Exhibiting the Post-Communist Exotic: Nostalgia, Humour, and Commodification in Kitschified Museum Exhibitions[1]

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In the post-communist cities of Budapest, Prague, and Warsaw, privately operated museums are transforming the memory of communism into consumable experiences. This article introduces the concept of the *post-communist exotic* as both an analytical lens and a conceptual tool to examine how these museums render the communist past simultaneously strange and familiar for contemporary audiences. It examines how curatorial strategies utilise kitsch in the form of nostalgia, humour, and commodification to mediate historical specificity and global accessibility, thereby producing emotionally resonant and commercially legible narratives. By foregrounding the interplay between local agency, global circulations, and the imperatives of market logic, the post-communist exotic as a tool illuminates how memory in post-socialist contexts is actively constructed, circulated, and marketed. Ultimately, it offers a framework for examining the interplay of power, ideology, and affect in contemporary memory practices.

Keywords: post-communist memory, kitsch, nostalgia, museum studies, heritage tourism

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According to Stephen Michael Christian and Brent Steele, modern society transforms the past into a series of exploitable commodities.[2] This observation is particularly resonant in the post-communist context, where the communist past is stripped of its political complexity and reconfigured as a commodity for consumption. In cities such as Prague, Budapest, and Warsaw, the remnants of the communist era have been reimagined as attractions that cater to contemporary consumer interests. Retro-themed museums and cafés recreate the aesthetics of everyday socialist life, transforming once-ordinary objects, such as enamel mugs, propaganda posters, and functional, mass-produced furniture, into carefully curated objects of curiosity. Guided "communist tours" and bunker excursions offer participants an experiential encounter with Cold War history by inviting visitors, for instance, to don gas masks or handle other similar artefacts. Similarly, the use of vintage automobiles, such as Trabants or Nysa vans, transforms former symbols of economic limitation into vehicles through which visitors can imagine what it was like to navigate the streets of a communist city. Through such practices, the post-communist urban space becomes animated by commodified experiences that repackage the memory of communism, once defined by ideological conflict and systemic constraint, into entertaining consumable commodities tailored for the global market.

The transformation of the communist past into exploitable goods relies on a deliberate process of mediation through which the past is rendered both accessible and fascinating to contemporary audiences. For the past to become marketable, it must be translated into forms that are legible to tourists, making it recognisable enough to be consumed, yet distant enough to evoke a sense of novelty and intrigue. I argue that this process lies at the core of the commodification of post-communist memory, reinforcing broader narratives of the Cold War. On the one hand, the remnants of socialism are framed as exotic, peculiar, and antiquated artefacts of a vanished world. On the other hand, they are made comprehensible through *aestheticisation* and narrative framing that align them within the Western triumphalism context. Thus, the dissonant past is transformed into a coherent and palatable experience, in which political tensions are neutralised, and historical complexities are smoothed over.

[2] STEPHEN MICHAEL CHRISTIAN, BRENT J. STEELE, *Specters of Schmaltz: Aesthetics, Death, and the Haunting of Communist Kitsch*, in: Necrogeopolitics, (eds.) Caroline Alphin, François Debrix, London 2019, pp. 163–182.

This oscillation echoes Graham Huggan's theorisation of exoticism. In *The Postcolonial Exotic*, Huggan defines the exotic not as an intrinsic quality residing "in" particular peoples, objects, or places, but as "a particular mode of aesthetic perception" that renders "people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them."[3] For Huggan, the exotic constitutes a "semiotic circuit" that oscillates between strangeness and familiarity, functioning as a symbolic system that domesticates the foreign by translating it into intelligible cultural codes. Exoticism becomes a strategy of appropriation, absorbing and rearticulating cultural difference in ways that reinforce dominant epistemological and aesthetic orders. Thus, the exotic, while it follows a predictable logic of assimilation, is contingent and context-specific, shaped by the historical, political, and economic conditions that determine which forms of "otherness" can be rendered marketable at a given moment.[4]

In this article, I propose the concept of the *post-communist exotic* to make sense of the ways in which the communist past is rendered simultaneously strange and familiar for contemporary audiences. Drawing from Huggan's theorisation, the *post-communist exotic* functions as a semiotic circuit in which historical artefacts, practices, and spaces are translated into recognisable symbolic frameworks, outlined by the interplay of historical, political, and economic factors that determine which manifestations of "otherness" are deemed necessary at a given time. In this framework, exoticism is a relational process by which meaning emerges through the interplay between the historic object, the narrative imposed upon it, and the interpretive framework of the audience. Such a theorisation of the *post-communist exotic* extends Huggan's framework of exoticism by emphasising how it operates not only across geographic or cultural difference, as in postcolonial contexts, but temporally, mediating between past and present. It foregrounds the ways in which memory is selectively curated, *aestheticised*, and circulated, producing marketable experiences. In this sense, the post-communist exotic is both a conceptual tool and an analytical lens, capturing the dual processes of estrangement and domestication that define the commodification of socialist memory in contemporary urban spaces.

3 GRAHAM HUGGAN, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, London–New York 2002, p. 13.

4 GRAHAM HUGGAN, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, pp. 13–14.

This article demonstrates how the concept of the *post-communist exotic* can illuminate the curatorial strategies and frameworks through which the communist past is presented in privately owned tourist-centred museums in Budapest, Prague, and Warsaw. I find that these museums strategically deploy kitsch to mediate the tension between strangeness and familiarity, employing nostalgic recreations of domestic and public spaces, humorous interpretations of politically difficult episodes, and the commodified framing of both exhibitions and the museums themselves. Such strategies render the past legible and engaging to a global audience, translating narratives, objects, and affect into forms that are simultaneously accessible, appealing, and compelling. In doing so, these exhibitions raise critical questions about the processes through which memory is *aestheticised*, selectively curated, and circulated as a consumable cultural product.

In her study of post-socialist Hungary, Lisa Pope Fischer observes how communist kitsch acquires new meanings as people reinterpret and repurpose the past to navigate the challenges of a market economy, providing commentary not only on historical experiences but also on contemporary society. To capture this process, she introduces the term *kitschification*, describing the ways in which material culture symbolically reflects the reinterpretation and disempowerment of past powers. Pope Fischer emphasises that *kitschification* generates a curated fantasy of the past, revealing the intricate interplay between memory and the social, economic, political, and cultural conditions of the present.[5]

What makes *kitschification* particularly apt for exhibitions of the communist past aimed at a global audience is its production of multivocal symbols capable of expressing multiple perspectives, including East-West contrasts, generational differences, class positions, and political orientations, and its manifestation across diverse forms such as retro fashion, everyday objects, and tourist memorabilia. Through *kitschification*, the material culture of communism evokes varied forms of nostalgia while simultaneously offering reinvented observations on the past, smoothing over political intricacies and rendering history consumable, accessible, and symbolically resonant.[6] For individuals who experienced communist Hungary firsthand, kitsch may provoke nostalgia for a less stressful

5 LISA POPE FISCHER, *Washing Machine Races, Gulag Pizza, and McLenin Kitschification in Post-Socialist Hungary*, Ethnos 82/2017, no. 2, p. 335.

