

Censorship as a Vocation: The Institutions, Practices, and Cultural Logic of Media Control in the German Democratic Republic

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My news today is that censorship is hardly ever censorship.

— — — Arthur Miller, “On Censorship and Laughter”

What do you think you would find on the desk of a censor? He — almost certainly “he” — would not need much. A jar filled with blue pencils. A coffee cup. A phone for whispering praise to the higher-ups and for ignoring the entreaties of his victims. For reading material, an ideological reference manual or a dog-eared sheaf of instructions would suffice. Surely, one would not expect to find any actual books on the censor’s shelves — why read when your life is committed to eviscerating literature?

What sort of person sits behind this desk? How did “he” come into this line of work in the first place and what motivates his daily practice of it? Does any little boy or girl dream of becoming a censor when s/he grows up?

Censorship is enigmatic, the antithesis in so many respects of our vocational beings as intellectuals. In fact, it is fair to say that the censor is the anti-intellectual. As one of our peers intimately familiar with censorship and its agents, J. M. Coetzee, has testified, “Censorship is not an occupation that attracts intelligent, subtle minds” (1996:viii). What more need be said? Censorship is a

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crude business: punitive, petty, anti-humanitarian, and far beneath the work of the truly gifted and intelligent.

Like any negation of self, one hardly wants to know more about the censor, because one is already certain enough what composes him: the absence of morality and ethics, the inversion of standards and norms, the immersion in the abyss of power onto which the writing of (good) intellectuals should always instead seek to cast light. As the historian Robert Darnton writes, “The trouble with the history of censorship is that it looks so simple: it pits the children of light against the children of darkness . . .” (1995:40; also Jansen 1988: 4) My opening question is along the same lines: Why is the censor such a convenient fulcrum of intellectual counter-distinction, one who, like a vampire, labors extractively in darkness so that the rest of us might work productively under the sun? What does our relationship to the censor tell us about our relationship to our own intellectual practices and about our strategies of identity-formation as “intellectuals?”

In this essay, I will make the somewhat counter-intuitive argument that, as a kind of operation upon public language and upon public knowledge, censorship is a productive intellectual practice not unlike other professional intellectual labors. And, I will argue further that, under certain social and historical conditions, censorship may even be regarded as an intellectual vocation.¹ This is a line of argument that has already become significantly less counter-intuitive over the past decade. Academic writings on censorship no longer approach censorship as an undifferentiated evil, but rather have begun to analyze censorship as a complex configuration of both restrictive and productive textual practices further mediated by dynamics of social and historical context.² In this, a “new” academic discourse on censorship has gradually sought distance from the more transparent understanding of censorship mobilized in periodicals such as *Index on Cen-*

¹ In this essay and elsewhere (n.d.; 2000) I utilize an expanded technical definition of “intellectual” as “knowledge-specialist.” By “intellectual practice,” then, I mean actual individual and social practices oriented to the composition, accreditation, and dissemination of “knowledge” (habituated semiotic order).

² A number of scholars have noted that “censorship” should not simply be seen as restrictive practice but also as productive of knowledge. Miklós Haraszti’s *The Velvet Prison* (1987) remains one of the most developed arguments for analyzing the actual practices of censorship as cultivating and seductive, rather than as interdictive in the traditional sense. More recent studies have also called simplified paradigms of “censorship” into question with evidence of the complexity and heterogeneity of operations upon knowledge condensed under this rubric: Burt (1994); Choldin and Friedberg (1989); Darnton (1995); Holquist (1994); and Jansen (1988). There have also been a number of excellent historiographies of censorial practices that illuminate censorship as an everyday practice in historical context, most often from the perspective of literary intellectuals in tension with governmental efforts to regulate print production (for example, Burt 1993; Patterson 1984; also Johns 1998; see Wortham 1997:506–10 for a review of further texts). Finally, Pierre Bourdieu’s (1991) link of censorship to the negotiation of relations of authority and expertise in fields of intellectual production is valuable for drawing comparisons between censorship within state-socialist and market-capitalist states. These implications have been elaborated in the analysis of Western academic life by Bourdieu himself (1988), as well as by Buskirk (1992) and Wortham (1997), among others.

sorship and has called the utility of the category of “censorship” itself into question. Yet this has also neither been an easy nor a complete reconceptualization of censorial activity. Simon Wortham explains the discomfort that nominally “critical” academic intellectuals have with normalizing censorship as an intellectual practice: “it seems to me that any departure from the notion of censorship as ‘bad’ is troubling to the modern-liberal mind mainly because it destabilizes an oppositional logic which identifies knowledge as ‘good’” (1997: 510). I will return to Wortham’s insight in the conclusion of this essay: The relationship of the intellectual subject both to the actual and the imagined practices of textual control condensed under the rubric of “censorship” has a great deal to do with sustaining a phenomenology of the “good” productivity of knowledge. More specifically, I will argue that this “oppositional logic” seeks to recover a positive, non-alienated relationship between the intellectual subject’s experience of intellectual labor and the epistemic objects of his or her intellectual productivity.

Nevertheless, despite the recent move to complexify “censorship” as an analytical category, there is still apparently only modest interest in investigating the censor’s point of view. Much of what is written on actual practices of censorship is, reasonably enough given its authors and audience, oriented to the experience of the victim of censorship. A practitioner’s account of why or how one performs acts of censorship is rarely forthcoming (see, however, Darnton 1991:202–17). In the first place, perhaps, there have been logistical problems—regardless of ideological orientation, states do not willingly grant potentially subversive outsiders access to their most intimate operations upon knowledge. But there is also a certain chauvinism implicit in our comfort with the silence of censors—these are “functionaries” not “intellectuals,” it is convenient to believe, relatively mindless agents of power who destroy because they are unable to create, and thus we expect they will predictably justify practices that they scarcely understand.

This selective academic interest in censorship is paralleled, it is worth noting, by the academy’s hesitancy to publicize its own corrective operations upon knowledge. Corporate pressures upon media selectivity have been well-documented (see Bagdikian 1997; Herman and Chomsky 1988; McChesney 1997) but considerably less is said, for example, about the compromises to individual vision forced by the “peer review” system in the humanities and social sciences that mediates the great majority of academic publications.³ Of course, one may

³ Harcum and Rosen (1993) and Shils (1990) are two examples. It should be noted by contrast that there is a well-developed critical literature in the physical, biological, medical, and statistical sciences on the institution of peer review and its effect upon the constitution of scientific knowledge (Chubin and Hackett 1990; Daniel 1993; Weeks and Kinser 1994). One possible explanation for the greater critical interest in peer review within the biological, chemical, and medical sciences is the perception that it may contribute to various forms of “bias” in scientific results (Lock 1985: 26–38). With no such overarching expectation of bias-free knowledge in the post-1960s social-scientific mainstream, peer review may never have become singled out as a mediating process worthy of great reflexive interest.

simply argue that peer review and related “gatekeeper” practices are matters of safeguarding professional standards and not genuine “censorship” (denoting ideologically oriented interdiction). But, does academic professionalism itself not also involve the socialization of individual authorship, the definition of the parameters of legitimate intellectual activity, the cultivation of generic “disciplinary” standards of research methods, interpretation, and representation, and so on? It is even more striking, given the proliferation of reflexive social science over the past two decades, that “peer review” and other epistemic standardizing practices have not emerged as sites of ethnographic inquiry. To date, there have been only captivating glimpses into the complexity of our own processes of knowledge-making, such as Moshe Shokeid’s account of his dialogue with one of his manuscript editors, “This dialogue of collaboration gives evidence of a deep engagement in a joint venture but also . . . of a confrontation of conflicting positions and, at times, mutual irritation” (1997: 634; see also Brenneis forthcoming; Lutz 1990).

SALVAGING KNOWLEDGE OF CENSORIAL RELATIONS

My case study of censorship will be the rituals, practices, and institutions of media control in the German Democratic Republic. This is an apt case because relatively open access to the archival records of a collapsed authoritarian state offers rare glimpses into the complexity of censorial mechanisms that are carefully and energetically occluded by “living” states. At the same time, studying the media-control system of a collapsed state creates particular methodological problems. This essay is not directly based upon participant-observational research, rather it is a work of historical ethnography that seeks to reconstruct intimate knowledge of an institutional system and its allied practices from archival documents, historical narratives, and personal memories of first-hand experiences of censorship from a place that no longer exists.⁴ This in no way involves implicit criticism of Malinowskian field methods, rather it is a kind of complementary “salvage anthropology”⁵ that capitalizes upon the rare opportunity of access to a collapsed state’s archival nexus in order to gain different insights into that state’s logic of cultural production and control. This opportunity is what allows the essay to construct knowledges of “the censor’s perspective” and of the immediate social context of media-control practices which would be unavailable, now or then, through participant-observational methods.⁶ Of course, what is sacrificed in pursuing this opportunity is the kind of

⁴ I completed over one hundred interviews with former GDR journalists in 1996 and 1997 (ranging in status from freelance journalists to former chief editors) as part of a broader ethnographic project on the professional transition of former East German media professionals to life and work in the unified German media system. In these interviews, and in countless other informal interactions, the topic of censorship both in the GDR and in the post-unification media emerged frequently.

⁵ I thank John Borneman for suggesting this characterization of the project.

