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U.S. Pop Culture Decontextualized: Neoliberalist Ideologies in Socialist East Germany

This paper sketches a broader critique to the study of popular culture as it is currently undertaken in various fields in Western academia. While it stresses that popular culture must be taken seriously as a subject of critical inquiry, it contends that the divergence from the original agenda of critical cultural studies currently leaves us with analytical “blind spots” in the study of pop culture. These blind spots relate to what political scientist Michael Parenti observed with regard to his field:

There are political scientists [in the US] who spend their entire lives writing about American government, the presidency, and public policy without ever once mentioning capitalism, a feat of omission that would be judged extraordinary were it not so commonplace.

While there are scholars concerned with the connection between culture and the capitalist market, they generally focus on the production side. Issues of symbolic representation of the “doctrines of the free market,” however, remain at the margins. This is surprising for the definition of “power as a social force” that underlies the study of symbolic representation in pop culture demands an all-inclusive scope of analysis.

Contrary to many scholars of culture, this paper does not hold that “culture ... [tends] to dominate

over economic processes and rationalities” or that they have become relatively autonomous. Rather, it follows Karl Polanyi’s analysis, which shows that through the processes of modernity’s structural differentiation (“great transformation”) and the separation of the economic and cultural sphere, the latter received a particular political meaning within the public sphere increasingly subordinate to the laws of the market. The cultural realm, generally in tension with the marketplace as the sole organizer of the economic sphere, increasingly depended on the same as a source of revenue and, thus, is shaped by market demands even if just by creating favorable conditions for the market’s legitimacy.

To make this point clear, this paper draws from the historical analysis of the German-German media context prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and, more specifically, the role of U.S. pop culture in East Germany in the 1980s. Its overall assumption is that the analysis of Western pop culture in a socialist context makes visible what all too often remains unquestioned if seen within the same ideological paradigm. Four years after World War II, in 1949, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), rebuilt by the Western Allies, became a social democracy integrated into the international capitalist market while the German Democratic Republic (GDR), occupied by the Soviet Union, became the Western border of the communist or socialist bloc. Consequently, throughout 40 years of division, West Germany followed a free-market ideology that was closely linked to democratic

participation and consumerism while the East German ruling party propagated consumption according to needs, not wants, in a socialist planned economy. Economically, however, East Germany was never able to disentangle itself from the influence of the Western capitalist economy. More importantly, as one historian points out, for most of the period from 1949 to 1989, the “standard by which East Germans judged their material existence was not their own previous deprivation of 1945... but the real and imagined quality of life across the border in West Germany.” A reason for this “imagined quality of life” was to a large degree due to the uniqueness of the East German media landscape. The German-German border allowed for the transmission of West German broadcast signals across “enemy lines,” which by the 1980s gave West German television programming a central place in the daily media consumption in East Germany. This situation differed from other cross-border data flows (for instance, the U.S. and Canada) in what Roger Silverstone calls “the context of values.” In the midst of a battle between two competing socio-economic ideologies, Western media messages clashed with a propagated value system that – at least theoretically – claimed legitimacy as the overcoming of capitalism. This paper, arguing that media use (also in a socialist country) closely relates to the demands of everyday life, looks at the role of U.S. television pop culture in this interplay during the 1980s. It follows Jean Baudrillard, who states that the “ideology of consumption” is central to the modern United States. But while Baudrillard stresses the symbolic and social meanings attached to and communicated by commodities, this paper asks for the more profound implications of free-market values centering around it. U.S. pop culture emerged out of a “context of values” that emphasizes on individualism and consumerism closely aligned to democratic participation, which asks for critical reflection. Seen in the socialist context, U.S. pop culture challenged socialist ideals, production shortages and propaganda, while simultaneously propagating and legitimizing free market values tied closely to different ideologies of human freedom. With the fall of the Soviet Union, neoliberalism remained, and with the acceleration and internationalization of the capitalist market it

