Gender, Utopia, and Ostalgia: the Pre- and Post-Unification Visions of East German Science Fiction Writer Alexander Kroger

Sonja Fritzsche, *Illinois Wesleyan University*
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SONJA FRITZSCHE

Science fiction authors from eastern Germany have begun to publish after a hiatus of more than ten years that followed reunification with the West on October 3, 1990. Almost without exception, these titles come from writers who worked in East Germany. Where many books are slightly revised versions from East German times, a few new novels and anthologies have also appeared. On the whole, former eastern authors, who previously published in a protected market, now have joined science fiction authors all over Germany in their effort to find a national audience amidst heavy competition from Anglo-American translations.

There is, however, one major exception to this rule. Alexander Kröger (pseudonym of Helmut Routschek) is an established author from the former East, who has managed to consistently publish a number of novels since his retirement from the natural gas industry in 1994. Like the majority of science fiction authors in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Kröger wrote in his spare time. Despite this status, he became one of the genre's most prolific writers in East Germany. Since 1969, he has written some nineteen novels and numerous short stories. In the GDR, many of his titles appeared in multiple editions. Like most East German science fiction, his books continuously sold out. His total circulation now reaches upwards of 1.6 million copies. Kröger's novels have been translated into Polish, Hungarian, Russian, Sorbian and, most recently, into Chinese. Since 1995, he has published seven new novels and five new editions. This productive capacity in a time of relative silence merits notice.

The overarching purpose of this article is to mark the change in the political project present in Kröger's science fiction before and after reunification. To this end, I have chosen two novels, one Der Untergang der Telesalt (The Downfall of the Telesalt), published immediately prior to November 9, 1989, and Der erste Versuch (The First Try), published in 2001. Both novels represent
what was known in East Germany as a *Warnungsroman* or novel of warning. This genre incorporates the misfit protagonist and societal critique of Tom Moylan’s critical utopia, but its form retains a closed narrative structure. *Downfall of the Telesalt* comments on the real-existing socialist society of East Germany, yet preserves its ideological ideal. *The First Try* responds to today’s globalization with a socialist utopia on Mars.

The female protagonists in both novels provide a useful marker with which to analyze the change in Kröger’s utopian writing. From one perspective, these two disaffected characters challenge their surrounding societal norms. The first, Fanny McCullan, finds her own voice in the middle of a decaying civilization; the second, Alina Merkers, ends a relationship on Earth and leaves to further her own career on Mars. A closer look at these two incarnations of the socialist superwoman reveals their function as utopian signifier within a greater Marxist project. The “emancipated” woman becomes the vehicle and measure, rather than the true subject, of progress towards socialism.

Consequently, on the surface, *The First Try* represents a conservative return to socialist-realist narrative strategies of the early GDR. However, my final assertion links Kröger’s recent publication to the current phenomenon of “nostalgia” or nostalgia for the East. The incorporation of anti-globalization and environmentalist themes signals a move away from the past and towards a future other than that of today’s Federal Republic. In this way, I maintain that Kröger’s novel *The First Try* serves as a site of resistance in opposition to a western free market economy that “so frequently foreclose[s], or at least dismiss[es], the radically different social and historical experiences of the New Federal States” (Blum 231). The study of Kröger’s writing lends itself to a greater understanding of identity formation and cultural change in contemporary Germany.

**I**

East German science fiction was itself overwhelmingly utopian in nature. Some titles corresponded with the totalizing utopia that Marxism-Leninism had become as implemented by the country’s two successive premiers, Walter Ulbricht and Erich Honecker. Yet, other science fiction authors developed their own form of ambiguous utopia within socialism. They included Johanna and Günther Braun, Angela and Karl-Heinz Steinmüller, and the
internationally known mainstream writers Christa Wolf ("Self-experiment," 1975) and Franz Fühmann (Saiäns-Fiktschen, 1984). These authors critiqued the East German system and looked for a "Third Way."

One type of novel that emerged at this time was the Warnungsroman or novel of warning. Theorized by the Soviet literary critic Eugeni Brandis, the novel of warning differed from the "anti-utopia" or "bourgeois dystopia" in that it incorporated a "productive" warning, couched as an optimistic belief in social progress ("Die wissenschaftlich-phantastische Literatur und die Gestaltung von Zukunftsmodellen" 798). In the late sixties, the predominant East German science-fiction publishers adopted this policy to incorporate novels that were to point out potential missteps along East Germany's path to communism (Kruschel 63-64).

Brandis's definition, written within the Eastern Bloc, had an inherent political meaning. Authors who published in the GDR were expected to demonstrate their loyalty to the party. A "productive" warning referred to one that was commensurate with Party policy. The censor evaluated the appropriateness of a book's "optimism" through an intensive manuscript review and approval process. In many cases, this requirement led to "self-censorship" by writers, who learned what was publishable and what was not.