⁶ In fact, I tried very hard to find censors (Agitation Department employees) who would speak with me about their past practice but was rebuffed in several instances. The criminalization of the

“thick” description which accompanies traditional ethnographic representation. I have provided contextual historical material (both remembered and archived) to help fill this gap, but I ask the reader’s understanding in advance that even densely articulated historical ethnography will not be able to imitate the experiential “there-ness” of traditional ethnography. Nevertheless, even if the observed praxis of the censor remains elusive in this text, the censor’s praxis is neither occluded nor secluded in my analysis. The anthropological value of this project should be evaluated comparatively in terms of what light its analysis of the structures and practices of censorship in the GDR might shed on other economies of representation and knowledge, inside other authoritarian states and elsewhere.

The structure of this essay grounds my analysis of the practice of censorship in the GDR in both social-historical and institutional-cultural contexts. The first section explores how the production of *Kultur* (culture) became central to the agenda of the two German party-states (the Third Reich and the GDR). In each, a politicized faction of intellectuals sought monopoly control over state power to realize a social agenda first articulated among the nineteenth-century German cultural bourgeoisie—the world-historical transcendence of the particularities and contradictions of capitalism and the cultivation of a new modern *Volk* (people, nation) held together by means of a non-extractive (that is, homogeneous and state-directed) economy of cultural production. The second and third sections explore how the entire apparatus of media control in the German Democratic Republic was organized toward actualizing this agenda. The exercise of what I term “hermeneutic power” in the party-state was explicitly focused on the perfection of public language as the natural vehicle of the incipient *Volk*’s awareness of itself. The fourth section describes how, within this cultural logic of media control, the purification of semantic and referential features of language became an object of the greatest intellectual artistry and significance. For the functionaries working in the Agitation Division (*ZK-Abteilung Agitation*) of the GDR party-state, “censorial practices” (among them, the editing, licensing, and criticism of media texts) were treated as truly vocational activities since even minute textual and lexical calibrations were believed to contribute to the greater welfare of the *Volk*. The everyday life of censorship in the GDR was, from the perspective of its practitioners, suffused with a gentle, progressive aura not unlike the elusive vestiges of vocationalism present in any intellectual profession embedded in an institutional context. The essay thus moves beyond the distancing critique of censorship as “who will get whom” (Holquist 1994:15–16) and toward the ethnographic analysis of censorship as a complex of intellectual practices in social-historical context.

GDR regime in unified German public culture after 1990 had made most of the central figures unwilling to grant interviews to either journalists or scholars.

THE PLACE AND IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION
IN A GERMAN PARTY-STATE

Before turning to the actual institutions and practices of media control in the German Democratic Republic, it is vitally important to understand something of their historical context and ideological justification in the East German party-state. I have developed the argument at length elsewhere that the evolution of the party-state as a societal-political form in Germany was directly linked to the nationalist ideologies developed by factions of the German *Bildungsbürgertum* (cultural bourgeoisie) during the nineteenth century (Boyer n.d.).⁷ By “cultural bourgeoisie” I am referring to a caste of social actors who defined their social identity primarily through the distinction of *Bildung* (education, moral formation). Included in this group were civil servants, pastors, “free” professionals like doctors and lawyers, academics, literati, and a host of more marginal actors including journalists and freelance writers (Conze and Kocka 1985; Giesen 1998; and Giesen, Junge, and Kritschgau 1994; Kocka 1988). To summarize very briefly: I treat the language of national German *Kultur* that developed in the politically disarticulated and culturally hybrid setting of German-speaking Central Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a communitarian horizon (an idealized sphere of collective belonging) and as an epistemic product of the German intelligentsia. Although the language of German national belonging claimed an inscrutable timeless essence for the German *Volk*, I demonstrate, following Norbert Elias (1994) and Bernhard Giesen (1998), that “German-ness” was a work-in-progress of German knowledge-specialists, actively crafted to produce a vision of collective culture consonant with intellectuals’ own phenomenological intuitions about the nature of social relations. While *Kultur* indeed came to mean different things in different times (and different things to different people in the same times), its structural position as an index of cultural unity and vitality remained constant in the social imagination of the *Bildungsbürgertum*. Let me emphasize this point: my argument is not that the terms *Kultur* and *Volk* were semantically homogeneous over the two hundred year period I discuss (they were not). My argument is rather that among the German-speaking educated cultural elite of Central Europe these terms were systematically, indexically deployed throughout this period as key signifiers of imagined, collective “German-ness.”

In truth, until the latter half of the nineteenth century, there was little political or societal reality to “being nationally German” beyond the discursive networks and creative expressions of the German intelligentsia itself (Sheehan 1981:8–10). The German-speaking states of Central Europe were (from the point of view of its nascent cultural bourgeoisie) hopelessly locally oriented and

⁷ To be clear, I am not arguing that the party-state, as a governmental form, is somehow ethnotypically “German.” My concern here is rather to identify the centrality of the cultural bourgeoisie in the development of the political forms of the nation-state and the party-state in German-speaking Central Europe.

vernacularized in their actual existence, sharply in contrast to the potential trans-locality that German intellectuals sensed through the expanding networks of their own social relationships (Giesen 1998:67–70). Unlike other European cultural bourgeoisies (particularly in the French and British cases), the German cultural bourgeoisie elaborated a language of nationality free of centralized state apparatuses and of systematized trans-local institutional and professional frameworks, and also of a strongly socially integrated commercial bourgeoisie (Blackbourn 1991:4).

With no concerted challenge to their own vision of national wholeness, “German-ness” became indelibly modeled on the social experience of intellectuals themselves. They perceived in their own trans-local social networks a systematicity of communication and caste consciousness. This systematicity was, the *Bildungsbürger* told themselves and others, no accidental network. Rather it was evidence of a sacred, intangible inner unity of a collective ethnic belonging (a *Volkgeist*) that would extend itself forth historically to integrate, purify, and sublimate the vulgar masses of locally embedded German-speakers into a powerful ethnic *Volk* with an awareness of its own collective being, agency, and history (Giesen 1998:80–102). Thus, because the lineaments of their own social networks depended on trans-local communication, language became objectified as the essential tissue of all social belonging for the German cultural bourgeoisie. Language was, alongside principles of consanguinity and territoriality, treated as a mystic source of interconnectedness that formed the distinctive character of German national *Kultur* (see von Humboldt 1988:42; also Herder 1966; and Bauman and Briggs 2000:170–94).

Because of their idiosyncratic experience of nationality as a meaningful order of collective belonging, the *Bildungsbürgertum* claimed for themselves the role of *Kulturträger* (literally “bearers” of culture) of an incipient German nation-state (McClelland 1982; Elias 1994; Giesen 1998). In the philosopher Fichte’s vision, the enlightened culture bearers would mediate the production of a *Kulturstaat* (cultural state) of institutions to contain and to reproduce the symbolic and moral orders of national essence (see McClelland 1982:50). Utilizing institutions such as the university and the print media to preach standardized German linguistic and cultural orders, German intellectuals indeed sought over the course of the nineteenth century to rationalize and nationalize cultural production in order to release the ostensibly inevitable progress of organic national development from the uncultivated vernacularities of actually-existing German-ness (Bauman and Briggs 2000:166–69; Blackall 1978; Boyer n.d.; Ziolkowski 1990). The cultural bourgeoisie thus worked to convert the indexicality of their trans-local experience into referential systems which would stabilize the meanings, principles, and traits of “being German” (a process Michael Silverstein has termed “nationalist deixis” [2000:121]). Of course, the intellectuals routinely claimed quite the opposite, that intellectual activity was simply formalizing the true spirit of the *Volk* on their behalf. Herder wrote,

“A poet is the creator of a nation around him, he shows them a world and has their souls in his hand to lead them there. That is how it should be” (in Bauman and Briggs 2000:182–83).

The bad news for the cultural bourgeoisie was that their relatively privileged relationship to the articulation of national culture shifted over the course of the nineteenth century as the social networks of the German industrial bourgeoisie became integrated with those of the German aristocratic elite. The actual course of national development after the middle of the nineteenth century was increasingly negotiated by a restricted convivial arrangement of grand-bourgeois and aristocratic-statal interests (Blackbourn and Eley 1984). In this new arrangement of powers within the German societal elite, intellectuals saw the fruits of their advocacy for national systematicity increasingly co-opted in the name of industrial productivity. The spiritual character of the *Volk* became not the ultimate object of national labor but instead simply an opportune medium for rationalizing consumption patterns and for expanding networks of commodity circulation and capital accumulation. At the same time, the imagined totality of the cultural bourgeoisie was strained by increasing labor specialization and factionalization within its own ranks (see Giesen, Junge, and Kritschgau 1994:372–76; Ringer 1969).

