

H-Net Reviews

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Rainer Gries. *Produkte als Medien: Kulturgeschichte der Produktkommunikation in der Bundesrepublik und der DDR.* Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2003. 624 S. EUR 40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-935693-96-7.

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The All-Consuming Problems of Identity and Cultural History

Rainer Gries's magisterial Habilitationsschrift, *Produkte als Medien*, is great science, but is it great history? Well, the answer is a qualified maybe. Gries suggests that the products used by consumers and the choices made in the consumption cycle is a valid means of "doing cultural history." Somehow reducing cultural history to a sparkling wine, a liqueur, and a skin cream raises my hackles at the thought that the sum total of German heritage and tradition might be reduced to "stuff" (and disposable stuff at that)! Considering, however, that modern people frequently define important aspects of their daily routines and lives via their identifications with consumer products, perhaps Gries is on to something by opening up and exploring consumption and the enigmatic *Produktkommunikation* as a means to expand our understandings of culture, history, and cultural history.

Produkte als Medien is neatly divided into five main sections, and the included bibliography. Gries provides an interesting starting point for discussion of consumer habits in the introduction by relating several anecdotes about "Ostalgie" and the difficulties many former DDR citizens experienced in the early post-*Wende* years. He categorizes these phenomena into "Geschmack und Eigensinn," "Produkte als Heimatspender," and "Unter Nostalgieverdacht" (pp. 24-35). With less irony than one might suspect, Gries traces a path linking local production with higher quality and the lack of familiarity with Western products in the states of the former East Germany. Of particular importance is the inclusion of "Aus unserer Heimat" or "Ostprodukt"—even after the mid-

1990s—as a selling point (p. 22). All of this, of course, raises the larger question: what is at work in consumer loyalty? The product itself, or its marketing or advertising?

To address this far-reaching point, Gries outlines marketing history and its theoretical developments in Germany from the late-nineteenth century up to the present. In a turn on Marshall McLuhan's tag line, Gries summarizes the place of the product in the consumer cycle as "the product is the medium," a statement that also serves as the book's main title (p. 87). He supports this argument with a fairly elegant "three dimensional model" of *Produktkommunikation* (pp. 84ff). Rather than a simple "sender-message-receiver-feedback" model of communication, Gries adds to the mix connotative and denotative elements, which are either explicitly or implicitly stated in the marketing or advertising strategies of a product. Although steeped in the appropriate jargon of his disciplines, Gries's "three dimensional model" is simple: on one level, there are the ways in which a product is presented to the consumers (presentation); on another level, there are the many uses and adaptations of a product (perceptions); and at the core, surrounded by connotative and denotative auras, is the product (object) (see Figure 3, p. 88). This theoretical structure is not wholly original, and Gries credits a fusion of semiotic, anthropological, and sociological elements in the context of what might otherwise be an ordinary business or marketing history. The question remains: is this cultural history?

Developing this theory, and its potential applications to the social and material histories of West and East Germany from the 1950s to the 1980s, rounds out the remainder of the volume. In the third section, Gries takes the reader decade by decade to place marketing and consumption habits in the corresponding “Wessi” or “Ossi” context. These chapters provide an interesting and pertinent support to more fully developing his thesis that products are only a beginning, and the meanings (ascribed or subscribed to products) lie in the three-dimensional model of *Produktkommunikation* outlined earlier. In its bringing together of a variety of marketing strategies (with a heavy dose of product slogans) and ample use of consumer polling results over time and place, the book starts to come alive as a cultural history, or at least one more recognizable to me as such.

The three chapters of the fourth section on “product biographies,” however, are the most compelling portion of *Produkte als Medien* (pp. 285-559). The genealogical coverage of these three products and their place in German history are worth the book’s purchase price by themselves. By directly applying his “three dimensional model” to Deinhard Sekt, Echter Nordh user Doppelkorn, and Nivea, Gries sets up formidable testing conditions for his theory of *Produktkommunikation*. Ostensibly unrelated products, all three cut across German history and its twentieth-century administrative division. In these product biographies, the elegant simplicity of the “three dimensional model” shines through clearly; and, more importantly, allows for important interpretive analysis of how and where these products fit into the ethos of daily life.

Leaving aside the conclusion, which does tie the product biographies into Gries’s original insistence that political and social history should be more open to possibility that *Produktkommunikation* can inform a larger cultural history (pp. 11-12), *Produkte als Medien* is re-

ally three books in one. First, the theoretical model is essentially a stand-alone section. Second, the comparative analysis of West and East German consumer history can easily be read on its own merits. And third, the individual product biographies are the stuff of “pop” history. Although intimidating in its reach (it is, after all, a Habilitationsschrift), *Produkte als Medien* benefits by intertwining these three separate strands of social and cultural history (informed heavily by Gries’s marketing/business history background) into a fairly cohesive whole.

Is this cultural history? Yes and no. Gries brings together business practices with consumer practices and offers a more complete picture of German consumer culture—cultural history at its best. Moreover, rather than bringing a more conventional (i.e., Leftist, Marxist, Neo-Marxist, etc.) ideological agenda to consumer history, Gries’s introduction to the wider discussion of consumer/consumption studies from the producers’ perspective is refreshing. Certainly the author’s own disciplinary bent is prevalent, and the over-reliance on “business speak” gets in the way at times (even to the point of losing the significance of what *Produktkommunikation* is); but Gries balances this language with a fair and critical interpretation of what happens when we place his model in historical contexts. In this sense, however, Gries is not really writing cultural history but something more reminiscent of historical economic sociology. There is something in *Produkte als Medien* for just about everyone interested in the place of consumer culture in the modern world: a theory, itching to be applied more globally; and, of course, the historical studies of German consumer culture. This volume will appeal mostly to specialists in the fields of marketing theory, business communication, and German Studies (culture, language, and history). While the detailed bibliography is worth mining for a variety of disciplines, the absence of an index (subject, person, or any combination of these) is a highly visible shortfall.

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