

Introduction

The past two decades have seen an influx in formerly communist countries in Eastern Europe, as well as currently communist countries in Southeast Asia, of bars, cafés and restaurants that pay homage to the heydays of communism, literally inviting customers to “consume the past”. The respectful handling of political heritage poses a serious dilemma for many formerly communist countries, who embrace the much-needed income and employment brought on by international tourism. As more and more tourists demand ‘authentic’ experiences, theme parks, hotels and, increasingly, restaurants seek novel ways to distinguish themselves¹, and find themselves exploiting the past as a result. The growth of the leisure industry worldwide means eating and drinking out of doors has turned from a necessity into a recreational activity for all layers of society, resulting in what Shelton calls a “democratization of luxury”. The bar, café or restaurant thus becomes “a symbolic space which effectively consists of a ‘theater for eating’” or drinking.²

This theatrical or kitsch aspect is central to the concept of the communist-themed establishment. Combined with their function as commercial establishments as well as their role in promoting the country’s political heritage, communist-themed establishments come with a wide-ranging set of functions and connotations. By some, they are seen a blemish on the memory of victims of communism, by others as ‘quirky’ must-visit places that take the communist past with a grain of salt; for again others, they are repositories of nostalgia, or vehicles for the pursuit of educational or ideological objectives.

The first part of this paper will examine the curious in-between existence and function of the communist-themed establishment more generally, and place it in its cultural context. The second part will introduce three of these establishments, located in Berlin, Germany; Wrocław, Poland; and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, as case studies, my methodology of choice. Findings are based on material collected and observations made during personal holiday visits and analysis of secondary data and theory from multiple print and electronic sources.

The communist-themed establishment

To find out how these establishments function, it becomes for the moment necessary to generalize about several key features. The basic premise of themed establishments is to allow the customer to experience an exotic, often idealized world from up close, relying mainly on decorative artefacts to recreate the desired ambience and elicit feelings of nostalgia from their customers. Their aim in this is, as Svetlana Boym has it, “to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time as space.”³ This makes communist-themed establishments quintessentially kitsch as, according to Walter Benjamin’s definition of the concept, they decrease any reverential, time-imposed distance between viewer and artefact⁴.

¹ Beardsworth & Bryman 229

² Shelton (1990) qtd in Beardsworth & Bryman 233

³ Boym (2001)

⁴ Andrew Benjamin 41

Kitsch is approachable, tangible, and appeals to our childhood desire to touch and explore, and therefore easily triggers feelings of nostalgia both genuine and simulated. Boym identifies two types of nostalgia, restorative and reflective, a distinction which will be useful to my argument. Restorative nostalgia⁵, she writes, “protects the absolute truth” of the past; it aims for “a transhistorical construction of the lost home”⁶ and takes itself very seriously. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, “does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity”; it can be ambivalent, humorous and ironic, thriving in “the longing itself, and delay[ing] the homecoming.” These, she notes, are not binary terms, and as we shall see, communist-themed establishments may have elements of both. Depending on which type of nostalgia they want to trigger, communist-themed establishments employ two types of kitsch in their theming: melancholic and nostalgic. Melancholic kitsch, which focuses on the ending of the experience and the passing of time, is suited to reflective nostalgia, acknowledging the ending of the era that is portrayed, and accepting and playing with the idea of death and loss. Nostalgic kitsch lends itself better to restorative nostalgia, as it focuses on a continuous moment, frozen in time, and idealized.⁷

Both types of kitsch in the communist-themed establishment are generally in the socialist realist style – simple, colourful, and easy to come by, as well as to imitate. Socialist realism was the art style of choice for Stalin, Hitler, Mao Tsetung and virtually any other communist regime, as billboards lining the roads in Vietnam still show, and has been called ‘totalitarian kitsch’ when used for ideological purposes. Being visually ‘cute’ and easily digestible, having a plainly laid-out message and demanding nothing of the spectator but to be consumed makes it ideal for spreading ‘educational’ or, more often, ideological messages.⁸ Bearing symbols and slogans that already promote a spirit of equality and accessibility to resources for all, socialist realist art lends itself extremely well to the idea of the communist-themed establishment as a “theatre for eating” where luxury is democratised.