Kultur became less and less a common point of departure for German intellectuals and more and more a fiercely contested object of debate in its own right. Every intellectual faction believed it had legitimate authority to build a referential system around the now-established “fact” of German cultural identity. Each intellectual faction, however, also sensed that its claims for cultural unity and harmony were structurally invalidated by numerous competing claims of cultural essentialism. As Durkheim wrote of totemism in the *Elementary Forms*, the “contagiousness of the sacred” (that is, the fundamental fluidity of symbolic relationships due to the symbol’s juxtaposition of abstract social value with concrete objects) is the anxious condition at the root of all ritual practice oriented to maintaining collective categorization (1995:224, 325–29). The paroxysmal language of “cultural crisis” at the end of the nineteenth century vividly demonstrates the German cultural bourgeoisie’s misrecognition of their own increasing epistemic hybridity (cf. Mannheim 1946:37–39). The contagiousness and increasing indistinctiveness of central totemic categories of national belonging such as *Kultur* and *Volk* in the context of rampant intellectual specialization and factionalism was at the root of the malaise that many attributed variously to modernity, to capitalism, or to capital’s anthropomorphic agents—the Jews (Postone 1980; Newborn 1994; also Stark 1981; and Giesen, Junge, and Kritschgau 1994:380–92). In my argument, it was the explosion of heteroglossic discourse around national identity from *within* the cultural bourgeois elite and the inevitable polysemy that infected terms such as *Volk* and *Nation* that was the actual root of the cultural elite’s phenomenological anxiety about their cultural order slipping away.

The polysemy of *Kultur* was feared to herald the end of German identity since *Kultur* was the central index of collective self-identification as “being nationally German.” The many factions within the German intelligentsia shared an intuition of the “national” condition of linguistic and cultural homogeneity having been perverted by exterior forces. Thus, various factions carefully developed and tenaciously disseminated ideological programs aimed at recapturing the cultural unity “lost” to the capitalist deformation of modernity (for examples, see Mosse 1998 and Ringer 1969). It was from within this context of intellectual-cultural anxiety and the political, social, and economic instability of the 1920s that the imagination of socialist and fascist party-states emerged. The party-state, according to my thesis, was foremost a political solution to forestall heterogeneity within intellectual culture that cloaked itself under the manifest rationale of seeking to “reintegrate” the fragmentary German *Volk* through the mass production of a natural *Kultur* by and for “the people.” Although, as noted, this “lost” cultural unity was itself ideological—a transposition of enlightenment-era networks of intellectual exchange into a vision of homogeneous collective consciousness—it nonetheless was viscerally understood by many factions of the German cultural bourgeoisie as the essence of their vocational injunction to lead German society either back or forward to a modern or non-modern “wholeness.”

Both the Nazi and GDR party-states sought to transcend the heterogeneity of discourse on the nation by fusing a single intellectual faction (the vanguard party) and its prevailing ideology and hermeneutics of everyday life into the political center of an administrative and institutional apparatus. Intellectual diversity would be thus circumvented and intellectual legitimacy would be clearly defined: one was either “for” or “against” the vanguard party’s epistemic settlements. And, since the vanguard party designated itself as the articulator and enabler of the collective intention and virtue of the *Volk*, the standardization of epistemic production in the party-state around the knowledge-laborers of the party elite would have the cascading effect of producing a non-contradictory public culture on behalf of the *Volk* (see Mosse 1966:133–96). The state would transform itself, so the model went, from a shield for aristocratic and capitalistic privilege into a “culturing” force oriented to the intuition, articulation, and reproduction of a purified language of mass national belonging. Thus, the state would, in its daily practice, become the political and organizational mechanism for the actualization of the cultural bourgeoisie’s national imagination (cf. Szelényi 1982; Konrád and Szelényi 1979).

Given this intensification of the social agenda of the nineteenth-century *Bildungsbürgertum*, it is sensible that the vanguard *Kulturträger* of the Nazi party-state (the NSDAP party) and of the GDR (the SED party) approached mass cultural production (especially in the arts, schools, and the mass media) as cornerstones of their programs of social engineering (see Bathrick 1995; Hale 1964; Jäger 1995; Mosse 1966; von Hallberg 1996; Weinreich 1999; Wulf

1966). In general, the Nazi party-state was far less rationalized and centralized in its approach to mass cultural production (this was also true of its political organization; Broszat 1981). Likewise, the manifest social agendas of the two party-states were wholly different, with the Nazis urging tribalist and biopolitical cultural traditionalism and deriding the logic of enlightened progress via collective modernization which became so central to SED social imagination. But I see the two party-states nonetheless as parallel political responses to the climate of anxiety and pessimism about national-cultural decline which became widespread in mainstream German intellectual culture in the late nineteenth century and which reached its crescendo in the Weimar period (see Ringer 1969).

In a GDR textbook on the theory and practice of socialist journalism, *Kultur* is defined as “the totality of the ends and means of human activity,” and thus its perfection became a central objective of the socialist program:

The incontrovertible first maxim of the socialist cultural programme states that all *Kultur* belongs to the *Volk*. The *Volk* is the creator of *Kultur* and therefore all values of *Kultur* must flow back to them. Under socialism, we abolish the artificial division of *Kultur* inherited from antagonistic social relations, where there is a *high* culture for the benefit of a ‘spiritual elite’ and a *low* culture for the ‘great mass’ of the *Volk*. By eliminating the isolation of workers from the considerable achievements of humanity, *Kultur* is realized for the first time as an inalienable human right (Poerschke et al. 1983: 230).

Kultur was, according to the SED, in its natural state both the source and the end of the *Volk*’s labor — it congealed a complete economy of social values deduced from an homogeneous ethnic-national collectivity. But, under capitalist relations of production, of “*Volk*-hostile imperialistic mass culture,” (ibid.: 231) *Kultur* became detached, much like Marx’s theory of estranged labor (1978), into an alienable formality permitting both the fetishization of *Kultur* as a commodity form and the accumulation of the finest human cultural products by a few at the expense of the majority. The SED declared that the historical caesura of the party-state would reverse the cultural deformation of the elite culture/mass culture split. It promised all individuals in the cultural nation the future inalienable pleasure of the total fruits of *Kultural* production.

It is impossible to correctly understand the policies and institutions of the SED party-state if one interprets its objectives as governed by a *zweckrational* thirst for power for its own sake. The socialist party-state explicitly conceived itself and oriented its practice as the antithesis of this model of (petty) politics. The party-state was committed to harnessing the enormous socializing potential of a modern administrative apparatus in order to fulfill the Fichtean vision of the *Kulturstaat* — a state which existed solely to cultivate and to mediate the totality of the *Volk*’s own creative activity and to restore its fruits, *Kultur*, to its rightful creators. This noble project at the horizon of everyday activity, so akin to the national vocation sought by intellectuals in the previous century, explains why many, perhaps most, professional intellectuals in the GDR participated so actively and unapologetically in an industry of cultural production dismissed in

the West as a mindless, mechanized “information dictatorship” (Holzweissig 1997:9).

Of course the SED did not undertake this project in a geopolitical vacuum. And, yet, Soviet hegemony over GDR political culture largely strengthened the legitimacy of the SED party-state as an agent of international socialism and provided international incentives to the GDR to further elaborate, centralize, and rationalize its governance over cultural production. In this, national and international inclinations toward the party-state’s rationalization of public cultural production dovetailed with one another.

THE *LENKUNGSSYSTEM*: HERMENEUTIC POWER
AND MEDIA CONTROL IN THE GDR

In his memoir, former journalist and Politburo member Günter Schabowski — a man who will likely be best remembered for having issued the vaguely worded announcement about future travel-rights that catalyzed the stampede to the Berlin Wall on the night of 9 November 1989 — described his experience of the logic and exercise of power in the GDR:

The outward similarities [of the GDR] with the old courtly society are clear. To draw attention to them then only serves a metaphorical or polemical purpose. Perhaps not, for I see another, more substantial connection. Kingship was a form of power that did not legitimate itself through clever and profitable reactions to economic forces. Quite the contrary, obsessions with prestige and extravagance eventually stumbled suicidally against sound economic rationality. Economic reason then was elevated by the successor bourgeois society into the position of a God. Since economic sense was not alone the foundation of power and existence for a kingship, it had to be justified through a mythos, an ideology — the doctrine of divine right. The feudal-courtly society was ideological, a ‘mind-society’ [*Kopfgesellschaft*], a society which one had to believe in, in contradistinction to the ‘stomach-society’ [*Magengesellschaft*] of capitalism.

Capitalism doesn’t need an ideology to function, or, put another way, it permits a thousand different ideologies. Our socialism on the other hand was focused on consciousness (Schabowski 1991:119–20).

What was at stake in control over cultural production in the party-state, as we have discussed above, was the control of the production of collective consciousness (see Lenin 1961; 1962; also Jansen 1988:105–8). But guaranteeing that the production of *Kultur* could be industrialized (in this sense, reproduced institutionally on a mass scale) without the alienation of the *Volk* from its cultural forms was by no means a simple matter. In fashioning their cultural agenda, consumption was given relatively little attention by the party elite. It was assumed that the perfectly crafted cultural product would be correctly consumed because the state-sponsored public culture was, to follow its logic, inalienable from the *Volk*’s own latent cultural productivity. On the other hand, for the same reason, public cultural production was considered rife with potential wrong turns and dangers. If it failed to produce an organically integrated public culture, the party-state recognized it would be producing nothing

more than the kind of marketplace of empty symbolic forms typical of the deceptive “mass culture” condemned by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1994). The party therefore invested an unimaginable amount of time and energy into the day-to-day regulation of its culture industries precisely because any public deviation from the established party hermeneutics of everyday life was taken to signal a relapse into the dissonant, hybrid, and thus regressive economies of cultural production they identified in the West.