6 L. POPE FISCHER, *Washing Machine Races*, p. 332.

way of life. For younger generations who did not live under socialism, it may be seen as an attractive form of retro style. For outsiders, such as Pope Fischer herself, as an American, it may signify the Cold War image of communism constructed through cultural memory and propaganda.[7]

In her theorisation of *kitschification*, Pope Fischer describes a process by which popular culture reinterprets time and space, and through humour and nostalgia, can ease political and historical controversies.[8] Building on Pope Fischer's analysis, I introduce commodification as a third dimension. While nostalgia evokes sentimental longing[9] and humour, drawing on Freudian theory, renders political taboos emotionally palatable and psychologically manageable,[10] commodification transforms memory into a transactional experience: the past becomes a product, and its presentation a marketable service. Together, these three dimensions, namely, nostalgia, humour, and commodification, form a comprehensive framework for understanding the manifestation of *kitschification* in these museums and their exhibitions, as well as their manifestation of the *post-communist exotic*.

Drawing on fieldwork conducted between October 2021 and October 2024 in Budapest, Prague, and Warsaw, this study adopts a qualitative methodology informed by museum and cultural studies, guided by theoretical approaches to narrative, symbolism, and emotions. These three dimensions provide a framework for understanding how exhibitions structure, mediate, and communicate the communist past, complementing the earlier discussion of *kitschification* and the *post-communist exotic* by highlighting the mechanisms through which memory is curated, *aestheticised*, and rendered consumable.

The first dimension, narrative, examines the spatial and temporal organisation of historical meaning within exhibitions. As Mieke Bal observes, exhibitions guide visitors through curated sequences that resemble a story: "walking through a museum is like reading a book." [11] Studying narrative trajectories allows us to interrogate not only which stories are told, but how they are organised, paced, and concluded.

7 L. POPE FISCHER, *Washing Machine Races*, p. 334.
8 L. POPE FISCHER, *Washing Machine Races*, pp. 331–365.
9 MAYA NADKARNI, OLGA SHEVCHENKO, *The Politics of Nostalgia: A Case for Comparative Analysis of Post-Socialist Practices*, Ab Imperio 5/2004, no. 2, p. 501.
10 L. POPE FISCHER, *Washing Machine Races*, p. 335.
11 MIEKE BAL, *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis*, London–New York, 1996, p. 4.

Attention to these sequences reveals how exhibitions can smooth over ideological tensions, omit complexity, or produce simplified arcs of rise, rupture, and resolution, which are strategies that resonate with the domestication of strangeness and the *aestheticised* reinterpretation characteristic of the *post-communist exotic*.

The second dimension, symbolism, focuses on how objects within exhibitions function as signifiers that undergo semiotic transformation. Sheldon Annis's observation that symbols are inherently multivocal and context-dependent aligns closely with Pope Fischer's notion of multivocal *kitschification*, in which objects carry multiple meanings for different audiences.[12] Drawing on Krzysztof Pomian's concept of *semaphores*, museum objects acquire new symbolic roles, often detached from their original ideological or practical function. [13] In this study, I examine how artefacts shift in significance when removed from their everyday or functional contexts and placed in curated displays alongside other objects. This recontextualisation demonstrates how museums actively contribute to the creation of meaning, transforming once-utilitarian items into carefully curated carriers of cultural and historical significance.

The third dimension, emotions, centres on the affective dynamics of exhibitions and the role of feeling in the construction of meaning. Building on Sara Ahmed's conception of emotion as a form of social and cultural impression, this research emphasises that affect emerges relationally through encounters between viewers and objects, shaped by curatorial choices that frame how visitors are intended to feel, whether through visual pleasure, humour, nostalgia, or empathy. Silke Arnold-de Simine's concept of *secondary witnessing* further illuminates this process, highlighting how objects can evoke intimacy and connection even when the historical events they reference are temporally or personally distant. Strategic deployment of emotion, in this sense, complements *kitschification* and the *post-communist exotic* by making the past emotionally compelling and simultaneously relatable to diverse audiences.

This article begins by outlining the conceptual framework that underpins the analysis, introducing kitsch and *kitschification* as key theoretical tools. It situates kitsch as a dynamic cultural process through which material culture mediates the entanglements of memory, ideology, and

12 SHELDON ANNIS, *The Museum as a Staging Ground for Symbolic Action*, Museum International 38/1986, no. 3, pp. 168–171.

13 KRZYSZTOF POMIAN, *Historia. Nauka wobec pamięci*, Lublin 2006.

the market in post-socialist contexts. Following this theoretical grounding, the article turns to three museum case studies that form the empirical foundation of the research. This section provides both an overview of each museum and a discussion of the interconnected strategies through which these institutions *kitschify* the past. Together, these theoretical and empirical discussions establish the basis for the article's core analytical sections, which examine how the mechanisms of kitsch, specifically nostalgia, humour, and commodification, operate to produce what is theorised here as the *post-communist exotic*.

The first section critically examines how nostalgia enables museums to construct localised narratives while appealing to ostensibly universal affective themes, such as childhood, domestic life, and everyday commerce, thereby revealing the selective framing inherent in such presentations. The second section interrogates humour as both a coping mechanism and a mode of critique, showing how irony, parody, and caricature not only recast the political complexities of the period but also mediate them in ways that can obscure or simplify deeper structural tensions. The third section examines commodification, analysing how the transformation of memory into a marketable spectacle shapes engagement with the past. The article concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of the *post-communist exotic*, suggesting that although these exhibitions can promote cultural literacy and facilitate transnational dialogue, they also carry the risk of simplifying and/or homogenising the complexity of experiences of oppression, ideological struggle, and systemic inequality.

On Kitsch and *Kitschification*

While its origins lie in a derogatory term used in nineteenth-century Munich art circles, the rise of kitsch is inseparable from the processes of modernity, such as mass production, rapid urbanisation, and the expansion of a literate working class eager for accessible forms of culture.[14] Often dismissed as a low-brow, mass-produced aesthetic reliant on popular cultural icons, Chris Baldick famously defines kitsch as "rubbishy or tasteless pseudo-art of any kind," epitomised by souvenirs that parody high culture, such as Mona Lisa ashtrays, or devotional artefacts

[14] S. M. CHRISTIAN, B. J. STEELE, *Specters of Schmalt,* p. 166.

like glow-in-the-dark, flesh-coloured statues of Jesus Christ.[15] Similarly, Matei Calinescu characterises kitsch as implying "aesthetic inadequacy," underscoring its marginal position within modernist discourse and its opposition to the ideals of originality, authenticity, and intellectual depth.[16]

However, as Monica Kjellman-Chapin argues, kitsch is far from static or one-dimensional. Rather, it is mobile, complex, and historically adaptive, with exaggerated sentimentality and melodrama often cited as its defining features.[17] Walter Benjamin famously suggested that kitsch provides "instantaneous emotional gratification" without the demands of reflection or critical engagement.[18] It thus operates less as a category of artistic inferiority and more as a mode of reception, which is a cultural form that privileges affective immediacy over cognitive depth. Kitsch thrives precisely on its capacity to elicit recognition and comfort, reaffirming what is familiar and collectively nostalgic. Where fine art demands interpretation and distance, kitsch closes that gap, producing an instant affective response grounded in shared myths, symbols, and iconography circulated through education and mass media.[19] Its mass appeal, therefore, lies in accessibility, which can be referred to as an aesthetic democracy that affirms belonging through recognisability.

