interpretation is that the fantasmatic demands we make of the object can never be fully satisfied. Karl

Figlio (2003) suggests that

[...] modern culture tends towards concrete thinking, which treats memories and historical situations as if they were objects. It can invest these objects, which are phantasies, in actual, present objects, and collect them, preserve them, destroy them and restore them. Time simply marks the changes in, or re-arrangements of, these objects, so we can lapse into the belief, largely unconscious and under the sway of wish-fulfilment, that we can enter into history by literally reversing time. (p. 152)

What this implies is that we hold on to external objects as a way of unmaking history, so as to make reparations. By doing so, we simultaneously find a way of 'preserving and restoring internal objects' (p. 155). What is thus being engaged in is a recurrent movement from internal objects to their external 'props' or 'containers' and back to these internal objects. These implications, however, extend beyond the home and concern all forms of preservation, 'whether of documents, artefacts, buildings, sites of special scientific interest or accounts of the past' (p. 155).

To a degree, the museum artefacts enable the continued existence of the GDR. Through their physical presence outside of the realm of the fantasmatic, they speak of former lives and purposes. At the same time, they are not wholly real. As quotidian objects which are no longer in use, they have become partsymbolic through their display in the museums. By retaining its reliance on objects, nostalgia is in fact protected from proliferating uncontrollably. Nostalgics are able to use the object to evoke from it a sense of continuity and meaning. Enacting a parting with the object is then a way of decathecting one's investment in what is lost. The fetishistic quality of this relationship is thus not incidental: 'the acknowledgements and disavowals of loss that constitute fetishism can be understood as modes of remembering and forgetting' (Radstone, 2007, p. 148). This means that, despite the positive affect that abounds in these

museums, they can in fact serve as places of collective mourning. They allow for what is unspoken or cannot be named to emerge, but while they provide recognition and a degree of contextualisation for these fragmented sensations, they cannot secure their inscription in larger narratives of history. In the language of object relations, these sites create a third space (Froggett and Trustram, 2014) – a safe environment where the ‘little madresses’ (Kuhn, 2013) of a communion with objects of the past is possible.

The decrease in visitor numbers those museums are experiencing – and which even led, in the case of the Timetravel Museum, to closure, or, in the case of the Dokumentationszentrum Alltagsgeschichte, to continuous financial difficulties – can only partially be explained by the overabundance of similar museums in East Germany, with the two museums discussed in this text representing the largest or most critically appraised spaces. I argue that their declining role can be read as an indication that the processes described in this text are entering a final stage, insofar as this can be enabled by the mediation of objects. Indeed, according to one of Thalia Gigerenzer’s informants in her work on GDR museums as ‘memory laboratories’ (Gedaächtnislabore), the time of ‘cleaning supplies and egg cups’ is long over (Gigerenzer, 2013). At the same time, a continued search for one’s Heimat, or home – for what it means to feel ‘heimisch’ – motivates many regional visitors. This does not mean, however, that the more general public fascination with the quaint objects of the GDR has completely abated. Indeed, another space, the DDR Museum in central Berlin, has a collection of over 250,000 original GDR objects, which it displays in an exhibition space of 1,000 m<sup>1</sup>, many of them in audiovisual or tactile exhibits. According to its advertising slogan, it is ‘one of the most interactive museums in the world’ and has proven so successful an initiative that in 2012 it was the most visited history museum in Berlin; however, fewer than a quarter of its visitors were born in the GDR (Arnold-de Simine, 2013). Even more curiously, a museum of GDR objects has opened in a geographically removed location: the ‘Wende Museum’ in Culver City, Los Angeles,<sup>9</sup> whose initial collection was based on GDR items that the American curator had purchased while resident in Germany (Brock, 2018). In line with a renewed interest in the Cold War and with (perceived) increasing political and cultural parallels to the climate of the time, it has since shifted both didactic and material focus in order to document the history of the Cold War more generally through the mediation of its artefacts. However, this does not apply to all new museums of GDR material history. While revising this text, I decided to pay a visit to another museum of the type to which this article is dedicated. The self-consciously named N’Ostalgie Museum<sup>10</sup> transferred its collection to the centre of Leipzig from its original location in the small town of Brandenburg an der Havel in 2016. Its permanent collection consists of around 30,000 GDR objects, which – together with the obligatory gift shop – are located over two floors in a central location in the city. I once again walked through the exhibition with my mother, and before we even began to exchange impressions I was