The communist-themed establishment’s key feature is thus its accessibility. This includes physical accessibility, which means it usually occupies a central location in a big city, as well as financial accessibility, which means that eating and drinking there is usually one of the cheaper options, if not the cheapest⁹. In addition, it strives for “cultural accessibility of the thematic motif”,¹⁰ which relies on what Beardsworth and Bryman call “theming intensity”. Theming intensity consists of, first, “the levels of intellectual and economic capital which are committed to the theming process”, and second, “the strength of the diner’s subjective experience of, and involvement in, [the theming] process.” I will now examine the first point more closely by focusing on the three case studies, before moving on to discuss the second point, the customer’s subjective experience of the space.

Three communist-themed establishments

⁵ Boym (2001)

⁶ Idem

⁷ Oquialaga 122

⁸ Chapin-Kjellman 35

⁹ Blair (2017)

¹⁰ Beardsworth & Bryman 236

I've picked these establishments because I have personally been there and experienced their atmosphere, and because, as will become clear, they employ radically different strategies to appeal to the customer's nostalgic feelings.

The very first communist-themed establishment I ever encountered was Klub PRL, named after the Marxist-Leninist Polish People's Republic – the Soviet-imposed puppet government that ruled the country from 1947 to 1989. Located on the main square of the city of Wrocław in Poland, the pub is filled to the brim with communist artefacts; on the walls, Marx and Lenin mingle with Stalin and Mao, period propaganda and hammer and sickle emblems, and uniformed staff members stand ready to greet you with "Hello, comrade". The menu offers traditional Polish food such as jelly chicken, bread with lard and pickled cucumbers, and cheap beer, but also takes pride in serving "Western imperialist" Coca Cola¹¹. Similar PRL-themed pubs are found in big cities all over Poland.

PRL's theming is what Beardsworth and Bryman have termed as "parodic". It is a clear example of reflective nostalgia, embracing the contradictions of modernity with an ironic twist. The customer is "deluged with images and experiences drawn from a stereotyped version. . . of the period and culture"¹². With the restaurant's call to "come experience the past in case you've missed it", the artefacts become melancholic kitsch, indicating a clean break between the communist past and the present. Removed from their original contexts, they lose any threatening and symbolic value they had: by putting a portrait of Stalin up above the espresso machine, the feared dictator becomes harmless decoration. In addition, the restaurant mixes genuine artefacts with obvious fakes, a motley arrangement that makes it impossible to distinguish a central narrative. A dangerous consequence of this strategy is that it "encourage[s] a lack of interest in the historical and cultural foundations of the originals upon which they purport to be based." The customer then loses "any inclination to attempt to establish any difference between the fake and the real"¹³, which may lead to simplified and false notions of the communist past, where traumatic events are conveniently left out or forgotten. The main criticism directed at PRL, as well as other communist-themed establishments, is that their supposed authenticity is a sign of disrespect to the victims of communism, whose memory is erased as a result.

The second establishment I will discuss is Café Sibylle in Berlin, which between 1949 and 1990 was the heart of East Germany or the German Democratic Republic. In Berlin many coffee houses and restaurants take their style inspiration from the communist past, a result of what has been termed 'ostalgie' – nostalgia for the east. Café Sibylle, however, is special: it is the only establishment on my list with its roots in actual historical events. It opened in 1953 as a milk- and ice cream café on Stalinallee, a socialist showcase with selected shops and facilities. The café soon turned into an exclusive address and a central point of contact for the district. It

¹¹ Klub PRL homepage

¹² Beardsworth & Bryman 241

¹³ Idem 237

closed down after the Berlin Wall fell, and was reopened in the early 2000s, the street name by then having been changed to Karl Marx Allee. It went bankrupt but was soon reopened again in 2018, and the inauguration ceremony was attended by Hans Modrow, the last Prime Minister of the GDR, who described the cafe as "a symbol of the capital"¹⁴.