The fundamental principle of power within the SED party elite was what I term, “hermeneutic power”: that is, the power to cultivate order in epistemic processes, to rationalize interpretive and representational practices (in this case) to a political ideology, and, subsequently, to define, institutionalize, and reproduce the parameters of legitimate and illegitimate knowledge (cf. Bourdieu 1991:165). In one well-known SED slogan, the principle of hermeneutic power was expressed as, “Much is waiting to be brought into order that is not yet brought into order.” The ultimate goal of the exercise of hermeneutic power was the harmonization of all individual intellectual labors in the GDR with the hermeneutics of social life calibrated within the party elite. Within the accredited institutional networks of GDR intellectual culture, modalities of hermeneutic power were diverse and manifested through myriad classificatory, interpretative, and analytic practices. Yet all the variations possessed two common threads. All indexed the “most advanced” order of knowledge, the *Wissenschaft* (science) of Marxism-Leninism, to sacralize their judgments. And, all substantiated their legitimacy by claiming to articulate the will of the *Volk*. The combination of the statuses associated with scientific rationality and cultural will vouchsafed a virtually impregnable sense of legitimacy for party hermeneutics (seen from the perspective of the party, of course).

The injunction of the party intellectual elite in the party-state was to provide systemic orders of ideation, interpretation, and communication to the chaos, individuality, and particularity that were assumed to be epistemically rampant in the empirical perception of reality. Perception offered signs, in the logic of the party, but only the party’s mediating hermeneutic power could offer the correct contextual meanings and reference for these signs by integrating percepts into the absolute scientific truth of Marxism-Leninism. Thus, the state’s control over public cultural production became an instrument aimed at rationalizing collective consciousness. And, GDR professional intellectuals such as journalists became, to quote Stalin, “engineers of the soul” (Jansen 1988:109).

The fundamental objective of media control in the GDR was the harmonization and calibration of the knowledge in circulation in the state-sponsored “public sphere” (cf. Habermas 1989) in keeping with the vicissitudes of party hermeneutics. The SED felt managing the economy of signs and meanings in its public sphere to be of such vital importance to their *Kulturstaat* that it required an elaborate *Lenkungssystem* (system of control) to regulate mass media production.

It is important to emphasize that restrictive control was focused primarily on the circulation of information. Like the administrative system in the GDR as a whole, the economy of legitimate information was centralized.⁸ At the infra-structural level, media control therefore began with the restructuring of the media networks in the GDR during the 1950s and 1960s to guarantee a centralized organization for the dissemination of party hermeneutics from the center in Berlin to its regional peripheries (Boyle 1992:129–37). New production centers for radio and television production were constructed in Berlin and its suburbs. Meanwhile, the print media were rationalized into a district (*Bezirk*) system that routed party hermeneutics from Berlin to each district-level SED office and to its *Bezirkszeitung* (regional newspaper), some of which had as many as twenty local editions with total circulations ranging between 150,000 and 600,000 (the flagship paper, *Neues Deutschland* by comparison published over a million copies a day for the country's population of 16 million). The SED also prohibited the distribution of any "news" from a non-GDR source.⁹

Instead, the SED set up centralized monopolies through a single news information service, the *Allgemeine Deutsche Nachrichtendienst* (ADN) and a single news photo service (see Boyle 1992:138–40; Minholz and Stirnberg 1995:203–14). ADN became an official state institution in 1953 and provisioned both the electronic and print media with its virtual monopoly on foreign correspondents, its vast local correspondent network throughout the GDR, its legitimate access to western press and wire service reports, and its control over all publishable photos. ADN thus exercised critical selective influence over what information could appear in the GDR media, especially in terms of foreign affairs. Radio and press coverage would often simply reproduce ADN reports verbatim, since every journalist knew the serious professional danger of inaccurately rewriting an ADN report. By restructuring institutional channels of informational flows, the party could and did guarantee a great deal of homogeneity in media forms simply as a result of the structuring of the flows.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the SED also worked assiduously to slowly wrest

⁸ Although the GDR was nominally legitimized "democratically" by a plurality of political parties, and although each of the SED's "competitor" parties (CDU, LDPD, NDPD, and DBD) were permitted to publish several regional papers of their own, the non-SED party presses submitted to nearly the same media controls as the much larger SED press did (see Holzweissig 1997:74–81). The paper supply of the non-SED press was also rationed such that circulations were held artificially low. There was no question, at any rate, that any of the non-SED affiliated papers could openly question the legitimacy of SED's role as the "vanguard party" in all matters cultural and political.

⁹ Nevertheless, the penetration of West German radio and television into all but the northeastern and southeastern corners of the GDR presented a constant source of public cultural forms beyond the SED's cultivating control. West German television in particular made the SED elite profoundly anxious, leading to calls for a "round-the-clock ideological engagement in the ether with bourgeois ideology" from SED General Secretary Erich Honecker in 1976 (Holzweissig 1983:13–14). One weekly GDR television program, *Der Schwarze Kanal* (The black channel), consisted entirely of point-by-point refutation of western media broadcasts and of ad hominem assaults against Western society.

control over the education and training of journalists away from the GDR journalists' union, the VDJ (see Blaum 1985). Although the union and its membership of professional journalists initially sought to win back the relative professional freedom of Weimar-era journalism, the SED finally broke the VDJ as an autonomous institution through pressure and attrition and integrated them by 1960 into a subsidiary role in the *Lenkungs-system*. The VDJ's advocacy for autonomous professional standards was quickly replaced with a single party supervised program for the training of socialist journalists at the Karl-Marx University in Leipzig. Through this institutional platform, the party was gradually able to insure that the threshold to journalistic professionalism in the GDR would henceforth require if not explicit party membership then at least party certification.

Within the institutional structure of the GDR mass media, there was no ministry of media control in the GDR; there were even no official "censors" in the media-control apparatus. In the first place, such an office would have violated the GDR constitution which until 1968 explicitly claimed a freedom for the press (see Holzweissig 1997:13); but, more importantly, it would have violated the SED's own claim to legitimacy as the mouthpiece of the *Volk*. If indeed the SED had interpreted and expressed the will of the *Volk* correctly, then what need would there be for censorship? Moreover, the fundamental principle of "party affiliation" (*Parteilichkeit*) in German political tradition demanded that the loyal party member be independently and willingly committed to the same ideological program as that articulated by the party leaders (see Requate 1995). The journalist was expected to be a loyal and enthusiastic *Parteisoldat* (party soldier) and not a cajoled functionary who had to be placed under constant surveillance.

At the level of intra-institutional practice, the mundane maintenance of hermeneutic power in the GDR media was attenuated to the production, distribution, and incorporation of the *Parteilinie* (party-line). The party-line was the given hermeneutic settlement the party elite had negotiated and determined for a given object of representation. A visual metaphor for the distribution network of the party-line would be cone-shaped. At the tip was the *Generalsekretär* (General Secretary) of the SED, a figure who embodied a tremendous structural fusion of absolute ideational power and absolute administrative power, much as the NSDAP had with their Führer, Adolf Hitler, who was both a political and military leader as well as a *Meinungsführer* (leader of opinion), the ultimate intellectual arbiter of the will of the *Volk*. The General Secretary's determinations of interpretive order were held sacrosanct at all inferior levels of party hierarchy (see Holzweissig 1997:33–34, and Boyle 1992:167, for diagrams of these relations). The channeling of hermeneutic power was largely unidirectional, descending and spreading outward from the General Secretary, constraining the daily epistemic works of the party's professional intelligentsia and yet infusing them with a world-historical purpose. Any sign of discord with the *Parteilinie*

in the lower hierarchical ranks was greeted with immediate public censure, party disciplinary actions, and, in the worst cases, also with being “sent into the desert” (*in die Wüste geschickt*) as party parlance described being cast out of the fertile cultural Eden of the SED.¹⁰

GDR media control likewise originated in the General Secretary’s personal supervision of day-to-day media production. Gunter Holzweissig describes the amount of time that General Secretary Erich Honecker (1971–1989) spent each day in editing and writing newspaper articles and commentaries as “unimaginable” (1997:60). Like his predecessor, Walter Ulbricht (1950–1971), Honecker dutifully and daily proofread the first few pages of the party central organ, *Neues Deutschland* (which contained verbatim the *Parteilinie* with regard to foreign and domestic news, coverage of party events, and political commentaries), made corrections down to the level of punctuation and diction, read a plethora of West German papers, scribed acrimonious and sometimes cryptic responses to them, and handed these on to the Politburo’s Secretary of Agitation for general circulation.

Honecker also routinely wrote news-bulletins to be circulated by the central news agency, ADN. The news agency became (like *Neues Deutschland*) an effective and efficient institutional medium through which the General Secretary could distribute the results of his hermeneutic labors. Honecker worked closely with then Secretary of Agitation, Joachim Herrmann to ensure that his articulation of the party line would be circulated without emendation or corruption. Rolf Schablinski, the Assistant Director of ADN from 1979 to 1989, testified at the 1990 trial of Herrmann that:

There was a comprehensive system in place for the co-ordination of information [*Informationen*] and news reports of national and international characters. All reports which were considered important had to be sent through the so-called ‘supply system’ either by telephone or in writing to Herrmann’s office. The decision whether the report in question could appear as is or whether it had to be re-written or whether Agitation would re-write it themselves was made there. ADN was obliged to publish the reports in question exactly as they were returned to us by Herrmann’s office. Herrmann himself had to confer with Honecker and the two of them reserved for themselves the final decision-making power about whether a particular report might be published or not.