is commonplace in the representation of the socio-economic realm in pop culture. Especially in a period of socio-economic crisis, however, we need to rethink this seemingly apparent connection as well as pop culture’s role in representing the current socio-economic and political order. U.S. Pop Culture in Europe Several scholars have looked into the various ways in which U.S. pop culture – from Hollywood movies and music to TV shows or specific brand name products – have been received and re-adapted to European contexts – a process the Dutch historian Rob Kroes calls “creolization.” Kroes follows scholars such as John Fiske and Henry Jenkins, who emphasize “the capacity of readers to resist dominant ideologies, [and] to construct their own meaning.” In short, no one can predict how pop cultural products will be adapted and made sense of in a particular cultural context or by different people. Accordingly, these studies generally stress the cultural transfer between the U.S. and other nations and redefine debates on “Americanization” in that they insist on local resistance or re-adaptation of U.S. cultural products rather than critically analyzing the product itself. Consequently, prominent subjects are local (non-U.S.) consumer practices, business cultures or cultural exchanges that emphasize “a cultural and social synthesis that has both accepted and resisted American influence.” These studies have been done with a particular focus on postwar Germany.

This body of work is useful in its emphasis that distribution does not exclude forms of resistance. Still, it generally lacks two major points. First, the overall focus lies on Western Europe, while the Eastern perspective, if considered at all, is limited to a few particular case studies. More importantly, as pointed out by U.S. communication critic Herbert Schiller, even if adapted to specific local contexts, cultural messages in Hollywood movies are still from Hollywood, and as such, as emphasized by Hirschman, express and represent the “values of the social and historical context that engender them.” According to Schiller, the international distribution of U.S. mass entertainment products has been taken as a welcomed addition in an ideological war, in which the overall goal was to introduce people around the world to the merits of democracy and free market ideologies.

While Schiller and others refer to this

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process as “media imperialism,” the U.S. political scientist Joseph Nye famously coined the term “soft power.” Taking a less critical (and arguably supportive perspective) on the international spread of U.S. influence, Nye differentiates between the more subtle effects of culture, values and ideas in shaping the preferences of others from more direct coercive measures, such as military action (hard power) or economic incentives. Jim McGuigan stresses the concept of “ideology” which refers to how dominant power relations and inequalities are legitimized at various levels. While these include abstract theory and professional expertise, he suggests that “everyday language and ‘common sense’ exemplify the operations of ideology most profoundly in securing consent to prevailing and otherwise questionable arrangements.” Whatever the term, all of these scholars identify popular culture to be an important part in propagating and normalizing particular sets of socio-economic values.

It follows that the majority of literature focusing on the re-adaptation and “creolization” of U.S. pop culture to Western European contexts during the Cold War assumes this shared socio-economic sphere. Therefore, it ignores that the corresponding analysis remains within this one ideological paradigm. Put differently, it abstains from looking at broader socio-political implications coming along with the distribution of U.S. cultural products in an international setting in which socialism, as Petra Kabus called it, propagated humble demands and higher ideals while “images [i.e. Western advertising] were flowing into East German living rooms, with which the own economy could not compete.”

The reference to the representation of capitalist, or more specifically neoliberalist, ideologies demands some clarification. On the one hand, there are of course the more obvious market-oriented references in pop culture. Roger Silverstone states that “dominated by appearance, [we] live of our life according to the logics of fashion of clothing, food, and other consumables – a language preeminently of consumption.” He stresses the connection between consumerism and the individual’s freedom of choice that – explicitly or implicitly – are connected to ideals of democratic participation or, as Kroes calls it, the

“democracy of goods.” Here, it is assumed that consumers acquire messages about products from a variety of media vehicles on a daily basis. These messages, according to Elizabeth Hirschman, convey symbolic meanings concerning the use of products to express personal values, social norms and cultural ideologies. This relates to Frankfurt School scholar Erich Fromm, who points out that capitalism, understood not simply as an economic system but as a social system, influences more than how we make or spend money. It influences the very essence of our lives and the ways in which we as human beings communicate and deal with one another, the values we hold and how we judge others accordingly. In the neoliberal marketplace, individuals compete for goods, jobs and power, not least to maintain what is dearest to them, for instance social relationships. Simultaneously, these social relationships themselves become commodified. Both aspects, the very representation of people’s sociology as well as explicit references to individuals’ consumption in the market economy, illustrate the principles around which we organize life and what we value as desirable or “accomplished.”

