Ambivalent Americanizations: Popular and Consumer Culture in Central and Eastern Europe

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This conference set out to explore 'Americanization' in new perspectives as well as in new comparative constellations. A central concern was to advance scholarship on 'Americanization' by asking for the experience of Central and Eastern Europe focusing on the years 1945-1989. Here 'Americanization' figured within a political, cultural, and economic context that defined itself in sharp contrast to 'America'.[1]

The contributors used case studies to elaborate the various and distinct processes by which consumers adapted, imitated, and creatively appropriated American culture. This led to a broad spectrum of disciplinary perspectives and individual geobiographical horizons which stimulated discussions about the ambivalent codes in which American commodities and cultural practices interacted with local contexts.

The format of the conference was designed to allow for a maximum of exchange between the participants. Most notably, exchanging drafts and papers prior to the meeting contributed to the conference's success: Nurtured by the great variety of case studies, common patterns, methods, and interests emerged which can now serve as the basis for further inquiry.

Thomas Kolitsch and Leonard Schmieding opened the conference with talks on the strategies of dealing with popular music in the GDR. Focusing on rock'n'roll Kolitsch argued that the ambivalences of such strategies were to be found in a number of neologisms such as „Nietkapphose" (blue jeans) and „Kollektivdarbietung" (performance), that marked a practice of substitution. Another example of this practice was the Lipsi, a dance performed live to the occasion by Kolitsch and his wife. It was created by GDR officials to imitate American dances in a socialist manner aiming to deprive American popular culture of its critical potential. In the following presentation, Leonard Schmieding examined how these strategies of cultural appropriation figured in the context of hiphop in (socialist) theory and practice. With various original soundbites from the 1980s, he illustrated how artists profited from the officials' poor command of the English language and therefore could voice their critique in English raps.

Reinhold Wagnleitner, accompanied by his brother Günter in an extraordinary keynote lecture cum concerto, convinced the audience that jazz indeed is the classical music of globalization. The Wagnleitner brothers highlighted both the tearful and the joyful moments of jazz in its 100-year-old history. Their informance emphasized the inherently globalized and globalizing character of jazz and contextualized instances of its transculturation in the Eastern Bloc, including a concert of American artist James C. Booker in the Leipzig Moritzbastei.

The Friday morning panels discussed the social role of consumer goods in Poland and the GDR. Based on a quantitative study, Magdalena Ziolek probed into young Poles' attitude towards Americanization and globalization. The individual perceptions of American lifestyles proved to be diverse and contradictory, especially when significant elements had already been adopted in the Polish cultural context. Ewa Grzeszczyk's paper on American models of consumption and their pertinence in the Polish context demonstrated that consumer cultures are always historically situated—they can never be taken over completely or unchanged. Religion profoundly influenced the transfer of American elements into an emerging Polish consumer society.

Nadine Swibenko approached the popularity of so-called „Ost-Produkte" (products of East Germany) applying the originally American „shopping for identity" paradigm. Her presentation prepared the ground for an interpretation of East German working migrants to West Germany as a diasporic community characterized by specific patterns of consumption.

The following panel was occupied with narratives of two popular genres. Katja Kanzler scrutinized the cultural mobility of the American Wizard of Oz and his reappearance in Soviet children's books. Her argument revealed that the ambiguities of the re-writing were smoothed over by a firm

[1] For programme see: http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/termine/id=4636

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ideological contextualization that stipulated an exegesis which the text itself actually defied. Nevena Dakovic traced the Americanization of Serbian television since the 1970s and read the soap opera Lisice (Foxes) as the Serbian equivalent to Sex in the City. Her interpretation laid bare moments of friction with and deviation from the American 'original.'

The last panel of the day investigated material culture in the GDR. Sebastian M. Herrmann invited the audience to „Meet the Plastics" by reconstructing the story of the genuinely East German material „Plast". Here again, socialist attempts at self-definition against the capitalist enemy resulted in uncanny instances of resemblance with US-American precursors. Anne Koenen studied the GDR consumer society on the basis of mail order catalogs, framing the latter as the epitome of the „American Way of Buying". On the one hand, her view on the catalogs elucidated the (eventually failed) effort to cultivate a socialist consumer behavior, on the other hand, it exposed astonishing similarities between East and West German mail order catalogs.

The concluding panel dealt with two moments of cultural confrontation during the Cold War. Malgorzata Gajda-Laszewska discussed the image of America conjured up by Polish propaganda posters in the years 1945-56. Providing a close reading of the posters' figurative language she illuminated the reasons for the campaign's failure and eventual cancellation. Talking about the 1959 American Exhibition in Moscow, Zoe Kusmierz highlighted the role of household technology for American self-representation. In Sokolniki Park this self-representation entered a complex interplay with visiting Moscovites and state policies.

Responding to all previous panels, Heike Paul furnished a critical summary of the conference. After contextualizing the papers in the academic frameworks of Americanization, she emphasized the productivity of the case study format, in which the international cast, a methodological eclecticism, and a range of transdisciplinary perspectives collaborated to open up a cluster of epistemic positions. Wrapping up the individual papers Paul outlined several thematic as well as theoretic and methodological synergies that could inspire future research projects.

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