Coda

A Chameleon Wedding

Dennoch ging alles
Wie auf einer
Chamäleon-Hochzeit
Großartig zu

And yet, as if
at a chameleon wedding
everything came
together splendidly

—Sarah Kirsch, from the poem "Langer Winter"

If the most satisfying ending to a love story is a wedding, then it might be metaphorically apt to end this historical account on November 9, 1989, with the images seen around the world of people dancing in the streets and atop the Wall. At the conclusion of the German-German love story, this could be a restorative celebration like those that end the comedies of Plautus and Shakespeare. Of such finales, Northrop Frye observes: "As the final society reached by comedy is the one that the audience has recognized all along to be the proper and desirable state of affairs, an act of communion with the audience is in order.... The resolution of comedy comes, so to speak, from the audience's side of the stage" (164). And indeed, when the Wall came down, the world celebrated along with the ecstatic Berliners. In the West, this moment seemed to be the culmination of a long and concerted courtship. The years of patient détente, of wooing and waiting, had finally paid off. Chancellor Willy Brandt's "Wandel durch Annäherung" (Change through Approach/Rapprochement) had had just that as its intended goal. In his "Report on the State of the Nation," delivered on January 14, 1970, Brandt had offered the following reasons for the new *Ostpolitik,* or foreign policy toward East Germany:

> Because there will be less fear, because the burdens will become lighter, because people who have not seen each other for years will be able to meet again, because it will

> perhaps be possible for two people from the two German states, which are now so inhumanely divided, to marry one another. Those are the objectives, both large and small, but always concerned with human beings. (Qtd. in Freund, 82)

As if in fulfillment of Brandt's prophecy, the initial accounts of the *Wende* (Turning Point—the name given to the unification period, 1989–90) were filled with stories of newfound love and love regained, of couples playing out in miniature the *WiederVereinigung*—(re)unification—of their respective states. Such stories are collected, for instance, in a volume entitled *Liebeswende/Wendeliebe* (Turning Point of Love/Love at the Turning Point), published by Morgenbuch Verlag in 1992. "When the Wall fell," we read in the introduction, "people fell into each other's arms. Drunk with happiness. Only on the second look did they see whose arms they fell into, and whose arms they fell out of. The catchphrase of those days: *Madness (Wahnsinn*). The collective sentiment: Everything goes. Did everything go?" (Mauer, 5).

A note of apprehension like the one at the end of this passage seems almost obligatory in the otherwise euphoric discourse of the *Wende*. Describing the intoxication of those first days, one also intimated the hangover to come. A collection of political cartoons about the *Wendezeit,* for instance, is ironically entitled *Flitterwochen: Karikaturisten sehen das Jahr nach der deutsch-deutschen Hochzeit* (Honeymoon: Cartoonists Look at the Year after the German-German Wedding). Here, it seems that the honeymoon was over before it began. The political cartoonists, by vocation naysayers, bring out any and all possible roadblocks to the harmonious merger of East and West. As the title suggests, a number of these cartoons portray unification through the metaphor of marriage. A drawing by Klaus Böhle for *Die Welt,* for instance, shows West German chancellor Helmut Kohl walking arm-in-arm with his bride, East German CDU chairman (and newly elected GDR *Ministerpresident)* Lothar de Maizière. Maizière is carrying a bouquet of Deutschmarks and along with his train is towing a massive safe, on which sits Gregor Gysi with a PDS flag.[1] The caption reads: "One always marries the whole clan" (Man heiratet immer die ganze Sippe).

In an article on representations of the GDR in political cartoons from the year 1989–90, Susan Morrison investigates the patterned gendering of East and West in the metaphors of marriage and romance so prevalent at the time. The GDR is almost always female, Morrison points out, and the FRG male. Based on the content of the cartoons she has analyzed, Morrison offers an explanation for these standardized gender roles:

> Obviously the West has the economic power the East lacks. The East economically plays a role not unlike that of the woman in a patriarchal society. . . .

1. After 1989, the SED changed its name to Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus (PDS). Gysi was the PDS chairman.