struck by the seemingly distracted way its exhibition had been put together. The museum website informs visitors that the curators have deliberately refrained from including information about the objects in the exhibition to give visitors more space to 'rummage through the objects'. However, the haphazard manner in which objects were piled next to, or on top of each other, based on categories such as 'consumer electronics' or 'uniforms', with no apparent thought to their cultures of production or historical period, conveyed above all the impression of a storage facility of objects fallen out of use – a pre-stage to Benjamin's 'scrapheap'. In part, this may be related to a sense of saturation that has been reached in my own and my mother's encounters with the everyday artefacts of the GDR in museum settings. However, while the N'Ostalgie Museum's location in Leipzig's restored historical centre creates a setting different from those of the two museums discussed in this article, and while some of its provincial cousins may continue to exist for longer, unnoticed but also undisturbed, there was a sense that this final incarnation of the GDR museum of everyday history most closely resembles a true terminus for these objects.

## Conclusion

The debate surrounding the question of how to evaluate 40 years of GDR history also shapes the demands the public makes of Ostalgics. While nostalgia is often considered a narcissistic undertaking – though is more recently seen to have distinct benefits for the individual—in the case of nostalgia for the GDR, a definite separation from the past is encouraged. In other words, official history is to be firmly inscribed in personal memory. Acknowledging that complete separation may not be possible or even desirable, however, the two museums of the everyday culture of the GDR aim(ed) to provide a space of recognition and commemoration of the material practices of East German history. The two museums described in this text emerge as ambiguous spaces, with polysemic effects. They do not aim to articulate a full critique of the past or present, instead highlighting the ostensibly depoliticised aspects of GDR life and enabling the visitor to relate to artefacts of the past without any specific moral imperative, thereby marking a distinct contrast to the didactic entertainment offered in Berlin's DDR Museum. One could argue that, within the hegemonic narrative of post-war German history, this in itself becomes a political gesture. There is clearly more of a need to carve out a space for all aspects of the GDR past to be memorialised in towns whose communities have been impacted so significantly and negatively, away from prying Western gaze. However, by confining this to relatively marginalised sites, the argument can be made that this, too, is a rather convenient arrangement that served to keep these memories away from public discourse. The objects of the GDR have now been stored away in their final locations, similar to the way in which transitional objects are eventually discarded.