This interpretation aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, which situates taste within broader hierarchies of social power and symbolic exchange.[20] In the post-communist context, the commercial and affective value of kitsch is similarly tied to systems of legitimacy shaped by Western cultural and ideological dominance. The marketability of the communist past depends on its translation into a familiar aesthetic that conforms to Western expectations of the "other," an act that both eroticises and domesticates the past. In Budapest, for instance,

15 CHRIS BALDICK, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 2nd ed., Oxford 2001.

16 MATEI CĂLINESCU, *Faces of Modernity: Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch*, Bloomington 1977, p. 234.

17 MONICA KJELLMAN-CHAPIN, *Introduction*, in: Kitsch: History, Theory, Practice, (ed.) Monica Kjellman-Chapin, Newcastle upon Tyne 2013, p. ix.

18 WALTER BENJAMIN, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in: Illuminations, (ed.) Hannah Arendt, New York 1968, pp. 217–251.

19 CATHERINE A. LUGG, *Kitsch*, London 1999, p. 9.

20 PIERRE BOURDIEU, *The Forms of Capital*, in: Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education, (ed.) John G. Richardson, New York 1986, pp. 241–258.

the ruin bar Red Ruin openly exploits the image of the communist other through humorous and parodic portrayals of ideological images. A mural depicts Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Karl Marx cheerfully toasting beer mugs, while slogans such as "You couldn't get detergent, but you could get your brainwashed" adorn the walls, which satirise historical memory while commodifying it as entertainment. In Prague, souvenir shops along King's Way (*Královská cesta*) sell Russian matryoshka dolls and trapper hats (*ushanka*), which are objects unrelated to Czech cultural identity, alongside traditional Czech souvenirs like Bohemian crystal and miniature replicas of the Charles Bridge. This aesthetic conflation blurs national distinctions among former Eastern Bloc countries, packaging them into a homogenised and marketable "communist chic." Similarly, in Warsaw, nostalgic sightseeing tours in vintage communist-era vehicles such as the *Żuk* transform everyday artefacts of constraint into playful emblems of retro authenticity. Across these examples, kitsch operates as both medium and message. It becomes a mode of translating the complex and often painful legacies of socialism into accessible, emotionally gratifying, and commercially viable experiences.

Case Studies: Museums that Fill a Market Gap

This article analyses three case studies: the Budapest Retro Interactive Museum (BRIM), the Museum of Communism (MOC) in Prague, and the Life Under Communism Museum (LUCM) in Warsaw. Going beyond just staging curated artefacts, these museums stage immersive performances of memory that align with the global tourism industry's emphasis on experience. Despite their differing national contexts, these privately owned, tourist-oriented museums share the common purpose to provide accessible, emotionally resonant, and commodified encounters with life under communism. Most of them were founded by local entrepreneurs who identified a gap within the heritage market and developed their collections through personal networks, garage sales, and collaborations with antique dealers, often without formal training in museum studies.

The Budapest Retro Interactive Museum, founded in 2021 by graphic artist and businessman Ákos Horváth, is centrally located in the Hungarian capital and caters to both local and international visitors. Inspired by Berlin's DDR Museum, Horváth converted a derelict office building

into a vibrant, retro-themed exhibition space after recognising that no existing museum in Budapest addressed the everyday experience of life under communism. Rather than presenting a linear historical narrative, BRIM offers a thematic and affective exploration of the socialist past, encompassing childhood, domestic consumption, space exploration, and media culture. Visitors can engage with a range of interactive features such as dressing in period clothing, performing as television news anchors, or wandering through reconstructed streets lined with vintage shops and vehicles. The on-site retro bistro reinforces this nostalgic sensibility, serving 1970s-inspired food and drinks, including Unicum jelly shots, amid décor evocative of the textures, colours, and atmospheres of the socialist everyday life.

The Museum of Communism in Prague was founded in the late 1990s by Czech entrepreneur Jana Čepičková and American entrepreneur Glenn Spicker in response to the absence of a dedicated communist-era museum in the Czech capital. Initially located above a McDonald's and next to a casino, a juxtaposition that often drew criticism for its overt commercialism, the museum has since relocated and expanded to the Republic Square (*Náměstí Republiky*). Designed by Czech-born documentary film-maker Jan Kaplan, the exhibition is organised into three thematic sections: Dream, Reality, and Nightmare, mirroring the ideological trajectory of communism in Czechoslovakia. Combining historical artefacts, propaganda materials, and immersive installations, the MOC employs a narrative that balances accessibility as it alludes to globally known references. In addition to catering to tourists, it offers educational initiatives, including student competitions and a guidebook, *Legacy*, designed to engage those who want to learn more about the period.

The Life Under Communism Museum in Warsaw was founded by tour guides Marta and Rafał Patla, who initially conducted tours in vintage communist-era vehicles. Their garage-based display of socialist-era objects evolved into a full-fledged museum located in central Warsaw. The LUCM presents immersive reconstructions of flats, cafés, kindergartens, and workplaces, enabling visitors to experience quotidian life under the Polish People's Republic (PRL). Exhibits such as the Frania washing machine, Bambino phonograph, and Fiat 126p car foreground the material culture of everyday socialism, evoking nostalgia through tactility and domestic familiarity. The exhibition opens with a section on opposition movements, framing the ensuing reconstructions within

a wider political narrative that connects personal memory with collective history.

These privately owned, tourist-focused museums play a pivotal role in transforming the communist past into kitsch, recasting a politically charged history as an entertaining, affect-driven experience tailored for global consumption. In contrast to state-funded institutions, which often foreground political repression, state violence, democratic struggle, resistance movements, and collective suffering, these museums highlight the textures of everyday life, emphasising emotional accessibility and visual immediacy over ideological depth. Three interconnected strategies underpin this process: the use of recognisable cultural symbols, immersive reconstructions, and interactive participation.