> Feminist discourse has exposed the role of the "other" played by women. And the GDR was also depicted as "other." The "other" is doomed to definition and marginalization only in terms of the "dominant." . . . As we know from the political events of 1990, the GDR has indeed lost its independent status and its identity is rapidly becoming blurred—at least officially—into that of the FRG. (49)

For the purposes of the present discussion, what is most interesting about both Morrison's survey and Böhle's cartoon is the centrality of financial concerns as a self-evident component of the marriage metaphor. Consider the 1993 poem "Zweitehe" (Second Marriage) by Kay Hoff, a former citizen of the FRG:

My—no, preferably not a love letter,	Meine—nein, lieber kein Liebesbrief
Not a love poem, why would it be,	kein Liebesgedicht, warum auch,
No flattering words, please:	keine schmeichelden Worte, bitte:
We are, finally, together, decked out	Wir sind, endlich, beisammen, grau
In gray at the registry-office, all business,	gebügelt zum Standesamt, sachlich,
No wafting veil, reasonable. . . .	kein Schleierwehen, vernünftig. . . .
. . . . .	. . . . .
. . . Mine becomes yours,	. . . Mein wird Dein,
Henceforth, by law, you	künftig, gesetzlich geregelt, Du
Are mine, that's how it always was with us.	bist mein, so war das immer bei uns.
Once we both knew, back then,	Einmal wussten wir beide, damals,
What joy is—Yours, mine,	was Glück ist—Deines, meines,
Two joys. Now we know,	zweierlei Glück. Jetzt wissen wir,
Of all things, what's what.	ausgerechnet, was Sache ist.[2]

As the poet says, this is "not a love poem." Far more, it seems to be an expression of property relations: "Mine becomes yours, / . . . You are mine. . . ." If the West were the "I" and the East the "you" of this poem, then the implicit economy of the political cartoons would apply here as well. The East gains the buying power of the West ("Mine becomes yours") but loses its autonomy and identity ("you are mine"). On the occasion of the German "second marriage," Hoff's poem implies, sentimental gestures would only hide the real nature of this union: "Now we know / . . . what's what."

It is a self-help cliché that money plays a major role in the success or collapse of marriage partnerships. Even the East German marriage handbook *Unsere Ehe* (Our Marriage) contains a chapter titled "Ehe mit Rechenschieber" (Marriage with a Slide Rule), which begins: "To establish and uphold a household the partners need, along with any number of good qualities, money. The sooner they understand that, the better" (Polte, 97). The historical circumstances of the connection

2. Hoff, "Zweitehe," ed. Conrady.

between marriage and money hardly need to be pointed out: until the eighteenth century, marriage was usually a matter of property, rather than of love.[3] These associations can be derived from the other side as well: the word *economy* comes from the Greek *oikos,* "house," and refers to the management of a household. The economy, in other words, begins at home.

Throughout this book, we have been exploring connections between the precepts of romantic love and those of the economy writ large. I have argued that, by definition (at least self-definition), romantic love spurns the consideration of economic factors, insisting on a kind of narrative autarky. Marriage, in its cultural articulation, seems to do the opposite: it is the point at which the romantic couple is recognized as linking up to broader networks of exchange. Thus, for instance, the works analyzed in chapter 3 begin within the connubial sphere: if these marriages are embedded in an increasingly problematic political economy, then the extramarital affair that sets each plot in motion extends the promise—however fleeting or illusory—of escaping, or even transforming, this unsatisfactory status quo.

In light of these considerations we can see why, searching for a metaphor appropriate to the reorganizations of a rapidly unifying Germany, so many commentators looked to marriage—not as the close of a romantic comedy, however, but as the beginning of a domestic drama. Here, true to form, the main conflict seems to be about money. It was immediately clear that it would be a Herculean task to bring these two systems together. If the West saw itself as a garden of golden apples (to stretch the metaphor), then the economy of the East was an Augean stable.

