

Borders, Pictures, and Strawberry Foil: Refashioning the Countercultural Legacy of East Berlin

[Fashion, Art and Urban Alchemy](#)

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As Germany geared up its planning efforts to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Wall, and with the 2006 documentary *ostPUNK!/too much future* as inspiration, former East Berlin model Marco Wilms decided the time had come for him to make a documentary about his experiences in the East Berlin underground fashion scene. Like the director of *ostPunk*, Carsten Fiebeler, Wilms had studied directing at the Film and Television University "Konrad Wolf" (HFF – Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen) in Potsdam Babelsberg, and he had also taught film in Vietnam and Thailand (for the DAAD), in Russia (for the Goethe Institute), as well as in Berlin (at the University of the Arts – Hochschule der Künste Berlin, HdK). With a half dozen documentaries under his belt [SLIDE]<sup>1</sup>, Wilms felt ready to make an intervention into the historical memory of reunified Germany, in which the former Eastern part was being increasingly subject to containment by the dual prongs of Stasi fascination, on the one hand, and Ostalgie, on the other. As has in the meantime been convincingly established in scholarship [SLIDE – and here you see some of the key works], "the *Ostalgie* wave [of the late 90s and early millennium], offer[ed] little real resistance to the free-market economy that... engulfed the citizens of the New Federal States" (Cook 214). Ostalgie was "a symptom less of East German nostalgia than West German utopia" (Boyer 363), and as unhelpful for "Ossis" (that is, those from the former East) as the concomitant reduction of the GDR in post-unification public narratives to the prison camp of a criminal regime, which only served to reduce its citizens to that camp's abject inmates (Boyer 377). As neither

of these tendencies provided a particularly pleasant form of identification, there was a perceived need on the part of many former East Germans [SLIDE] to find a new kind of third, post-Cold War way that was neither Eastern nor Western. That need was particularly strongly felt among the no longer that young but still hip who were looking to resist the lures of the increasingly dominant so-called “Bohemian Bourgeoisie,” who are for the most part from the west, whether the former West Germany, Western Europe or Anglo-America (Boyer 379). What I hope to establish in this paper is that Wilms’ 2008 documentary [SLIDE] *Comrade Couture: Ein Traum in Erdbeerfolie* (A Dream in Strawberry Foil) should be understood as precisely such a new post-Cold War third way, one that mobilized a particular retro style from a particular past to establish itself as trend-setting and distinguish itself in its present. Further, in contrasting *Comrade Couture* with the first of thus far three music videos that David Bowie has released in his recent comeback [on the occasion of his 66<sup>th</sup> birthday – born 8 Jan 1947] [SLIDE], evocatively titled “Where Are We Now?,” I would like to try to more clearly delineate what nostalgia is, and isn’t, or rather – where I see the limits of nostalgia’s theoretical traction as being located.

*Comrade Couture*’s effectiveness can be attributed to a number of Wilms’ directorial decisions, and, in the first instance, his turning himself into the film’s main protagonist and making available a great deal of personal as well as archival material, such as his modeling license [SLIDE], images of himself modeling [SLIDE], as well as raw footage of underground fashion shows from the 80s [SLIDE]. The makers of fashion documentaries usually have some kind of special access to private material, sometimes through familial connections (as in the case of the 2012 *Diana Vreeland: The Eye Has To Travel*, which was directed by her daughter-in-law, Lisa Immordino Vreeland), or by making exclusive deals with designers (such as Karl Lagerfeld and Valentino) – [and it is hardly a coincidence that first-time director Immordino Vreeland enlisted the help of

Bent-Jorgen Perlmutter and Frédéric Tcheng, who served as the associate editors of *Valentino: The Last Emperor* in assembling her documentary about her mother-in-law.] Such circumstances do not usually make for compelling cinema as the director is beholden to the star of the film, or to relatives, and is not in a position to offer any kind of larger or critical perspective. [One generally comes away from these documentaries feeling like one has read a Wikipedia entry written by a reasonably competent undergraduate that gets things right but doesn't quite seem to understand or be able to communicate the significance of the findings.]