Writing in accordance with the overwhelming Marxist-Leninist direction of the SED, therefore, led to narratives with an implicit setting within the coordinates of historical materialism. Even those authors who critiqued the system through science fiction did not question the overall final goal of achieving a communist Germany. In part, this affirmation of the idea, not the reality, of East Germany can be attributed to Germany's past. Particularly in the years immediately following World War II and the revelations of the Holocaust, some believed communism to be the only viable method by which to avoid the recurrence of fascism.

The novel of warning, when compared with Western theory, is most similar to Tom Moylan's critical utopia. In Demand the Impossible, Moylan identifies a new Anglo-American tradition of utopian writing that emerged in the late sixties. He demonstrates the manner in which Johanna Russ's novel The Female Man (1975) is "self-critical, conscious of itself and its history" (57). Moylan points to the "fragmented" and "incomplete" form of Russ's story: "She uses utopia as a literary practice; she does not assert utopia as a literary object" (56). Likewise, he remarks on the "[u]topian vision and
an awareness of the denial of that vision in the everyday life of American society” in Marge Piercy’s work (121). Her *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) “breaks open realist narrative” and “allow[s] for the development of a radical utopian activism in the text that offers serious oppositional challenge to the historical status quo” (123). Moylan sets these novels in opposition to the “instrumental” classical utopia such as More’s *Utopia* (*Scraps of the Untainted Sky* 83). Being “critical” means that the novel rejects the “utopia as blueprint” (*Demand* 10-11). While preserving the quality and power of hope in the dream for the future, the critical utopia also acknowledges the imperfections that exist both in the present and in the utopian dream.

It is imperative to remember that where Moylan’s authors composed in a free society GDR writers worked under censorship. Novels of warning, or what I have termed elsewhere “ambivalent utopias,” did not fully reject “utopia as a blueprint.” The censor did not allow them to do so. Certainly, many texts of East German science fiction incorporated elements of the critical utopia, first in content and later in form. Select science fiction authors articulated the discrepancies between reality and their revised version of the blueprint in indirect and discreet ways. Indeed, the nature of science fiction utopia changed over time from that of a Marxist-Leninist one, somewhat unified by censorship and historical experience, to a utopia of experiment and exploration. This change included forms of ambivalent utopia and even rare dystopia written as negative reflections of the greater utopian projects of the individual author(s).

Described best as adventure science fiction, Alexander Kröger’s writing is strongly utopian in character. It is possible to chart the development of the utopianism present in his prose over the course of his twenty-year career in East Germany from a strict compliance with the party line of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) to an alternate socialist vision of his own articulation. Since reunification, the only science fiction author from the East to publish new work regularly is Alexander Kröger. Then as now, he still maintains socialism as a central rationale for his novels. Kröger explains that the “constant optimism about the future” in his writing “[could] cannot be explained completely through the rationale of the state, but rather is also due to my own current convictions” (“100 Zeilen zur DDR-SF” 120).

In many ways, the parallels that existed between Kröger’s political convictions and those of the SED resulted first in his popular socialist space-
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operas. Characters exemplifying the socialist personality—the ideal person expected to occupy the communist future—populated these early worlds. Such protagonists exuded loyalty, rationality, a sense of community, and a love of peace. They also possessed an extreme sense of self-sacrifice to the socialist cause and were typically male.

There were, however, female characters as well. The communist superwoman appeared in GDR science fiction as early as 1957. In the only study of gender in East German science fiction from the seventies and eighties, Mikaela Blume concluded that there were three general types of such superwomen. The first existed merely as an extension of her boyfriend or husband and had little identity of her own. The second had some type of scientific career, but was primarily represented by her physical beauty and family. The third and most common type of superwoman was a cardboard copy of the male superscientist, who also happened to be a woman (Blume 5-15). Such female figures represented early attempts to portray the emancipated woman of the future.

In examining the manner in which Kröger's utopian vision drives his writing, the changes in his portrayal of the socialist woman become paramount. Communist superwomen populated his first series of novels. As late as 1980, Kröger created the female biologist Anne Müller, who disappeared on Mars in Die Marsfrau. Müller was once a serious scientist, and attempted to create the first self-sustaining human on the planet. Now subsequently green with chlorophyll in her body, Müller is the “Mars woman.” She appears to two young scientists on the planet as an enticing, nude apparition, who has lost all reason and flits across the planet's surface. Müller has sacrificed herself for the benefit of socialist science.

