



PROJECT MUSE®

November in Berlin: the End of the Everyday

Joe Moran

History Workshop Journal, Issue 57, Spring 2004, pp. 216-234 (Article)

Published by Oxford University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/169723>



Photograph © Joe Kerr.

Leipziger-Straße, East Berlin, 9 November 1989. From *Autopia: Cars and Culture*, ed. Joe Kerr and Peter Wollen, Reaktion, London, 2002.

November in Berlin: the End of the Everyday by Joe Moran

One of the problems with developing any historical awareness of the everyday is that it appears to have neither a past nor a future. The time of routine is unbounded, interminable, uninterrupted: the way things have always been, always will be. In the everyday, as Maurice Blanchot writes, 'we are neither born nor do we die: hence the weight and the enigmatic force of everyday truth'.¹ No wonder, then, that theorists of the quotidian have been particularly interested in what happens when these routines are disrupted in dramatic or violent ways. Such moments shatter the continuum of the everyday, its existence as simply a blank present of waiting and boredom, separate from the event-driven processes of history. They force us to confront fundamental questions about the quotidian: what are we waiting for, when will the waiting end, and what will we do when it does?

The fall of the Berlin Wall is an obvious recent example of this

disturbance of the everyday, the transformation of unthinking routine into new forms of awareness. For a few, extraordinary days in November 1989 Berliners shook off the mundanity and predictability of their daily lives. They danced around in their nightshirts, let off fireworks and kissed strangers, with whom they exchanged the single word: 'Wahnsinn.' (Crazy!) Rules and conventions were turned on their head. In a country with a mandatory closing time of 6.30 p.m., shops stayed open as long as they liked. In a country where minor traffic infringements are serious offences, people jaywalked, climbed up trees and road signs, and those with a GDR passport travelled on public transport for free. In order to make sense of this extraordinary interruption of routine, though, we need to understand the nature of the everyday itself as a space for the quiet accumulation of repetitive acts, and of more subtle, unnoticed transformations. In other words, we need to think about this moment in relation to its 'before' and 'after'.

Cold War Berlin lent itself readily to dramatic iconography. Its most recognized sites were those where ordinary Berliners rarely ventured: Checkpoint Charlie, which was only open to Allied forces and officials, and Glienicke Bridge, the scene of East-West exchanges of spies and dissidents. But in this notably untouristic, working city of studied boringness, the more significant reality of the Wall was that it bisected and transformed the routines of everyday life. This was especially the case because the postwar partition of Berlin had followed ancient district boundaries rather than more pragmatic contemporary divisions. When the Wall was built, it was set back slightly into GDR territory but otherwise followed the Soviet sector's border strictly, and so threaded its way between tram tracks, rivers, squares, railway stations and even, in Bernauerstraße, between houses and the pavement outside. Its arbitrariness meant that it cut through the heart of the quotidian life of the city, most notably for the tens of thousands of *Grenzgänger* (border-crossers), who lived in the East but worked in the West, and who suddenly could not go to their jobs. For many Berliners, the flash-point during the Wall's construction in August 1961 was not the roadblocks or wire fences but Friedrichstraße station, where the shared U-Bahn and S-Bahn lines between East and West were interrupted by customs posts. Here, guards had to restrain distraught East Berliners as the information was conveyed to them in the most mundane way possible – a posted announcement, signed by the Minister of Transport, about train services being 'discontinued'.²

If the erection of the Berlin Wall transformed the everyday life of the city, though, its survival is an example of how the extraordinary can be routinized, can develop its own rhythms, expectations and realities. From the mid 1960s onwards, the number of attempted escapes across the Wall started to fall and level out, and most East Berliners developed a philosophy of *bequemes Schweigen* (convenient silence, or keeping quiet for an easy life).³ After the sometimes violent repressions of the 1950s and early

1960s, the most common experience for East Berliners in this period was not fear but boredom, a sense of the quiet futility of everyday procedures. Within the context of a daily life which was grudgingly accepted as inevitable, the Wall simply became part of the scenery. As Robert Darnton puts it, East Berliners 'accepted the Wall as a fact of life, as something inexorable, built into the landscape – there when they were born and there when they died. They left it to tourists, took it for granted, forgot about it, or simply stopped seeing it'.⁴

THE WALL AND WAITING

In the early 1920s Siegfried Kracauer produced two short essays for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on themes which would later be close to the hearts of Cold War Berliners: boredom and waiting. These essays focus on the white-collar workers and professional classes of large German cities such as Berlin and Frankfurt, and consider what kinds of boredom and waiting would be more than merely a capitulation to the existing social order. In the first sentence of 'Boredom' (1924), Kracauer states that in modern society the 'self has vanished – the self whose presence, particularly in this so bustling world, would necessarily compel [people] to tarry for a while without a goal, neither here nor there'. Kracauer's original German makes a suggestive link here between the verbs *langweilen* (to bore) and *verweilen* (to tarry or linger). He claims, though, that this sense of boredom as a 'long whiling away' has been largely extinguished in a contemporary culture which distracts individuals from their relationship to dead time. Mass culture provides us with a series of diversions – neon advertising signs, escapist films and the blare of gramophones and radios – so that we cannot find the quiet and solitude necessary 'to be thoroughly bored with the world as it ultimately deserves'.⁵

Another Kracauer essay, 'Those Who Wait' (1922), considers the scholars, intellectuals and professional people, lost in the loneliness of the large cities, who experience existential dread as a result of the collapse of traditional sources of higher meaning such as church, nation and community. For these people, caught between the twin evils of self-deceiving optimism and total scepticism, the only remaining attitude is one of waiting, a kind of 'hesitant openness' which consists of 'tense activity and engaged self-preparation'.⁶ One might criticize the elitism of Kracauer's distinction between the low-status salariat's search for mindless distraction, and the more glamorous *weltschmerz* of the intellectuals who are tormented by their inability to believe. It is unclear whether 'those who wait' are actually seeking some kind of social transformation or simply cultivating a more individualized *ennui*. In a sense, though, this lack of clarity is partly Kracauer's point: given the obdurate reality of boredom and waiting as crucial modern experiences, people need to think about what they might actually be waiting for.