The narrative structure of *Comrade Couture*, in contrast, shows that Wilms understood only too well the situation that his generation, his comrades, faced. In their early 20s in the 1980s, they were entering their 40s in the new millennium, in a city that was gathering momentum as the European capital of what Tobias Rapp has termed the EastJet set, [a hot spot of techno-cool]. While Wilms' project did not end up being a nostalgic one, it did start off that way: "in the post-medical era of nostalgia... [as Dominic Boyer has shown], nostalgia most often appears discursively not as a search for a place, a home or nation, but as a sociotemporal yearning for a different stage or quality of life... [In this respect, post-Socialist nostalgia... is understood as a desire to recapture what life was at that time, whether innocent, euphoric, secure, intelligible]... "as Kant put it, [it is nostalgia] for our youth" (Boyer 2010, 18). Wilms admits that that was what his project was *intended* to be. Not only did he search out archival material and appropriate protagonists, he also dug out the old leather jacket [SLIDE] which, as he shyly but proudly admits, he designed himself [SLIDE], [and he describes his project as time travel that will help him understand better what exactly it is that he's been missing or has felt is lacking in the present ("das ist wie eine Zeitreise. --> dann wußte ich, was mir fehlte").] It is precisely this staging and reflecting that prevents *Comrade Couture* from remaining nostalgic. Wilms could have anchored the documentary in the

past and shown the scene “wie es eigentlich gewesen ist”, how it really had been or as it appeared in the “Free Within Limits/ In Grenzen Frei – [Mode-Fotografie-Underground: DDR 1979-1989]” exhibition at the Kunstgewerbemuseum in 2009, [and as we are presented with Diana Vreeland in *Diana Vreeland: The Eye Has To Travel*, that is, how she really was, or at least how she appeared in interviews.] But no – Wilms sets his documentary in the present and sets about *recreating* one of the fashion shows he has found footage of.

Wilms’s choice of protagonists also works against his project remaining nostalgic. It is possible that Sabine von Oettingen [SLIDE], Frank Schäfer [SLIDE], Robert Paris [SLIDE] and Angelika Kroker [SLIDE] were the only “heroes” from that time who were available or would agree to be interviewed, for whom he also could find adequate archival material. Nevertheless the constellation they form has a striking balance. Oettingen and Schäfer are extremely dynamic and self-stylized in the manner of Berlin’s trend-setting popularity [SLIDE]. They have not sold out and become complacent members of the bourgeoisie but rather have remained committed to non-traditional relations and creative endeavors: Sabine [SLIDE] (or Bienchen as Wilms affectionately nicknames her) is still a fashion designer but also a single mother who lives on a farm; Frank [SLIDE] is still a hair-stylist and lives in Mitte with his dog. It is Sabine and Frank, whose energy drives the project [SLIDE]. Robert and Angelika, on the other hand [SLIDE], are both more traditional, and more melancholic. We learn little about Angelika’s current work (she was one of the designers for Allerleirauh “back in the day”), and even less about the reasons that Robert has just returned from India with his wife and child, and whether he was there for a visit or is in Berlin for one [SLIDE].

It is *this* type of nostalgic melancholy that we encounter in Bowie's "Where Are We Now?" [SLIDE]. As a critic in the *New Statesman* noted, "The first line he's spoken in years, "Had to get the train from Potsdamer Platz . . ." is a call out to the class of '77, sending them right back to those heady times." The images that accompany the somber lyrics make clear that it is those times that matter to Bowie, and not the place, as does the misspelling of Potsdamer Platz, with a z instead of an s. The grainy, black & white images that appear on the large screen that has been set up in an artist's studio (which happens to be director Tony Oursler's) do not correspond to the places in the lyrics. When he sings of Potsdamer Platz, we see a stretch of the Wall with Tacheles graffiti-ed onto it; similarly, when he sings "near KaDeWe," [SLIDE] it is not the department store on the Kurfürstendamm we see, but rather the Dom with the TV tower at Alexanderplatz in the background. In other words, what we see is a Cold War imaginary reminiscent of the pre-lapsarian part of Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire* with politically redolent symbols like the Reichstag [SLIDE], and ending with the iconic angel on the Victory Column [SLIDE].

Just as "after the *Wende* ... West Germans tend[ed] to allochronize their encounters with East Germans and eastern Germany," that is, to narrate the East through temporal displacement (373), so too is Bowie displacing Berlin and by implication the reunified Germany of which it is now the capital, to the past. Bowie's video can be seen as depicting a move further west of the same kind of same anxious desire that motivated Ostalgje; that is, the Western belief in the future that motivated the Ostalgic relegation of East Germany to the past here makes the same move in relegating reunified Germany to that same past. And, of course, it is not difficult to identify the anxieties motivating Bowie in Big Society Britain, esp if one is a reader of the Open Democracy website, which I am and highly recommend [SLIDE].<sup>2</sup>