Yet from another perspective—as we will see, from a largely East German perspective—the metaphor of marriage would draw attention to another difficulty involved in the merger. If love and marriage go together, as the old song has it, like a horse and carriage, it seems that the *Wende* may have put the cart before the horse. Jutta Gysi has characterized unification as an "overhasty marriage" which might have benefited from a longer engagement (qtd. in Morrison, 40). And so as economists, politicians, and pundits (the political cartoonists of *Flitterwochen* included) hashed out the financial ramifications of the new German union, cultural producers began working on a task no less pressing—indeed, as Gysi points out, already overdue—that of bringing together what I have been calling the "libidinal economies" of East and West.

In the preceding analysis, I have claimed that romantic narratives, with their inherent impulse toward harmony and closure, often constitute an attempt to mitigate ideological aporias or reconcile incommensurable value-systems. It is no wonder, then, that the *Wende* period saw so many narratives of East-West romance: the *Liebeswende* stories, for instance, or Brigitte Burmeister's 1994 novel, *Unter dem Namen Norma.* Such accounts represent an explicit attempt to navigate the

3. See, for instance, the chapter "Love and Marriage" in Luhmann's *Love as Passion,* 145–54.

transformed erotic landscape of unified Germany, to make sense of the sudden proliferation of desires, possibilities, and alternatives.

Sonnenallee, the film with which my investigation began, takes part in this effort. In the introduction, I suggested that Haußmann's film may be understood in part as an attempt to vindicate the ways of the East to a Western audience. *Sonnenallee*'s love story, I argued, is integral to this goal: when Michael declares himself "young and in love," our generic understanding fills in the gaps. "When a boy sees a girl for the first time," remarked Haußmann in an interview, "that's something that everyone understands" (Haußmann et al., 21).[4] We are now in a position, however, to take this analysis a step further, for Michael does indeed seem to be in love—but not just with Miriam, the girl next door. Instead, the film's passionate attachments appear to embrace all the objects of his erstwhile homeland: a battered cassette player, a keenly anticipated telephone, a protean *Multifunktionstisch* (multifunctional table), a homemade T-shirt promoting "Rock & Pop." *Sonnenallee* is, in its way, a paean to the beloved lost objects of the GDR.

In "Performing 'Ostalgie,'" a thought-provoking article on *Sonnenallee,* Paul Cooke draws attention to the film's "fetishistic" focus on certain artifacts of the former GDR, a kind of "'ostalgic' product placement" that allows East German viewers "a celebratory moment of *jouissance* as they recognize a now forgotten object" (163). Further along in the article, Cooke links this romanticization of *Ostprodukte* (East German products) to the film's overall romantic scenario. Drawing on Helen Cafferty's work on *Sonnenallee,* Cooke calls attention to the film's generic "overcoding," its hyperproduction of romantic couples. As Cafferty points out, heterosexual couples proliferate in *Sonnenallee,* from Michael and Miriam to Mario and the existentialist Sabrina, from the rekindled passion of Michael's parents to his sister's serial love affairs (258). "This overloading of the film's generic features," Cooke notes, "which highlights *Sonnenallee*'s light-hearted romantic element, mirrors the film's overtly over-indulgent nostalgia towards the paraphernalia of the GDR." From this, however, Cooke draws a completely different conclusion from the one the analysis in this book would teach us to expect: "This, in turn, suggests that East German spectators are not to take the film at face value, but are rather being invited to explore critically their relationship to their pre-unification experience" (164). As we have seen throughout this book, however, love stories rarely invite "critical exploration," at least on the surface. Invoking the generic privilege of love's ineffability, they resist analytical interpretation, or at least suggest that the price of too much prying is a loss of narrative pleasure. Cooke is right in pointing out a certain amount of exaggeration in *Sonnenallee*'s romantic scenes, perhaps even a touch of Brechtian alienation effect. This light irony, however, never comes between the viewer and his

4. I was directed to this quote by Cooke, "Performing 'Ostalgie'" (162).

or her *jouissance*—it neither disturbs the vicarious pleasure of the film's romantic happy ending nor interrupts the delight of ostalgic brand-recognition.

