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From Impossible Journeys to Possible 'Nostalgic Sites' in Post-Communist Reunified Germany

Abstract

From impossible journeys to possible 'nostalgic sites', new tourist objectives, destinations for cultural journeys, also places whether built or re-built, and objects whether made or re-made, of memory considered authentic show-cased as a tourist experience or reconstituted in our most recent era of great transformations. The city with its inexhaustible capacity for mutation, following the example of the one most «loved by Italians», Berlin, cultural magnet, leads to a new «Tourist Gaze» (Urry, 2002). This paper focuses on the development of museums of history, captured from a distinctive angle of daily life, in the former Eastern Bloc countries which are still coping with the long-lasting effects of Communism. Prague, Warsaw, Moscow, and Berlin rapidly changed their 'façade' by introducing key attractors for the development of tourism including museums dedicated to the communist era.

Keywords

1989; Nostalgic Sites; Museum of History; Post-Communist-Era; Urban Changes; Vintage Objects; Creative and Cultural Tourism.

Abstract

Dai viaggi impossibili ai possibili "luoghi nostalgici", nuovi obiettivi turistici, mete di viaggi culturali, anche luoghi costruiti o ri-costruiti, oggetti fatti o rifatti, della memoria considerata autentica, messi in mostra come esperienza turistica o ricostituiti nella nostra ultima epoca di grandi trasformazioni. Le città con le loro inesauribili capacità di mutazione, sull'esempio di quella più "amata dagli italiani", Berlino, magnete culturale, portano a un nuovo "Tourist Gaze" (Urry, 2002). Il presente lavoro si concentra sullo sviluppo dei musei di storia, visto dalla particolare angolatura del quotidiano, nei Paesi dell'ex blocco orientale che si stanno ancora confrontando con il passato comunismo. Praga, Varsavia, Mosca e Berlino hanno rapidamente cambiato la loro "facciata" introducendo importanti attrattori per lo sviluppo del turismo come i musei dedicati all'epoca comunista.

Keywords

1989; Siti e Nostalgia; Musei di Storia; Epoca Post-Comunista; Cambiamenti Urbani; Oggetti d'epoca; Turismo Culturale e Creativo.

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1. Post 1989: after the *Wende*

The year 1989 represented a caesura and a point of no return for the entire urbanistic area of Eastern Europe. Slowly, but inexorably, it drew closer to all those propitiatory forms of great "tourist seduction", already emblematic in post-war Western Europe, as confirmed by the many *villes lumière*.

It was a world firmly supported by capitalism, sustained by incipient economic development, and fostered by the Marshall Plan. Each European country was committed to the reconstruction of places (but also ideologically of peace: 1945 saw the birth of UNESCO; 1957 that of the EEC), by promoting major public works. This included modernising urban systems to such an extent as to represent in the collective imagination of Eastern Europe, particularly in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) – main subject of our considerations here – for obvious reasons of geographical and cultural-linguistic relations, that *Schaufenster*, an "unattainable" showcase, a mythical Eldorado, in which the tourist industry presented itself as dynamic, leaning towards mass, international xenophile consumption.

"Reiselust", the spasmodic desire to travel, became a *Leitmotiv* in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) before 1989 and tourism acted as an economic flywheel entirely abandoned to private enterprise, since Western Germans saw free time in antithesis to the previous centralised policies of Hitler's *Kraft durch Freude* (abbreviated KdF, "strength through joy") which exploited the leisure time of the working class. Carl Degener, a Western tourism entrepreneur, was indeed right in 1949 when he predicted a great flow of travellers, and already in 1968 around nine million Western Germans crossed the borders to visit destinations such as Austria (above all for obvious affinities), but also Spain and Italy.

Italy, a land which a few years earlier – after becoming the enemy – had been the theatre of bloody battles and reprisals, and had nevertheless left many soldiers with a sense of nostalgia evoked on one hand by the desire to return to the places they had "visited" as *Wehrmacht,* and on the other hand by Italy's history and heritage which brought them back to their common cultural origins. Quite different were the conditions in the East at the end of World War II.

Indeed, the totalitarian regime of real socialism advocated a «planned and conscious organisation of leisure time» (Bagger, 1988: 12), tending to control the masses even outside their working lives. It should be noted that this position reveals a certain continuity with a tendency to exploit and control workers already experienced in Italy with Mussolini's *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro* founded in 1925. This was followed in Nazi Germany by the 'vigourism' of the *Kraft durch Freude* in November 1933, i.e., a few months after Hitler seized power, and was even more successful. Although the KdF tended to "depoliticise" with the promise of a *Massenkonsumgesellschaft*, a society of mass consumerism, by breaking with class privileges, the real-socialist system was inclined to politically indoctrinate.