Herrmann gave all of the reports to Honecker who personally edited them and released them. Herrmann then took these re-written reports to be sacred. Nothing could be

¹⁰ Between 1981 and 1988, GDR state records indicate there were 163,285 *Parteiverfahren* (political investigations) undertaken across the entire country to determine whether certain SED members or candidate-members “had to be distanced from the party because they stood against the general line of the party, because they denied the successes of our socialist state, or through unparty-like behavior or continuous grumbling and grouching damaged or betrayed the GDR” (in Modrow 1994:262). There were three possible outcomes of such proceedings: warning (*Rüge*), serious warning (*strenge Rüge*), or expulsion (*Ausschluss*). During the same period, some 62,124 (or 38 percent) of the *Parteiverfahren* resulted in expulsion (ibid:262–65). For expelled journalists, this also meant a *Berufsverbot* (professional exclusion), meaning one was no longer licensed to practice journalism in the GDR. One expelled journalist I interviewed nevertheless was allowed to teach classes on journalism at a secondary school.

changed or altered or added to them, even if they were factually incorrect or if the report was written in such a way as to be unintelligible (document AZ:111-1-90-3:8).

That even Honecker's spelling errors and factual inaccuracies were taboo (see also Boyle, 1992:171; Arnold and Arnold 1994:103–4) underscores his sanctified position in the party-state's economy of cultural production. Ordained the most expert among expert intellectuals, Honecker was invested with the privilege and responsibility of generating epistemic order from the orthographic to the hermeneutic.

This accounts for the otherwise perplexing issue of why a head of state would spend so much of his time writing newspaper commentaries and scrutinizing television broadcasts. The entire organization of the party-state was, perhaps to our minds obsessively, focused on public cultural production as the means to the actualization of *Volk* consciousness. As the *Meinungsführer* of the intellectual vanguard—and, with the mass media designated as networks of cultural reproduction, forges of pure mass consciousness, crucibles of party hermeneutics and centers of party organization—it is sensible that the General Secretary would involve himself in even minute ideological calibrations of the formal texts ready for circulation into the public sphere. So involved was Honecker with the negotiation of symbolic order, it is rumored that he on occasion even personally matched newsreaders' ties with the background sets of *Aktuelle Kamera*, the GDR nightly news program.

Although an illuminating ritual of hermeneutic power, the daily involvement of the General Secretary in media production was not systematic. The responsibility for comprehensively managing mass media production on a day-to-day basis fell to the Agitation Division of the Central Committee (for the SED press), to the GDR state Press Office (for the non-SED press), and to the State Committees on Radio and Television (for the electronic mass media). The autonomy of the latter two state regulatory offices was largely illusory, however, since the Press Office and both State Committees received daily instructions and feedback from the Agitation Division, were directed by loyal SED elites, and referred all major decisions directly to the Secretary of the Agitation Division, who was appointed as a member of the Politburo (Holzweissig 1997; Boyle 1992). The Agitation Division therefore possessed nearly complete authority to monitor the entire GDR mass media, to make any changes in personnel and content they deemed necessary, and to give journalists hourly, daily, and weekly updates of minute adjustments to the *Parteilinie*, handed down to them in turn from the Politburo. The surveillance of regional mass media meanwhile fell under the immediate jurisdiction of the local SED party branch and its own Agitation staff. These regional offices received the full range of daily advisories from the central office in Berlin but apparently retained some autonomy, in keeping with the vassalage principle, to regulate the local media themselves.

The Agitation Division issued a continuous stream of supplemental advisories to the heads of the GDR media that articulated adjustments to party hermeneutics and argumentation (Arnold and Arnold 1994:98). The primary ritual for disseminating these advisories was the infamous (among journalists) Thursday “argumentation sessions,” also known colloquially as the “Argus” (Bürger 1990; also Büro Schabowski DY 30/IV 2/2.040/6 and consecutive files). These were formal meetings to which the organizational directors in the GDR media were “invited” and which were held in the Central Committee building and supervised by the Director of the Agitation and Propaganda Division who was a direct subordinate of the Secretary for Agitation. The instrumental purpose of these meetings was threefold: (1) to articulate the *Parteilinie* for the upcoming week along with detailed instructions about which events were of particular ideological or symbolic significance; (2) to circulate a list of tabooed themes and words which were not to be circulated in the GDR media; and (3) to mete out specific criticisms or praises for individual organizations who had or had not fulfilled the expectations of the party elite over the past week. Although these argumentation sessions were putatively dialogues between the Agitation experts and leading journalists about how best to fulfill the injunction of socialist journalism, most participants recall them as didactic monologues intended to discipline leaders of the GDR media into acknowledging the absolute sanctity of the party line.

Hans-Dieter Schütt, then chief editor of the SED Youth League daily *Junge Welt*, describes the Wednesday meetings of the Agitation Commission that preceded and prepared the material for the larger Thursday gatherings as follows:

As a rule we waited there for more than an hour for [Agitation Secretary] Herrmann who always arrived out of breath from a meeting with Honecker. Then he held a three- or four-hour monologue about current events and that was that. It was basically just like receiving orders in the army, but at a more elite level. I still have in memory the mental image of a group of intimidated, nodding, feverishly note-taking, but above all, silent media leaders, myself included. In the most extreme cases, they might throw significant glances at one another, but then certainly with the feeling that they had probably gone too far. Resistance with one’s eyebrows! (in Holzweissig 1997:26–27).

Although Schütt recalls the meetings as a ritualized genuflection to the power of the party-line, others present at these meetings suggested to me that they actually delivered other kinds of information: ministers, directors of state firms, and other experts were invited to speak on a wide range of topics, often quite frankly. What was absolutely clear to those listening, at any rate, was that any information that chafed against the party’s interpretation of its own success was to be held strictly in the confidence of an intellectual elite (who the party believed were intellectually mature enough to cope with the contradiction between party interpretation and perceptual reality) but under no circumstances to be merged into public representation.

Gunter Holzweissig offers a composite sample list of taboos and rationales

taken from the notes of Dieter Langguth, an Assistant Director in the Agitation Division from 1984 to 1989 (1997: 38). A few of the more striking interdictions included:

- Do not use the term, ‘State Circus.’ (It could make the state seem ridiculous. Out of spite, one newspaper then used ‘GDR Circus.’ This was promptly forbidden as well.)
- Nothing about formaldehyde. (People could become afraid of getting cancer.)
- Nothing about putting, lawn bowling, villas, or boulevards. (They awaken desires which we are not capable of satisfying.)
- Do not photograph the fruit on the tables at official receptions. (Otherwise the people will become envious.)
- Nothing about Bratwurst-kiosks. (People are already eating enough meat.)
- Nothing about homemade gliders. (People may think to escape.)
- Nothing about Formula 1 racing. (We cannot afford it.)

Censorial taboos often appear emblematic of the arbitrariness of state power as it seeks to stifle intellectual creativity. Yet, in the logic of the hermeneutic power of the party-state, such surveillance over signification was essential to purifying public knowledge of illegitimate epistemic forms. The SED’s understanding of its interdictory interventions was that their aim was not so much to stifle journalistic creativity as to harness and to harmonize myriad acts of individual creativity into an orchestrated collective creativity evincing the collective consciousness of the *Volk*.

As Langguth’s list shows, the taboo system was largely aimed at productivity problems, specifically at failures of the planned economy to achieve sufficient productivity to satisfy popular demands. Many of the taboos were intended to block consumer desires by surgically removing lexical stimuli from mass consciousness. SED language ideology suggested that without the public representation of a sign or of a lexical construction such as “Formula 1 racing,” neither public consciousness of its referentiality nor the actual object of reference would exist: literally, “out of mind, out of sight.” Thus, for the SED’s media-control apparatus manipulating referential determination became a goal second only to control over the circulation of signs. We see here “the monologic terror of indeterminacy” that Michael Holquist writes is “the essence of all censorship” (1994:21).

The weekly ritual of the *Argu* was augmented by frequent phone calls from the Agitation Division to various individual media organizations with post-facto (most often negative) reactions to specific articles or broadcasts (Arnold and Arnold 1994:107). One reason that it is difficult to estimate the scale of this feature of the control apparatus precisely was that the majority of advisories were apparently delivered orally and without record (Holzweissig 1997:37). One chief editor I interviewed calculated that he received calls from Agitation functionaries on average perhaps twice a week, but that high-ranking functionaries from other ministries called him as well, if, for example, they wished to personally express outrage for what they saw as a less-than-glowing representation of some operation under their jurisdiction.

Regardless of the party's pretensions to a unified system of knowledge control, this abundance of advisories, warnings, and censures arrived on chief editors' desks in a haphazard way, with the weekly, daily, and hourly updates from the Agitation Division sometimes contradicting one another and with the threat of personal intervention by Honecker or Herrmann always on the horizon. Against the backdrop of this many headed hydra of the "party line," chief editors had the unenviable task of assessing every actual line of text produced within their institutions for "political errors" (*politische Fehler*) in the reportage. "Political error" was the term used broadly to denote any perceived dissonance between a given textual representation and the relevant settlement of the party line on the topic. Among the worst were those pursued post facto because some GDR media text had been picked up by the West German media in order to make the GDR or the SED seem foolish. One journalist described to me his worst political error as having mentioned the presence of potholes in East Berlin streets: "In and of itself that might not have been damning, but unfortunately for me the West Berlin press caught wind of the story. Thankfully, I had good contacts with western journalists via the Church so they couldn't discipline me too severely for fear of that information being leaked to the West as well."