Sibylle is especially popular with older customers who cherish nostalgic memories of visiting it in their childhood. The current interior incorporates original wall paintings from the 1950s, which were discovered during the refurbishment. There is also a permanent exhibition on the history of the area which is separate from the dining area, but invites visitors to get up close and personal with real artefacts from the GDR, including typewriters, furniture, and even a piece of the moustache of Stalin's statue which used to be located on the Stalinallee. On the menu are typical German dishes like Flammkuchen, potato salad and sachertorte. With its authentic murals and artefacts – melancholic kitsch items whose value lies in their past usefulness – and its adherence to presenting a true slice of GDR life, Sybille embodies restorative nostalgia. Its theming is on the other end of the spectrum compared to PRL, what Beardsworth and Bryman call "reliquary": a place of pilgrimage which showcases genuine artefacts, or "relics"¹⁵. Rather than parodying it, the museal area has an educational factor in that it enshrines and emphasizes the continuity between present and past. However, Sibylle does not present the past as an idealized scene: it makes clear that that was then, and this is now.

My third case study is an establishment I encountered on a trip to Vietnam in April of this year. Cong Ca Phe is a coffee franchise which started in Hanoi in 2007, and has spread to all major Vietnamese cities since then. It is named for the Viet Cong, the shorthand for the Northern Vietnamese communist troops who fought to reunite the communist north and the then-catholic south between roughly 1963 and 1975. The communist government that was established after their victory in 1975 is still in place today. Cong Ca Phe's shops are decorated in a vintage style with military overtones, including green walls, metal seats, lamps with iron frames or plastic buckets for shades, and staff dressed in military caps and uniforms reminiscent of army fatigues. They also sell merchandise: notebooks, crockery, military-style wallets, and clothing. Despite the name, there are few overt references to the period, like Viet Cong flags or portraits of Ho Chi Minh, their leader. The perceptive visitor may notice famous war photographs, reproduced on the walls or on the merchandise, but certainly none that depict the gruesome events of the war. On the menu are fairly standard coffee specials, but also more unique beverages like ginger coffee. A Cong Ca Phe commercial shows a mother and her teenage daughter united in collective nostalgia after drinking this traditional recipe from the mother's childhood¹⁶. A popular propaganda slogan for the North was "Vietnamese people

¹⁴Gehrke (2018)

¹⁵ Beardsworth & Bryman 240

¹⁶ Cong Ca Phe Youtube channel

all come from the same womb”, reinforcing the link between the individual Vietnamese’s childhood and the nation’s “childhood”, the wartime period when it was born and grew up.

Cong Ca Phe appears to fall somewhere in between restorative and reflective nostalgia. It is restorative in that it stops the clock in 1975, emphasizing the government’s humble militaristic beginnings in an idealised moment that lasts until the present day. The decorative elements are nostalgic kitsch, explicitly fake but authentic in that they own up to their own fakery. Though the formerly North Vietnamese leaders are not the object of parody here, the establishment has a reflective, ironic twist, with its lamps with buckets for shades, and notebooks promoting “a revolution of love”. Interestingly, the lack of any overt references to the communist regime has the same effect as the confusing proliferation of images in Klub PRL: it makes the décor recognizable as being of the past, but keeps it vague enough for any offensive elements to be easily edited out, so they don’t ruin anyone’s appetite.

The customer’s experience

Here is a clear prerequisite for which elements of the communist past lend themselves best to being commodified: the extent to which they can be absorbed into an “appealing meta-narrative that is consonant with the act of eating”.¹⁷ Communist-themed establishments must find a way to unite their theme with “the contradictions of modernity”, among which is the ever-proliferating demand for and choice of food. Their anti-modern, kitsch nature seems antithetical to their role as capitalist places of business, which must continuously offer customers something new and exciting to maintain their appeal. However, according to Beardsworth and Bryman, whose concept of ‘quasification’ refers to the customer’s involvement in the theme, customers are happy to accept “the commercial nature of the establishment, which reveals itself in having to pay one’s bill or in being enticed to purchase merchandise”, as part of the experience. By offering “both food and fantasy as a package, the one [is] being deployed to reinforce the appeal of the other”¹⁸. In Café Sibylle especially, authentic artefacts take centre-stage, so “the logic of the diner’s attendance is as much to pay homage to the objects as to consume the food on offer.”¹⁹ By offering dishes and drinks from or inspired by the era, nostalgia is more easily triggered among customers. In this, we can see a trend either for serving up “what the people ate where there was nothing to eat” or for simply offering that country’s traditional food; the latter choice makes the restaurant more accessible to a wider public.