Leisure time, in fact, invoked the education of the socialist, the prevention of class conflicts, the strengthening of ideological belonging, the protection of health – in short, control of the individual. The intent that ran parallel to the material construction of socialism with major public works that would build that tangible legacy peculiar to many large Eastern European cities still evident today.

The German Democratic Republic was emblematic of that system and, albeit seemingly paradoxical, travel was impossible, destinations limited to the Iron Curtain area, denied by the state that barricaded itself behind an entirely anti-tourist tendency, unwittingly and increasingly stimulating even more the *Reiselust* and a social intolerance that would culminate in the 1989 Leipzig demonstrations with the famous slogan, «Visa frei nach Hawaii» («Free visas for Hawaii»).

The politicisation of leisure time expressed through the network created in 1947, two years before the state itself, the FDGB-Feriendienst, the trade union's after-work club, followed the Soviet example (Görlich, 2012). It mainly promoted holidays in the GDR at union-owned holiday apartments (in 1953 Ulbricht with the so-called "Aktion Rose" permitted the confiscation of houses or private holiday homes and forcibly nationalised them). The regime established holidays at political prices, yet this benefit was limited to the most productive workers and party loyalists. It was a privilege. Gradually, the tourist offer was extended to hotels of the more luxurious *Interhotel* chains; cruises organised with the peace tourism fleet, formed of the *Fritz Heckert* and *Cap Arkona* cruise liners, which since 1961, the year the Berlin Wall was built, had been restricted to routes within the Warsaw Pact bloc areas.

With the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, the post-socialist East also began to disengage the economic system from the dictates of the *Planwirtschaft*, centred on five-year plans, which for decades had led to repeated forms of urban mortification: poor lighting in the built-up areas, no glittering billboards, and miserable shop fittings. Already in 1990, eminent architects had started to discuss the issue: «Why do we live in such ugly environments, why does this area seem to be a total catastrophe?» (Derek, 2020: 135).

This began the *re-generation* process of cities that, starting from the buildings, brought with it new forms of urban planning and a new interpretation in terms of architecture for both residential and non-residential spaces, aimed, among other things, at increased humanisation and socialisation. Above all, however, it became part of the capitalist development, attracted by the appeal of epochal changes due to globalisation and multiculturalism, initially approached via the *gentrification* process then extended to the tourist phenomenon, the driving force behind the intercultural project as well as the soul of social progress.

In contemporary narrative, a new awareness is thus manifested under the banner of the idea of *Urbi et Orbi* (to the city [of Rome], to the world), which had built the grandeur of the Roman Empire, whereby the city, in order to

fulfil its function as such and attract new talents, must grow, develop, modernise and showcase itself internationally. Today we would add, digitise itself, be environmentally friendly, green, and more tolerant.

Post-totalitarian Warsaw was reborn, from a tourism viewpoint, under the aegis of its «communist heritage» (Derek, 2020: 135). Derek points out that this heritage has been interpreted as «unwanted» (Light, 2000; Turșie, 2015) or «dissonant» (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996), surely contested or considered difficult for most people in Poland; a past that more than being enhanced needed to be erased – yet in 2007, for example, the Palace of Culture was listed as a national monument. Kenney (2002) argued that pulling down statues and topographical revisitations, in a word obliterating an era and its expressions of tangible heritage, was more keenly felt in Poland than in other eastern European countries, perhaps rightly so, due to the country's geo-political vicissitudes.

Ostentatious buildings, product of the physical legacy of four decades of Communism, despite the post-communist aspiration, were impossible to cancel, «any attempt to draw a line under this era is frustrated» (Derek, 2020: 138), if we think of the Central District or the Marszalkowska Residential District built in the 1950s, or the Central Station, created in the 1970s. However, undoubtedly in one way or another tourism has put an end to many melancholic repressions (psychological) or demolitions (physical), thanks to these very urban landmarks. We are reminded of the doggedness in destroying symbols of the past.

With its contribution to the affluent society with its hedonistic and exotic accents, in fact, despite the complexity of the relation between tourist and citizen today renewed in the post-Wall era, the host and guest exchange has instilled the elaboration of collective memory by overturning those forms of resistance against the communist era in its cultural heritage. This has also smoothed out the previously existing frictions whereby the tourist from the West was seen as a «class enemy» or experienced «with a sense of inferiority», so much so that it can be said that thanks to the tangible urban legacy, intercultural relations have also been pacified in an interchange between peers. This also explains why «of all the buildings built between 1945-1989 that have been recorded as historical monuments, half were not listed until 2016-2019» (Derek, 2020: 138-139).