Some chief editors reveled in the task of toeing the *Parteilinie* and in their relative elevation in the structure of hermeneutic power, and these individuals disciplined their journalists accordingly. Other chief editors, however, according to the testimony of former employees, attempted to deflect the arbitrariness of the taboo system and to protect their journalists from its most severe affects. Chief editors, at any rate, had some authority to insulate their journalists from the Agitation Division, especially if they had good personal *Beziehungen* (connections) in the Central Committee and were willing to "take some heat" for articles which were deemed to contain serious errors. One former chief editor explained to me that the taboos were not in all cases binding, "What you have to understand was that it was a character issue. If you wanted to see strict orders (*Befehle*) in these advisories it was entirely possible to do so. But you could also see them as guidelines." Journalists even at the most carefully supervised institutions such as *Neues Deutschland* described to me a newsroom atmosphere where journalists could discuss even politically sensitive issues with relative openness and collegial frankness. It was understood, however, that to publicize the results of any of these debates and dialogues meant professional suicide.¹¹

JOURNALISTS' MEMORIES OF THE EXPERIENCE OF CENSORSHIP

When I asked my East German interlocutors to articulate their memories of the *Lenkungssystem*, most recalled to me that self-censorship more than external

¹¹ It is important to note that most Western media professionals likewise segment information into categories of "private" and "public" circulation (see Buchsteiner 1997 and Tuchman 1978).

ensorship governed the reality of their daily life as media professionals in the GDR. In memory, the complexity of the media-control apparatus was often condensed into the trope of the *System* (system), an inflexible juggernaut which set conditions of possibility for all journalistic practice in the GDR. Many narrated their GDR professionalization experience to me as a process through which they had gradually internalized the prime directive of the *System*: to follow the *Parteilinie* in all matters (see Boyer 2001). This began, they said, with their education as journalists at the Department of Journalism in Leipzig. According to the testimony of my informants, students who received the greatest praise and best jobs after graduation were not those with outstanding talent, but rather those who demonstrated themselves consistently as the “most convinced party enthusiasts” (see Steul 1996:109). Students were encouraged to understand their professional activity not as “journalism for its own sake,” but rather as a journalistic work always oriented to a higher collective purpose, that is, as “party-journalism.”

Many former East German journalists described the presence of *Schere im Kopf* (scissors in the head) that careful attention to their professional role as party-journalists had cultivated in them. As they went about their daily media labors, they understood in the best spirit of professional ethics that certain questions were simply not asked and certain sentences simply not written. The majority of journalists reported an intuitive and disciplined respect for the hermeneutic power exercised by their superiors in the GDR’s culture industry. But it is important to understand that the majority of GDR journalists were not simply ideologue-opportunists, as they are often characterized in the western German media, nor were they listless functionary-scribes.

Journalist Albert E., professionally successful in both the GDR and FRG media systems, described to me why he became and remained a journalist in the GDR:

My first point of access to journalism was a desire to talk to the world. To be honest, it had nothing to do with the Party back then. Then later of course through the training came the self-understanding and feeling that you were the arm of the Party, a piece of the Party. . . . You have to understand that the *ideal* of journalism in the GDR seemed completely reasonable. Journalism was supposed to show life as it really is (*lebensnah sein*). That’s a good thing isn’t it? Journalism was supposed to be cosmopolitan (*weltoffen*), also a good thing, no? Journalism was supposed to unlock the intellectual inheritance of the working class, and why not? It all *sounded* good. The problem was that you ran into the worst problems you could possibly imagine if you ever tried to put any of these ideals into practice. Because the reality was that “to show life as it really is” meant photographing Honecker forty times at a rally.

The majority of my journalist interviewees explained to me that, like Albert, they continued to believe in the ideals of socialist journalism long after they had become discouraged by the reality of socialist journalism. The perpetually unfulfilled hope of these ideals helps explain the complex calculus (in de Certeau’s sense, 1984:xix) of journalistic labor in the GDR as it was described

to me—a professional intellectual life stretched between censorship and circumvention, duty and fear, willing participation and half-hearted resignation, belief in the potential of the party and depression at the reality of the party. As a journalist from Dresden explained to me, “For myself, I worked hard before 1989 to try to make this a good newspaper by finding any small way I could to improve things. Others maybe were satisfied, or they had given up already, I don’t know. I was no dissident. I *wanted* the GDR, but I often felt hemmed in. You couldn’t write something because you heard that Berlin didn’t want that, and they were so sensitive up there, they imagined the class-enemy everywhere in everything. I tried to do my profession well, but the room one had was small [gestures an enclosed space].” Still, the *Schere im Kopf* endured, not only because of fear, privilege, and duty, but also because journalists believed quite honestly that the GDR’s model of the party-state, for all its chronic failures, was still oriented toward a nobler ideal than the western German state, which had simply given in to the default “stomach-society” of international capitalism. One man lamented that since 1989 the media lacked any unified sense of social purpose, “In the GDR we were always striving for something. Here you can do anything but it never goes anywhere.” Party journalism is thus remembered, for all its restrictions and frustrations, as having contained the potential of a greater vocational reward if the party had ever been capable of producing a public *Kultur* truly by and for the *Volk*.

When information control, taboo lists, party discipline, and self-censorship all failed, the party resorted, although not routinely, to more serious disciplinary actions to ensure proper media control. Although there are few written records documenting party disciplinary actions against journalists, my interviews with several journalists who were given *Berufsverbote* (professional exclusions) in the GDR suggest that reasons varied from repeated failure to exhibit an appropriate respect for the party-line to unintentional ideological errors that were magnified in the SED’s opinion by embarrassing serendipitous coverage of them in the western media.

Even so, this reflected the evolution in disciplinary practice from earlier in the Cold War, when even misspelled words could lead to severe disciplinary action. The best-known and most tragic of these cases occurred in 1953 following Stalin’s death. The death notice arrived at the trade union newspaper, *Die Tribüne*, after the print deadline, and was hastily inserted into the next day’s paper. In the confusion to rearrange a comma, the typesetter accidentally replaced the word “peace” with the word “war,” thereby producing the following sentence, “With the death of Josef Stalin passes the paramount champion for the preservation and consolidation of war in the world.” The SED took swift and brutal action. The chief editor of *Die Tribüne* lost his job, the supervising editor of the night shift was arrested and taken to a special Stasi prison, beaten, and forced to admit under duress that he had ordered the error in the employ of western secret services (Holzweissig 1997:141–43). Both he and the typesetter were

later sentenced to five-and-a-half year prison sentences for espionage. One journalist who worked at *Die Tribüne* at this time described to me the hopeless feeling in the editorial office, “It was truly terrible. Each of us knew that it could have just as well been us. We couldn’t conceive it. I mean, anyone who works in a paper under that time-pressure understands that once in a while errors like that are bound to occur. We knew then that none of us were safe” (cf. Schabowski 1991:84f.). Professional discipline and fear of arbitrary reprisal dovetailed in the everyday life of the GDR journalist as *Parteisoldat* (soldier of the party). Although it was increasingly rare in the 1970s and 1980s for a journalist to be jailed simply for a “political error,” the threat of state violence remained a companion presence in every journalist’s life.

THE VOCATIONAL GOAL OF “CENSORSHIP”: LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY AND THE CRAFTING OF PURE REFERENTIALITY

I once asked a former GDR chief editor why it was that the printed word held such power for the SED, and why they went to such pains to establish mastery over it. His response illuminates the importance of creating a fixity in, or pre-determination of language that the SED believed would crystallize a rightful systematicity in the semiotic mediation between the *Volk* and its material environment:

The printed word was so important because everything was predetermined. In the opinion of the leaders, nothing was supposed to happen that they hadn’t planned in advance. There was no spontaneity. It wasn’t permitted. So [for journalism] the most important dogma was “it had to *look good*.” Therefore the headlines had to be right and the political line had to be right. . . . The leadership lived through the printed word and the spoken word on television. . . . It’s a crazy case of wishful thinking. It’s voluntarism, no? It’s like saying, “I want something to be true” and then when I see it the next day in the newspaper, I can say to myself, “See, the newspaper says it’s true too!” *Wunderbar!*

The SED sought the perceived semantic stability and referential formality of the “printed word” as the natural medium for its work upon *Kultur*. By controlling the institutions of cultural (re)production wherein printed words were produced and their meanings negotiated, the SED placed the negotiation of semiotic order into the hands of a select caste of party professionals who were expected to calibrate and fix public meaning for particular lexemes and, thus, to structure the perception of empirical reality in the language of SED ideology. The SED never feared that the masses themselves possessed the hermeneutic power to classify and determine the meaning of signifiers in the GDR life-world such as empty store-shelves, twelve-year waiting lists for cars, and crumbling building facades; these were particularized and disaggregated percepts without knowledge-specialists to provide systemic hermeneutic order and significance to them.

In this, the SED displayed a well-developed and centralized ideology of language and culture that provided the motivating logic for all of its media-

control practices.¹² The SED's effort to achieve this ideal monopoly on collective consciousness through standardizing and systematizing reference and meaning in the GDR's public culture exposes a relationship to language that Kathryn Woolard describes as typical of European language communities which "reveal a tendency to see reference or propositionality as the essence of language, to confuse or at least to merge the indexical functions of language with the referential function, and to assume that the divisions and structures of language should — and in the best circumstances do — transparently fit the structures of the 'real world'" (1998:13).