Kracauer's emphasis on waiting is an attempt to alleviate 'the overburden of theoretical thinking' in cultural criticism, to 'shift the focus from the theoretical self to the self of the entire human being'.⁷ As the other essays collected in *The Mass Ornament* make clear, his work represents a pioneering contribution to the study of everyday life because it seeks to examine those 'inconspicuous surface-level expressions' which elude statistical analysis or philosophical abstraction.⁸ It focuses not on readily identifiable events or ideas, but on the invisible products of habit which become significant simply by being endlessly repeated. When many theorists were emphasizing the city's restless modernity and phantasmagoric experiences, Kracauer wrote about the empty, purposeless moments of time which permeate the urban everyday, and which are filled by commuting, queuing and monotonous office work.

The most influential theorist of everyday life in the postwar period, Henri Lefebvre, also focuses crucially on the experience of waiting. Lefebvre argues that waiting is an inevitable product of the bureaucratic appropriation of everyday life – the development of large-scale economic systems, the increasing segmentation of time, the rigid separation of public from private spheres. He suggests that one of the distinctive features of modernity is the growth of 'compulsive time', a kind of limbo between work and leisure, exemplified by the rush-hour commute, in which no-one is making explicit demands on us but we are still trapped by the necessity of waiting.⁹ Lefebvre, like Kracauer, sees waiting as an embodiment of the nameless, indefinable anxieties experienced in modern society. His most distinctive contribution to marxist thought is to compress various terms used by Marx – such as *Entfremdung* (estrangement), *Verwirklichung* (inauthentic fulfilment) and *Vergänglichkeit* (transience) – into an all-encompassing term, 'alienation', and to expand Marx's focus on the alienating nature of work into a more broad-ranging consideration of alienation in everyday life.¹⁰ This notion of alienation represented an implicit critique not only of Western consumer culture but also of the bureaucratically-manufactured dissatisfactions of Eastern European socialist societies. After his expulsion from the French Communist Party in 1958, Lefebvre made these connections between 'state socialism' and 'state capitalism' explicit, at a time when Cold War ideologues were emphasizing their differences. He suggested that the problem with Stalinist and neo-Stalinist socialist governments was that, just as in Western societies, they defined their success solely in terms of improved productivity and technological advances, and failed to consider change at the level of everyday life.¹¹

Lefebvre's and Kracauer's work, which suggests that the experience of waiting incorporates both boredom and possibility, might be a way of considering the differing experiences of the everyday in East and West Berlin during the Cold War. Lefebvre suggests that many of the products of the post-war consumer revolution – such as the women's magazines, like *Elle* and *Marie-Claire*, which emerged in France in the 1940s and 1950s –

were designed to fill the frequent periods of waiting in modern life with easily digestible, diverting experiences.¹² Life in Cold War West Berlin, the 'shop window of the West', could be interpreted in similar terms – the chic boutiques on the Kurfürstendamm, the cornucopia of the food hall at the KaDeWe, and the shops and cafés of the Europa Centre: all provided a temporary distraction from the city's failure to catch up with the West German economic miracle, and from the claustrophobia and boredom of 'Wall sickness'.

In East Berlin, waiting was not something so easily concealed through distraction, since it was clearly part of the fabric of daily life. As in other Eastern Bloc countries, it was common in the GDR for people to join the ends of queues without knowing what was at the front; in a nation of shortages a line of people was likely to have something useful at the end of it. The cumbersome state machinery also meant that waiting lists for consumer goods were extraordinarily long: ordinary citizens had to wait some twelve years for a car and thirteen for a telephone. These long periods of waiting produced a different attitude to time, in which the whole pace of social life was slower than in the West. Primitive technology, such as hand-operated barriers at level crossings, increased journey times; cars with two-stroke engines went slower; speed limits were lower; traffic lights even remained on red for longer.

To a certain extent, this experience of waiting was justified by an ideology of deferral: if ordinary East Germans made sacrifices now and lived up to revolutionary ideals, it was argued, they would be rewarded with a more equal society. One well-known 1950s party slogan claimed: 'The way we work today is the way we will live tomorrow'. By the early 1960s, though, it was becoming harder to convince an increasingly sceptical population of the necessity of waiting.¹³ The new policy of subsidized consumerism, centred on washing machines, refrigerators and cars, was part of a recognition that an improved standard of living could not be endlessly delayed. Although a partial success, it inevitably produced different forms of waiting. In the last years of the GDR, the attempts by the regime to suggest that waiting was a practical lesson in collectivity – describing a queue, for example, as a *Wartekollektiv* (waiting collective) or a *sozialistische Wartegemeinschaft* (socialist waiting-association) – came to seem like the laughable death-knell of an increasingly ineffective thought police.

If the Berlin Wall was the Cold War incarnate, it was not because of its dramatic narratives of attempted escapes in home-made aeroplanes and improvised tanks, the narratives which are told in the Checkpoint Charlie museum on Friedrichstraße. These events were significant enough, of course, but relatively rare. Rather, it was because the Wall concretized (literally) this experience of waiting. Westerners travelling to East Berlin often had to wait for hours at checkpoints, as they filled in currency forms, queued up for the compulsory exchange of money, had their passports and visas stamped by a succession of guards, and were searched for prohibited

Western 'propaganda'. The procedures for East Berliners wishing to cross over into the West were still more lengthy, and were, of course, preceded by the much longer and usually fruitless wait for a visa.

For Lefebvre, the seminal modern experience of waiting is neatly encapsulated in a common piece of street furniture, the traffic light. He suggests that traffic lights are symptomatic of the invasion of everyday life by signals whose meaning is taken for granted and whose broader provenance we are never invited to consider: 'The perfect signal is perfectly impersonal, it repeats itself indefinitely, even when there is no one in front of it . . . it is always in the same place, always reiterating its imperious command or interdiction, never beginning, never ending.'¹⁴ Traffic signals always go without saying: anyone seeking to determine their underlying logic will have to look elsewhere, to legal precedents, political decisions and urban history. These instantly legible signals are the most visible manifestation of the everyday's colonization by an abstract system which provides only for its own smooth running.