Of course, this does not mean that everyone in the Western world holds the same ideals or that all one sees in pop culture is one and the same. Regarding West German media influence in East Germany, Kurt Hesse rightly points to the complexity of Western media outlets, which disallows a coherent representation of “the West.” While complexity is generally emphasized in relation to the Western world, it is often unjustifiably denied when the focus shifts to “the East.” Furthermore, Hesse leaves unmentioned that though complex, mainstream media (also in the West) tends to uphold and legitimize current socio-political order of a capitalist democracy. Thus, instead of following preconceived notions of media’s complexity and its surrounding socio-economic context, we need to ask ourselves: What are current common patterns around which social communication is organized, and how are these patterns represented in pop culture?

The German-German Media Context

Since the inception of national television in both

German states in the 1950s, both states aimed at servicing the whole of Germany. Due to rapid technical advances and cable and satellite technology, however, it was the West German broadcasting service (ARD) that reached almost all of the GDR by the mid-1980s. The quality of reception depended on the geographical area; it was best in the regions close to the border and around Berlin. The southern part of the GDR, without reception, was soon called “the valley of the clueless,” an indication of the importance of West German media. Though estimates vary, by 1989 about 90 percent of East Germans regularly watched and listened to West German broadcast programs. This indicates why some scholars conclude that “the quality of GDR life [was] certainly shaped, in part, by Western customs and goods, Western ideas and example, all pervasively displayed by Western media.”

Konrad Dussel, in his benchmark book *Deutsche Rundfunkgeschichte* (German Broadcasting History), concludes that GDR broadcast media were meaningless; only a minority of East Germans ever really switched to domestic channels, in large part due to their abundant propaganda. Instead, Western media outlets satisfied what de Sola Pool calls the Easterner’s hunger for true information. Consequently, East Germans predominantly watched West German programs, a point worth further consideration. On the one hand, Dussel’s and de Sola Pool’s conclusions stress that, contrary to popular perception, there never was an effective information monopoly of the socialist party in East Germany. Rather, the East German media landscape was defined by an information overflow, which put the East German audience at the center of an ideological “airwave war.” On the other hand, de Sola Pool’s statement exemplifies distorted but dominant concepts of Western media’s “neutrality” and credibility during the Cold War, coming along with a simplified version of the complex GDR media landscape and the ways in which people made use of it. The idea that East Germans watched either East or West German channels, indeed, is misguided. Lothar Bisky, director of the college for film and television in Potsdam-Babelsberg during the last years of the GDR, argues that media use in the GDR was not an “either/or” question; there were not two groups

of media consumers. Instead, it was quite common to listen to “both sides,” and to try to make up one’s own opinion accordingly. This arguably allowed for a greater awareness that, as one East German worker put it, “...both [East and West German news] had been biased; the one side in this way, the other side in the other.” East Germans lived in between both. An East German innkeeper explained that to him it had been rather confusing to constantly find himself between “two worlds” confronted with opposing viewpoints while the truth might have been “somewhere in-between.”

The focus on the influence of Western news and information media in East Germany, however, leaves unmentioned the crucial importance of pop culture in this interplay. Michael Meyen, a communication researcher at the University of Munich, stresses that popular culture plays an important role in everyday media use. From hundreds of biographical interviews with former GDR citizens conducted between 2000 and 2002, he concludes that the majority of people in the GDR wanted television programs to offer entertainment, first and foremost. He underlines that, just as in West Germany, only a relatively small group of media consumers was interested in news programs.

Especially during the 1980s, the general popularity of West German entertainment programs in the GDR helped shape East German media policies and programs. Aiming to reach its own audience, GDR programming was internationalized and Western formats (i.e. detective stories, entertainment shows) were adapted, which made for several domestic hits. Put differently, even though the socio-economic ideologies differed, the majority of East Germans did not choose by ideological “label” what they found entertaining even though the implications of their choice went beyond issues of entertainment.

