

# Cowboys: East Germany

## Visual Anthropology



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## Research into a Visual Culture

### **Introduction:**

*Cowboys: East Germany* examines the constructed identities and practices of the American Western Cowboy and “cowboy lifestyle” as taken up and lived by the people of the former East Germany. From 1961 to 1989, The Wall, separates East Germany, the Deutsches Democratic Republic (DDR) from West Germany and on a global scale, physically demarcating the Cold War’s boundary separating the Communist East from the Capitalist West. Developing behind “The Wall,” the idea of Cowboy represents a type of freedom and individualism for East Germans, as imagined in the lifestyle of the cowboy. Emerging from the shadows of Communism, the adopted - and well-adapted - cowboy lifestyle re-imagines the cowboy ethos as agency to hold on to what is seen as good from Communism and eschew perceived ills of Capitalism. Values the East German cowboys wish to retain and “bring over” from their communist past - like helping one’s neighbor, a non-materialist rural life, family values, and attachment to the land and working with animals - are reinterpreted as “cowboy” values from an imagined American West.

In this series, which is part of a broader collection of portraits, documentary images and a documentary film, I began with an older view camera, 4x5, similar to cameras that have been used to document the American frontier. Later, in 2016, with digital resolutions matching that of 4x5 film, a digital camera was used. Both formats reveal the rich details, with which the cowboys authenticate and construct their identities. Documented as found, whether at a rodeo, other event, or at their homes, they present themselves as they are for the camera. Isolated from the environment, against black, the photo invites inspection and consideration of dress as part of constructed identity. In addition to a visual tool, the black background, isolating the subject, stands as a metaphor suggesting many of the subject’s experiences behind The Wall, and isolation from the West.

During trips to Germany from 2002-2016, I photographed these self-constructed cowboys, cowgirls, as well as their gatherings at rodeos, dance halls, saloons, and saddleries. The idea of the cowboy and the American West took hold in the former East Germany when it was separated West Germany and the rest of the Western world. The West represented freedom and individualism. Even after The Wall was torn down (1989), and communism was replaced

by capitalism and unification with West Germany, the cowboy remained an iconic symbol because it came to represent a non-materialist, rural life and an attachment to the land.

## **Explanation of the research**

### **Abstract:**

Cowboys: East Germany is about a popular culture, and begins in the West - of America. It involves Folk traditions, negotiations of power, individual and group identity, and cross-cultural representation. Identity can shift over space and time, and be re-represented, adopted and adapted to serve a purpose. It can thrive and become something original and serve a new purpose in its newly found home. I intend to find out what that purpose is, and to what extent - how and why - it is represented with a group of East Germans who identify with the idea, the ethos if you will, of the American Western Cowboy. With the use of modern media - digital video and film photography, traditional ethnographic questions are proposed and answered revealing trans-cultural representations of a seemingly out-of-place culture. Spanning an ocean, temporal space, continents, language, different ideological nation-states this project explores a popular culture shift from its roots in America to an unlikely place in a former communist state. Originating in socialist Germany, an unlikely culture has brought to the present day - through an adopted and adapted lifestyle - the spirit of the American Western Cowboy.

### **Research:**

My project begins with my reading of a reference in a best-selling book, called *Fast Food Nation* in which the author, journalist Eric Schlosser, comments on an irony. Writing about fast food coming from the West in America - where there is culture of cowboy - and moving East as it developed, he remarks that in the former East, the first McDonald's happens to be in this town called Plauen, where (ironically) there is a cowboy culture. He then describes some of the cowboys he saw, and his description floored me. I thought, I grew up with these guys. I have to go see this!

Questions that led to an ethnography:

- Is the former East Germany such an unlikely place for this lifestyle to develop?
- What does it mean to be cowboy in East Germany?
- What does "cowboy" represent to the men and women both here and there? Is it different? Is it the same?
- What notion, or ideology identifies one as a cowboy?

Their representation of 'cowboy' is in fact their projected identity, or their representation of the self.



- How did this come about?
- What are the mechanisms of its evolvment?
- Why and how has it sustained itself?