Beginning in the late seventies, Kröger began to distance himself from the party line and to point to the SED's failure to create a truly communist society.² Kröger's superwomen become more complex and paradoxical with the transformation of his political vision. Essentially, they represent the site of ideological struggle in his writing. Robina Crux gains independence and self-assurance in the Robinsonian Die Kristallwelt der Robina Crux (The Crystal World of Robina Crux, 1977), but loses the benefits of social interaction and becomes isolated. In Souvenir vom Atair (Souvenir from Atair, 1985), talented scientist Wally Esch inhabits a communist world on which women have long been “emancipated” from the physical burden of childbirth. They now watch
their children develop in incubators. However, she appropriates her scientific knowledge for personal use rather than societal gain. Esch violates the world order against cloning in order to become a mother and keep the spirit of her dead husband alive. Consequently, she leaves her high-profile job for a lesser position on a remote island to have the baby and prevent it from being discovered. Finally, as is shown in *Downfall of the Telesalt*, McCullan finds her voice like Robina Crux, but only after she also drops out of society. Clearly, Blume's study fails to illuminate the tension that exists between ideological narrative compliance and a desire for individual rights and gender equality in these female characters.

Film theory provides further clues to clarifying the function of women in Kröger's later science fiction. In her study of female protagonists in East German film from the seventies and eighties, Andrea Rinke describes the portrayal of women as having two functions. First, she agrees with film critic Hans-Rainer Mihan, who states that “female protagonists stand for the potential for the development of human beings under socialism” in East German film (Mihan 12). In communist philosophy, this equivalency can be traced back to Friedrich Engel's essay “Socialism: Utopian and Scientific” (690). Accordingly, in East Germany, one way of symbolically illustrating the progress towards this path in Marxist-Leninist discourse was to place an “emancipated” communist woman in a central role. On the one hand, this character functioned as an empty placeholder. Such a narrative choice can also be interpreted as a demonstration of what was known as *Parteilichkeit* (compliance with the party line).

Rinke, however, goes further by identifying the female characters in East German film as “represent[ing] change and challenge in socialist society” (190). In her film analysis, she finds that, particularly in the Seventies and Eighties, female protagonists increasingly became a location from which to express dissatisfaction with the lack of progress made towards the promise of gender equality. Rinke maintains that directors used female figures to “address controversial social issues” as the censors concentrated more on the portrayal of the male protagonists than on the discursively symbolic females (190). Thus, in the Fifties and Sixties, the female protagonist in film remained the objectified superwoman. In the Seventies and Eighties, however, she functioned as a “safe” location from which to introduce dissent.

These statements regarding GDR film are particularly true of *The
Downfall of the Telesalt. Kröger's articulation of his own, alternate socialist vision is most pronounced in Downfall and its character Fanny McCullan. Indeed, in a personal interview in 1999, Kröger described this novel as his "coming to terms with and rejection of" the GDR. This novel was Kröger's last East German publication. His editor accepted the first draft in 1987, and it appeared in 1989 before the fall of the Berlin Wall ("Re: Science Fiction Buecher" 12 Sept 2003).

Kröger's Downfall is a novel of warning and contains many critical elements that are neutralized by a closed, utopian frame story. Anthropologist Sam Martin relates the entire adventure several years after his ship, the Fotrans, has returned to Earth. He tells the story of a deep-space expedition charged with mapping a select area of space. There it discovers an inhabited planet, which the crew dubs Flora due to its jungle-like surface. To the crew's surprise, the inhabitants are actually human, descendants of the crew of the spaceship Telesalt. This ship was one of six from Earth charged with colonizing space in the year 2080. Now several centuries later, the crew of the Fotrans makes contact with the human colonists and attempts to explain the matriarchal societies they discover.

The events leading up to the launching of the first spaceship, the Telesalt, present an idealized post-Cold-War Earth in which communism has prevailed. All world powers have signed a treaty to eliminate weapons of war. The world experiences a period of peace, justice, and wealth as well as plentiful energy, material, and labor supplies due to the redistribution of resources away from defense. A number of "pioneer projects" come into existence, one of which creates a number of space colonies. These goals can now be pursued cooperatively rather than competitively through the newly founded World Consortium for Space Travel. The human exploration of space proceeds under the motto: "Space for Humanity!" (64).

What is significant about Downfall as a GDR science-fiction novel is that it is set in a time period beyond this idealized, communist future. Sam Martin relates past events not positively, but rather critically with the benefit of hindsight. Instead of praising the assumption that communism will bring peace to the universe as it had to Earth, Martin labels human efforts at this time "arrogant"; their dreams are merely a "euphoric frenzy" (64). His is a colonialist critique normally reserved for the capitalist West. Yet, in Kröger's novel, this critique is directed at a communist society of the past.
First, Martin points out that the newly established communist world order was one from which primarily industrialized nations benefited. Secondly, the four to six spaceships that Earth launched were to explore, colonize, and act as a bridge for the human settlement of space, a mission which, Martin comments, would be considered “absurd” in his age. According to Martin, his present has a more realistic vision of the difficulties of space travel: “Today, we are cleverer” (65). He states that a period of “euphoria and plenty” can lead to “chaotic evolution and unfruitful blossoms” (65). Thus, where the past believed that technological development along with societal progress would lead to inevitable advancement in space, actual results led to less idealistic and more rational notions of what is possible.