First, such museums draw on Cold War imagery and ideological tropes familiar to international visitors. The MOC, for example, features the iconic poster of a matryoshka doll with fangs, which serves as a visual shorthand that condenses diverse socialist experiences into a single caricature of menace and absurdity. While immediately legible, such imagery reinforces Western triumphalist narratives and simplifies historical complexity.

Second, immersive reconstructions simulate everyday life under communism, inviting tactile engagement. At the LUCM, a meticulously reconstructed apartment, replete with authentic furnishings, allows visitors to step into the rhythms of everyday life, such as cooking, cleaning, and working, within spaces marked by scarcity and limited resources. While such exhibits cultivate empathy for those under state control, they often privilege affective resonance over critical understanding, framing socialism as a monochrome world of monotony and repression.

Third, interactive experiences transform history into participatory entertainment. At the BRIM, visitors don vintage clothing or pose as television anchors, transforming acts of historical engagement into playful performance. Such activities may evoke *prosthetic memory*, which is the acquisition of memories of events or experiences that one did not live through, but which feel personal, often through mediated representations like films, museums, or photographs.[21] Simultaneously, the availability of such activities also risks reducing history to spectacle. As tourists document and share these experiences on social media, the past becomes

21 ALISON LANDSBERG, *Prosthetic memory: The transformation of American remembrance in the age of mass culture*, New York 2004.

a series of curated moments, consumed visually rather than interrogated intellectually.

Globalising Nostalgia through Curated Ambiguity

Once considered a curable medical condition in the 17th century, nostalgia is now widely understood as a historical emotion shaped by temporal displacement and cultural longing. Derived from the Greek "*nostos*" (return home) and "*algos*" (longing), Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed."[22] She distinguishes between restorative nostalgia, which seeks to reconstruct a lost world, and reflective nostalgia, which emphasises the affective and constructed nature of memory itself. With museums possessing a unique discursive authority to define historical truth, the exhibitions examined here function as sites of both restorative and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia is evident in the presentation of material artefacts and personal testimonies that reconstruct the past as tangible, coherent, and morally legible. At the same time, reflective nostalgia emerges through interactive elements and careful curation, foregrounding the mediation of memory and inviting critical and emotional engagement.

A compelling illustration of this tension can be found at the LUCM. The exhibit, featuring Joanna Szczepkowska's 1989 televised declaration that "communism ended in Poland," exemplifies restorative nostalgia, presenting political change as a clear-cut, triumphant break. Similarly, Tomasz Sarnecki's *High Noon* poster reimagines Poland's democratic transition through a Western heroic archetype, embedding the Solidarity movement in a mythic narrative of moral clarity. These displays function as nostalgic time capsules, stabilising memory within a redemptive national framework. Yet, elements of reflective nostalgia are subtly present. The adoption of a Hollywood cowboy figure as a symbol of Polish resistance gestures toward the *constructedness* of memory and the interplay between global imagery and local history. These hybrid representations showcase symbolic borrowing and the layered processes of historical meaning-making.

In contrast, the Museum of Communism in Prague offers a more sustained engagement with reflective nostalgia through personal video testi-

22 SVETLANA BOYM, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York 2001, p. 3.

monies. Visitors encounter the communist past not as a linear moral tale but as a mosaic of everyday experiences. Josef Klimeš's recollection of working on the Stalin Monument, motivated by the financial imperative of supporting his family rather than by political conviction, and Monika Arkai's memory of experiencing the Soviet invasion while on holiday with her grandparents in a quiet garden near a nature reserve together illustrate how personal memory unsettles and complicates dominant public narratives. These testimonies resist didactic closure, emphasising the contradictions and ambiguities of lived experience.

These museums, I argue, function as spaces of *curated ambiguity*, combining authentic artefacts with affective displays that resist singular interpretations. Kitsch plays a key role here, collapsing historical distance through sentimentality and familiarity. This aesthetic, while often derided for its lack of critical edge, facilitates reflective identification, especially for visitors unfamiliar with the region. Themes such as childhood, domesticity, and everyday consumption transcend cultural boundaries, enabling emotional engagement across diverse audiences.

The BRIM illustrates this with its opening exhibit on childhood, which combines local specificity with emotional accessibility. While showcasing Hungarian pioneer uniforms, flags, and period-specific memorabilia, it also includes universally resonant items like roller skates and puzzle books. This combination allows for an open-ended interpretation, which not only caters for local audiences who have lived through the period but also to international audiences. The museum's interactive screens further universalise the experience. Descriptions of playground equipment blend humour and nostalgia: "No evidence anyone ever turned the swing around its axle, but every child tried." These global narratives tap into shared memories, inviting identification regardless of cultural background.

Another instance of *curated ambiguity* is a large poster installation that incorporates a live camera feed, capturing visitors' faces and projecting them onto a screen at the centre of the composition. Surrounding the projection are overtly ideological slogans, which read, "To my sweet parents" above and "Learning better for peace" below, flanked by a prominent red star and two children holding books. These design features clearly reference socialist-era propaganda intended to mould model youth under the communist regime. The installation blurs the distinction between past and present by placing visitors directly within the visual frame. For older audiences, the experience may evoke personal

associations, while others may perceive it as ironic, quaint, or oddly universal, recalling the generic certificates or commendations once distributed in school settings. In this way, the participatory design employs nostalgia as a flexible and affective mode of engagement rather than a prescriptive or didactic tool.

In a global tourism context, stylised immersion often takes precedence over analytical depth as museums do not simply reconstruct the past but also repackage it for broader consumption, blending temporally specific memories with marketability. Drawing on Maya Nadkarni and Olga Shevchenko's modes of nostalgia, *proustiana* nostalgia, which relies on evocative objects to trigger memory, and *habitus* nostalgia, which engages the body through recreated environments, are particularly salient in this context.[23] As Andreas Huyssen observes, contemporary memory cultures increasingly prioritise sensory engagement and affective immediacy over historical critique.[24] These modes not only provide memory cues but also restore feelings of familiarity and a sense of belonging. In the museums analysed here, these nostalgic modalities are activated through immersive reconstructions of everyday life under communism. From interiors of a "typical flat" to "socialist" or "communist" classrooms and shops, these exhibits not only display historical objects but also re-create the environments and practices that once gave those objects meaning. While these reconstructions strongly resonate with those who experienced state socialism firsthand, I argue that they are equally designed to appeal to visitors without direct personal ties to the period or place.

A recurring theme across all three museums is childhood, illustrated through evocative recreations of both domestic and educational spaces. These scenes bridge local memory and universal affect. At the BRIM, for example, visitors encounter a 1970s-style living room featuring toys familiar to both Hungarian and international audiences, including the chequered-eared rabbit from a Hungarian cartoon series and the globally popular Japanese Monchichi doll. The Monchichi doll serves as a point of familiarity, providing international visitors with an easy entry into a setting that might otherwise feel culturally distant. The Hungarian rabbit, by contrast, introduces an element of difference that signals authenticity while remaining safely decipherable within the broader grammar

23 M. NADKARNI, O. SHEVCHENKO, *The Politics of Nostalgia*, pp. 487–519.
24 ANDREAS HUYSSEN, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Stanford 2003.

