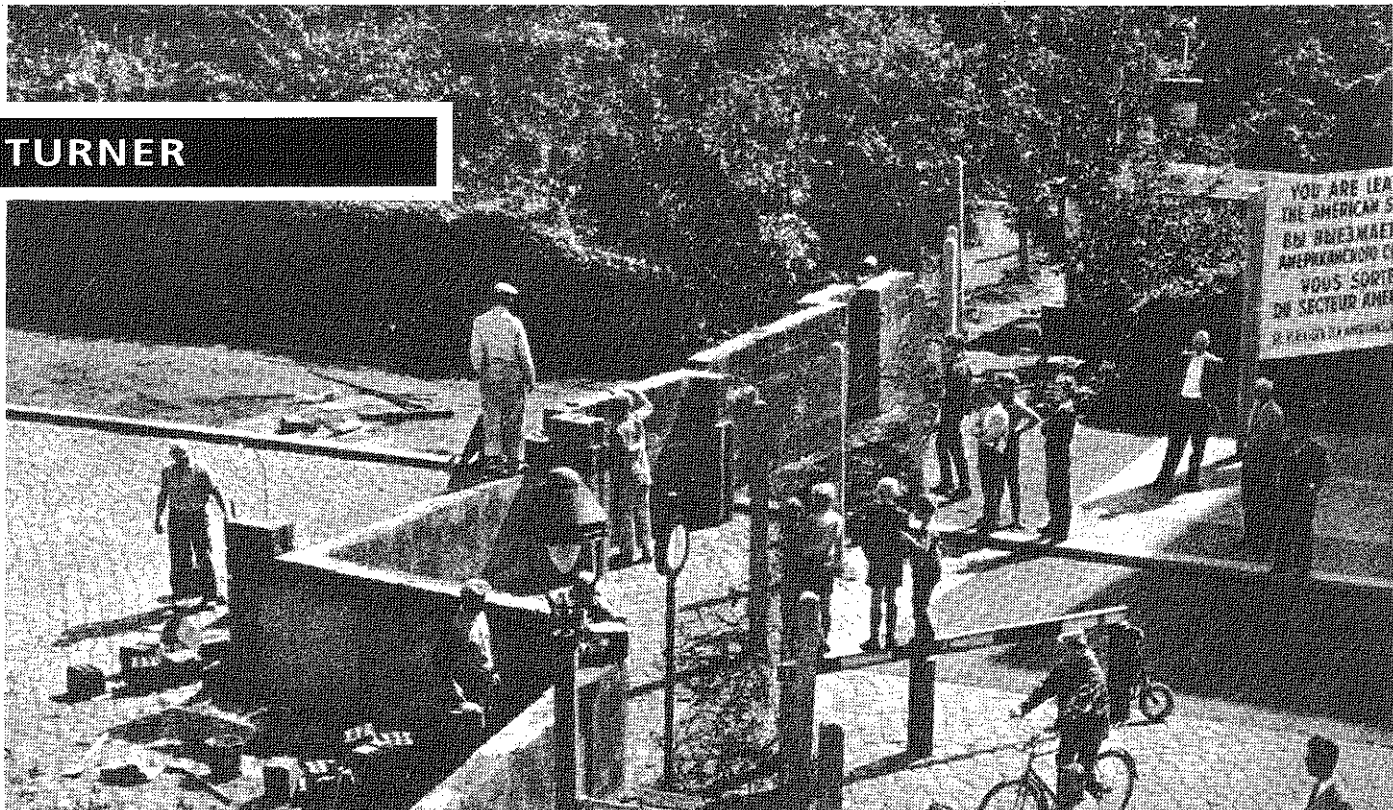


LORI TURNER



# The Berlin Wall: Fragment As Commodity

Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror.

Walter Benjamin, "Theses VII"

There is one kind of prison where the man is behind bars, and everything he desires is outside; and there is another kind where the things are behind bars and the man is outside.

Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*

demise as a triumph for liberal democratic capitalism. It has been called a "scar" and a "snake" which runs "through the heart of a once proud European capital, not to mention the soul of a people." (*Time*, 20.11.89) The Wall also became symbolic for artists, musicians, and playwrights. Lou Reed devoted an album to it, David Bowie sang about it (*auf Deutsch*) on his *Heroes* album and the Sex Pistols themselves wanted to jump over it to the east side. Now, in the West Berlin press at least, there have been attempts to poke fun. One West Berliner said it looks like a piece of Swiss cheese. Another writer referred to those gaps in the Wall as a peepshow. There are surprisingly few jokes about it in the Canadian or American papers.