In practice, the “pioneer projects” have resulted in failure. Martin relates the experiences of a woman who has dropped out of society on a distant planet and lives out her days in almost complete isolation. She is the individual subject who comes to see the imperfection of society around her. Unlike many other female protagonists in GDR science fiction, we also seem to experience Fanny McCullan as subject, since it is her voice that narrates the gradual devolution of the human settlement on Flora. However, McCullan’s voice is actually mediated through Martin’s translation and interpretation of her journal. In many ways, the character of Fanny McCullan, despite her “individual” decision to drop out of society, also functions as discursive object in that this action is a warning of false steps made on the path to socialism. It is through his narration of the adventure that the novel critiques East Germany’s blind devotion to the idea of communal progress and its failure to meet individual needs.

Fanny McCullan was a teacher and came to Flora with the Telesalt. We learn from the ship’s last logbook entry dated 2097 that its landing meant a “a new era for this planet, thanks to the spirit of humanity, unity and peace!” (98). McCullan tells of the talented experts who had come to what she calls “New Earth” with the most advanced technology. She relates how the crew immediately went to work on building a highly developed settlement on Flora to be followed by other similar colonies. Yet, McCullan is also quick to point out the many challenges that confronted the settlers and the heroism that was to be expected of every member of the crew. Nevertheless, these socialist personalities are anything but successful. On the second day of the construction of the colony, an animal native to the planet kills one person.
Soon accident after accident eventually leads to the abandonment of the first settlement named “Goal” after an explosion irradiates the entire area. The colonists then move to the second city named “Lake City,” but leave much of their machinery and electronics behind.

What follows is McCullan’s description of the manner in which the society is forced to adapt itself to the planet rather than the reverse. We discover that “Mountain City” and “Lake City” go through various stages of breakdown and degeneration until they reach the state in which the Fotrans finds them. What the Fotrans’ crew discovers is a democratic matriarchy that is presented not in utopian terms as an alternate model, but rather as a reinterpretation of the past. Instead of the existence of a “primal matriarchy,” which Engels expounds upon as a proto-communist societal form in his book *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), this matriarchy only maintains the semblance of equality.

Close reading of *Downfall* reveals gender relations that were, in many ways, an ironic reversal of what GDR feminists perceived to be unfulfilled promises by the government for emancipation. There is a virus on the planet Flora that causes depression and infertility in many men. This virus is given as the explanation for the ensuing matriarchal structure. Officially, men are considered to be equal. In practice, however, due to the unreliable reproductive qualities of the Flora men, Martin emphasizes that this equality is true only “in principle” (112). Ironically, men only have worth in this society if they are fathers. If they cannot demonstrate parental status, they are placed with other outcasts at the margins of the village. Furthermore, because the women also lead harsh lives, the matriarchal society provides anything but positive refuge. Instead, the status of this society carries with it an environmental message that points to the futility of human hubris in the face of nature.

There is also little hope present in the figure of Fanny McCullan herself. Through her, we discover that, along with the material aspects, the colonists of Flora also lose their knowledge of civilization. As the building of the initial colony “Goal” begins to falter, adolescents at a younger and younger age are removed from school to help in the construction. Fewer and fewer teachers are available, and the purpose of teaching eventually becomes that of day care rather than instruction. Finally, the explosive destruction of the school signals the destruction of the new society’s memory. McCullan’s distress at this disregard for education leads her to two separate emotional
breakdowns. These also lead, in part, to the dissolution of her marriage and to her eventual separation from the collective. As she is no longer able to contribute physically to the colony and also is inwardly and then outwardly critical of its development, McCullan feels increasingly alienated from her fellow settlers. She drops out of their society as a result, a common strategy of dissident East German characters in the late Seventies and Eighties.

Such feelings of alienation are the second cause for the failure of the Telesalt mission. In her journal, McCullan emphasizes that it was not just the loss of technology which led to this downfall, but also a non-democratic method of administration once they had arrived. Leadership proceeded from the top down and determined what was the best course of action next for the colonists. Despite her continual disagreement with the other colonists' actions, McCullan's voice never is heard. Not only does this silence pertain to her professional life as educator, but also to her private relationship with her husband. He is placed in charge of the colony and, due to his new duties, grows apart from her. He chooses to focus solely on the crisis at hand rather than on their individual marriage. Unlike with other socialist personalities, their self-sacrifice leads not to stability but to societal and marital failure. Her husband's inability to listen to a variety of voices and perspectives, including hers, contributes to the downfall of the Telesalt mission. At first blaming this downfall on her own "egotism," the colony with its growing antagonism towards her causes McCullan to leave and take shelter in the abandoned Telesalt ship. There, she records the history of the human colonies on Flora and, from time to time, visits the towns and observes their slow adaptation to the planet.