Figure 1. Mock-up of a child's room at the Museum of Communism. Photo by author, 2019.

of childhood memorabilia. Thus, by placing a globally circulating toy alongside one shaped by socialist cultural production, the display collapses historically distinct modes of childhood toys into a single, nostalgically curated tableau. In staging the dolls as interchangeable icons of retro childhood, the exhibition transforms them into *aestheticised* props, inviting sentimental recognition while obscuring the economic and ideological boundaries.

In the MOC, a boy's bedroom is staged behind a barrier, allowing only visual access (see Figure 1). The room features a Rubik's Cube, which is of Hungarian origin but widely recognised as a global icon, alongside generic items such as a globe and a calculator. The room also includes hockey equipment, a detail that carries particular cultural resonance in the Czech context, where ice hockey functions as a potent symbol of national pride and collective identity. Its presence evokes not only the everyday leisure practices of the socialist period but also the sport's broader role as a domain in which Czechoslovakia asserted international visibility and occasional triumph over dominant political powers. These items gesture toward a universalised image of late twentieth-century

education and sport, smoothing over the stark differences in material availability.

Another mock-up found in the MOC is a classroom, which introduces a more overt localised context. Regionally specific markers, such as Russian text on the chalkboard and a glass case containing artefacts like a gas mask and a folded Pioneer uniform, point to Soviet influence and Cold War anxieties. Yet these same objects function as familiar Cold War signifiers for international tourists, instantly readable through the popular imagery of films, textbooks, and media representations. The gas mask, for example, evokes globally recognisable narratives of nuclear fear, while the Pioneer uniform recalls the broad trope of socialist youth indoctrination widely circulated beyond the Eastern Bloc. In this arrangement, the exhibition constructs environments that are saturated with local markers of era and place yet assembled from objects that translate easily into the global semiotic repertoire. This strategic interplay allows visitors to feel that they both recognise and "discover" the communist past.

The LUCM's kindergarten classroom displays region and period-specific toys that signal its specificity, such as a *Rumcajs* doll, a beloved Czech literary character, which anchors the scene in local cultural memory, evoking narratives and aesthetics familiar to Central European audiences (see Figure 2). Alongside it, more universally recognisable items such as tabletop football sets and generic building blocks provide immediate points of identification for visitors without prior knowledge of Polish (or Eastern bloc) childhood culture. The presence of strollers, walkers, and other childcare implements further situates the exhibit within a broadly shared emotional register of early childhood, fostering affective resonance across national boundaries.

The theme of domestic life is developed most extensively at the BRIM and the LUCM, where full-scale apartment reconstructions allow visitors to step into the material world of socialist housing. The BRIM's mock-up of a 1970s Budapest flat features familiar design elements, such as brown furniture, wall-mounted cabinets, and canned goods in a bright orange kitchen, that evoke emotional resonance even for those unfamiliar with the Hungarian context. On one of the kitchen shelves, the museum showcases the Hungarian soft drink Bambi, once the only nationally produced soda in Hungary until the arrival of Coca-Cola and Pepsi in the late 1960s. Named after the Disney character, Bambi is remembered not only through taste but also through cultural references, such as Eszter Kovács's pop hit, "*A pancsoló kisgyerek*." The BRIM situates Bambi

Figure 2. Toy-filled cubbies designed to evoke childhood memories of the Socialist period, on display at the Life under Communism Museum (LUCM) in Warsaw. Photo by the author, 2021.

alongside other period sodas, such as Márka, Hüsi, and Sztár Cola. Their branding echoes international products, creating visual parallels that help foreign visitors emotionally connect with unfamiliar objects. For example, Bambi's orange label recalls Fanta or Mirinda, while Márka's green bottle resembles 7 Up or Sprite (see Figure 3).

The LUCM's domestic exhibit features a compact layout of a kitchen, living room, and bedroom, illustrating the cramped living conditions common in the People's Republic of Poland (see Figure 4). An introductory infographic contextualises these spaces within the constraints of postwar housing policy, framing home life as both a basic need and an aspirational ideal. Additionally, iconic objects such as the Frania washing machine, which is Poland's first mass-produced rotor model, anchor the display in local memory while also reflecting universal themes of domestic labour and ingenuity. The museum text recounts how the washing machine was used for various purposes beyond washing clothes, such as churning butter and facilitating illegal printing of counterfeit goods,

Figure 3. Recreation of a typical kitchen cabinet with sodas at the Budapest Retro Interactive Museum. Photo by author, 2021.

Figure 4. Recreation of a mock-up of a typical flat in the PRL. Photo by author, 2022.

highlighting how resourcefulness became a vital survival skill. These narratives may resonate globally, reflecting shared experiences of adaptation during economic scarcity.

Recreations of economic life vary among the three. In terms of commerce during the period, the BRIM presents a bustling street scene with shop windows displaying electronics, cameras, and toys. In contrast, the MOC's mock-up of a convenience store offers a more realistic portrayal of socialist-era scarcity, featuring sparsely stocked shelves and a photo of a queue outside a shop. The former's presentation evokes a nostalgic fantasy of abundance and prosperity, while the latter's imagery provides the visitor with a visual shorthand for everyday deprivation. Despite these differences in portraying economic conditions, both displays operate through a dual logic of nostalgia: they appeal to local visitors through regionally specific items and brands, such as Hungarian electronics or Czech canned goods or soap brands, while simultaneously remaining

legible to international audiences through globally popular goods at that time, such as cassette players, cameras, or personal computers.

Dining culture is another domain through which these museums stage nostalgic engagement. At the BRIM, a retro bistro invites visitors to sit on red vinyl chairs, enjoy coffee, and sample era-specific treats such as the locally iconic Kojak lollipop. Playful elements, including an operational jukebox and themed Unicum jelly shots, enhance interactivity while reinforcing a stylised, consumable vision of socialist leisure. The LUCM, by contrast, recreates a milk bar (*bar mleczny*), a utilitarian canteen that was a central feature of the urban life of communist Poland. However, its standardised furnishings and presentation of institutional-style meals may also resonate with internationally recognisable forms of communal dining, from school cafeterias to workplace canteens, allowing global visitors to immediately situate the experience within their own personal memories.

Habitus nostalgia, by contrast, is activated in the BRIM's interactive installations, such as the retro phone booths that play period-specific jokes, songs, and oaths (see Figure 5). These sensory experiences re-engage embodied practices from the socialist era, allowing visitors to access memories through physical interaction and auditory immersion. Nadkarni and Shevchenko caution, however, against viewing such elements as purely ideological.[25] What may appear as nostalgic remnants of communism often also signify deeply personal associations, such as singing with friends, adolescent defiance, or first love. This complexity was evident during conversations with Czech colleagues about the music playing in the background while I was visiting the MOC. The museum was playing Petr Kotvald and Stanislav Hložek's 1982 hit "*Holky z naší školky*" on loop. The conversations I had prompted animated recollections of their youth. Their responses revealed how the song's nostalgic power resided not in its political context but in intimate, everyday moments of growing up. This illustrates how such exhibits can collapse ideological, personal, and emotional layers of memory.