This account of the management of waiting in modern bureaucratic systems is one way of thinking about the Cold War division of Berlin. Western visitors to the city were often surprised at the quotidian mundanity of the Wall, at the fact that this concrete eyesore with death strips, watch-towers and armed guards could exist side by side with ordinary shops and offices. Although this was partly to do with the accidental way in which the Wall cut across the most routine activities of Berlin life, it is also clear that the Wall was made possible by its integration into these daily routines. The checkpoints contained little that would not have been seen on other roads or intersections, albeit in greater number: there were stop signs, speed-limit signs, lights, cones, automatic barriers. In a sense, the division of the city was reduced to a series of traffic signals, a set of bureaucratic transactions which 'simply' required one to have the right papers, with everything (passport, visa, transfer documents) in order.

Everyday routines take on their own reality, become their own *raison d'être*. One of the more darkly comic aspects of 9 November 1989 and its aftermath was the prolonged death-rattle of bureaucratic procedures which no longer had any reason to exist. After the Politburo member, Gunter Schabowski, had made an ambiguous statement about changes to travel arrangements on television, huge crowds of East Berliners flocked to the Wall. This meant that the border guards, who had simply been taught to obey orders like human traffic lights, were faced with the momentous decision of whether or not to let people through. The overwhelmed guards began stamping anything, from passports to driving licences. One Danish visitor even handed the guard his cat's vaccination document and was waved through.¹⁵ Eventually, all checkpoints bowed to the inevitable and stopped stamping anything. In the months that followed though – before German reunification – the guards returned to their duties, inspecting bags, checking papers and often causing huge traffic jams, to no apparent purpose.

It is surely significant that, after reunification, the tensions between East and West Berliners were most memorably condensed in the battle over a humble traffic light. East German opposition to the relentless Westernization of their half of the city was articulated in a well-publicized campaign to save the cute, jauntily-hatted 'little lamp man' on GDR traffic lights from being replaced by his characterless West German counterpart. Mark Duckenfield and Noel Calhoun have suggested that, in a political climate in which organized protest against Westernization was muted, East Germans latched on to the *Ampelmännchen* as a harmless symbol around which resistance could be sublimated and marketing possibilities exploited. The *Ampelmännchen* could function in this way because he was essentially meaningless, associated primarily with children's songs about traffic safety, and therefore free of the taint of totalitarianism.¹⁶

While it is true that the *Ampelmännchen* does not form part of an obvious political iconography, perhaps the significance of traffic lights, as Lefebvre suggests, is that they disrupt any clear relationship between signifier and signified. The everyday is 'the place where significations rise and then fall away into insignificance':¹⁷ omnipresent objects cannot always be reduced to their 'meaning', because people mould their own activities unconsciously around their shape and texture. Even without the Wall, Berlin is a city which has always depended on the careful policing of space and movement. In 1924, Europe's first electric traffic light was erected in Potsdamer Platz, which was then one of the busiest intersections in the world. If everyday life is made up of activities and things which people do not notice unless they are absent, then it is significant that the *Ampelmännchen* was catapulted into cult status precisely when its existence was threatened. As a way of temporarily restricting the movement of East Berliners through the city, the *Ampelmännchen* encapsulated the often unremarked but significant experience of waiting. This was only exacerbated after the fall of the Wall, as a post-reunification boom in car ownership, and extensive construction projects, created virtual gridlock on the city's roads.

THE REVOLUTION IS NOT A BANANA

The significance of boredom and waiting in Cold War Berlin marks an obvious point of connection with the New Left thought which emerged in Western European countries from the 1950s onwards, and which sought to rediscover marxism as a critique of everyday life. In this context, it is useful to compare the events of November 1989 with another revolutionary moment, the Parisian *événements*, and in particular the writings of the Situationists. A key aspect of the Situationists' work was their condemnation of the dead, alienated time of everyday activity: the dreariness of office life, the wasted hours of the daily commute, the controlled experiences of leisure time. The famous slogans of May '68 – 'Beauty is in the street',

‘Beneath the paving stones, the beach’, ‘Never Work’ – suggested that the revolution would be achieved not by seizing hold of strategic points or key institutions, but by transforming the oppressive boredom of daily life.

This revolutionary agenda was, of course, a specific response to Western consumer society, which Situationist Raoul Vaneigem called a ‘universe of expanding technology and comfort’ in which people were ‘turning in upon themselves, shrivelling up, living trivial lives and dying for details’.¹⁸ In another sense, though, the post-Stalinist socialist societies provided ample proof of the Situationist thesis about the poverty of relative abundance and the boredom of waiting. The ‘success story’ of the Eastern Bloc, the GDR of the Honecker years had witnessed some real achievements – full employment, cheap food, low-rent housing, comprehensive healthcare – alongside its more obvious failures. It was this sense of unrealized potential that East Germans eventually grew tired of, as much as the confinement of the Wall, the privileges of the *nomenklatura* or the surveillance of the Stasi. For East Berliners the endless propaganda about successful five-year-plans could not conceal the impoverishment of the everyday: the life in shoddily-constructed, poorly-maintained tower blocks, the endless queuing for basic necessities, the interminable wait for consumer ‘luxuries,’ the imprisonment in unfulfilling work routines.

From another perspective, of course, it is possible to see the fall of the Wall as a kind of joke at the Situationists’ expense, an inverted version of the revolutionary ‘situation’. As they streamed through the Wall, East Berliners flocked to the very sites which the Situs would have dismissed as part of the society of the spectacle: the shops, bars and restaurants of the Ku’damm and Tauentzienstraße, where they queued up for Big Macs and stuffed their acrylic shopping bags with economy packs of Marlboro, cosmetics, fresh fruit and children’s toys. For many Ossis, the truly utopian moment of November 1989 was the unpeeling of a banana for the first time, because they were unavailable to most GDR citizens, whereas West Germany had (and the united Germany now has) the largest market for bananas in Europe. In Western culture, the banana represents a peculiar combination of mundanity and exoticism. The bestselling food item in most Western supermarkets, it is an entirely routine, omnipresent object which, thanks to the Lacatan’s monopoly of the Euro-American market, is the same wherever it is found.¹⁹ On the other hand, the exotic origins of the banana mean that its shortage (for example, in wartime) is often seen as symptomatic of more significant deprivations.