Prague, the city inextricably linked to literature «with all its dark corners, narrow alleyways, and vast historic squares, was always Franz Kafka's city», as we can read on the *Visit Czechrepublic* website[1]. A description that harks back to that greyness typical of the urban planning in Soviet countries, *anti-ville lumière* to say the least, although in the post-communist era the situation was rapidly reversed. The places designated for mass tourism were transformed into

[1] <https://www.visitczechrepublic.com/en-US/60414aa1-e348-4c48-add2-844d011be914/place/c-prague-franz-kafka-square> (6.3.2024).

centres of international receptivity and hospitality, turning «dark corners» into shining tourist attractions, while «hypermarkets, warehouses and industrial plants», or «commercial properties» (Sýkora and Ourednek, 2007: 214) are currently changing the suburban areas of post-communist cities more radically than the suburbanisation of homes. In the real-socialist past those suburbs with their soaring, prefabricated high-rise buildings (*Plattenbau*) had a strategic importance as they had to make up for the housing shortage. Nowadays, they are considered a subject of interest to the *neo* «tourists of the lost revolution», to paraphrase H.M. Enzensberger when referring to tourism from the West in post-'68 Prague.

In Berlin, the protagonist par excellence of the *Wende* (turning point), the transformation is inexorable. Resembling London in 1970s, the new German capital is a crossroads of young multi-ethnic communities and a cultural and artistic hub of heterodox globalised and progressive lives, in the sense of innovative, technological, and work addicted, the well-wisher of start-ups. Furthermore, the metropole is marked by extreme trends, represented by its world-famous outrageous discos.

2. Disorientation, McDonaldization of Museums

After the first years of disorientation in Berlin, since 1969 – when it was erected – one can observe the Urania-Weltuhr, the clock standing at the centre of Alexanderplatz, showing the world's time zones, now in the former GDR finally liberated from the idea of the «no more time zone limit». There were no longer possible zones and impossible zones, Hawaii, Dakar, Paris, or Rome; the reconnaissance process had begun for the formulation of new geographical mental maps introjected until then into the geographical limits established by the Eastern bloc. An era had come to an end. At last, in the post-communist era, the 'possible travel' epoch was inaugurated.

The eloquent image in the film *Goodbye Lenin* (2003, directed by Wolfgang Becker) in which the old GDR furniture (symbol of the *Wende*), where the savings in GDR-marks of a lifetime were hidden, is discarded because it belongs to a past which many people would like to forget, and becomes the allegory of *Ostalgie* (Steimle, 1992). In fact, the protagonist's mother, who represents the old era and considered the GDR regime so important did exactly this, anticipating symbolically the meaning of a past, which will be re-discovered in many ways later.

Those objects represent the history to cancel since everybody looks at the new, as they need to have a vision of the future and forget the past. Only later would humanity preserve the memory of the past in order to rebuild history.

Indeed, in the post-Wall era those old objects, previously despised and even ridiculed, became precious tangible protagonists of collective memory; with grassroots initiatives in a bottom-up action, traits of a culture that was un-

known to most, were brought to life in interactive museums and squares, fuelling a trend that soon became mainstream, thus resulting in increasing international tourist flows. There can be no doubt that the tendency to McDonaldization (Ritzer, 1983), an adherence to unbridled consumerism, leads to the commercialisation of historical memory, in a hagiographic process, in which the common materialisation of real-socialist ideology is exhumed for people who knew nothing about it, in short, for tourists.

From museums *en plein air* where *post-Wende objects* were displayed as true-life-souvenirs, to street markets of fake-nostalgic-replicable relics that became a veritable historical stage transformed into a museum. For example, in Prague, the *Museum of Communism* opened, ironically enough, in the premises rented for McDonald's in 2002 by an American businessman, Spiker, with Jan Kaplan as curator. Both «have managed to turn the anti-capitalist era into a free market commodity», as we can read in *The Guardian* (Connolly, 2002)[2], which conceives it as a drama in three acts: dream, reality, and tragedy, and goes on to say, «It is no wonder that the museum is as yet failing to attract large numbers of domestic visitors. The story at McDonald's is quite the opposite». The initial resistance on the part of those who experienced that period in their everyday life, and, therefore intimately, is now flaunted and eviscerated without anyone's consent.