However, McCullan's character does not provide a respite in the bleak inner story. Her maintenance of the values and ethics that the Telesalt crew brought to Flora does lead to her creation of a written record, i.e. the preservation of knowledge as the symbol of civilization. Yet, there is no hope present in her situation other than her process of finding her own voice through the journal, without which there would be no story. Representing the erudite, ascetic outcast, McCullan is able to pass on her knowledge to an adopted son, Pitt. It is this son who takes over the task of journal writing after McCullan dies. Unfortunately, Pitt suffers from infertility and is unable to reproduce. He finds a companion, Laura, who also lives in the ship with him. However, she is an outcast because she is lame. It is she whom the Fotrans
crew finds dead in the *Telesalt*, with the journal in her long-decayed hands. Still, Laura has been unable to contribute to it due to her lack of education. She only preserves knowledge.

In the context of the GDR, such a narrative indicates a deep dissatisfaction with the prevalent belief in progress as outlined by scientific socialism under Honecker. It draws upon the growing recognition of the limits of human ambition articulated in the peace and environmental movements in East Germany in the Seventies and Eighties. Still, the setting of the story itself, the era of Sam Martin, has learned from the past and contains a more sober hope for the future. Speaking in overarching terms, Martin believes that a communist humanity has learned its limits in part from the lesson of the *Telesalt* mission. As proof, Martin cites the new policy of exploration in his present, a policy in which colonization even of unpopulated planets without need is considered immoral (101). The *Fotrans*’ mission is to map out possible planets only for the time when the resources of the Earth’s solar system run out. Thus, according to Martin, knowledge is still valued, but the limits of such knowledge are recognized. Although his society is not perfect, it has learned from the past and will continue to improve. Martin’s present perspective leaves this earlier period behind and closes what had been, in many respects, an open narrative. However, it is with such a warning that the novel attempted to correct the path of socialism in East Germany. Through this narrative, Kröger, who remains a socialist today, finally distanced himself from the state.

Moreover, as we have seen in Kröger’s novel, the female protagonist becomes a conduit for his philosophy rather than its subject. Alice Jardine has discussed a similar use of what is encoded as the “feminine,” a process she labels “gynesis,” in postmodern theories. This process describes the method in which metaphors for the “feminine” are encoded as “space” or “gaps” that try to resist existing theoretical absolutes (36). In the different context of East Germany, the definition of gynesis can be applied to refer to the patriarchal construct of “woman,” whose emancipation signaled the establishment of communism. Therefore, where the critical narrative space is feminine in Kröger’s novel, a masculine voice and project appropriate it. In *The Downfall of the Telesalt*, McCullan records and analyzes. However, a male narrator relates McCullan’s story to the reader, and thus diminishes its direct impact and renders it an object from the less enlightened past. McCullan reaps the
consequences of resistance while Martin learns from her fate and becomes the hero at home. McCullan's function as a philosophical tool becomes even more pronounced in the role of Alina Merkers in the *The First Try*.

II

The Berlin Wall fell in the same year as *Downfall*'s publication. Like the civilization on Flora, the Socialist Unity Party crumbled. On October 3, 1990, East Germany ceased to exist and rejoined West Germany to create a newly expanded Federal Republic of Germany. Today, Kröger draws on the pessimism, located primarily in the Eastern states, that has resulted from persistent social and economic stagnation. His novel applies and transforms past values into a new optimism commensurate with the present. His resultant utopian writing appears simultaneously conservative and radical. It is mediated by a dogmatic past and is uncompromising in its treatment of contemporary world politics.

The nature of Kröger's writing style becomes clearer when viewed through the lens of current scholarship on a recent phenomenon known as "ostalgia." The term "ostalgia" is derived from the word "nostalgia." In this context, it refers to a failure to consider the role the means of production played in maintaining a non-democratic political system in East Germany. Since the mid-Nineties, East German cultural and material products, hitherto consigned to the past as outdated items, have attained a "cult-like" status. Parties that simulate life in the former GDR, the creation of trivia games devoted to East Germany, the successful reintroduction of East German brands such as the laundry detergent *Spec*, *Vita Cola*, and the ever-popular *Mosaik* comic book provide evidence of what has been attributed to an escapist nostalgia for a lost Eastern past.