As they heard the news of the mass exodus on television, some West Berliners arrived at the Wall with bunches of bananas, which they threw at the Easterners, many of whom scrambled to catch them, while others shouted angrily: ‘We are not apes!’²⁰ Reams of Geertzian thick description could be expended on this small but significant incident, which added a new dimension to the already problematic relationship between the banana and colonialism. Bananas became so associated with Western triumphalism

after the fall of the Wall that Situationist-style graffiti began appearing on walls in East Berlin: 'The Revolution is not a Banana'. These sceptics saw the 'banana revolution' as evidence of the rapaciousness of consumerism, equally apparent in the shameless attempts by companies like Coca-Cola and West cigarettes to create instant brand loyalty by handing out freebies and bombarding the Wall area with advertising.²¹ From this perspective, the hysteria that greeted the fall of the Wall could be seen as a confirmation of the Situationist thesis about the role of consumption as an apparent inversion of the alienated everyday, which only ends up duplicating its disappointments.

It is worth stressing the difference, though, between the Situationist attempt to smash through these everyday routines, and the Berliners' efforts to re-enchant them and invest them with new meaning. The Situs were explicitly responding to the new work-life patterns made possible by the restructuring of social space in Paris in the 1950s and 1960s. During this period, the city's working-class and immigrant populations were dispersed to the suburbs, and an elaborate system to facilitate commuting was created. Car parking was allowed on public thoroughfares for the first time, an expressway was built on the right bank of the Seine, and the *Périphérique* (orbital motorway) and RER (suburban railway) were both constructed. The Situationists were particularly aggrieved at the demolition of Victor Baltard's beautiful nineteenth-century pavilions, which housed the old food market at Les Halles, and their replacement by a shopping centre-cum-interchange for the RER and métro.²² In his influential *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (1967), Vaneigem repeatedly uses the daily commute as an example of the alienating nature of modern life. He wonders how much humanity can remain in people who are 'dragged out of sleep at six every morning, jolted about in suburban trains' and 'tossed out at the end of the day into the entrance halls of railway stations, those cathedrals of departure for the hell of weekdays and the nugatory paradise of weekends, where the crowd communes in a brutish weariness'.²³ Although not explicitly articulated as such, the Situationist practice of *dérive* (drifting) was clearly imagined as an inversion of the much more common practice of the daily commute. The *dérive*, unlike the commute, emphasized chance, unconstrained movements rather than habitual, restricted ones; open-ended rather than restrictive time; and travel as pleasure rather than simply an adjunct to work.

Unlike the Parisians, though, Berliners had been denied the dubious pleasures of the commute because they were hemmed in by the East-West divide and the 'country wall' around the city. Up until 1989, there was little of the peripheral development which transformed Paris and other major cities in the postwar period, and the suburban railway had been allowed to drift into disrepair. This is all the more significant because Berlin is naturally a commuter city. It is notable that Walter Benjamin chose Paris, rather than his hometown of Berlin, to explore his concept of *flânerie*. Paris

is a compact city whose length or breadth can be traversed in a few hours by foot; Berlin is a spacious city which really needs to be circumnavigated by public transport. There is ample visual evidence for this in the form of the 170 underground stations, the S-Bahn tracks elevated on steel pillars, and the trams, taxis and buses that fill the streets. Given this context, it is interesting that the movements of Berliners after the fall of the Wall mimicked the commute and other daily routines in a mixture of gentle mockery and bemused rediscovery. Younger Easterners, whose underground stations had been closed for nearly thirty years, were amazed to discover that a U-Bahn even existed. Their meandering journeys on the underground, taken just to have the pleasure of stopping at newly-discovered stations, created a permanent rush-hour. One of the more ironic sites of the weekend after the fall of the Wall was the carnivalesque transformation of both Western and Eastern forms of waiting – traffic jams and queues. In the huge jams which clogged up the checkpoint roads, Trabi drivers produced an impromptu, atonal horn concerto, and pedestrians pushed champagne through the windows and banged on the roofs. In West Berlin, huge, snaking queues formed outside the sex shops (banned in the East) and the banks where Ossis lined up to collect their 100DM ‘welcome money’.

In the delight that the Berliners took in the rediscovered quotidian, we can see a hankering after communality which is missing from the Situationist agenda. The *dérive* was a romantic, individualistic reappropriation of the mysterious spaces and simmering energies of the city, with its precedents in *flânerie* and the urban poetics of the historical avant-garde. As Lefebvre pointed out, the tactic of the *dérive* was thus poorly equipped to deal with one of the key rearrangements of social space in the postwar period: the dispersal of workers into suburbs and new towns.²⁴ For the Situationists, the strap-hanging masses simply had to reject their stultifying routines, which tragically separated them from more authentic needs and desires. But to see the commute simply as a form of false consciousness is always to look at it from the outside in. We need instead to undertake what Gottfried Korff, after the French anthropologist Marc Augé, calls an ‘S-Bahn Ethnologie’²⁵ in order to understand how the daily commute produces minimal but significant forms of community. As Augé argues, the metro is where subtle forms of unofficial memory can be nurtured, and where individual itineraries merge seamlessly with collective procedures. It is also one of the few places in which we can encounter marginalized others in the increasingly zoned spaces of the modern city.