The Free Market in Socialist East Germany

West German broadcasting came along with advertising, which ironically made Western consumer products part of the daily television experience in East Germany. These ads displayed the construction of social meaning around

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commodities that were generally foreign to, and unattainable in, the GDR. Also, the socio-economic context and everyday reality differed. Socialism propagated freedom from material wants for the betterment of society at large, not the individual's freedom to choose from a variety of products through which social meaning was to be communicated. Furthermore, the constant display of consumer products through advertising clashed with daily experiences in a state-governed economy that was characterized by supply shortages, by standing in line and by the unavailability of goods. Last but not least, the content of ads and the proclaimed quality of products could not be checked through the product itself. Rather, conversations with either friends or relatives from the FRG, or more commonly, narratives of GDR citizens who had been allowed to visit West Germany filled the gap of first-hand experience. Some scholars, therefore, stress that the "consumer tourism" of former GDR citizens that set in immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall can be taken as an indicator for the long-lasting impact of consumerist messages over 40 years of division. Paul Betts argues that this consumer tourism became the early expression of political liberation. Consequently, not a few intellectuals in East and West Germany have denied any kind of political motives of East German uprising, interpreting the "political revolution" as a mainly consumer-oriented drive towards an imagined Western way of life.

Commercial messages, however, are not transmitted by advertising alone. They also are engrained in pop cultural products that make up most of the time spent watching television. For instance, two of the most popular TV shows in the GDR during the 1980s were the U.S. soap operas *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. Both shows revolved around the tragedies, intrigues and joys of wealthy oil families, the Ewings in *Dallas* and the Carringtons in *Denver, Colorado* (*Dynasty*). Internationally, *Dynasty* had an estimated audience of 120 million viewers in 80 countries and *Dallas* had an audience of 130 million in 90 countries. Their dubbed versions were transmitted to the GDR via West German broadcasting signals where they became regular topics of conversation, especially among women.

Marc Auge, stressing the folkloric characters of both shows, argues that the simplicity of the plots crossed political or economic divides and made both shows seductive precisely because they were profoundly "cultural." "They bring on stage civilizing heroes, they express simple fashion and certain values of the land of their birth; and they charm the peoples in whose lands they are transmitted," doing so less through the content of their messages than through the "repeated evocation of the universe that engenders them." Auge's emphasis on the "cultural" narrative and simplicity of content undermines that the cultural, of course, is political in that it clearly emerged from, and therefore carries with it, free-market and consumption ideologies.

Ien Ang underlines that both shows are literally and figuratively rich in consumerist imagery, mingling stereotypes of Western images of luxury and overabundance, consumerism and the freedom of the capitalist world. Already the opening scenes of both shows vividly portray capitalist affluences. *Dynasty* presents an opening of jewelry, a chilled champagne bottle being opened, gushing oil wells, men and women in evening wear, diamonds, yachts, luxurious automobiles, and swimming pools. This consumerist imagery speaks a language of a luxurious lifestyle that needs no consumer socialization to be understood.

The U.S. television critic Horace Newcomb, on the other hand, aiming to explain the popularity of *Dallas* in the U.S., stresses the anticlimax of the "Dallas decade." He asserts the show's "timing is perfect": in "a time of decline, of recession and restriction, a time of real trouble [in the U.S.]," *Dallas* led the ratings for it was far detached from the decline of the great cities in the East and Midwest. This sharp contrast between the representation of luxury in *Dallas* and the U.S. zeitgeist of its time has little relevance to the recipient not living in the world that is seemingly represented. Still, Herta Herzog emphasizes that *Dallas* and *Dynasty* delivered strong (distorted) messages of the U.S. to the outside world. Those explicit and implicit messages that reached millions, in spite of cultural, political or economic differences, might have been effective because of the series' simplicity. The shows touched the very basis of human existence (i.e. love, social

relationships) while being entangled with free-market ideologies (i.e. affluence, individualism, the struggle for power and wealth).