Thus, these exhibits demonstrate that *proustiana* and *habitus* nostalgia are not limited to those with direct memories of communism, but are actively curated to resonate with diverse, transnational audiences. Universal themes, such as childhood, domestic life, and commerce, enable emotionally compelling and cross-cultural connections. Whether

[25] M. NADKARNI, O. SHEVCHENKO, *The Politics of Nostalgia*, p. 502.

Figure 5. A retro-style phone booth featuring pre-recorded Communist-era jokes, part of an interactive exhibit at the Budapest Retro Interactive Museum. Photo by the author, 2022.

through interactivity, immersive spatial design, or material culture, the exhibitions blur the lines between personal recollection and collective imagination. They do not impose a singular historical narrative but create flexible, affective environments where visitors can feel both recognition and estrangement. This *curatorial ambiguity* enables the exhibits to function as both mnemonic tools and cultural mediators, bridging generational and geographic divides while reshaping how the communist past is remembered and reimagined.

Projecting Humour through Staged Absurdities

In post-communist museums, humour functions as a powerful narrative device, offering visitors a means to engage playfully and critically with the socialist past. For those with lived experience of communism, it serves as a coping mechanism for revisiting politically sensitive or painful memories. Drawing from Mikhail Bakhtin's work, Pope Fischer argues that humour through kitsch can "liberate" individuals from the authority of the past by addressing taboo or uncomfortable subjects in disarming ways.[26] For younger or international visitors unfamiliar with the context, this comedic framing can provide an interpretive gateway, though it may also provoke confusion or disorientation. It is precisely this ambivalence that underscores humour's reflective potential, revealing how memory is constructed not merely through facts but also through subjective means such as emotion, cultural idioms, and collective critique.

Across the three museums examined, humour is deployed through three interrelated key strategies: satire, parody, and caricature. Satire, characterised by irony, exaggeration, and ridicule, targets institutional absurdities and ideological inconsistencies. Parody imitates styles or systems to expose their flaws, while caricature distorts features to highlight underlying truths. Ultimately, these displays of humour treat grim topics with levity, offering emotional distance and critique. In post-communist memory, it helps reframe censorship, surveillance, and propaganda not by trivialising it, but by reducing its power through humour.

At the BRIM, visitors use rotary phones to listen to jokes translated from Hungarian, English, German, and Russian, critiquing state inefficiency. One of the jokes, which was also told during my participation in

[26] L. POPE FISCHER, *Washing Machine Races*, p. 335.

the communist walking tour of Budapest, centres on the inefficiencies of the planned economy by highlighting the absurdity of long-term state scheduling. In the joke, a man is finally able to purchase a car after years of saving. The official informs him that, due to shortages, the vehicle will be delivered in August, three years in the future. Unfazed, the man asks which day in August it will arrive. Puzzled, the official asks why that detail matters, to which the man replies, "The plumber is coming that morning." By aligning the absurdities of bureaucratic time with everyday logic, the joke sharply critiques the failures of central planning while remaining universally relatable to anyone familiar with administrative inefficiency.

Another joke targets the disconnect between ideological rhetoric and material reality, a recurring theme across the Eastern bloc. In this version, a Communist Party official questions a worker about his willingness to contribute to the cause: "If you had two houses, would you give one to the Party?" The worker responds affirmatively. The official continues, "If you had two cars?" Again, the worker agrees. But when asked, "If you had two shirts, would you give one to the Party?" the worker replies, "No, because I have two shirts." The humour hinges on the sudden pivot from abstract generosity to concrete scarcity, exposing the performative nature of political loyalty. As Bakhtin argues, such humour functions to subvert dominant ideologies by highlighting their internal contradictions, allowing people to laugh at the dissonance between what was expected in public declarations and what was possible in private life.[27]

Another example of humour appears in cabaret sketches, such as András Kern's *Halló, Belváros*, which parodies bureaucratic futility. In the sketch, a caller is endlessly redirected from one office to another, encountering opaque procedures and indifferent officials, with no resolution ever reached. The comedy arises not only from the repetitive absurdity but also from its subtle critique of the inefficiencies and frustrations inherent in socialist bureaucratic systems. By foregrounding the everyday experiences of navigating state institutions, the sketch transforms mundane encounters into sites of laughter, allowing viewers to reflect on historical realities while engaging with them through irony. This blend of satire and lived experience exemplifies how humour can make complex social and political conditions legible and emotionally resonant, mediating memory in ways that are simultaneously entertaining and critical.

27 MIKHAIL BAKHTIN, *Rabelais and His World*, Bloomington 1984.

The BRIM's inclusion of *It's Winter*, a Russian-developed "anti-game," exemplifies parody and critical engagement through interactive media. The game situates players in a dreary, hyper-realistic post-Soviet environment, complete with panel houses, overcast skies, a tiny kitchen, and a shabby staircase. Classified as a sandbox, post-Soviet, "sad 3D" experience, the game offers no conventional goals, adventures, or narrative payoff. Players cannot escape their environment, and no thrilling plot unfolds. Instead, the mundanity, confinement, and *aestheticised* bleakness of everyday life under socialism are rendered into an interactive, immersive experience. Through this game, the museum enables visitors to confront the frustrations and monotony of the period. While the museum provides little contextual information about the game, online reviews on the Steam community website attest to its affective authenticity. Reviewers write, "It's like I'm back in my childhood" or "F*ck, I live here," highlighting its capacity to evoke lived memory. For outsiders, however, *It's Winter* functions as a stylised, surreal simulation of a defeated world.

At the MOC, humour is deployed to critique the contradictions and excesses of communist life. One example is the reinterpretation of COMECON in the museum text as a punchline: "Let's rejoice, let's be merry, we don't have shit, so let's share," a phrase that encapsulates the ideological dissonance between utopian promises of collective abundance and the material deprivation of everyday life. Similarly, the Stalin Monument, colloquially nicknamed "the line for meat," lampoons the absurd rituals and bureaucratic inconveniences that became hallmarks of state socialism.

Additionally, the MOC's exhibits similarly deploy humour to critique propaganda. An example is the museum's description of the Stalinist fairytale *The Proud Princess*, in which capitalist realms are portrayed as silent and joyless, while the socialist utopia is depicted as a place where cheerful workers sing. The film's binary world, once designed to reinforce loyalty, now appears kitsch. By recontextualising these propagandistic mechanisms, the MOC invites visitors not to mock victims of ideology, but to interrogate the ideological machinery itself. Such humour serves as a mode of critical remembrance. For local audiences, it resonates as shared cultural memory, and, for outsiders, it offers entry points into unfamiliar histories.