The successful film *Goodbye Lenin* (2003) illustrates the ostalgia phenomenon well. The film begins in East Berlin in 1989, where Alex and his family live. After seeing him participate in a demonstration, his mother suffers a heart attack that leaves her in a coma. While she is unconscious, the Berlin Wall falls. East and West Germans reconnect, and the city begins its transformation from communism to a free-market system. When his mother awakes, the doctors warn Alex that a sudden shock might kill her. Since his mother had been a proud socialist, he is convinced that she will die if she
learns of the impending German reunification. Therefore, he does not tell her the truth and reinvents East Germany within the space of her bedroom. He procures old Free German Youth uniforms at a nearby flea market and hires former members to sing socialist songs at her birthday. Alex scrounges in the trash for empty jars of East German pickles that he refills. A co-worker helps him recreate the GDR news show Aktuelle Kamera in order to explain the infiltration of Coca-Cola into East Berlin. Essentially, Alex recreates a now-lost past out of love for his mother. Ostalgia critics warn that film viewers identify with Alex and his project, and regress into their own memories. The film’s harmless presentation of artifacts from an undemocratic system obscures the power structures that created them (Bisky 127).

Recently, some scholars have endeavored to reach a more complex understanding of the motives behind ostalgia. Anthropologist Daphne Berdahl observes that the use of the term nostalgia itself implies an uncritical engagement with the past. She points to an accompanying assumption that this same past must somehow be mastered (205). In her opinion, such expectations dismiss a complex and continuing process of the selective integration of the past by former East Germans in order to explain and to justify the present. For instance, Alex’s recreation of East Germany is not just for his mother, but is also a process through which he mourns his own past. Berdahl suggests that such “dismissals and attempts to belittle [ostalgia] may be viewed as part of a larger hegemonic project to devalue eastern German critiques of the politics of reunification” (205). It is in this spirit that I examine Alexander Kröger’s science fiction novels as a site of opposition to the predominance of West German values in a reunified Germany. A focus solely on the degree of complicity in a past regime leads to an epistemology of guilt or innocence. This method precludes the formation of questions that relate to identity formation and utopia building of the past and in the present.

Recent studies of ostalgia denote more complex processes of identity negotiation in such practices. Martin Blum identifies the now broad array of the phenomenon’s participants as individuals who “miss a sense of legitimacy of their individual past, together with its own symbols and rituals” (230). For Blum, ostalgia is not an identification with the product itself. Rather, it is a process of reliving and remembering experiences associated with those products, a past which many Easterners discarded in favor of a Western identity in the early Nineties. Along similar lines, Berdahl emphasizes the
importance of a “shared memory” present in ostalgia, which “represents loss, belonging, solidarity and a time that differentiates Ossis [Easterners]” from “Wessis” or Westerners (203).

Claudia Sadowski-Smith focuses on the very act of recognition that such a memory is shared. She points to the increasing reevaluation of an Eastern identity which had been negated, and believes this phenomenon represents an emerging opposition to the GDR’s rapid transformation to a market economy (2). Her analysis incorporates a concept that Daniela Dahn has called “internal dissent” to describe the everyday practices of dissidence common among citizens of East Germany (Westwärts und Nichts Vergessen 201). Sadowski-Smith identifies the resurgence of that same “internal dissent” now with products identified as part of ostalgia by the purchase and consumption of products seen by Westerners as inferior or backward (1).

Kröger’s post-reunification novels belong to the ostalgia phenomenon both as consumer item and as narrative. Upon his retirement, Kröger founded his own publishing house: the Kröger-Vertrieb Cottbus. Managed by his wife, Susanne Routschek, the books published by this firm have a slick, Western look about them. Far from the dull pastels of East Germany, these covers are all of the same shiny, green appearance that marks them as Kröger novels. The individual cover photos are highly illustrative of each novel, and the books are printed on high-quality paper in the Czech Republic. On the covers, there is no mention of the GDR, and the novels appear Western.

According to the author, however, Easterners easily recognize the name Kröger as an author from the former East Germany. The advertising material from his publisher reads: “Do you still remember Alexander Kröger?” and “Do you remember the title Sieben fielen vom Himmel (Seven Fell from Heaven)?” (“Sie kennen” 1). Kröger’s audience includes young readers from the new Eastern states. Parents who read Kröger’s novels as children are now buying new titles for themselves or for their children. One woman named her daughter Surki, after a character in Kröger’s Seven Fell from Heaven, an East German title from 1969 (“Re: Science”).

In a book market dominated by science fiction in translation, the purchase of Kröger’s books represents not only choosing a German author but, in this particular case, a former East German author. This venture makes very little money and produces on the average 2000 copies per title. Still, Kröger and Routschek do have the satisfaction of knowing that eight titles have sold out.
Kröger’s novels represent successful ostalgia products. Once purchased, however, how does the narrative function in this way? In the following section, I look more closely at *Der erste Versuch* (2001), a parallel story to *Das zweite Leben* (1998). *Der erste Versuch* means literally “the first try”; *Das zweite Leben*, “the second life.” Both of these books appeared after the dismantling of the GDR, an event that represented the end of one life and the beginning of a new one. Yet, where *Downfall* left behind the euphoria of a communist imperialism in space, Kröger’s most recent novel points to similar imperialist tendencies and corruption in the rapid pace of globalization today. This critique parallels many of the arguments of the most recent protests over the World Trade Organization (WTO) or the World Bank. Kröger’s closed apocalyptic narrative juxtaposes the self-destructive, capitalist earth to a progressive research commune on Mars.