The SED was actively seeking to "engineer" collective consciousness of the "real world" through standard languages of representation and interpretation at the same time that they told themselves and their citizens that they were simply crafting into actuality the ontological potentiality of the *Volk's* own naturally systemic consciousness. This appeal to the "naturalness" of linguistic coherence is also ideological. That the indexicality, or "context embeddedness" (Hanks 1996:177) of language could be systematically made dependent upon perceived "absolute characteristics" of — in the SED's case — the culture of the German *Volk*, explains how so many operations upon language in the GDR media-control apparatus could yet be claimed as being absolutely natural (that is, not works of human artifice, but rather ineluctable extensions of nature).¹³

This distillation of language in the name of the *Volk* linked the professional intellectuals working the GDR media-control apparatus to the work upon national identity undertaken by the German cultural bourgeoisie of the last century. Standardizing labors upon language and their desired results of predictable semantico-referential order were the means through which the intangible systematicity of the *Volk* could be made manifest. Rituals like the Thursday Argus were oriented to precisely this goal: elaborating the SED's ideologies of linguistic homogeneity and systematicity into concrete actions that rationalized the referential and semantic features of language. In short, the SED believed that the lexeme would become an idea-vehicle to transfer tokens of hermeneutic order between the party nexus and the masses. Since mass media technologies provided a primary conduit (and a serial organization; see Anderson 1983) for these harmonizing transfers, mass media language had to maximally rid itself of polyvalent meanings and imprecise significations. Otherwise, as the cul-

¹² For a survey of comparative research on language ideologies see Blommaert and Verschueren (1998); Gal (1998); Irvine (1992); Kroskrity (1998); Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity (1998); Silverstein (1976; 1979; 1985; 1998); and Woolard (1998).

¹³ Woolard further observes that "[Linguistic] structure conditions ideology, which then reinforces and expands the original structure, distorting language in the name of making it more like itself" (1998: 12). Irvine and Gal (2000) offer valuable discussions of processes in language ideologization such as "iconicization" and "fractal recursivity" through which (1) a "people" is defined iconically through a particular linguistic genre like "plain speech," and (2) where an opposition salient at one level of relationship is projected to others. For the articulation of collective identity, such homologies are often taken as evidence of the naturalness of the opposition in question, and they thereby reinforce and elaborate one another as "natural" distinctions.

tural bourgeoisie had discovered in its “cultural crisis,” polysemy and heteroglossia would herald the disintegration of *Kultur*. For language to be any good for socialism, as Maxim Gorky once proclaimed, it had to be rid of the “pernicious toxin” of the inherited significations of bourgeois philistinism (Gorky 1934:64; see also Zima 1975:90).

Discourse on language produced within GDR universities often thematized this tension between linguistic structure and the desired goal of linguistic “clarity,” by which was meant clarity of reception on the part of the citizen-addressee of the intentional message/meaning the party wished the lexeme to convey. Vagueness and ambiguity in public language, hallmarks of dreaded polysemy, had to be minimized at all costs.¹⁴ As GDR media scholar Karl-Heinz Röhr counseled journalists: “One must write about unclear topics in as clear a way as possible. One must explain why they are ‘unclear.’ One must remove a lack of clarity wherever possible especially when this is a result of the vagueness of statements or of their ambiguous nature. One must write attractively and interestingly even when one is dealing with special and difficult questions. And one must do all of this because the masses are truly waiting for the responses to these questions and problematics” (1968:156–57).

Media historian Rolf Geserick notes that most academic work produced within the GDR on media language focused on the problem of how to wring greater “linguistic effectivity” (*sprachliche Wirksamkeit*) from media representation and, to this end, advised that journalists utilize “clear structures of argument, logical consistency, easily recognizable sentence constructions, a high proportion of verbs, avoidance of abstract formulations, novel constructions, moderate closeness to common speech, concreteness, beneficial redundancies, originality and entertainment value” (1989:297–98). All these formal linguistic conventions were believed to increase the “receptivity” of citizens to GDR media messages and thus to the rightful epistemic order, the *Wissenschaft*, determined by the SED party elite.

The journalist’s relationship to language was a central problem in theoretical and practical considerations of socialist journalism. The ‘Handbook of GDR Journalism’ (*Journalistisches Handbuch der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik*) offers a comparative discussion of the different languages of representation available to the journalist for depicting everyday life in the GDR:

Our life, which must be reflected in journalistic language, is filled with contradictions and with struggle and motion. The journalist stands in the middle of the fray, takes sides, and fights on the front lines. For this, he needs a polemical, powerful, and accurate language. . . .

So-called functionaries’ German (*Funktionärsdeutsch*), the dry, scarcely concrete kind of German influenced by abstract expressive constructions of scientific discourse, nevertheless is capable of unambiguous descriptions of important issues. It is therefore

¹⁴ In another context, Holquist describes a similar effort to legislate “a writing so pure it would make reading superfluous” (1994:21).

ten times better than the nebulous flattery behind which many scribes of the imperialist bourgeoisie attempt to conceal reality. Still, the vanguard of the working class cannot isolate themselves through their language. We are undertaking the greatest revolution in German history. We must therefore find a language that dignifies such an epoch and which is worthy of the entire nation (1960: 187).

The ranking of possible journalistic languages in this passage further reveals the tenets of SED language ideology. Worst of all is the “nebulous flattery” of bourgeois journalism which sweetens and conceals “reality” through its ornateness of representation. Better, but still not perfect, is the functionaries’ German; it alienates the *Volk* through its abstraction, but at least it is honest and dictates a correct and earnest systematicity over the experience of everyday life. The best form of language is the “polemical,” “powerful,” and “accurate” language of SED imagining. Following this metaphor, one imagines the SED’s ideal language as a quiver filled with carefully balanced arrows. Each arrowhead would contain a pure, incontrovertible meaning. The journalists were the archers who daily sought the target-citizens. The journalists’ counterparts in the Agitation Division were the fletchers who guaranteed the craft and precision of the arrows. The SED believed that only this collective effort could develop linguistic forms strung taut with poetic spirit and yet capable of absolute referential precision; and they believed only these lexical forms would constitute a linguistic systematicity worthy of the title, “*Volkskultur*” (culture of the people).

What was *yearned* for in GDR journalism was thus something far more sublime, some improbable fusion perhaps of Lenin and Goethe, than what ended up filling the electronic media and the pages of the GDR press for four decades. No matter how strange or absurd GDR media language became to those who were not actively engaged in its calibration, within the Agitation Division and the upper echelons of the SED party elite, media language was perceived to be capable of mystically coupling the sanctified hermeneutics of party discourse with the *Meinungen* (opinions) of each of its citizens (see Zima 1975:86–88). This transition from collective language to collective knowledge was the threshold of the “greatest revolution in German history”—transforming the “natural” essence of *Kultur* finally into the “reality” of public culture.

For the “censors,” those functionaries working in the apparatus of the Agitation Division, this vision was the guiding light of their professional practice, an injunction to incrementally actualize mass consciousness through linguistic reform that was accepted with great seriousness. Reading through the interior correspondence of institutions such as the GDR Press Office and the Agitation Division, one gains remarkably vivid insight into the daily lives of the professional intellectuals responsible for managing information flows and for refining the language of the media (cf. Drescher 1991). Besides monitoring daily media production, they spent a great deal of time proactively refining the language of the media itself, negotiating their argumentation, counter-acting the argumentation of the class-enemy (most often in the form of media messages

from West Germany), and rigorously integrating the most recent pronouncement of the General Secretary into the practice of media representation. They took special pleasure in thinking of ways to increase the “effectivity” of journalism and the “receptivity” of the masses to media representations. Even citizens’ letters (which were rarely published in their received form¹⁵) were answered with a great deal of care, sometimes generating two single-spaced pages of apology for empty store shelves or interminable waiting lists, framed by careful (but rarely formulaic) explanations of the difficulties of maintaining a socialist economy in a capitalist world system (DR-6/151 and consecutive files; DC-9/111; DC-9/112).

The daily litany of agitation work was to “increase the level [*Niveau*] of journalistic activity” (for example, DC-9/20; DC-9/8). “Progress” and “development” were routine themes in internal discourse. Every evaluation of an actual text was oriented to how media work in general could be further perfected. This meant combating perceived laziness and inattention among journalists, selecting themes that would cast the GDR in a positive light, and, overall, in bringing the represented reality of life in the GDR in line with the party’s desired reality of life. Dr. Kurt Blecha, head of the GDR Press Office, explained during one internal pep talk, “Sure, we emphasize success-oriented propaganda, but only because we are successful and not perhaps because we are interested in glossing things over. Still, we don’t nail up our remaining inadequacies on bulletin boards, rather we work single-mindedly to bring into order what is not yet in order” (DC-9/1022).