To dismiss the behaviour of the East Berliners in November 1989 as self-indulgent is to deny the utopian dreams and desires which they invested in their newly-acquired video recorders and ghetto blasters, albeit ones which were doomed to disappointment when they found out that the pre-war wiring and poor current variance in the GDR were unable to cope with modern Western appliances. The events which took place after the fall of

the Wall are a reminder that revolutions can unearth mundane desires which may be a disappointment to the more programmatic ambitions of revolutionaries. It is precisely because the fall of the Berlin Wall was initiated by 'ordinary' people that they could not articulate their desires in recognizably radical ways, and that they fastened on to the banal experiences of daily life. In the most basic sense, as Timothy Garton Ash puts it, the East Berliners just went to the shops and came home again.²⁶

LEARNING THE EVERYDAY

There are two main senses to the word 'routine': it is an unchanging and often unconscious series of actions in everyday life, or a well-rehearsed sequence, as in a dance or stand-up routine. This latter sense reminds us that, in fact, all routines are learnt: the mundane practices of daily life are simply those in which the learning process has been erased. Amidst all the fraught discussion about the politics of monetary and political union in the months and years after November 1989, more subtle developments were happening under the surface. East and West Berliners had to relearn how to live their everyday lives. To many Berlin citizens, their new routines seemed far stranger than the extraordinary ones they had left behind, which had been naturalized through over-familiarity. Ossis entering West Berlin for the first time were staggered by the casual opulence which had become part of daily routine. One East German woman referred to this feeling as 'West-shock', which consisted of 'realizing the *normality* of life there, that all the wealth and glitter was part of normal life'.²⁷ Western visitors to the East were equally disorientated by the discovery of another country in which the everyday had a surreal quality. This strangeness could be seen in the wide avenues with few cars, the empty shops, and the grimy buildings. But it could also be felt and smelt in the gritty air and the distinctive 'GDR smell', an amalgamated by-product of cheap cigarettes, toxic car emissions and archaic industrial systems using inefficient brown coal.

The asymmetrical nature of the reunification process meant that the burden of relearning these routines fell disproportionately on the East Berliners. In the aftermath of the fall of the Wall there was a plethora of Ossi/Wessi jokes based on the dual premise of the former's gaucheness and the latter's arrogance about the superiority of their own way of life. East-erners' nickname for their West Berlin counterparts – *Besserwessi*, a pun on *Besserwisser*, or know-it-all – betrayed both a resentment about their supposed conceitedness and an admission of the existence of strange, unwritten habits which would have to be painfully learnt by outsiders. The East Berliners who flocked to the West in November 1989 were easily identifiable by a look of baffled appreciation and a particular kind of attire and appearance: stout jacket, acid-wash blue jeans, standard-issue heavy shoes and functional haircut. In the months and years that followed, they would have to learn about fashion, personal grooming and comparison

shopping, and get the hang of gizmo-laden Western cars, cashpoint machines, microwaved meals and modern appliances. Gradually, habits would be unlearned and newly acquired, and it would become more difficult to distinguish people from the different sides of the city, as individual differences migrated into the even less visible quotidian: accents, gestures, voice inflections, patterns of speech, shared memories.

After the fall of the Wall, then, Berliners were starkly confronted with an everyday life which normally lies concealed beneath a veneer of banality and boredom. This was nowhere more apparent than in the dead area in the heart of Berlin left by the Wall, with its remnants of former activities and roads leading nowhere. It took the best part of a decade for the two parts of Berlin to be reconnected through the restoration of roads, bridges and railway networks, which served as a visible reminder that the city's everyday routines were still in the process of being recreated. The ordinary communal facilities of daily life that most people take for granted – heating, communication, water, drainage, waste disposal – also had to be renegotiated. Aside from the inevitable problems of unifying amenities in a city in which almost everything was in duplicate, the new authorities were hampered by the backwardness of the East, the extent of which only became visible after the fall of the Wall. It was discovered that most of East Berlin's utilities were not only unmodernized but had not been properly maintained for nearly half a century. Although West Berlin had more phones than people, there was only one for every ten people in the East. The two electricity systems were completely incompatible, there were huge leaks in East Berlin's gas system, and its sewers were leaking raw sewage into the water table. Forty per cent of East Berlin households were not even connected to the main sewage system, and twenty-five per cent had no plumbing at all.²⁸

This moment of crisis in the reinvention of daily life brought into sharp relief what Lefebvre identifies as a particular characteristic of the everyday – its failure to keep up with the historical possibilities of modernity. Although he uses this idea of the residual status of the everyday to explore uneven development in capitalist societies, it has considerable explanatory power when dealing with the GDR. The contrast between self-proclaimed modernity and a marginalized everyday life was particularly marked in East Berlin, which, as a frontline in the Cold War, was designed partly as a showcase for Westerners. The flagship architectural projects, such as the *Fernsehturm* (Television Tower) and the *Palast der Republik*, the Intershops which sold luxury products to West German tourists, and the chic restaurants and cafés of the *Nikolaiviertel*, were all designed to proclaim the modernity and success of the socialist experiment. Meanwhile, the ordinary citizens living in the cheap prefabs and old tenement blocks in peripheral districts like Marzahn and Lichtenberg were left with the less glamorous residues of that experiment, often surviving without inside lavatories, running hot water or central heating. One could hardly have a more potent

demonstration of the unevenness of change in modern society, the way that 'the maelstrom of technicity leaves human relations and everyday life in its wake like so much stagnant jetsam'.²⁹

The East German example suggests that the boredom of the everyday is a force both for change and for inertia. While it carries within itself the possibility of the sublimation of revolutionary desires, as in the GDR's so-called niche society (*Nischengesellschaft*) of alcohol, cheap cigarettes and West German television, the everyday can also gradually produce a desire for utopian transformation in its accumulated drip-drip of daily frustrations. Most of all, though, according to Lefebvre, it can function as the lodestone around which the status quo is reorganized after a revolutionary moment. His explanation for the failure of the '68 *événements* is that Parisians simply got sick of the privations and disruptions, and longed to get back to a normality which they defined in politically-neutral terms.³⁰ People can feel nostalgic for even the most enslaving of routines, the certainties that at least make life predictable – they prefer 'boredom at zero point' to the 'hazards of desire'.³¹ In fact, those who had troubled to listen for more than the popping of champagne corks in November 1989 might have heard these rumblings among East and West Berliners: the former worrying about the end of their protected rents, secure jobs and cheap food, the latter anxious about being asked to foot the bill for reunification.