The LUCM also embraces caricature through vignettes of Leopold Tyrmand's satirical, polemical book titled *Rosa Luxemburg Contraceptives Cooperative: A Primer on Communist Civilisation*, which offers

a scathing critique of life under communism. In the museum, sections of the book can be read, one of which is a caricature of the Communist Everyman and his absurd quest to purchase ham. The endless queue, the shrinking ham, and the glum resignation of the protagonist all paint an exaggerated but recognisable portrait of scarcity under Communism.

Commodifying History through Entertainment

All three museums reframe history into a form that is simultaneously exotic enough to intrigue and familiar enough to be easily consumed. This transformation unfolds through three interconnected mechanisms: the *aestheticisation* and symbolic mediation of ideology, the staging of history through pop cultural codes, and the translation of past life into consumable, affectively mediated encounters.

The first mechanism centres on repackaging symbols saturated with ideological meaning into commodities that serve new cultural and commercial purposes. As Nadkarni and Shevchenko note, medals, statues, and propaganda posters have been transformed into marketable objects, a phenomenon they describe as the "fashionability of socialist historicity," which is particularly appealing to younger generations with no direct experience of the regime.[28] Similarly, Pope Fischer defines *kitschification* as the symbolic disempowerment of past authorities through the aesthetic repackaging of their material culture.[29] In this light, privately owned, tourist-oriented museums often adopt a retro-themed visual language that detaches communist-era objects from their original political context, rendering them more consumable. As Fritzsche observes, such presentations cultivate "nostalgia without melancholy," inviting engagement with history through stylised, often ironic visual appeal rather than emotional or political weight. [30]

The BRIM exemplifies this approach through its playful integration of ideological symbols into domestic and decorative objects. A tabletop clock, for instance, features a foundry worker holding an ingot in place of a pendulum. In this example, a figure of heroic labour is reimagined

28 M. NADKARNI, O. SHEVCHENKO, *The Politics of Nostalgia*, p. 499.
29 L. POPE FISCHER, *Washing Machine Races*, p. 332.
30 PETER FRITZSCHE, *Specters of History: On Nostalgia, Exile, and Modernity*, The American Historical Review 106/2001, no. 5, p. 1618

as an eccentric design element, more whimsical than didactic. Similarly, fine china adorned with floral motifs conceals socialist emblems on its reverse. Also displayed with the underside facing visitors, the plates reveal a hammer and sickle alongside a red star, transforming propaganda into a playful, curious discovery rather than a statement of authority. Even overtly ideological objects, such as crockery bearing the Hungarian Socialist emblem, are reframed. Presented on an embroidered book cover labelled a "national birth certificate," state symbols are mediated through domestic craft, softening the coercive connotations of power and recasting the objects as cultural heritage rather than ideological instruments.

The LUCM employs a comparable strategy with propagandistic materials. Posters from the Central Statistical Office, originally designed to communicate production targets, demographic goals, or civic norms, are displayed in bright colours with retro graphic design, transforming them into visually striking "vintage infographics" today. Freed from their prescriptive function, visitors encounter them not as directives of state power but as stylised markers of a bygone era, engaging with history through design, colour, and nostalgia rather than ideological authority.

By embedding symbols of state power within the aesthetics of craft and domesticity, both the BRIM and the LUCM strip these objects of political authority, transforming them into quirky, nostalgic décor. Embroidery, floral motifs, and familiar domestic settings render formerly coercive symbols approachable, creating a tension between the accessible, through aesthetic and everyday associations, and the strange, through their historical and ideological origins.

The second mechanism involves staging the past through pop-cultural codes. The exhibitions are explicitly tourist-oriented, with popular culture functioning as a key currency in the process. These museums reframe the past through cinematic and commercial codes, creating a blend of familiar tropes and historical distance, in which Hollywood and other globally circulated media serve as central reference points.

A notable feature of the BRIM is the minimisation of explanatory text, leaving visitors to interpret objects independently through its *curated ambiguity*. International audiences may rely on pop cultural knowledge or Cold War stereotypes, which amplifies the exoticism of the era through widely recognisable tropes. One glass case contains an AK-47, a Soviet RPG launcher, a K-5 missile, spy tools, barbed wire, and a GSh-6 flight helmet, which are juxtaposed with Lenin busts. Another glass case

contains fine china adorned with Soviet propaganda positioned next to a gun. Such configurations of objects evoke imagery reminiscent of Cold War thrillers, reinforcing familiar stereotypes of the Soviet "Other."

The MOC explicitly stages Cold War rivalry through its panels, which repeatedly juxtapose the Eastern Bloc against the United States. A display titled "Our Model and America's Rival" features iconic images, including Yuri Gagarin and Stalin parades. Subsequent panels reinforce this binary: one contrasts Czechoslovakian fairytale films with the opening of Disneyland, while another positions COMECON as a political instrument of Moscow rather than genuine economic aid. Such curatorial strategies heighten ideological drama, transforming historical events into digestible narratives that align with Western media interpretations.

The LUCM similarly draws on Cold War imagery through its gift shop, where souvenirs such as enamel mugs, cigarette lighters, and magnets depict the Fiat 126p and Trabant, which are vehicles featured in Cold War films like Bridge of Spies (2015), Atomic Blonde (2017), and Red Sparrow (2018). These items resonate even with visitors unfamiliar with their historical significance, relying on the global circulation of cinematic codes rather than local knowledge. Across all three museums, history is reimagined as a sensory, cinematic, and commodified experience, blending nostalgia, spectacle, and interpretive play to create the post-communist exotic for contemporary audiences.

The third and final mechanism is consumerism, both in practice and in display. On the one hand, these museums turn icons of localised memory into kitsch consumer goods. Nadkarni and Shevchenko observe that the rising cultural value of communist-era consumer goods reflects growing disillusionment in the post-socialist East with once-idealised Western models.[31] Former symbols of scarcity, such as the Bambino, Frania washing machine, and enamel mugs, have been reimagined as nostalgic artefacts that evoke emotional connections beyond their original contexts.

In museum shops, visitors can purchase playful renditions of propaganda and symbols of state authority. The LUCM's shop sells red star badges, enamel mugs, and toy versions of Polish cars, facilitating an affective yet apolitical engagement with the past, allowing visitors to "take home" communism as a form of irony, rather than an ideology. At the MOC, for instance, Lenin's head is sold as a candle, a satirical inversion

31 M. NADKARNI, O. SHEVCHENKO, *The Politics of Nostalgia*, pp. 487–519.

Figure 6. Lenin's head candles are on display as souvenirs in the museum shop at the Museum of Communism, Prague. Photo by the author, 2019.

of past reverence, which also evokes the first mechanism of repackaging symbols saturated with ideological meaning (see Figure 6). Matryoshka dolls with fangs and angry expressions offer a comically grotesque interpretation of Russian heritage.

