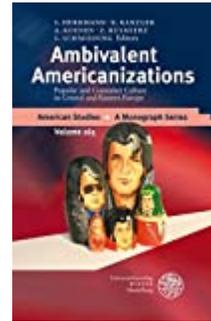




**Sebastian M. Herrmann, Katja Kanzler, Anne Koenen, Zoe A. Kusmierz, Leonard Schmieding.** *Ambivalent Americanizations: Popular and Consumer Culture in Central and Eastern Europe.* Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter Heidelberg, 2008. 281 S. ISBN 978-3-8253-5488-6.



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## S. Herrmann u.a. (Hrsg.): *Ambivalent Americanizations*

The volume is part of an American Studies monography series published in Heidelberg. It explores the Americanization of Central and Eastern Europe (the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Albania, Yugoslavia) during and after the Cold War and surveys how the established concepts of Americanization of Western Europe have to be modified to examine the related phenomena behind the Iron Curtain. The book is based on the central themes of the 2005 conference, "Ambivalent Americanizations" and focuses on the forms and conditions of transfer and reception. It aims to show some unexpected routes of cultural artifacts and help understanding the peculiarities of Socialist consumer cultures.

After a foreword by the editors, the book is divided into five sections: music, popular genres, shopping, material culture and confrontations, containing altogether twelve case studies. Using case studies instead of a grand narrative was a conscious decision by the editors to sacrifice thematic unity in order to focus attention on details. The result is a number of in-depth analyses of some exciting issues with a broad spectrum of angles.

For instance, Thomas Kolitsch's paper focuses on the transfer of rock'n'roll into the GDR during the 60s, chronicling the strategies used by the German authorities from prohibition to reinterpretation to substitution and integration. Leonard Schmieding's "Of Windmills, Headspins and Powermoves" analyzes the routes hiphop took over the Atlantic and the Iron Curtain, showing patterns of interpreting, redefining and reevaluation of the American genre.

Nadine Swibenko's sociological study analyzes how East Germans began to rediscover old East German brands (e.g. "Vita Cola", "Rotkäppchen" sparkling wine, "Spee" washing powder) years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Swibenko claims that in the 1980s Western brands and especially American brands, were considered symbols of a higher standards, of prosperity and of a vaguely defined "Golden West", but by the early 1990s, East Germans began to rediscover old East German brands. The reason for their renaissance is that they evoke nostalgic memories of a bygone era and shopping for these brands becomes a strategy to reconstruct shared identities. Although she only concentrates on the GDR,

the reemergence of socialist brands in other Central European countries would provide additional promising areas of research.

Ewa Grzeszyk's piece is the most theoretical one in the volume, yet it is understandable also for laymen. It distinguishes three American models of consumption: the puritan, the veblenesque (or shopping for status) and the contemporary hedonist and pinpoints the different consumer groups practising them. She uncovers the differences between the American and the Polish consumer behavior and consumption patterns, showing how Poland's cultural and religious traditions and its present economic situation have influenced how American patterns fit the local context.

Katja Kanzler's essay about Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and its Soviet plagiarized version, Alexandr Volkov's *The Wizard of the Emerald City* and its *Magic Land* sequels concentrates on a very popular genre: the magical quest narrative. She uses one of the most famous children's novels and its Soviet version because their reach in the Cold War was overlapping with the geo-political mappings of the era. Since *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was written before the advent of the internet, it was easy for the authorities to block Baum's original in the Eastern Bloc, which made plagiarizing the novel easy. Although, it should be noted that her claim that Volkov's novels were very popular not only in the Soviet Union but in the whole Eastern Bloc seems exaggerated.

Kanzler proves that the Soviet and the American *Wizard* novels are more alike than different and the

differences resist easy harmonization with national and ideological signifiers (p. 101), therefore she sees Baum's novel as a great example of how American popular culture can function as an agent of cultural exchange, whose influence reaches beyond the traditional routes of cultural diplomacy. One interesting characteristic of her essay is that it ignores the political interpretations of Baum's novel, although *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* has often been interpreted as a political and monetary allegory.

Nevena Dakovic's piece in the popular genres section of the volume gives an overview of the history of popular television genres in Yugoslavia and a detailed comparison of the *Sex and the City* prime time television series and its Serbian version, *Lisice* (The Foxes), which visualized promises of affluence and dreams of consumer culture. The analysis shows a constellation in which cultural Americanization clashed with the anti-American political climate, where the ultraconservative far right claimed that the series betrayed the average Serb by featuring protagonists who, in contrast to the majority of Serbs, did not have financial worries.

The essays in *Ambivalent Americanizations* often use the postcolonial approach to theorize about the Americanization of Eastern Europe. They offer an inspiring and thoughtprovoking read for everyone interested in the region, especially for those who had lived in Eastern and Central Europe before the disintegration of the Iron Curtain, providing them with a new perspective into phenomena they probably were not consciously aware of as they happened.

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