The second pillar of “theming intensity”, is “the strength of the diner’s subjective experience of, and involvement in, [the theming] process.” Walter Benjamin has pointed to “the desire of the present-day masses to ‘get closer’ to things spatially and humanly”²⁰, which is especially true for reliquary-themed establishments. Despite kitsch’s reputation of being low culture for the masses, the clientele of communist-themed restaurants deserve a more nuanced portrayal. For

¹⁷ Beardsworth & Bryman 244

¹⁸ idem

¹⁹ Beardsworth & Bryman 240

²⁰ Walter Benjamin 1055

a start, these establishments show that the divide between high and low culture is becoming increasingly blurred. People are much more culturally omnivorous than in the past, and many see a visit to a communist-themed restaurant as an essential part of experiencing that country's culture, complementary to a museum visit. Furthermore, the communist-themed restaurant relies on the customer's "virtual capital", an "extensive conceptual repertoire"²¹ of notions about the communist era, garnered from movies, books, photographs, and souvenirs. These visitors will thus pick up visual clues and feel like they understand what is going on, enhancing their enjoyment of the experience. Thus consumers enjoy these spaces not merely passively, with the theme serving as a thin veneer for a business underpinning, but with the feeling that they're in on the joke, especially if there is an ironic sentiment behind it. An example are the famous war photographs in Cong Ca Phe, there as indicators of the period for a lack of other obvious emblems. The customer's virtual capital is also necessary to create simulated nostalgia, which helps younger generations understand clues that are obvious to the generations who lived through that era, and trigger simulated feelings of nostalgia.

For the foreign tourist, the appeal lies not so much in the recognition of artefacts and the resulting nostalgia, as in the chance to view the exotic, dangerous past of the East from up close, as well as "the generation . . . of exciting and out of the ordinary experiences which are nonetheless relatively safe". This voyeuristic tendency places customers seemingly "outside the modern context, but. . . in fact firmly and safely rooted in it"²²; there are no Stasi officers listening in on their lunch talk. The legacy of communist regimes, evident not only in monuments and museums but also in a lack of crowds, cheap accommodation and food and drink, have proved appealing particularly to Westerners in search of novelty²³, who rely on modern representations of the past to find out "what it was like back then".

Thus, the communist-themed establishment is also enjoyed by the visitor who admires kitsch for being kitsch and appreciates the ironic usage of artefacts from the communist past. This then paves the way for a more critical treatment of these artefacts as a way of coming to terms with the trauma of the past and its ending. This may pass into the parodic, as at Klub PRL. However, these opportunities for educating the visitor and making the country's collective memory more accessible to foreigners also makes communist-themed establishments likely vehicles of political capital for governments, who can use them to counter dominant narratives about the era, or reinforce current ideologies. Cong Ca Phe, for example, follows the war museums in Vietnam in being uncritical of the Viet Cong's rise to power and advocating hollow sentiments of peace and love. It is a powerful strategy, whereby "domestic populations are. . . reminded of who is in charge and theoretically reassured while the outside world is favourably impressed and opposition is averted."²⁴ While the artefacts of a communist-themed establishment may therefore encourage a customer's engagement with history, some employ strategies to obfuscate truth and reality, which will in fact discourage the visitor from engaging critically with the theme.

²¹ Beardworth & Bryman 252

²² Beardworth & Bryman 249

²³ Henderson 244

²⁴ Henderson 250

Conclusion

In this paper, I have illustrated the many different functions of communist-themed establishments, which can broadly be divided into places of restorative nostalgia, creating a utopian atmosphere that often appeals to the customer's childhood memories, and places of reflective nostalgia, which allow customers to engage with the communist past more critically by emphasizing its ending. I have shown that food in particular is an important part of the communist-themed establishment's success: even if dishes aren't completely period-authentic, customers are keen to suspend their disbelief to engage in genuine or simulated nostalgia. The educational benefits of communist-themed restaurants are doubtful: in many cases, the theming is deliberately vague or muddled, facilitating the creation of false memories. With the exception of Café Sibylle, the case studies show a strong tendency to forsake objective truth for a more subjective meta-narrative that suits modern demands, such as the comfort and the appetite of the visitor. Still, the visitor is encouraged to engage with the theme: the establishments are usually expressly curated for those visitors who will pick up on historical details. The basic premise is one of equality: a narrative which is accessible and digestible to all. This makes these establishments particularly successful in modern communist countries like Vietnam, where a highly accessible narrative of continuity between the past and the present is used to disseminate the government's ideology to a wide audience.

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