Over the last few years much attention has been given to the phenomenon of so-called *ostalgie*. In Berlin this is most evident in the East German bric-à-brac on sale in the *Flohmärkten*, and the brisk trade in reproductions from the GDR era. What is most interesting about such 'Ossi kitsch' is its polysemic quality, its unstable mix of nostalgia, sentiment and laughter. Trendy young West Berliners now drive Trabants with jazzy paint jobs and souped-up engines, ask for East German Club Cola in their cocktails, and play the various board games, like *Kost the Ost* (Taste the East) and *Ferner Osten* (Far East), which require them to answer trivia questions about everyday life in the GDR. Older East Berliners, meanwhile, shop in special stores selling Spee soap powder, Cabinet cigarettes and Rotkaeppchen, the GDR's sweet, sparkling white wine. Depending on its context, *ostalgie* can function as decontextualized retrochic or as an important conduit of the non-discursive aspects of cultural memory.

It is significant, though, how much of *ostalgie* is based around the recreation of everyday routines which are not easily articulable, right down to the preference of some East Berliners for the more abrasive GDR toilet paper. One of the reasons, perhaps, why *ostalgie* has focused so closely on East German material culture is that the latter is especially open to these unspoken forms of remembrance. Since GDR goods were heavily standardized for both ideological and pragmatic reasons, ordinary citizens shared a common experience of the concrete particulars of everyday life, and these textures and details are now powerfully evocative. *Ostalgie* relies on a notion of East German everyday culture as lagging behind the West,

either in tongue-in-cheek Western formulations of the GDR as ‘the land that time forgot’,³² or in the more sentimentalized Eastern versions of a vanishing past.

Ironically, it is the GDR’s pretensions to modernity which now make its everyday culture seem so endearingly dated. This is most clearly demonstrated in one of the iconic phenomena of November 1989: the Trabant P601 car, or Trabi. During the Cold War, this vehicle seemed to embody the differences between East and West Germany. While West Germany’s car manufacturers – Mercedes, Audi, Volkswagen – were credited with spearheading the country’s economic success, the Trabi was dismissed as ‘the command economy on wheels’. It was nicknamed ‘the cardboard car’ because it was made from Duroplast, an unrecyclable phenolic resin strengthened by Soviet cotton wool waste (and, in earlier models, compressed brown paper). Its two-cylinder, two-stroke engine burned a petrol and oil mix which produced ten times as much pollution as Western cars, and which gave it its distinctive cough and splutter. Its accelerator pedal even had a point of resistance part of the way down to discourage excessive fuel consumption.³³ The Trabi was an embarrassment to the global car community because it represented all the mundanity of cars with none of their counter-narratives of speed, status and escape.

Remaining in production, essentially unchanged, for a quarter of a century, the Trabi was characterized above all by its perpetual sameness. There were, of course, slightly comical attempts to differentiate between particular models. The Trabant P601 was produced as either a ‘limousine’ or ‘estate’ car, in ‘standard’, ‘special request’ and ‘de luxe’ versions, the latter having such exciting additional features as a different-coloured roof, chromium-plated bumpers and headrests. There was even a convertible Trabi with the trendy name, ‘Tramp’, which was essentially a civilian version of the GDR army jeep. Minor improvements to the Trabi, such as changes to the ventilation system or slight increases in engine performance, were promoted as major technological breakthroughs. But in terms of their overall design, these different models were indistinguishable from each other. When the new Trabant 1.1 with four-stroke Volkswagen engine was finally launched in autumn 1989 with great fanfare, it was hidden under an old Trabi’s body.³⁴ Car parks in the old GDR looked like loading bays, with their serried ranks of near-identical Trabants. And there was no clearer visual representation of the everyday’s residual relationship to modernity than the endless stream of mustard-yellow Trabis trundling through the checkpoints in November 1989. However much the Trabi’s manufacturers might try and link this to the socialist principles of East German design – *Zweckmäßigkeit* (functionalism), *Notwendigkeit* (necessity) and *Minimalgestaltung* (minimal-composition)³⁵ – it was clear that this car was the most visible example of the GDR’s failure to deliver privatized consumption.

After reunification, the East German market was flooded with used

Volkswagens and Mercedes and, no longer protected by the East German economy, the Trabant factory in Zwickau quickly went belly-up. By the time of monetary union in July 1990, East Germans were abandoning their Trabis in the street or exchanging them for more valuable currency such as Western cigarettes. But the process of kitsch recuperation had already begun, as street artists made makeshift sculptures from the abandoned cars. Berlin shops today sell Trabi memorabilia – die-cast models, T-shirts and key-rings – and Trabi parts are recycled as furniture in smart café bars. The Trabi is now being celebrated for precisely the same reason that it had once been such an embarrassment: its ability to *traben* (trot along) behind the more spectacular achievements of Western consumerism. Of course, such *ostalgie* never acknowledges this uneven development as a problem: it fails to register the everyday as anything other than that which always lags behind. In Daphne Berdahl's terms, it is a practice 'that both contests and affirms the new order of a consumer market economy . . . consumers of *Ostalgie* may escape the dominant order without leaving it'.³⁶

BERLIN MOMENTS

The residual status of the everyday certainly complicates any idea of the *sanfte revolution* as a magical and spontaneous event. Lefebvre's notion of the 'moment' is useful in this context, because it suggests that certain experiences can help to reveal the everyday as that which lags behind, opening up its apparently inevitable dreariness to the reality of 'what is possible'.³⁷ One of Lefebvre's examples of such a 'moment' is the 1871 Paris Commune, a significant event because it succeeded in visualizing and temporarily transforming the taken-for-granted rhythms of everyday life. Rob Shields, though, has suggested that Lefebvre's notion of the moment is frustratingly ill-defined, and that he conspicuously fails to discuss its application to more recent revolutionary events such as the 1956 Hungarian uprising or the fall of the Berlin Wall. Shields suggests that this may have been because of Lefebvre's vestigial links with these communist regimes, which made him unwilling to criticize them openly: he was still (just) a member of the French Communist Party in 1956, and even towards the end of his life retained links with members of the East German intellectual and political elite.³⁸