West Berliners, noted for their ironic sense of humour, have lived with the Wall for twenty-eight years. *Amerikanismus*, it seems, is alive and well in West Berlin too. Despite the stereotypical view of the German obsession for cleanliness, the Wall has always been fair game for those with an urge to graffiti. The layers of indexical signs, painted over and over, lend the wall an auratic quality. The pre-fab slabs of interlocking concrete are not without traces of human intervention. Indeed, according to the official publishing house at Checkpoint Charlie, "the Wall speaks." It's too late now, however, to study the allegorical messages written on the Wall.

Apparently, the writing on the Wall was in direct contradiction to Honecker's prediction. Amidst the often conflicting messages two positions were relatively clear: there is evidence of a hatred of the Wall and belief in its transitoriness. We now see photographs of people taking a whack at the Wall; this sort of bravery is directly in line with the bold act of writing on the Wall. Both heroic deeds contain the same impulsive desire to alter the meaning of the Wall; both show studied disregard of who it belongs to.

**I**n 1939 Walter Benjamin likened commodity fetishism to the collection of souvenirs. The commodity as souvenir is seen as the result of the transformation of historical events into mass-produced articles. Ironically, fifty years later in his native city of Berlin, one finds great parties of people (*Mauer-Spechten*, wall-peckers as they are called in the West German press) hacking away at the Berlin Wall for the raw material a new commodity/souvenir will be made from: "authentic cuts from the Berlin Wall."

Benjamin's notes on the souvenir/commodity form part of his study of the now extinct Paris Arcades (the precursor of the modern department stores). When one now refers to the Berlin Wall fragment which appeared for sale in New York and Chicago only 48 hours after Egon Krenz announced freer travel, one must see it in the context of the Berlin Wall as a fragmented/fallen monument. Benjamin's research on the Paris Arcades can be

understood as a reconstruction of the *ur-*form of modern capitalist circulation. It is useful, then, to invoke Benjamin's research not only because he was a Berliner (his sister-in-law, by the way, was justice minister in East Berlin at the time the Wall went up) but also because his particular take on the nature of the commodity-form, its auratic and souvenir qualities, will hopefully help even the score amidst the cold war terminology appearing daily in the western press to "report" the events surrounding the Berlin Wall fragments.

The Wall, since its inception, has always been considered politically evocative, dangerous, symbolic. Not so long ago Erich Honecker claimed it would last another one hundred years. The East German SED called it an "anti-fascist protection barrier." The justification, for better or worse, was that it served security interests. For the West, however, it symbolized the height of the cold war. It is difficult still for western journalists to describe it without using outright provocative cold war terminology. There has been no reluctance to crow about its



EXCURSIONS

◀ Building

The W trophy re cold war. ly mainta white, the colour of wannabe highly pr colourful of graffiti. (as Wall) ticity tho have in c with graffiti that the s But more collector, these foss propagan Within Berlin rep derstand becoming Berlin ne (14.11.89) is. With t fragments extract pr taz repor while the ripping th side were to the W East Germ Germans as souvern man magi lic's exten rich Gen with a ni trip to W People their hear a novelty in Winni of it. The torically This is n Winnipeg agreeing significant purchase kind of in with the Native an those tha find them The V the eveni It is signi down on bered in versary o shattering were give businesse western p another h the Basti appropri like the E not made One C preneur v

The Wall, in fact, is turned into the trophy reserved for the winners of the cold war. While the east side was carefully maintained and painted a high-gloss white, the west side was left the natural colour of concrete but painted over by wannabe political pundits. Now the most highly prized pieces of the Wall are those colourful surface bits which contain traces of graffiti. The auratic quality it had then (as Wall) is testimony now to the authenticity those rarer bits of painted concrete have in circulation. A piece of the Wall with graffiti on it assures the consumer that the structure really has fallen down. But more important still, for the souvenir collector, a fragment of the Wall with these fossil remains carries a powerful propaganda message.

Within days of its demise some West Berlin reporters were scrambling to understand the significance of the Wall's becoming a commodity. In the West Berlin newspaper *taz* one reporter (14.11.89) wrote of how flexible capitalism is. With the selling of the Berlin Wall fragments we can see just how easy it is to extract profit from any situation. Another *taz* reporter (13.11.89) pointed out that while there were people on both sides ripping the Wall apart, those on the west side were doing it "as if" the Wall belongs to the West. An interesting twist. The East Germans built the Wall but the West Germans and their allies sell pieces of it as souvenirs. According to the West German magazine *Stern*, the Federal Republic's external affairs minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher presented George Bush with a nice souvenir piece during his last trip to Washington.