In *The First Try*, once again a female protagonist serves as the measure of human civilization. Alina Merkers is an anthropologist who has signed up for a five-year tour on one of the research outposts on Mars. The planet is to become a second home for humanity if it can be made more hospitable. Merkers comes from Earth via the space station just above this planet, as she has recently split from her long-time love interest, Milan Novatschek.

Novatschek is active in the “Second Life” movement, a business that offers to freeze its customers and bring them back to life at a desired point in the future. Having come under significant political pressure from the corrupt government of Europe, the Second Life movement secretly closes down. Novatschek is among the last members who choose to be frozen and awakened in fifty years. His adventures are related in the first book of this series—*The Second Life*.

However, Novatschek is important in *The First Try* for another reason. He makes up one of its two sets of doubles. Unbeknownst to Novatschek, his character undergoes a split in personality. He has a clone that is under the control of the Agency of International Trade Management. Where the first Novatschek goes into stasis with the hope of waking up to a better future, the second is the instrument of sabotage and corporate takeover. He represents all that is unethical in a world dedicated to profit.

The Earth of *The First Try* is controlled by a number of international corporations which are vying for global market dominance. As these corporations have expanded, energy has become the essential resource.
Two hundred years previously, scientists developed the so-called HAARP Project with the intent of scanning the Earth's surface for energy sources. This technology also could create a renewable energy resource. At the novel's outset, a number of rival corporations are attempting to construct a chain of functioning HAARP stations. The leader is the International Consortium with facilities in Alaska and on the Croatian Island of Unije.

Although the agency that Novatschek works for sounds like a regulatory body, it is also trying to take over the Consortium's HAARP facilities. Consequently, the Agency of International Trade Management employs the cloned Novatschek to sabotage the Consortium's project, run up expenses, and leave it vulnerable to the Agency's unfriendly takeover bid. Through Novatschek's undercover assignment, we learn of the unethical construction and operating procedures of both the Consortium and the Agency, procedures that are focused solely on turning a profit. Such practices also become criminal. When Novatschek's immediate boss instructs him not to kill, his agency contact, Cathleen Greff, does not hesitate to do so. Thus, murderous and corrupt practices undermine any pretense of a commitment to technological progress and human welfare by these global (i.e. capitalist) concerns. Interestingly, similar plots were common to socialist-realist science fiction, detective, and spy novels published in East Germany in the late Forties, Fifties, and Sixties at the height of the Cold War.

The novel also employs a familiar narrative strategy common to socialist-realist East German novels. In her book Post-Fascist Fantasies, Julia Hell analyzes the manner in which post-war socialist literature constructed a new father-centered cultural narrative. In such novels, the new pure, paternal state of East Germany replaced missing fathers and sons, who represented the fascist male family member. This strategy led to the “realignment of voice from National Socialism to communism, from the fascist father of the past to the communist father of the present” (153).

Furthermore, in her analysis of the romantic relationship of Vera and Pavel in Christa Wolf's Moskauer Novelle (Moscow Novel, 1961), Hell observes an equally interesting transformation of the female identity. In her study, she finds that feminine sexuality, associated with National Socialism, emerges in an asexual form after its transfiguration and realignment with the communist sublime (152). In other words, sexuality is discarded with the immorality of National Socialism and replaced by the superwoman as ideal
object, who is either joined to the communist father or husband.

A similar process is at work in *The First Try*. However, rather than the displacement of fascism with communism, this novel realigns the masculine voice of a less-than-ideal reunified Germany with the (re)presentation of the communist utopia. Merkers, discovering that Novatschek is somehow still on Earth and not in stasis, travels back in search of him. Upon meeting him, she realizes that he is somehow not her Novatschek. She cuts all emotional ties with him and returns to Mars. On Mars, her new liaison with Connan O’Bennett, although not expressly platonic, is nonetheless based in many ways on their cooperative effort towards the establishment of a Mars colony. Connan O’Bennett is a miner for the station Mars II and studied at the Freiberg Academy outside of Dresden, where Kröger also studied. O’Bennett represents the self-identified socialist. He has come to Mars to escape the competitive individualism of Earth that pits “person against person.... I am a communal type” (54).

