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An East German Writer Deplores GDR Nostalgia (2003)

East German writer Thomas Brussig criticizes German television networks for trying to boost their ratings with “Ostalgie shows.” Instead, he argues, networks should make a real contribution to inner unity by recognizing East German achievements in their regular programming.

German Unity, a Mess

Saying goodbye to the GDR is OK. But the Ostalgie shows are a full-blown abomination.

A street poll in Potsdam on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the unification of the two German phone networks on July 1, 1992. One man, a blue-collar type, says that he had already gotten his phone during the GDR – six weeks after he had applied for it. Excuse me??? It’s true, says the man, and adds: “Not everything was bad.”

July 1, 2002, was a historic day, a milestone, an endpoint of *Ostalgie*¹: If the GDR phone network, of all things, wasn’t even bad (out of every 1,000 inhabitants, 27 had phones), then what was? Not even this kind of statement will remain: “Full employment was certainly all right, but that thing with the phone network was really annoying.”

Ostalgie existed before television discovered it. The Dresden cabaret artist Uwe Steimle coined the term more than ten years ago, and the mood it describes has been virulent for at least as long. To explain the boom in *Ostalgie* shows, you have to understand how television people think. They see that the movie “Goodbye, Lenin!” was a huge box office hit, and they jealously think: “Oh, we’d like to have six million viewers, too.” And then they use the methods of television to create what they think they saw in “Goodbye, Lenin!” First and foremost, they overlook the fact that this movie did not insult our taste. And the success of this film – my theory – results from the fact that it did something that no one did in 1990: it bade farewell to the GDR. The GDR was laid to rest with dignity. Then a handful of sand on top and the “Sandman Song.” Closing credits.

¹ *Ostalgie*: Nostalgia for East Germany, a play on the German words *Nostalgie* (nostalgia) and *Ost* (East) – eds.

My Nausea is Here and Now

The GDR shows are digging the casket up again. When Dagmar Frederic² shows up on the screen with one of her song-and-dance numbers, it has nothing to do with nostalgia: my nausea is here and now. Part of nostalgia is that it is gone, over with, vanished, done with. But Dagmar Frederic is still East German television today, even if she has more wrinkles and is a little heavier around the hips than she was back then.

Am I being unfair? No way: “Do you know who my biggest fans are?” she asked the woman interviewing her as a test question. “It’s women. There are never fights or fits of jealousy on my account – my skirt always covers my knees!” That’s why Dagmar Frederic is East German television: only GDR television could produce a moderator who boasts of her unattractiveness. Still, her answer is truthful, in two ways, no less: I (male) do not count myself as one of her fans, and fights never break out on her account: we change the channel in harmonious agreement.

Except recently. ZDF³ was airing one of these nostalgia shows, and because I figured that every newspaper/radio station/TV station would be calling me for pertinent comments regardless, I wanted to prepare myself. But I hardly saw anything, because I had to constantly flee the living room. And I always returned believing that the worst was over – only to flee again in short order.

These nostalgia shows are not only a full-blown abomination, they are also a misconception. Would you like an explanation? Gladly. Almost everyone – this is my theory – has feelings of nostalgia. Everyone knows that things used to be better, and Grandpa even thought that World War I was terrific. People are simply made that way, and that includes people from the East, as well. Remembrances – this is my theory – are an organ of the soul, just like the stomach is an organ of digestion: remembrances process what was experienced in such a way that we can create a “meaningful life” or a “life story.” Remembrances are not interested in how things “really” were. They deceive, cheat, flatter, suppress, omit. As a rule, they secretly want to help us be happy.

Ostalgie differs from regular nostalgia in only one essential point: the interpretation of its object of transfiguration is hotly contested. The GDR is under particular pressure; the transfiguration must overcome the dominant historical picture of “Stasi terror,” “SED-state,” “totalitarian regime,” and so on. This historical picture lives in a dead spot in the experiential realm of many Easterners. In the minds of many people, the GDR is something different from what is presented to them by historians – also on television.

² Dagmar Frederic (born 1945), a singer, dancer, and entertainer, was also a famous television host during the GDR – eds.

³ ZDF: “Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen,” i.e., “Second German Television,” a public television channel based in Mainz.

This is where the nostalgia shows come in: as has been so well said, they want to pick people up right where they are. Of course, these *Ostalgie* shows are also the expression of a bad Western conscience and a botched German unification: if hardly an Easterner is editor-in-chief or artistic director, then proportionality is achieved by other means. In the process, every effort is made to avoid what is obvious to everyone: that ARD⁴ and ZDF are Western television. ARD and ZDF would much rather be what their names suggest: German radio, German television.

Leipzig got the nod as the candidate for Germany's bid to host the Olympics – it was not an act of charity on the part of German society, it was not merely a gesture. Leipzig was the top choice among German cities. The best thing about the choice of Leipzig is that it could just as well have been another city.

Dear television producers, don't bother with these *Ostalgie* shows. Sure, you want to do something patriotic, make a contribution to inner unity. But if your reporters' statistics would also take GDR athletes into consideration, if statements like "The most successful German marathoner at the Olympics was, of course, Waldemar Czierpinski, with his victories in 1976 and 1980" were completely natural, then you'd do a lot for inner unity and the East German soul, at little cost, though with some conscious effort. Your reporters could even say that Czierpinski was from Halle. That he was from the GDR unfortunately still sounds as though he had leprosy, and to say that he came from the former GDR is an even bigger faux pas: anyone who speaks of the former GDR is tacitly insinuating that a current GDR still exists and is therefore a divider. As we all know, the GDR ended in 1990, hence to call it "former" is to state the obvious.

But there are also small miracles: the 25th anniversary of the flight of "the first German in space"⁵ was just a few days ago, and West German television did special reports [on him] with pictures from then and now. Balanced and objective. That is why we much preferred to watch West German TV. Take that into unification.

You see, not everything was bad.

Source: Thomas Brussig, "Murx, die deutsche Einheit" ["German Unity, a Mess"], *Tagesspiegel*, August 31, 2003.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

⁴ ARD is the German association of public broadcasters – eds.

⁵ With the launch of Soviet space mission Soyuz 31 on August 26, 1978, former East German pilot Sigmund Jähn became the first German in space. Jähn was part of the Soviet Union's Intercosmos program – eds.