I would like now, in the final part of this paper, to turn to the theoretical implications of my readings of these two texts. As Anthony Vidler has shown in *The Architectural Uncanny* [SLIDE], the tradition of nostalgic melancholy has a key historical component – Homesickness,<sup>3</sup> Vidler has shown, often emerges in the face of the massive uprooting of war and ensuing Depression as the mental and psychological corollary to homelessness (7). Further, in showing how this type of nostalgia is operative in the case of Euro-American constructions of exile such as Malcolm Cowley's lost generation, Caren Kaplan [SLIDE] underscores [in *Questions of Travel* (esp in the section on Imperialist Nostalgia and Aesthetic Gain: Exile's Reward, cf. 33-40)], the aggressivity of this particular kind of expression of cultural dominance by showing how the psychoanalytic model that locates melancholia in "unresolved anger toward one who has died or been irrevocably removed" that "is turned inward, against the self" (33) is related to Renato Rosaldo's understanding on imperialist nostalgia, which revolves around the paradox that: "A person kills somebody, and then mourns the victim. In more attenuated form, somebody deliberately alters a form of life, and then regrets that things have not remained as they were prior to the intervention... In any of its versions, imperialist nostalgia uses a pose of 'innocent yearning' both to capture people's imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination" (34). We could also recall that Linda Hutcheon [SLIDE] in her work on Postmodern Nostalgia makes a point of "the *narratives* of nostalgia--from the Bible onward--[being] *male* stories, Oedipal stories which are alienating to women (who usually remain at home like Penelope, while men wander the world and risk getting homesick).<sup>49</sup>" Feminism, Hutcheon notes, has "no tendency toward nostalgia, no illusion of a golden age in the past."<sup>48</sup> If this logic is correct, then we could simply conclude that Wilms is not an imperialist but a feminist, and Bowie [and Sönke Wortmann, the female director of *The Miracle of Bern*,] is the opposite.

But then we wouldn't have understood the psychic mechanism that allows someone like Wilms to work through his potential nostalgia and not remained mired in the past. To do so, we need to turn to the triad Zizek establishes in *Looking Awry* between pornography, nostalgia and montage. [SLIDE]

– the function of the nostalgic object [Zizek writes] is precisely to *conceal* the antinomy between eye and gaze – ie the traumatic impact of the gaze *qua* object – by means of its power of fascination. In nostalgia, the gaze of the other is in a way domesticated, “gentrified”; instead of the gaze erupting like a traumatic, disharmonious blot, we have the illusion of ‘seeing ourselves seeing’, of seeing the gaze itself. [I.e. Kafka’s parable “The Door of the Law”] (Zizek, *Looking Awry*, 114)

Wilms, in this understanding, has learned how to handle the gaze of the other, possibly through his film-school training, but also possibly through his work in Russia and Asia (he is apparently fluent in Thai). He in any case has no need to domesticate or gentrify the gaze; he not only is aware of [SLIDE] “the gaze of the ‘other,’ of the hypothetical, mythic spectator from the [’80s] who was supposedly still able to identify immediately with the [GDR] universe” (112), but he confronts us with this other by intersplicing and juxtaposing images from the time with contemporary images. Wilms in this respect confirms Zizek’s model in that he is able by means of montage to overcome the seductive pull of pornography, which in showing all reverses the gaze and turns it on the spectator, who then can wallow in narcissistic pleasure.

Which is what Bowie presents himself as doing in “Where Are We Now?.” In reducing himself in the video to a living mask and inserting his face into a cutout on a screen, Bowie becomes a sad, Harlequin-esque figure, while at the same time [SLIDE] trying to remain a part of the present [his head is shown perched on top of a stuffed doll in the studio at the same time it peers out from the cut-out in the screen]. What we indeed have is, to return to Zizek, “the illusion of ‘seeing [him] seeing’, of seeing the

gaze itself." Bowie positions himself in the video as the gaze, "erupting like a traumatic, disharmonious blot" out of the screen. However, a later image of him in the video wearing a ...Song of Norway t-shirt [SLIDE] allows us to qualify which part of the gaze Bowie wants those of us proficient in Internet searches to identify him identifying with.<sup>4</sup> Apparently "in 1969, a woman called Hermione Farthingale, then the great love of Bowie's life, left him to go and be in a film. It was said he never got over it. That film was called *Song of Norway*" – cf. Heawood). This past loss, Bowie seems to be implying, has made him "a man lost in time" for whom place has become imaginary. For those like Wilms, who are aware of, and invested in, "the gaze of the hypothetical, mythic spectator from the ['80s] who was supposedly still able to identify immediately with the [GDR] universe" (112), viewing Bowie's video is very off-putting. Such viewers know that the lyrics and the images don't correspond, that the Dom [SLIDE] is nowhere near KaDeWe, and so are confronted with the realization that a fascination with the nasty, criminalized parts of (particularly East) Berlin's past have erupted into the memories of Western consumption – going shopping at KaDeWe and having a drink in the Dschungel [SLIDE] on Nürnbergerstrasse, (which is missing the umlauts and in any case can't be shown because it closed in 1993, was gutted in 2006 and is now the 4-star Hotel Ellington [SLIDE] where the V&A is putting up the winners of the "Win a Bowie Inspired Weekend to Berlin" contest that they're running in conjunction with their big "Bowie Is" exhibition [SLIDE]). Unlike the two videos that have been released since "Where Are We Now?" – "The Stars (Are Out Tonight)" with Tilda Swinton and the controversial "The Next Day" critique of the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church, Bowie tries in "Where Are We Now?" to show all; his aim is to reverse the gaze and restore the fascination of Berlin's history. This desire is what Žižek understands as pornographic, and is a striking contrast to Wilms, who demonstrates with *Comrade Couture* that the business of the filmmaker can be like that of the architect, as