In response to this, it is worth recalling that Lefebvre envisioned the 'moment' primarily as a stimulus to critical thought rather than revolutionary action, and as such he saw it as incorporating not only moments of radical upheaval but the experiences of love, friendship, play, knowledge, memory, and so on. As a recognition of discontinuity within the smooth, linear narrative of capitalist progress, the moment was necessarily short-lived.³⁹ Elsewhere in his writing, Lefebvre emphasized the fact that the revolution, when it came, would not be an instantaneous event. He criticized the 'great modern myth of the Revolution as total act, radical break,

absolute renewal',⁴⁰ and was scathing about the Situationists, who also looked to the Paris Commune as an example of revolutionary action:

Do they really imagine that one fine day or one decisive evening people will look at each other and say: 'Enough! We're fed up with work and boredom! Let's put an end to them!' and that they will then proceed to the eternal Festival and the creation of situations?⁴¹

For Lefebvre, the moment might provide a brief glimpse of a better world, but revolutionary change could only occur over a protracted period of struggle and transition. It was not enough simply to interrupt the everyday; it had to be gradually transformed.

In his later work on urbanization and social space, Lefebvre argued that revolutionary change had to be spatial as well as temporal: 'A revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential; indeed it has failed in that it has not changed life itself, but has merely changed ideological superstructures, institutions or political apparatuses.'⁴² Indeed, Lefebvre was attracted to the idea of the Paris Commune because it represented not so much the seizure of institutions as the transformation of a space. Specifically, it was a reconquest of the Parisian centre by those members of the working classes who had been banished to its northeastern outskirts, like Belleville and Ménilmontant, by Baron Haussmann's partitioning of Paris.⁴³ Lefebvre saw the 1968 *événements* as a response to a similar phenomenon: the colonization of the centre of Paris by commercial interests, and the exile of workers to suburbs and new towns. He was fond of pointing out that the student disturbances originated not on the Left Bank but in the new suburban university at Nanterre (the French title of his account of May '68 was *L'Irruption de Nanterre au Sommet*) – rather like the English revolution starting in Croydon or Milton Keynes.

The taking of pickaxes to the Berlin Wall could be seen, in this context, as the most triumphant refusal of the spatial zoning of the modern city. For all the excitement of that November weekend, though, this brief utopian moment was not translated into a more permanent revolution in social space. The apparently spontaneous destruction of everyday routines meant that there was little time for discussion about what would replace them. Instead of political and economic issues being thoroughly negotiated, the existing West German institutions were largely imposed on the East. The physical environment of East Berlin was also transformed by a relentless process of Westernization, from major architectural projects to smaller details like advertising hoardings, telephone booths and street signs. East Berliners, who saw the familiar reference points of their daily lives changed beyond recognition, could certainly be forgiven for thinking that they had exchanged one form of colonization for another. If revolutions need to take place across space as well as time, then the failure of the Berlin revolution is most neatly encapsulated in the fact that Wessis and

(particularly) Ossis still routinely refer to the other side of the city as *da drüben* (over there).

One of the most powerful ideas in Lefebvre's work, in fact, is the connection he makes between the transformations of everyday life in the postwar period and the sublimation of colonialist energies. For Lefebvre, the colonial relationship reproduces itself in a new kind of relationship between centre and periphery, which contrasts modernity with an impoverished daily life, often lived in the suburbs, non-places or marginal areas of cities. This logic has its origins in an ideology of capitalist modernization, which, in Kristin Ross's words, 'presents the West as a model of completion, thus relegating the contingent and the accidental – the historical, in a word – to the exterior'.⁴⁴ The mundane world of the everyday is seen as lagging behind the more glamorous aspects of modernity and is urged to 'catch up', but it will never do so because capital accumulation works by producing these imbalances and inequalities. This seems like a particularly telling description of Berlin after the fall of the Wall, when East Germans were urged to succumb to an 'inevitable' process of Westernization which confirmed their own traditions in their backwardness.

Among all the Eastern Bloc countries, the GDR's status as one half of a divided nation meant that this dialectic between modernity and backwardness was particularly apparent. The famous SED (Socialist United Party) slogan from the 1960s urging the country to outstrip the West without mimicking its capitalist methods – *überholen ohne Einzuholen* (overtaking without catching up), now the name of yet another *Ostalgie* board game – was quietly abandoned in the Honecker era. Under Honecker, the GDR's unofficial policy was to bring its standards of consumerism up to those of the West, even as the Wall demonstrated its justified fear about what might happen if any explicit comparison was made. The failure of this unstated policy of 'catch up' was one of many reasons for the fall of the Wall. As Jürgen Habermas argues, East Germans generally interpreted the events of November 1989 not as an opportunity to create a radically new kind of society, but as a *nachholende* revolution, a catching up.⁴⁵ The problem with seeing the revolution in this way is that it becomes just a rewriting of the narrative of capitalist progress, in which modernity is only moving in one direction and those who express doubts about this direction are 'not "with it", not with the movement which justifies its own existence merely by moving'.⁴⁶ The disappointment manifested in *ostalgie* is part of an awareness among East Germans that not only is this game of 'catch up' stacked against them, but its prizes might not even be worth winning. This notion of the everyday as that which is always trying to 'catch up' means that other directions which modernity could take are rarely considered.

CONCLUSION

My favourite Berlin Wall story is the one about the East Berliner who borrowed three books from the American Memorial Library in West Berlin

a few days before the Wall was erected in August 1961, and then returned them all in pristine condition on November 10, 1989.⁴⁷ This story seems to encapsulate the capacity of everyday routines to survive the most dramatic interruptions, and the loyalty of people to mundane tasks and communal rules. It is also symptomatic of the events of November 1989, which were truly a revolution of the everyday: they were about being able to commute and walk about the city, visit friends, go to work, and take your library books back.