People now seem to have a soft spot in their hearts for the Wall; it's now become a novelty item. The German community in Winnipeg just purchased a huge slate of it. They intend to donate it to the historically significant "Forks" development. This is noted with some dismay by the Winnipeg Native community. While agreeing that the Wall is historically significant for the Germans, they see this purchase for the Forks as indicative of a kind of imperialist practice: hauling off with the spoils. They would prefer to see Native artifacts at the Forks, preferably those that have been ripped-off and now find themselves in other countries.

The Wall as border lost its meaning on the evening of the 9th of November 1989. It is significant to note that the Wall came down on the day which is usually remembered in post-war Germany as the anniversary of *Kristallnacht* — the night of the shattering glass (the night Nazi thugs were given permission to smash Jewish businesses, houses, synagogues, etc.). The western press, however, preferred to make another historical analogy: the storming of the Bastille in 1789. Both analogies are appropriate to remember except that, unlike the Berlin Wall, commodities were not made of the fragmentary remains.

One Canadian Wall fragment entrepreneur was cited in the *Toronto Star*

(14.12.89): "I knew everybody in the world was watching history happening here and that's when I got the idea. I figured people would love to have a piece of that history, too. So I bought a hammer and chisel and started knocking off pieces of the Wall to sell back home." He apparently shipped 200 kilograms out of Berlin. According to *Stern* magazine (14.12.89) on the 18th of November nineteen boxes carrying 10,630 kilograms left Hamburg airport for Chicago. Another American entrepreneur took 75 tonnes through the Berlin Tegel airport. These are, apparently, typical examples. The *Chicago Tribune* (reprinted in the *Toronto Star*, 12.2.90) tells the story of an unnamed American promoter of the Berlin Wall fragments who claimed to have sold 90 tonnes of the stuff. According to an East German trade official the pieces marketed must be of questionable authenticity because that much concrete had not been removed from the Wall by private entrepreneurs.



Back in West Berlin, Wall fragment entrepreneurs were making 600 DM (\$360 Cdn.) per day selling to tourists who were not bold enough to get their own piece. A chunk about the size of a saucer would go for 40 DM (\$ 24 Cdn.). The seller could, of course, demand twice the amount if the piece still had graffiti on it. In Toronto CME Marketing would sell you a one inch piece of the surface material for \$14.95. Before Christmas you could buy pieces of the Wall marketed by Hyman Products Inc. in the Eaton's Centre for the same price. By February, however, the price was slashed three times. If this company is still selling them you will probably be able to find them for \$7.50 (or less). One word of warning, however, if the pieces are authentic they may be hazardous to your health. Both *taz* (2.12.89) and *Der Spiegel* (25.12.89) reported that the stuff of the Wall had tested positive for quantities of asbestos. Apparently the tests had been undertaken in the USA.

Hyman Products Inc. tries to disguise the commodity character of the Wall fragment by calling it (in their so-called

"Declaration of Authenticity and Origin") a "fragment of freedom ... a part of which you now own." Included in the brick-sized box in which the rubble is sold is an "Informative Booklet." One line reads: "The Wall was erected, but somehow a ragged (sic) few managed to slip by." The "Informative Booklet", however, reads more like an owner's manual:

Grip the artifact and in your hand is the past and the future. Let your fingers wander slowly across its battered surface. You can feel the balance of our lives. You can feel the struggles and the triumphs, the grief and the joy, the hope and the fulfillment. You can feel the distant tremor of tomorrow's history gently unfolding in the palm of your hand.

Marx himself couldn't have found a clearer case of the promotion of commodity fetishism. Indeed, the "Informative

a "fragment of freedom...  
part of which you now own."

◀ Tearing it down

Booklet" also calls the Wall fragment "an icon for future generations." It may seem strange to ask, but if the West hated the Wall now as much as it professed to hate it then, then wouldn't the West prefer to have it vanish overnight and forever? Instead, the pieces have become fetish objects packaged as souvenirs.

Admittedly it is a rather peculiar souvenir. After all it is sold to people far away from its place of origin. The buyer may never have visited Berlin or ever intend to go there. As a souvenir the promoters proudly advertise its origin and authenticity (this distinguishes it, by the way, from other commodities like the pet rock of a few years ago). Promoters couldn't get away with selling a vial of Parisian air or a can of San Francisco fog in Toronto or New York. For that you have to have "been there." One doesn't have to have been in Berlin on the evening of the 9th-10th of November. The fragment's status as a souvenir resides in the fact that it is a remnant of an historical event turned into a collector's object.



# Culture and Agriculture

## PART II: Monoculture

The message implied by the promoters of the Wall fragment is clearly a thinly veiled ideology. Capitalist free market ideology asserts itself by offering itself to the consumer, thus negating in one fell swoop any hint that there might be any choice. What makes it a collector's item is not really that it is in limited supply; it is a collector's item only while it still contains an aura of the cold war. In its commodity form it's sold as if it were a cultural treasure. In the examples on display at the major shopping malls you'll find it enclosed in a velvet draw-string bag.