Even those reluctant opponents of communist society in Poland understand the intrinsic meaning of a "*Disneyficationised*" memory. There were Rafał and Marta Patla who created the Museum of Life in Communist Poland, starting with the idea of bringing the Warsaw of that period back to life. They did it by travelling in vintage Nysa 522 vans and organising tours based on storytelling but also on participatory tourism in which total immersion in the environment visited is required.

The interest in a largely unexplored yesteryear grew. It was a sociologist and cultural entrepreneur from Freiburg, Peter Kenzelmann, who created the GDR-Museum in Berlin in 2004. Located in the heart of the city, in the eastern part of course, near the well-known Avenue Unter den Linden, it is supported by fans from all over the former GDR with legacies from that era. The museum initially aroused scepticism, especially in comparison with the neighbouring state-owned ones on the famous Museum Island. It is a private initiative outside official channels, and is therefore considered more commercial, and looked upon with distrust, since the culture of everyday life must be contextualised in a museum of history that, however, already existed and stands right next door, i.e., the Deutsches Historisches Museum.

The GDR-Museum is a kind of 'nostalgic site', a memorial to the death of communism, deliberately interactive, the real key to its resounding success: letting people experience first-hand how to drive a *Trabant*, the "duroplast"

[2] Connolly (2002) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/mar/06/worlddispatch.education> (6.3.2024).

cars produced in Zwickau, how to furnish a living room in communist society, the meagre comforts of life in the East. On its website one can read, «Geschichte zum Anfassen» (history to touch)[3]. The past thus becomes augmented reality in one's hands, evoking an experiential tourism able to attract more than half a million visitors each year, today among the top 10 museums for admissions in the German capital. If the relationship with the past can be revived as in a fiction, there is no fear of a revival, this is why the game appeals to most people, therefore countless other examples of museums of everyday life, the past of simple people, have been created and keep being created.

Meanwhile, Berlin was becoming one of the most popular capitals for international tourism. Time would reward this museum strand, with such astonishing results that after ten years, in 2016, it ranked 36th for visitors in the top 100 tourist destinations. The metropolis now had a capacity for 34,000 overnight stays, thanks to 632 hotels and other accommodation facilities and an average of three to four nights per arrival were registered in 2019.

A country, a city, before the *Wende* virtually ignored worldwide had become the subject of interest for large tourist flows. In the historic district of Prenzlauerberg, but about ten years later, the permanent exposition *Alltag in der DDR,* everyday life in the GDR, shown in the Museum in der Kulturbrauerei, was created inside a historic brewery in the heart of today's coolest area of the city, once home to the *Andersdenker*, intellectuals who were critical of the GDR system. The underlying concept of this museum is the question, who were these people, millions of individuals, and how did they live? An attempt, perhaps, to put history with sources and documents back in its place since this Museum is a branch of the Stiftung Haus der Geschichte (Bonn/Leipzig) mentioned above. Like in a Disney-like playground, «un espace rempli de significations, un tout cohérent et autosuffisant» (Liégeois, 2010: 93) in which visitors are guided but not restrained in their yearning for protagonism, and post-communism thus becomes a successful brand.

These are the first forms of «Participatory Museum» with the involvement of the public in the form of «Contribution, Collaboration, Co-creation, Hosted» (Simon, 2010). The most recent expression of this tendency is the Guatelli Museum in Parma, Italy, created in 2015, where 60,000 everyday objects are displayed (Cataldo and Paraventi, 2023: 108).

The immersion in socialist normality continues with the reconstruction of an entire flat, which becomes an advantageous tourist attractor; we are speaking about the actualisation of memory in which even real-socialist architecture is worthy of note. Special attention is paid to the living conditions in the *Plattenbau* with the museum-apartment *die letzte Platte* (the last prefabricated high-rise building), at Hellersdorfer Straße 179, in which everything has remained as it was then, complete with the original fixtures and fittings, the original wallpaper in the living room, ornaments, and naturally the most printed

[3] <https://www.ddr-museum.de/en> (23.09.2024).

reproduction of the GDR, Walter Womacka's *Junges Paar am Strand*. Another atypical form of museum dating back to 2004 is the Stasi prison *Hohenschönhausen* in Berlin, where the storytelling is done by former prisoners, now guides, who accompany tourists through the meanders of the darkest chapter of those years. A popular attraction for more dark tourism-oriented visitors, is once again the cinema, a medium with one of the strongest indirect pushes on tourism, which comes to our aid, this time with the film *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*) set in East Germany in 1984, which directs our 'gaze' to this place of terror. Paradigmatic also in its name is the *Tränenpalast,* the Palace of Tears, the former customs barrier between East and West Berlin used to cross the border on foot, mainly by GDR pensioners – or citizens living in West Berlin – visiting their relatives and controlled by the Stasi in the city divided by the Wall. Here two worlds inexorably bifurcated, hence the reference to the most human of feelings for involuntary separation, now a museum with its 160,000 objects of everyday use and design from the GDR and the Soviet Occupation Zone, inaugurated in 2011 by Chancellor Angela Merkel herself. It belongs to the Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland Foundation (House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany), and since 15 September 2011 has hosted in the listed *Tränenpalast* the permanent exhibition «Everyday Life of German Division», which shows how life was in divided Germany.