The degree of textual and linguistic detail that the “censors” occupied themselves with evinces their striking artisanal expertise in manipulating language. As one policy document stated: “there are no details that are not worth debate” (DC-9/1022). An upcoming television program might warrant several typed pages of commentary, ranging from an evaluation of the political message of the program to commentary on the costumes and talent of the actors (see Agitation 35680). Consideration was given down to the level of word choice as to how best to popularize party ideology. Which slogan would have a better effect — “Down with the imperialistic arms’ race!” or “Down with the imperialistic arms’ build-up!” — was one subject of debate (DY30/IV 2/2.040/6). How should the amount of crude oil deliveries from the Soviet Union be expressed, as “over 17 million tons” or “17.08 million tons” or “in value of 2.7 billion rubles” (Agitation 33918)? Of course, the principles of hermeneutic power remained intact at the level of textual encounters, so the provisional answers to

¹⁵ Ellen Bos writes that many letters ostensibly from readers were penned by journalists themselves (1993). The archival evidence suggests, however, that actual readers’ letters, many of which contained queries and criticism about supply shortages, were often answered privately by journalists or forwarded to the functionaries at the GDR Press Office or to the State Committees on Radio and Television.

even such apparently minute questions of signification were routinely referred upwards to the Secretary of Agitation for final determination.

The operations upon media language (and thus, in the SED's logic, upon public knowledge) undertaken by the functionaries in the Agitation Division and in the other institutional sites in the media-control apparatus thus betray a fundamentally artisanal and, I would argue, vocational character. There was certainly a repetitive character to much of their editorial work, but the microlabors of censorship also exhibited the care and precision of a craft. Accomplished correctly, such labors were believed to channel the productivity of language toward an ontologically determined and perfected mode of representation, not, as Coetzee and others presume, to simply restrict creative and political possibilities. In fact, the actual practice of censorship in the GDR looked a great deal more like the endless minute queries of professional editing than summary interdiction. The difference worth emphasizing is that the individual author was not given the option to contest these queries and criticisms.

A careful thematic and programmatic evaluation of feedback from listeners found in the archives of the State Committee on Radio offers a glimpse into the vocational self-understanding of the censor: "We could not fulfill our duties without connecting these to the improvement of the overall cultural level. Thus, we cannot even treat free time as an individual question, rather it must be treated as a social question of the highest grade. Society cannot be indifferent as to whether people are sitting around in bars or going to concerts . . . Radio and television and also the press have to form (*gestalten*) these themes in such a way that it leads to a formation of free time (*Freizeitgestaltung*)" (DR-6/168). The move from media forms to social formations was not merely rhetorical, it was construed as an ontological shift of which cultivated language was deemed thoroughly capable.

I found it difficult to suppress laughter while reading page and after page of such thoroughly earnest plans for manipulating collective consciousness through minute lexical calibrations. Yet this urge to laugh is telling, telling of an uncomfortable proximity between the censors' labors and vocational motivations and my own. The articulation of communitarian horizons and/or the ventriloquization of an extant social collective are never far-removed from the capacity of the intellectual as specialist in generalization (Giesen 1998:45). The Agitation functionaries' self-conception as intellectuals critical of the cultural decomposition of modern (capitalist) society and devoted to the pedagogy of a broader community is by no means intrinsically unlike the vocational profiles of Western critical intellectuals and or the identities of nationalist intellectuals in other places and times (see Suny and Kennedy 1999, for example). And, also like other professional intellectuals, the GDR "censors" were not oblivious, even in their world-historical optimism, to the ironic inability of their cultural labors to actually influence collective consciousness. Moments of metalinguis-

tic self-pity have been described to me by chief editors when the functionaries would lean in toward them and barely audibly lament the imperfect results of their language engineering. Somehow, the quest for pure referentiality always seemed to conclude in *Funktionärsdeutsch*. The intended flash of bringing natural language into being never successfully rid itself of the polysemy and particularity that seemed to them inherent in language-in-practice itself, except when it created a linguistic order so specialized and esoteric that only a select few understood what it meant. No matter how precise their operations upon language were, there was always the lurking danger of a double entendre such as “State Circus,” or of an empirical percept of productive failure that would necessitate further taboos and recalibration. The environment of actually existing socialism remained intractably unwilling to conform to the ideological conditions set for it and so semantic indeterminacy haunted every work of the Agitation functionary.

In retrospect, most of my non-journalist interlocutors remember the party-state’s public culture as distancing, “like listening to reports from another planet” as one woman put it. Put another way, the public language of the party-state was profoundly connoisseurial. It was a loving labor of cultural artisanry for those who invested their daily labors into it; yet, for those with no immediate relationship to this economy of semiotic and epistemic operations, the party-state seemed only to offer a public sphere with little interest in its alleged public or their local knowledges. This was perhaps the greatest of ironies in a country saturated with them. In their effort to complete and perfect the trans-local wholeness of the *Bildungsbürger* imagination, the SED managed instead to accelerate and sediment the localization and particularization of East German lives, a phenomenon that is well-captured by Günter Gaus’ description of the GDR as a *Nischengesellschaft* (society of niches; 1983). The referential feature of language upon which the SED had balanced their grand hope of a unified *Volk* consciousness was precisely the aspect of language they could not systematize, and eventually its dialogical relationship to the actual lived environment of the GDR betrayed them. The public language of the SED had become so neurotically obsessed with engineering reference from “the top down” that it finally evolved into a hopeless caricature of its claim to actualize the “natural” clarity of the *Volk*’s language.

CONCLUSION: FROM THE CRITIQUE OF “CENSORSHIP”
TO THE STUDY OF INTELLECTUAL PRACTICE IN CONTEXT

In the introduction to this essay, I asked why the censor so richly provisions our imaginations with images of the nothingness surrounding the luminescence of our own epistemic productivity. I have sought to show that the common perception of censorship as a struggle of heroic intellectual spirits against corrupting powers is a distinctly situated impression of epistemic alienation. What I mean by this is that in the figure of the censor as anti-intellectual we are not

symbolizing the mindless force that state power brings to bear upon creative, critical spirits. No, quite the contrary. “State power” is only a representational gloss of the actual, far more diffuse, threat. What is aggregated under the re-viled figure of the censor are the pluricentric institutional forces and constant heterogeneous intellectual productivity which wreathes and which threaten the integrity of our own knowledge-labors.

I suggest instead that we view the censor as a trope of intellectual alienation, a symbolic condensation of the anxiety created by the phenomenological awareness of the individual intellectual’s fragile position in an enormously complex economy of epistemic activity. Much as we saw for the *Bildungsbürgertum* of the nineteenth century, the specialization and diversification of intellectual labor creates a permanent state of crisis for any claim of a particular settlement of knowledge as being either absolute or authentic. Given the near infinite field of possible knowledges, the individual intellectual comes to sense that his or her careful epistemic works are inevitably partial, fragmentary, or of uncertain social value.

Through the invocation of an indexical other such as “the censor,” a figure whose ideational crudity and penury reciprocally defines the identity of productive, creative “intellectuals,” one is able to situationally, however fleetingly, locate and distance oneself from the social, institutional, and professional contexts of intellectual practice that mediate one’s own epistemic labors. One is thus able to indexically stabilize oneself as an independent, free-thinking knowledge-maker relatively autonomous of contextual inhibition or influence. The dilemma and motivating dynamic of the critique of censorship is thus not, as is sometimes contended, the creator pitted against the destroyer, but rather the creator pitted against intellectual context and its inevitable field of cultivating, compromising, and mediating hermeneutic powers.

The felicitous “otherness” of the censor also obscures the fact that not only in eastern Europe is professional intellectual life typified by the tension between the subjective-vocational desire for “pure” knowledge and the dynamics of intersubjective expectation and production that limit the scope of individual knowledge-making. In virtually any social context of knowledge-making, “centripetal” (in Bakhtin’s sense; 1981:270–72) forces of epistemic conservatism match and more often than not exceed reciprocal centrifugal forces of epistemic transformation and dissonant expression. In this, the caricature of the censor defers recognition of the kinship between various institutions and practices of intellectual professionalism.

The unifying factor in all such contexts of specialized knowledge-making is the social negotiation of accredited knowledge itself. As Bourdieu writes, “Knowledge of the social world and, more precisely, the categories which make it possible, are the stakes *par excellence* of the political struggle, a struggle which is inseparably theoretical and practical, over the power of preserving or transforming the social world by preserving or transforming the categories of

perception of that world” (1991:236; see also Larson 1977; Jansen 1988). Censorship, like corporate cultural policies or modes of professional evaluation, is about the negotiation, maintenance, and reproduction of epistemic order—to return to Durkheim, all share a common interest in limiting the contagiousness of social value in order to safeguard a social experience of “wholeness” via particular settlements of categorical and symbolic order. The exercise of what I term “hermeneutic power” is, in this broader sense, oriented to the production of *genre*, generic settlements of epistemic order which ideally are meant to reproduce without challenging, or drawing attention to, the doxic character of epistemic “order” itself.

Thus, I submit that the study of censorial practices should be situated within the ethnography of intellectual practices of conservation and creation (among them: representation, interpretation, editing, planning, licensing, criticism, and theorization) in their social and political contexts of cultural production. This move will illuminate not solely the actual complexity of practices like “censorship” but also the contradictions implicit in our routine practices and ideologies of “knowledge.” Such an expansion of critical attention to intellectual practices need not dull the teeth of outcry against the political abuse of intellectual labor; but it will necessitate a more nuanced enterprise. Unless the censor is represented as a real social actor in cultural and historical context, it will be impossible to determine the true affinities and differences between professional intellectual labor in authoritarian contexts and the disciplinary imperatives of intellectual professionalism more generally.

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