These ethnographic questions and other identifiers are brought to the fore here. I had to ask What is a Cowboy? And, who can be a cowboy? If people who do not ride horses, nor work with cattle can be (identify as) cowboy, how is this produced? Stuart Hall defines the practices of representation as "the embodying [combining] of concepts, ideas and emotions in a

symbolic form which can be transmitted [as in an advertisement] and meaningfully interpreted." (1997). The production of meaning (representation) only has meaning if the



sender and the receiver share, or can translate meaning in the same cultural space. How is meaning encoded, and decoded? Coding happens through a shared cultural space. How is a shared cultural space constructed? Construction happens through language and the sharing of meaning. Further, how is this meaning represented across a shared cultural space?

Some of the identifiers are: practicality, self-reliance, self-sufficiency, being in-touch with nature, politics, freedom, individuality.

De Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, speaks of popular culture as those behaviors of the "ordinary man," which make up everyday life. The "usage, or consumption" and "modes of behavior" in a popular culture are part of an individual's agency to act in society. (1984). Consumption is part of any popular culture, and the cowboys in Germany are no exception. What influenced a group of people to carve out a niche in a society ideologically opposed to the freedom and individual expressions associated with the West in general, and with the American Western Cowboy in particular? Within an overt system of control such as communism - which might be the ultimate ideological negation of an individual's free will - de Certeau would argue that their "power," their "strength of difference" lie in procedures of "consumption." Lacking the means to challenge the dominant social order, this group found a way to escape without leaving. Strategies and tactics are at play here, linguistically and representationally. To say, emphatically, in English, "I'm cowboy." To dress with cowboy boots, and a western belt buckle, and to wear a cowboy hat furthers an outward representation through consumption.

In fact, I might offer that the act of consumption itself is in strict opposition to the ideology of communism. These strategies of representation solidify an identity within a dominant power structure. De Certeau describes this agency as *la perruque*. Stealing without taking anything; a sort of sticking it to the man (so to speak) without him noticing is *la perruque*. The adopting and adapting of the ethos of cowboy I argue, is the individual agency of *la perruque* by these East Germans in response to the all encompassing power structure of the communist East. Identifying with this culture, that is represented as one inherently containing those ideals I mentioned above, is a possible reason for representing ones self as cowboy.

The Historical Hero and the Myth of the Frontier:

In the book, *The Wild West: The Mythical Cowboy & Social Theory*, Will Wright (2001) describes Karl Marx's "revolutionary hero," comparing it to the mythical western heroic cowboy. The Heroic figure is essential to both the myth of the cowboy and the ideology of Marx. Marx's hero is one of History while the cowboy hero is one of Nature. On the one hand we have the Revolutionary Hero who is rational by history, therefore becoming so much sooner than others -- in this case, the common man -- and is therefore the leader. He is the one who will bring freedom.

On the other hand, we have the Individualist Hero, who is rational by Nature. The cowboy is this hero. If all individuals are rational "naturally," then they are "thus equally rational all the time." Where the Marxist hero, taking a privileged authority, fights for equality, the cowboy hero fights for an individual social equality and is a "hero of defiance and disruption, a hero of social change, a hero of the market." The cowboy hero is by nature, suspicious of

government, and thus wants it small, weak, less able to affect his (the individual's) life. The mythical cowboy then - the antithesis to Marx's historic hero - "must defy the corrupt



government and fight for justice and decency." (Wright 2001:102-104).

Myth of the Frontier:

The symbolic narratives of mythology are transmitted to a society through various genres - credo, manifesto, sermon, folk song, a movie, or other - of mythic expression. The mythic expression of ideology is spread within popular culture, and through instruments of popular culture. Even under communist rule the people of East Germany were not entirely immune to the influence of western mass media. One VCR with recording capabilities can make available too many a copy of a popular western film, for example.

These ideological myths produced by commercial media play a particular role in society, and with the advent of new technologies -- an ever expanding "transportation network" of books, magazines, newspapers, and later radio, then television -- become so ubiquitous [in America] as to be expressed as a "national culture," writes Slotkin.

Thommy, one of my main informants, told me, "Yeah, Eric. When I'm this tall (making a leveling gesture with his hand), I see John Wayne movie, and from this day forward, I'm cowboy," he was not only declaring his identity based on myth, he is also commenting on how the lore of the Western Cowboy is preserved and designated by the "lore-masters," the

story-tellers of popular culture." (Slotkin: 1992). He's commenting on mediation of popular culture through the movies.