Dominic Boyer (2010) insists that 'we should regard Eastern European nostalgia always also as a postimperial symptom, a symptom of the increasingly manic need in Western Europe to fix Eastern Europe in the past' (p. 23), thereby foreclosing the possibility of non-capitalist forms of social and economic organisation taking place in the future. He goes on to argue that the Hegelian and Marxian use of alienation or *Entfremdung* can be applied to the way market forces and neoliberal forms of governance descended upon the former Eastern Bloc in an accelerated fashion post-1989. This went hand in hand with the 'precipitous expansion of Western European sociopolitical imaginations and institutions into Eastern Europe, largely for economic and security reasons, although proceeding always under the banner of civilizational union and redemption' (p. 17). Not only did these processes create new forms of inequality, they also cancelled out the 'idea of labour (material, industrial production) as the privileged site of community and solidarity' (Ẓiẓek, 2008, p. 40) – developments that continue to haunt especially smaller peripheral towns. It is no accident that these are the very places that established museums of everyday GDR history like the ones discussed in this article. This also means that the more narcissistic manifestations of nostalgia for the former GDR should not detract from the fact that 'in spite of all its failures and horrors, something precious was lost with its collapse, that has now been repressed once again into a criminal underground' (Ẓiẓek et al., 2006, p. 41). The loss that produces nostalgia is always of a dual nature, pertaining both to facets of the past that are irretrievable and to the sense of possibility that accompanied them. In the tentative words of Peter Thompson (2011), *Ostalgie* can thus be defined 'in addition to the very real sense of welfare stability the GDR represented for many – also the faint echo of the old idea of what the GDR might one day have possibly become but never did [...] [as] a desire for the promise and not the reality of the GDR' (p. 260). The museum spaces articulate this loss in hyperreal, enchanting settings. In fact, by their very overabundance of objects, the museums potentially compensate not only for the paucity of other spaces that publicly commemorate the loss of home, but also for the scarcity that was an integral part of real existing socialism. A fetishistic hoarding of familiar household objects is also in stark contrast to the 'unloved' objects of the socialist past, such as public monuments and statues, which were subject to large-scale removal or relocation. Such monuments 'seem in their mass to be forms of death amongst the living' (Bollas, 2000, p. 30), evoking no such 'heimisch' sensations, and being more reminiscent of tomb than home. By relegating the hoarding to others, and to other spaces such as these museums, a return to the lost home is deceptively safe, while each exit from it marks a reenactment of the parting. The spaces can thus serve as a temporary panacea for the alienation experienced by so many East Germans, gesturing towards a final, remote destination.

## Notes

- 1 Examples of such museums include the Haus der Geschichte in Wittenberg (<http://www.pflug-ev.de>), run by a non-profit association (PFLUG e.V.) and which, significantly, was founded by historians who had been made redundant with the end of the GDR. It organises exhibitions beyond the scope of GDR material history by seeking to provide an overview of the history of Eastern Central Germany (Mitteldeutschland) from the 1940s to the 1980s. Another, the 'Olle DDR' permanent exhibition in Apolda (<http://www.olle-ddr.de/index.html>), has a collection of over 12,000 original GDR objects (on this exhibition, see Macdonald, 2013). There are also small GDR museums focusing on everyday history in Malchow (<http://www.luftkurort-malchow.de/verzeichnis/objekt.php?mandat=130344>), Pirna (<http://www.ddr-museum-pirna.de>), Thale (<http://www.ddr-museumthale.de>) and Perleberg (<http://www.ddr-museum-perleberg.de>). Significantly, all these museums are similarly located in small, peripheral East German towns and often started as private initiatives.
- 2 Trabi is short for Trabant, an iconic small car produced in East Germany between 1957 and 1991. 'FKK' is the acronym of Freikörperkultur or 'free body culture', a naturist movement which was particularly popular in East Germany. The 'FDJ' or Freie Deutsche Jugend was the official youth movement of the GDR.
- 3 The Jungpioniere was a socialist youth organisation for East German children aged 6–10 (followed by membership in the Thälmann Pioniere and the Freie Deutsche Jugend).
- 4 <https://www.hdg.de/zeitgeschichtliches-forum/>. For more detailed information on these museums, see Arnold-de Simone, 2013, Berdahl, 2010 and Bach, 2017.
- 5 Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR. Its official website is <http://www.alltagskulturddr.de/>.
- 6 Retrieved 9 June 2016 from its official, now defunct website: <http://www.ddr-museum-dresden.de/cod/php/ddr-museum.php>.
- 7 <http://www.weltderddr.de>.
- 9 From the museum's now defunct website: <https://www.nostalgiemuseum-leipzig.de/index.php/de/>.
- 9 One anonymous reviewer commented that what emerges is a rather clear distinction between thinking and feeling. Where the Dokumentationszentrum encourages the former as a path to accomplish a distancing from the past, the DDR Museum Zeitreise implicitly argued for a form of re-immersion as a temporary panacea.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.wendemuseum.org>. The museum's name is linked to the way in which the fall of the Berlin Wall and subsequent transition are referred to in Germany ('die Wende' can be translated as 'the turn').

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