In the capital of Germany, the tourist potential is also fuelled by a constantly changing urban landscape, «Berlin die Stadt, die immer wird und niemals ist» (Berlin, the city that is always becoming, but never is) (Scheffler, 1910: 267), the *Baustelle* Berlin (work in progress Berlin). An interminable building site, favoured by these new forms of metropolitan tourism sometimes marked by voyeurism, or by the identity game in which the tourist becomes the «visitor-actor» (Avanzi, Mocchi and Sacerdote, 2021) participating in that emulation made possible because it takes place in a fun setting: «any physical barrier during the experience falls thus generating a very high level of emotional involvement» (Cataldo and Paraventi, 2023: 106-107, my translation). This has already been extensively experimented with the Wall Museum Check Point Charlie House in Berlin. A museum of McCarthy propaganda close to the former driveway border crossing between East and West Berlin, Check Point Charlie, opened in 1962 as an iconic symbol of the Cold War and of the division of Berlin and Germany. This "Wall Museum" was created by Rainer Hildebrandt with the aim to record the story of refugees from the GDR and to collect their escape plans. Today it is an attraction for many visitors since in the nearby area there is a reconstruction of the checkpoint itself complete with soldiers on duty and sandbags, indeed, a "must" for tourists visiting the city pretending to relive the Cold War atmospheres.

As Claudia Scandura points out, «Moscow has turned into New York's "head honcho", as in a short time it has become, like the American West City, one of the main hubs of the global network» (Scandura, 2024). It would seem

that the development of the city that dominated architectural trends and tastes in the Iron Curtain countries for decades is less interested in 'nostalgic sites'. In fact, as early as 1992, the post-communist culture, perhaps in continuity with Stalin's ambitious "seven sisters project", eight if one considers the Palace of Culture in Warsaw, and the constructions that go under the name of Stalinist modernist architecture in the Soviet satellite countries, consecrated *Moscow City* – the metropolis of 15 million inhabitants – to business, almost equalling the much better known City (of London), definitively sanctioning the caesura in the character of a renewed *Zeitgeist* strongly tending towards hyper-modernity. Malls, skyscrapers, and amusement parks take these new metropolises from a society based on actual or assumed class levelling to a society of class and lifestyle distinctions.

3. Conclusion

Cultural transformation after 1989 was immediate and often controversial, but what is certain is that the legacy of the communist era, which was discovered after some decades by tourists and people unaware of that past, represented by its architecture, urban transformation, and objects, led to a significant elaboration of the collective memory after having translated its contents *tout court* into a historical monument'of real socialism, previously unknown or rarely visited by the majority of people in the West, the same people who now populate in large numbers the physical legacy of Communism, or what remains of it.

Urban changes belong to the natural development of territories and human evolution. Indeed, a "Tourist Gaze" (Urry, 2002) gathers a different focus when intentionally visiting a museum, where cultural and social contents are exhibited to help learn and understand. However, there are also objects on display that are meaningless for most visitors, but which are of great sentimental value for their former owners. This generates a sort of cultural distancing that could result in a ghettoization that would have implications for the real protagonists of that history.

It is undeniable that the creation of commercial and non-commercial museums dedicated to the real-socialist era had, and still has the potential to delve into unexplored territories and produce a new awareness, as well as bringing to light through scientific research and more bottom-up exploration a historical period that would otherwise have been obliterated. At the same time, in those forms of cultural tourism, it nurtures the elaboration of historical memory for the benefit of new generations. In fact, the cultural interest in the post-communist world – in Berlin we can mention the atmosphere of Karl Marx Allee with its Stalinist buildings, and the remains of the Wall, and in Warsaw the afore-mentioned Palace of Culture – also aroused interest in other aspects such as the re-discovery of artists or authors, cultural protagonists ignored in that

era, and through contextual knowledge led to a reconciliation between host (the real protagonist of that history), and guest (the visitor), thanks to a shared history.

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