Needless to say, *Dallas* and *Dynasty* were a tremendous provocation to officials in the GDR. As a “notorious American TV-series,” *Dallas* embodied everything that distinguished Western capitalistic entertainment industry and a consumerist society. An article in the magazine *Theorie und Praxis des sozialistischen Journalismus* (Theory and Practice of Socialist Journalism), stresses the idea of U.S. entertainment as an ‘ideological weapon’:

Television entertainment continuously aims for the acceptance of existing order- and power structures in capitalism ... as unchangeable and god-given. This, in its most apparent way, finds its embodiment in the two spectacular American series *Dynasty* and *Dallas*. There, without scruple or critical reflection, one can watch the bribability of politicians, the financing of election spectacles or the corruption of the police in the U.S. What rules is money alone. A few civic authors interpret this aspect in both series as system criticism. In reality however, it reveals the rigorous-reactionary mentality of the aggressive monopole-bourgeoisie circle, which in the U.S. attained its dominant influence on public opinion not the least with the support of the entertainment industry. Here, antidemocratic behavior patterns are made popular in an uncritical way.

What is criticized is the central role of money in the Western world, giving individual freedom at the price of social cooperation. It is a warning at the same time to not be deceived by the representations of wealth and individual power, for that would give influence to the interests of “monopole-bourgeoisie” creators of the shows, and would finally lead to similar social injustice to wherever the shows were received. It is implied

that socialism is the better alternative.

Pointing to the “evils” of capitalism, of course, served as a rhetorical device to legitimize domestic deficits in the GDR such as political oppression, elite rule and production shortages. As one East German put it, it was made very clear that “they [were] the bad guys, we [were] the good ones.” Another East German worker, however, added “[t]hat it is not that simple in life, that there is not just a plus and minus, but a whole lot in-between, this is something we all know.” After all, *Dallas* in East Germany “is well-made mass culture on which opinions may differ. Certain is, anyone watching *Dallas* will most likely not be ‘bored to death’.”

What Can We Learn?

Looking at Cold War Germany from a post-Wall perspective helps to break with Western-centric assumptions that the current socio-economic order and its responding representations in pop culture should remain invisible. The German-German (media) context embodied a condensed microcosm of the international Cold War. Simultaneously it broke with Cold War concepts dominant in the U.S. and the USSR due to the geographical proximity of both states, their shared history and language and, after all, social bonds that remained in spite of the political divide. It also allowed for the transmission of broadcasting signals across “enemy lines,” which broke with the information monopoly of the ruling socialist party in East Germany. This, in fact, caused an information overflow that put the East German audience (in contrast to Western Europeans) in between two competing socio-economic ideologies. East Germans lived in between two media realities. One was the constant presence of West German news and entertainment broadcasts, which were always also representations of a social order based on free-market capitalism. East German media, led by party guidelines, stood in sharp contrast to Western narratives. It responded with Cold War rhetoric to the Western messages, while simultaneously adapting Western entertainment formats. U.S. pop culture, whether for better or for worse, offered an alternative that questioned the

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very reality of the East German media audience, an alternative that the general U.S. audience, for instance, did not have. But whereas proclaimed ideals of socialism could be experienced, and thus be double-checked with reality, those in the Western world remained bound to their media representations.

In East Germany, the implications of a free market engrained in U.S. pop culture stood against a propagated value system based on collective collaboration in a planned economy that was based on consumption of needs, not wants. U.S. pop culture and its explicit and implicit market ideologies challenged socialist reality and domestic production shortages by propagating and “normalizing” a Western lifestyle of material abundance while maintaining social stratification

of class to a (assumed) classless society. Focusing on cultural messages in the context of this contrast gives greater awareness that pop cultural artifacts carry explicit ideologies regarding how we imagine the very socioeconomic system we inhabit. Thus, disregarding the representation of the neoliberal market in pop culture has severe consequences for how we make sense of the role pop culture plays in current Western and non-Western societies defined by socio-economic crisis. Seen in historical perspective, it becomes clear that the current socio-economic order is an outcome of human decisions; thus other aspirations existed and other outcomes were possible. This is important for it allows us to seriously engage and break with common socio-economic patterns represented as “the norm” in pop culture.

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