Merkers begins her transition away from her feminine sexuality when she initially separates from Novatschek before he goes into cryogenic suspension. As stated, Novatschek’s double is his clone. Merkers’ double is the clone’s love interest and contact, Cathleen Greff. The novel not only presents Novatschek’s clone through his participation in sabotage efforts, but also in terms of his sexual relationship with Greff. The grotesque image of their entwined bodies, charred by a radioactive chain reaction, associates immoral eroticism with the global concerns on Earth. Merkers, having left the planet safely after identifying Novatschek’s double as a clone, returns to Mars’s Gemeinschaft (community) cleansed of any potential for eroticism. As the female protagonist, her choice of the Mars community represents a hope for a life different from that offered by Earth’s Gesellschaft (society). However, unlike the heroic McCullan, whose “emancipation” proved subversive in *Downfall*, Merkers’ emancipation is no longer one accomplished through her own individual identity as a woman. Instead, it is mediated through an individual satisfaction that comes from striving for the communal goal of the Mars colony, which is to find life on the planet. As Hell links Vera’s feminine voice to the collective in the Wolf novel, so is Merker’s renewed commitment to O’Bennett simultaneously a renewed commitment to the research collective on Mars.

By reincorporating socialist realist strategies, Kröger has drawn upon
the ideological narratives of the East German past and adapted them to the context of Germany's existence within a global market place in the twenty-first century. The Mars Station is necessarily a cooperative in which each person's function is important for survival. Through its juxtaposition of the communal and the individual, the novel quickly establishes the importance of the ethical self as a central focus. More importantly, the novel portrays the Mars Station not only as a comfortable refuge from an aggressive, capitalist Earth but also points to its important role in the peaceful expansion of humanity on Mars. In addition, the station continues the work of past socialist scientists who populated older Kröger novels. For instance, it refers to *Das Kosmodrom im Krater Bond* (The Cosmodrome in the Bond Crater, 1981) and the establishment of the first Mars Station. It also mentions the research conducted in *Die Marsfrau* (The Woman of Mars, 1980), to develop pigs that possess the ability of photosynthesis. Continuity ties the work done at Station Mars II not only to a fictional narrative of collective progress but also to novels of an East Germany that has been consigned to the past. This shared goal towards a peaceful progress of humanity in a socialist utopian space is directly juxtaposed to the dangerous technological experiments of a capitalist, individualist Earth.

Kröger's reincorporation of apocalypse into his science fiction narrative also echoes the socialist-realist writings of an immediate post-war period that warned of the dire consequences of nuclear war. In the Fifties and Sixties, such stories placed the responsibility for these circumstances solely on aggressive capitalist nations, primarily the United States. In the twenty-first century, Kröger once again identifies global capitalist concerns as the assured destroyers of the Earth. The HAARP Project, having been brought online, creates a deadly chain reaction in the Earth's ionosphere and exposes the entire planet surface to radiation. The decision to conduct a system test is arrived at prematurely and in haste due to financial pressure and increased competition. The test effectively wipes out all the human beings on the planet. The novel portrays this violent self-destruction of the "imperialist" elements of humanity as cataclysmic.

The final scene in *The First Try* points to the rebuilding of human civilization on a socialist model. The landing of the representatives of the Mars Station II and their reunion with the real Novatschek and his tiny community of survivors on Earth is met with the auspicious sounds of the
natural world. Novatschek has become the purified remainder. He is the pure post-fascist male hero as theorized by Julia Hell, after the figurative splitting of his identity into good and evil clones (108–109). The novel ends as the capitalist forces have destroyed themselves, and a new era dawns on Earth.

Conclusion

In The First Try, Kröger rearticulates a dream of a better future in response to his present. However, by his doing so, the portrayal of the female protagonist signals a conservative turn in his writing since reunification. His novels of warning or ambiguous utopias, as demonstrated by the character of McCullan, accomplished much of their critique through their discovery of their own voice apart from the collective. However, the post-unification character of Merkers finds her own individual voice upon merging it with the unified voice of the collective.

Alexander Kröger has incorporated many of the tools of his earlier socialist-realist science fiction novels, where class warfare takes precedence over gender emancipation, into his more recent works. The community is populated with the patriarchal socialist personality. While at first glance The First Try seems a mere regression into nostalgia, it also signals Kröger's first attempt at utopia since the fall of the Wall. This new novel of warning presents a utopian collective on Mars that is the antithesis of the problems identified in a reunified Germany within the European Union. Where the Mars collective contains many positive aspects of everyday life in East Germany (e.g. a small, closed, familiar community), it differs from the Marxist-Leninist vision of communist utopia. It is neither international nor national in its nature, but is based on person-to-person contact. The "small-is-beautiful" utopia is self-sufficient, as each member reaps the benefit of her or his labor directly. The novel is not without its problems and contradictions. However, this counter-utopia to what has become a dystopian reality to many former East Germans offers a return to the familiar past adapted for a present to provide a hope for the future.
Endnotes


3Sonnenallee (Sun Alley, 1999) is another “ostalgia” film.
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