Instead, *Sonnenallee* uses the generic markers of romance to instill and convey a particular affective stance toward the consumer universe of the GDR: not one of critical distance, but of warm affinity. This stance is more than just an exercise in nostalgic reminiscence. Its intentions pertain to the present: namely to the project of finding or forging a connection between East and West, of locating the common denominator of their libidinal economies. In a scenario of triangulation like that of so many romantic narratives, East and West Germany are brought together by a shared love object: the fetishized commodity.

Here one might be tempted to apply to *Sonnenallee* an argument that Cooke makes in a later essay on GDR-nostalgia television shows. The "real purpose" of these commercial entertainment ventures, Cooke claims, is "neither to present an authentic, nor a revisionist, representation of life in the GDR, but to attract viewers—that is, to make the GDR entertaining and, more importantly, saleable" ("*Ostalgie*'s Not What It Used to Be," 137). From a marketing perspective, too much friction between the old and new *Bundesländern* (the "old" German states being the former FRG, the "new" the erstwhile GDR) represents a lamentable constriction of the available customer base. Thus, Cooke argues, a formerly defiant *Ostalgie* has become reappropriated as a tool of commodification:

> Rather than viewing nostalgia for the GDR as a barrier to the long-awaited "inner unification" of the German people, as it has been previously represented in some western discourses, it is now used as a means of *achieving* unity. Within the context of the recent television programs, the representation of *Ostalgie* necessarily implies the existence of a unified "community of consumers," in which East German experience appears to have been brought into the cultural mainstream. (137–38)

Cooke, who earlier in this article cited Haußmann's critique of such *Ostalgie* shows, goes on to implicate the director in the creation of this "community of consumers": "The shows," Cooke observes, "appear to be the end product of a process that figures such as Haußmann wished to set in motion" (138).

In fact, however, the effort to triangulate between East and West through a shared attachment to consumer goods might reveal the opposite, for the commodity fetishes that evolved in the two Germanys were fundamentally and qualitatively different. In his article "The Twilight of the Idols: East German Memory and Material Culture," Paul Betts describes the changes in the symbolic valence of consumer goods in the former East. After an initial rush on previously unavailable Western goods, East German consumers discovered that this brave new marketplace left something to be desired:

> East German nostalgia was also fueled by the actual consumption of Western goods. Once purchased, many of these coveted articles lost their nimbus of symbolic capital

> and political magic and returned to the "disenchanted" world of hyped exchange-value, credit payments, and planned obsolescence. The point is that the historical aura of German goods had been radically reversed: the former longing for the emblems of a glamorous Western present had now been replaced by those from a fading Eastern past. (742)

Nostalgia for the East German commodity was not just the product of post-*Wende* disillusionment, but also an ex post facto recognition of conditions already in place before the fall of the Wall. These conditions are intriguingly illustrated in a scene near the end of *Sonnenallee.* Having miraculously acquired a copy of the coveted, forbidden Rolling Stones album *Exile on Main Street,* Michael's friend Wuschel brings the record to Michael's house for a listening. When they play the record, it turns out to be an East-bloc knockoff with a false label. It is at this moment, though, that the album reveals its true worth. "Listen carefully," Michael tells the distraught Wuschel. "This is the greatest Stones song I've ever heard!" The friends plug in their air guitars, and the music changes and thickens; it begins to rock. Soon the whole cast is dancing in the street. They boogie into the border zone, past the nonplussed guards, and through the opened gates into the West.

This scene is interesting less for its all-too-quaint rendition of the fall of the GDR—here, a revolution more vinyl than velvet—than for its telling account of East German commodity culture. Throughout the film, *Exile on Main Street* represents a kind of *über*-commodity, its astronomical black-market exchange value created by a combination of Western cool and Eastern taboo. Yet the song that has hippies and burghers, Stasi men, construction workers, and border guards dancing together in the streets is in fact a worthless forgery, an *Ostprodukt.* It is only the boys' investment, their willingness to listen creatively, to consume actively—in short, to improvise—that makes "Schnuk–Schnuk–Schnuk" into the greatest Stones song of all time.