The Berlin Wall, which became such a part of the daily routine of this city, has now been truly assimilated into its invisible everyday life. Most of the 900,000 tons of reinforced concrete that made up the Wall has been ground down to build new roads, car parks and children's playgrounds in the city.⁴⁸ Apart from the few remaining blocks of concrete protected by barbed wire, the former course of the Wall is discreetly marked by a thin strip of metal inserted between the paving stones, noticeable perhaps to tourists with time on their hands but not to the working people of the city. The fate of the Wall is a reminder that the everyday is something that we often fail to notice, because it is so obviously *there* that we look through and past it. The idea of the November revolution as a spontaneously occurring event reinforces this notion of the everyday as that which is invisible and therefore impervious to change. It suggests that everyday life is only rendered visible and transformable through extraordinary, unforeseeable interruptions. As events before and after the fall of the Wall make clear, though, the everyday is also a space for unfulfilled possibilities and for unseen but profound transformations.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Maurice Blanchot, 'Everyday Speech', *Yale French Studies* 73, 1987, p. 20.
- 2 Christopher Hilton, *The Wall: the People's Story*, Stroud, 2001, p. 59.
- 3 Mary Fullbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR 1949–1989*, Oxford, 1995, p. 149.
- 4 Robert Darnton, *Berlin Journal, 1989–1990*, New York, 1991, p. 83.
- 5 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Boredom', in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, transl. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin, Cambridge, MA, 1995, pp. 331–2.
- 6 Kracauer, 'Those Who Wait', in *The Mass Ornament*, pp. 138–9.
- 7 Kracauer, 'Those Who Wait', pp. 139–40.
- 8 Kracauer, 'The Mass Ornament', in *The Mass Ornament*, p. 75.
- 9 Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, transl. Sacha Rabinovitch, London, 1971, p. 53.
- 10 See translator's note in Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 1: Introduction*, transl. John Moore, London, 1991, p. 258.
- 11 Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, vol. 1*, p. 49.
- 12 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 2: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday*, transl. John Moore, London, 2002, pp. 13–14, 84–5.
- 13 Paul Betts, 'The Twilight of the Idols: East German Memory and Material Culture', *The Journal of Modern History* 72: 3, September 2000, p. 749.
- 14 Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 2*, p. 279.
- 15 Andreas Ramos, 'A Personal Account of the Fall of the Berlin Wall', <http://www.andreas.com/berlin.html>. Accessed 1 Nov. 2002.
- 16 Mark Duckenfield and Noel Calhoun, 'Invasion of the Western Ampelmännchen', *German Politics* 6: 3, December 1997, pp. 54–69.

- 17 Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 2*, p. 92.
- 18 Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, transl. Donald Nicholson-Smith, London, 1994, p. 160.
- 19 See Susan Willis, *A Primer for Daily Life*, London, 1991, p. 51.
- 20 Darnton, *Berlin Journal*, p. 317.
- 21 See Gottfried Korff, 'Spione, Hütchenspiele und Bananen: Alltags-Symbole und Metaphern im Prozeß der kulturellen Integration von Ost- und Westdeutschland', *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 91: 2, 1995, pp. 260–1.
- 22 Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City*, Cambridge, MA, 1998, pp. 25–6.
- 23 Vaneigem, *Revolution of Everyday Life*, p. 52.
- 24 Henri Lefebvre and Kristin Ross, 'Lefebvre on the Situationists: an Interview', *October* 79, 1997, p. 77.
- 25 Gottfried Korff, 'S-Bahn-Ethnologie', *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 93: 1, 1990, pp. 7–8. See also Marc Augé, *In the Metro*, transl. Tom Conley, Minneapolis, 2002.
- 26 Timothy Garton Ash, *We the People: the Revolution of 1989 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague*, London, 1990, p. 62.
- 27 John Borneman, *After the Wall: East Meets West in the New Berlin*, New York, 1991, p. 49.
- 28 Anthony Read and David Fisher, *Berlin: the Biography of a City*, London, 1994, pp. 309–10.
- 29 Henri Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity: Twelve Preludes, September 1959–May 1961*, transl. John Moore, London, 1995, p. 223.
- 30 Henri Lefebvre, *The Explosion: Marxism and the French Revolution*, New York, 1969, p. 89.
- 31 Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, p. 186.
- 32 Betts, 'The Twilight of the Idols', p. 793.
- 33 Jürgen Schiebert, *Duroplast in Pastel Colours: the Trabant*, Berlin, 1997, p. 45.
- 34 See Schiebert, *Duroplast in Pastel Colours*, pp. 41–45, 83; Wolfgang Schröder, *AWO, MZ, Trabant und Wartburg: Die Motorrad- und PKW-Produktion der DDR*, Bremen, 1995, pp. 63–5.
- 35 Milena Veenis, 'Consumption in East Germany: the Seduction and Betrayal of Things', *Journal of Material Culture* 4: 1, March 1999, p. 89.
- 36 Daphne Berdahl, '"(N)Ostalgie" for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things', *Ethnos* 64: 2, 1999, p. 206.
- 37 Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 2*, p. 347.
- 38 Rob Shields, *Lefebvre, Love and Struggle: Spatial Dialectics*, London, 1999, p. 144.
- 39 Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 2*, pp. 344, 352.
- 40 Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 1*, p. 65.
- 41 Quoted in Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: the Situationist International in a Post-modern Age*, London, 1992, p. 96.
- 42 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, transl. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Oxford, 1991, p. 54.
- 43 Lefebvre, *The Explosion*, pp. 117–18; see also Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*, Basingstoke, 1988, p. 41.
- 44 Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, Cambridge, MA, 1995, p. 196.
- 45 Jürgen Habermas, 'What Does Socialism Mean Today? The Rectifying Revolution and the Need for New Thinking on the Left', *New Left Review* 183, September–October 1990, pp. 3–22. For a fuller discussion, see *Die Nachholende Revolution: Kleine Politische Schriften VII*, Frankfurt am Main, 1990.
- 46 Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity*, p. 1.
- 47 Peter Schneider, *Extreme Mittellage: Eine Reise durch das deutsche Nationalgefühl*, Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1990, p. 127.
- 48 Denis Staunton, 'So what on earth did happen to the Wall?', *Observer* (London), 6 Nov. 1994, p. 20.