As commodities the Berlin Wall fragments defy memory: as fragments they are dead history. As the Wall came down its historical meaning went with it. Wolf Biermann (an East German folksinger and Nina Hagen's stepfather) asked in an open letter to *taz* (11.11.89) what would happen to the rubble from the Wall? He was probably the first to raise any questions. He wondered whether it is better that the pieces become souvenirs for Americans or whether they could perhaps be used for a better purpose. Biermann's question is buried under an avalanche of commentaries on the Wall. As simple as his question might seem, it raises an interesting point: the instant the Wall came down it seemed that anything might have been possible. This is not the impression one gets from most West German or North American papers.

That the fragments became commodities/souvenirs is perfectly in line with the logic of the production of commodities; that is, this seems to be a natural outcome. In retrospect it shouldn't seem surprising that the fragments became commodities, but this is not a *natural* result. The Wall built by East German workers was never meant to be anything other than a wall. That the pieces now are seen as commodities/souvenirs signifies that the Wall as monument has receded into the irretrievable past. The presence of the fragment in the present is contingent and tenuous. The emphasis placed on the authenticity of the fragment obscures its commodity character.

By invoking its authenticity, by highlighting its aura ("let your fingers wander slowly across its battered surface") the promoters of the Wall fragments are encouraging western consumers (western workers) to partake in the triumphal procession – to buy something that once symbolized oppression. The East German workers were forced to build the wall which prevented free travel to the West. Now that the Wall is fallen, its fragments have come to mean something quite different: the adoption of capitalist market principles, class division, unemployment, homelessness, etc. They have exchanged one prison for another and Berlin is a whole city again. ♦

*Lori Turner is a graduate student in York University's Social and Political Thought program.*

Life is plurality, death is uniformity. By suppressing differences and peculiarities, by eliminating different civilizations and cultures, progress weakens life and favors death. The ideal of a single civilization for everyone, implicit in the cult of progress and technique, impoverishes and mutilates us. Every view of the world that becomes extinct, every culture that disappears, diminishes a possibility of life.

Octavio Paz

**W**hat I have previously termed "the Disneyfication of culture and agriculture" is much more than the robotic takeover through simulacra of species and nature at specific Disney-sites around the planet. It is more than the perverse preference for the "life-like" that permeates post-modernity. Disneyfication might best be understood by reference to that term dreamed up by Walt himself to name his overarching goal: "imagineering."

The word conflates three others – image, imagination and engineering – and is thus a term entirely suited to this century: a century in which Descartes' metaphoric image of the cosmos, and all matter except the human body, as a lifeless clockworks or engine, became entirely concretized, i.e., literally lived out in every aspect of society. Through the triumph of Mechanism over Vitalism as the prevailing scientific and socio-economic paradigm, the machine became the highest value and most numinous symbol in the West.

Disney was thus the fulfillment of three centuries of Cartesian thought and rampant industrialization, but he was also the harbinger of the future. Reaching the peak of his career at mid-century, Disney was both sign and stimulus of a culture so thoroughly "imagineered" that the ability to imagine alternatives different from the prevailing technological dictates had all but entirely atrophied.

In the immediate post-World War II period, Siegfried Giedion observed in *Mechanization Takes Command*:

The assembly line and scientific management are essentially rationalizing measures. Tendencies in this direction extend relatively far back. But it was in the twentieth century that they were elaborated and became a sweeping influence. In the second decade (with Frederick Taylor as the central figure), it was scientific management that aroused the greatest attention: the interest of industry, the opposition of workers, public discussion, and governmental enquiries. This is the period of its further refinement and of its joining with experimental psychology (Frank B. Gilbreth, central and most universal figure). In the third decade (Henry Ford, the central figure), the assembly line moves to the key position in all industry.

Writing in 1948, Giedion recognized the unquestioned power accruing to the key figure in the Mechanistic paradigm: the engineer. "In the time of full mechanization," he writes, "the production engineer gained sway over manufactures of the most diverse types, seeking every possible opening in which an assembly line might be inserted." Replacing artist, priest, shaman, and even politician as the most numinous figure of our time, the engineer (as Disney recognized) is the techno-magician fulfilling Descartes' dream.

But even such an astute observer as Siegfried Giedion could not have known that those "manufactures of the most diverse types" over which the production engineer would gain sway included literally every realm of life. Genetic engineering, or biotechnology, is in this sense the logical development of the rise to supremacy of technology as our primary metaphor and the engineer as hallowed techno-magician. Jeremy Rifkin, the most outspoken opponent of biotechnology, writes: "Engineering is a process of continual improvement in the performance of