In such consumer investment we see the lasting success of the SED's failed efforts to create a socialist commodity fetish, a material trace of the transformed social order under socialism. Instead of acquiring a fetish quality from the conditions of their production, as the party had hoped, East German commodities were enriched by the circumstances of their *distribution.* The negotiation and cooperation, tips and trades, of the GDR's unofficial niche economy lent—and continue to lend—the East German object-world a unique social character.[5] In *Utopie und Bedürfnis,* Ina Merkel describes how the involved process of acquisition created a "satisfying"

5. See, for instance, Evelin Grohnert's fascinating conversation with a former HO department store manager about the complex network of barter and *Beziehungen* (connections) that augmented the GDR's feeble retail sphere: "'Es gab nichts, aber jeder hatte alles.' Renate Z., Verkaufstellenleiterin, erzählt" ("There Was Nothing, but Everyone Had Everything": A Conversation with Renate Z., Department Store Manager). See also Torben Müller's article on the East German DIY magazine *Guter Rat* (Good Advice), which offered its readers creative solutions to the retail system's constant *Engpässe,* or "shortages of consumer goods": "Vom Westen lernen, heißt improvisieren lernen: *Guter Rat*—eine sozialistische Verbraucherzeitschrift" (Learning from the West Means Learning to Improvise: *Good Advice*—A Socialist Consumer Magazine). From miniature-golf courses made of old tires to recipes

quality that seemed to inhere in the objects themselves: "The extra effort put into obtaining these objects also made their eventual acquisition more deeply satisfying than if one could simply go into a store and buy them. This deep satisfaction, many consumers lament, cannot be found amidst today's overabundance of consumer choices" (387).

If Western commodities obtain much of their fetish quality from their "branding," the distinctive mark of their derivation, then East German goods were subject to the opposite dynamic. As Martin Blum argues, "In the absence of the powerful corporate branding of the West, Eastern consumers frequently had to write their products' biographies themselves—biographies that were often closely related to the actual biographies of their customers' everyday lives" (241). Such "biographies," records of the objects' provenance, uses, and peculiarities, are also expressions of the objects' fetish quality, concretizations of the social ties that governed these object-histories.

The GDR's unique consumer culture, characterized by what Merkel calls "intense personal connections to objects" (364), is now a fading memory, and one that Westernized consumers, whose contrasting fetish would locate an object's value solely in its cost, will never fully understand. The stubborn material existence of East German commodities bears witness to another way of relating to the objects of commerce, another standard of value, another community of exchange. The consumer goods of the former GDR were usually inferior to those of the West, and they were never cutting-edge or state-of-the-art. Yet they were, in their way, precious: not owing to any qualities of their design or manufacture, nor on account of their surplus-value or luxury appeal, but rather because of the consumers' own investment—the time and effort spent to acquire, adapt, and maintain them. And now, unlike the objects of capitalist consumption, they cannot be replaced.

This is what *Sonnenallee* would tell us about its leading props—its truculent tables and hard-won telephones, hand-drawn T-shirts and phony Stones tunes—and why it draws on the tools of romance to get its point across. Looking beyond the obscene overpresence of the East German state, beyond the iniquity and absurdity of its dysfunctional public sphere, we find ourselves in love's temporary utopia, a world of invaluable, irreplaceable objects.

As we have seen, as much as they address the intangible play of emotion and inclination, love stories are also a means of managing objects. This, in fact, is the primary site of their ideological effectivity. Indeed, what love stories legitimize is not so much a symbolic order—most ideological constructions do that, and some more efficiently—as what could be called an object order: the dynamics of attraction and repulsion, of investment and disavowal, that determine the relative desirability of objects in a given sociocultural environment.

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with substitutions for scarce ingredients, *Guter Rat* was an official version of what GDR consumers had been doing all along: improvising.

As cultural producers have been doing for hundreds of years, East German writers and filmmakers enlisted the love story to help organize the complex, contradictory object order of the GDR. And in the transformed public imagination of unified Germany, the codes of romance will continue to strive for reconciliation; but they will also bear witness to the irreconcilable alterity of forty years' separation. Forty years, that is, of loving another way.