On the other hand, consumerism is also evident in the exhibitions, as the museums appear to display excessive quantities of the same consumer goods. While museums are indeed cabinets of curiosity where people display items of interest, I have observed how these museums take an exaggerated approach to this, particularly with household items. The BRIM's display features multiple brands of soap, toothpaste, coffee, cocoa, and cigarettes, as well as a dedicated glass case filled with various sugar packaging. Its mock-up of an electronics storefront is filled with radios, TVs, and cameras, while its reconstruction of a toy shop window is bursting with figurines, board games, and Rubik's Cubes. The LUCM also showcases various brands of radios, cigarette brands, and even coffee tins. These exaggerated displays mimic contemporary supermarket

aesthetics, ironically contradicting the narrative of scarcity that characterised the socialist economy. By saturating visitors with consumer goods, museums reframe the past as materially rich, visually seductive, and emotionally accessible.

Kitsch, Commodification, and the Exoticisation of Post--Communist Memory

In this article, I argue that the *post-communist exotic* manifests through the *kitschification* of the past, which operates through nostalgia, humour, and commodification. Nostalgia allows museums to present localised practices and artefacts while simultaneously enabling the multivocal reimagining of history. Even in the absence of shared historical experience, *kitschified* exhibitions evoke a broadly recognisable sense of longing through *curated ambiguity*, foregrounding everyday global themes such as childhood, domestic life, and commerce. As Susan Stewart notes, nostalgic objects are not passive remnants of the past but composites of present-day meaning that invite imaginative engagement.[32] Humour, meanwhile, transforms politically critical content into objects of amusement, functioning both as a coping mechanism for collective trauma and as a subtle form of critique. Exhibitions leverage humour to interrogate ideology and bureaucratic absurdities, amplify everyday struggles and cultural conformity through parody and caricature, and address state surveillance and repression, all while maintaining accessibility and relatability for their audiences. The *aestheticisation* of ideological content, the allusions to popular culture, and the deliberate practice and display of consumerism collectively serve to commodify the past, rendering it a consumable spectacle for tourism.

This blending of local specificity and global familiarity through the use of kitsch contributes to what I refer to as the *post-communist exotic*. These exhibitions translate the specificity of the communist era into a globally recognisable language, balancing local detail with broader affective accessibility. Such a *curated ambiguity* allows for either the globalisation of local memory such as the archetypes of childhood or the localisation of global cultural tropes, like the American Western posters in

32 SUSAN STEWART, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Durham 1993.

the LUCM. As Milan Kundera observes, kitsch fosters shared sentiment regardless of origin, and within these museums, it becomes the medium through which visitors connect with a past they may never have lived.[33] Rather than flattening memory, these spaces offer layered, affect-rich encounters that repackage nostalgia as a translatable, yet still resonant, emotional currency.

The exoticisation of the communist past through kitsch in tourist-centred institutions highlights the complex interplay between memory, tourism, and commodification in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. These exhibitions extend and reinforce the logic of global capitalism. They are not merely passive reflections of the past but actively produce and circulate historical memory as consumable experiences. However, the *post-communist exotic* is not solely a Western projection. These museums are locally conceived and curated, shaped by local and/or regional actors who engage with dominant global narratives while rearticulating them through local cultural and political frameworks. This dynamic reflects what Mary Louise Pratt calls *autoethnographic texts*, whereby marginalised or transitional subjects adopt, modify, and re-present dominant discourses.[34] While these museums often reflect the ideological frameworks favoured by Western audiences, they simultaneously appropriate and reconfigure those narratives, reframing the memory of communism in ways that align with local cultural and political agendas as well.

Building on this *autoethnographic* engagement, these exhibitions highlight the selective and constructed nature of collective memory. It reiterates that memory is not a neutral repository of the past, but rather a curated, performed, and reproduced entity through institutional and cultural practices. By privileging certain narratives, symbolisms, and emotions, museums shape what is remembered and what is forgotten. This selective process reveals how memory is deeply entangled with power. The histories that become consumable are those that can be aligned with broader political, cultural, and economic objectives. Meanwhile, inconvenient or contentious aspects of the past may be downplayed, omitted, or rendered unintelligible to certain audiences. Such practices highlight the tension between memory as a lived experience and memory as a mediated, commodified object.

33 MILAN KUNDERA, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, New York 1985, p. 129.
34 MARY LOUISE PRATT, *Arts of the Contact Zone*, Profession 1991, pp. 33–40.

On the one hand, the selective and mediated construction of memory in these exhibitions can foster cultural literacy and transnational dialogue. By translating local historical experiences into narratives that resonate with broader audiences, museums facilitate encounters with a past that might otherwise remain inaccessible, particularly for younger generations or international visitors. Their affective strategies can cultivate empathy and reflection, allowing audiences to connect with lived experiences across temporal, geographic, and ideological boundaries. In this sense, the *post-communist exotic* serves as a gateway to promoting cross-cultural understanding.

On the other hand, such mechanisms can carry significant negative implications, particularly in relation to historical accuracy and ethical representation. By privileging affective legibility and marketability, museums risk oversimplifying, homogenising, or even trivialising experiences of oppression, ideological conflict, and systemic inequity. Kitsch, while engaging, may obscure the material and structural realities of communist life, flattening diverse experiences into consumable archetypes. The mediation of history through commercial and aesthetic lenses can reproduce dominant narratives, reinforce stereotypes, and depoliticise past struggles, potentially shaping collective memory in ways that serve contemporary cultural or economic agendas rather than fostering more genuine critical historical understanding.

Recognising the duality inherent in mediated memory calls for a more sophisticated approach to memory studies, one that moves beyond simplistic binaries of "authentic" versus "inauthentic" recollection. The *post-communist exotic*, as both a conceptual tool and an analytical lens, provides such an approach, enabling a critical interrogation of how memory in post-communist contexts is actively constructed, circulated, and consumed. By framing exoticism as a relational process, where meaning emerges through the interaction between historical artefacts, the narratives imposed upon them, and audience interpretation, this lens illuminates the co-constructed, performative nature of memory and its inherent tensions as well as the negotiation between local agencies and global circulations. It exposes how exhibitions simultaneously educate, engage, and foster empathy, while also reproducing frameworks that may obscure a genuine comprehension of the past.

Ultimately, the *post-communist exotic* underscores memory as a contested cultural and political practice, shaped and mediated through institutional and social frameworks. As both a theoretical and methodological

tool, it facilitates a nuanced understanding of how communist memory is produced, circulated, and interpreted, offering scholars a framework for examining contemporary memory practices. In doing so, it illuminates the productive ambivalence of post-communist memory, which engages and educates, entertains and commodifies, and renders the complexities of the past legible while opening space for critical reflection on the legacies of the socialist experience.