described by Anthony Vidler in *Warped Space* [SLIDE]: “not... to arrest the tempo of history, nor to return to a better time, but to deploy space in a historical way that recognizes its own temporality at the same time as it provides a momentary fusing of the two, a temporary respite for reflection and experience, and thus a momentary point of reference for the modern psyche: a ‘postspatial void,’ so to speak” (242).

To bring things to a very brief conclusion then: what we have here are two examples that recreate late-Cold War Berlin by combining archival images with a contemporary setting. To consider both nostalgic is to rob nostalgia of its diagnostic power. It is to depoliticize the discourse and remove the possibility of identifying the pornographic, whether it be 80s underground fashion on the part of the East German regime, which Wilms succeeds in showing, or that regime itself, which for Bowie remains in the realm of fascination.

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<sup>1</sup> selected filmography: Resampling the Past D 2010 | 16 min. | Regie: Marco Wilms Peter Weibel - My Life Peter Weibel - Mein Leben D 2010 | 52 min. | Regie: Marco Wilms Into the Night with Christopher Doyle and Nonzee Nimibutr Durch die Nacht mit Christopher Doyle und Nonzee Nimibutr D 2010 | 52 min. | Regie: Marco Wilms Comrade Couture Ein Traum in Erdbeerfolie D 2009 | 82 min. | Regie: Marco Wilms Horses in Oils Pferde in Öl D 2007 | 26 min. | Regie: Marco Wilms The Future is Now! The Art Avant-Garde of China conquers the Market (Serie) Die Zukunft ist Jetzt! Chinas Kunst Avant-Garde erobert den Markt (Serie) D 2007 | 4x 26min. | Regie: Marco Wilms, Ilka Franzmann Light Art (Serie) Lichtkunst (Serie) D 2006 | 3x 26min | Regie: Marco Wilms Tailor Made Dreams Maßgeschneiderte Träume D 2006 | 87 min. | Regie: Marco Wilms Hunde Helden in Thailand D 2005 | 43 min. | Regie: Marco Wilms Berlin Vortex Mittendrin D 2003 | 80min. | Regie: Marco Wilms Naam Djai - The River of the Heart Naam Djai - Der Fluß des Herzens D 2000 | 65 min. | Regie: Marco Wilms

<sup>2</sup> Roger Cook identified a similar anxiety in the “1980s wave of nostalgia in the Federal Republic for the West German material culture of the 1950s”: “The eastern German imaginary escape from a capitalist market economy in which the former citizens of the GDR are disadvantaged has a potential western counterpart. Western Germans feel a comparable anxiety with respect to an open and free global market that could flood their economy with less expensive products from developing countries. The Federal Republic had already gone through a preliminary stage in economic globalization with the gradual formation and expansion of first the Common Market and then the European Union. ... [This] may have been in part a reaction to fears about the economic consequences of the European Union” (214-5). Not coincidentally, the subsequent EU enlargement of 2004 was accompanied by films that were similarly nostalgic for the 50s, such as *Das Wunder von Bern* about the great German soccer victory of 1954.

<sup>3</sup> or as Vidler puts it, “nostalgia for the true, natal home,”

<sup>4</sup> in 1969, a woman called Hermione Farthingale, then the great love of Bowie’s life, left him to go and be in a film. It was said he never got over it. That film was called *Song of Norway*. So what does it all mean? Bowie used to eschew nostalgia, always preferring the new. Now, four years off his seventies, with [rumours of ill-health](#) abounding (though always denied), he has created a beautiful new thing by rummaging through in the jigsaw pieces of his life and throwing them around, seeing where they lie.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/david-bowie-has-gone-from-new-to-old-and-what-a-beautiful-thing-it-is-8443239.html>