East German Cowboys as a Subculture, Identifying theory:

The nostalgia of the West, its frontier and the ideals which I identify in this section, are possible reasons why this lifestyle is so attractive and why this group of people have constructed a subculture with its identity as "cowboy."

I identify these East Germany Cowboys as a subculture. Dick Hebdige, in *Subculture The Meaning of Style*, is useful in his research of the punk subculture, which is also a pop-culture. Though not rebelling in the same way or for the same reasons as punks, and certainly mostly accepted in western society, the cowboy represents himself/herself with a very distinct and definitive style of dress (costume). I use his theory as a basis for which to call the German cowboys a subculture. Their response to a Marxist ideology, and rebellion against those ideals, and adoption of the ideals of cowboy, reifies the representation of identity in the style and dress of the American Cowboy. I further go on to cite Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson from *Culture Power Place, Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, the very idea of subculture "attempts to preserve the idea of distinct cultures while acknowledging the relation of different cultures to a dominant culture within the same geographical and territorial place." "The association of place with memory, loss, and nostalgia plays directly into the hands of reactionary popular movements."

Language. Folk-speech and identity Construction:

Will I find the songs that the East German cowboy bands sing reflecting German-ness, or Cowboy-ness? Or, will there be some hybrid? Using the English to name things like, "horse shoe," "truck," "cowboy hat," "boots," "belt and buckle," "ranch," "country and western," "The Ranch," and the various call-outs in square dancing: "Circle Left/Right. Forward and Back. Swing. Right and Left Thru, etc.," the Germans reinforce identification through the Mutterspreche, "mother tongue" of the Cowboy, as well as what De Certeau expresses as "folkelighed," or that which belongs to them as a group. De Certeau says that representation by the speech, oral or written, "is always determined by a system and codified by a way of receiving it." The mutterspreche is "a sign of identification and mimesis which serves as an indicator of belonging," states John Borneman and Abdellah Hammoudi, in the book, *Being There The Fieldwork Encounter and the Making of Truth*.

Manifestations and Visible Representations:



I construct a narrative in an ethnographic-documentary style attempting to answer broader epistemological questions: What is Cowboy? And, Why does this exist in such a seemingly unlikely place as East Germany? More to the point of my methods, what do portraits, as a system of representation, allow us to see about a person/culture? And, what do people involved in daily interactions (video) show/reveal? Aware of a postmodern idea of representation in ethnographic film - the relationship between ethnographer and subject - my film is concerned with dialogism, reflexivity and the narrative structure of ethnography. As Cool and Lutkehaus write, "the most valuable aspects of the ethnographic enterprise [are] our knowledge of ourselves and of others."

#### Conclusion and Methods, Convergent Representation of a Popular Culture:

As an attempt in discourse of a convergence culture and in an academic anthropological setting, I follow Henry Jenkins's assertion that "convergence represents a cultural shift," and consumers (readers of my paper; viewers of this film and series of photographs) are encouraged to seek out information and "make connections among dispersed media content." To get a more broad understanding of what my concepts and methods represent, and, more importantly, to get a "feeling" for the people of whom you have just heard about, one needs to see the films, and look at the photos.

As Hall says, the cultural practices of looking and seeing rest on "complex conditions of existence, some of which have psychic and unconscious dimensions." (1999: 312). The power of the image is indeed different from that of the linguistic sign. (Hall: 1999: 312). Meaning of an image is numinous. The impact of an image can be immediate and powerful even when its precise meaning is vague, suspended, or latent. This is why I have chosen to specifically link this paper in Popular Culture to the films of my research, and in fact, why I have made the attempt at referring to different media, and making it necessary - just as the cowboys were influenced by different mediation - to consume various media to garner a more complete understanding of this sub-culture.

#### Biography:

Eric O'Connell, an Associate Professor of Practice in photography and photojournalism at Northern Arizona University, holds an MA in visual anthropology (USC, 2010), and has worked and lived in New York City and Los Angeles as a commercial photographer for nearly 20 years. Having grown up in a ranching family in New Mexico, he is not only uniquely positioned to look at this subculture, but invested in this subject matter, as a matter of personal, and fond experience.

Included here are examples from behind the scenes, so to speak, of exhibitions in Hamburg and at the Texas Folklife Museum, and at the Galleria für Zeitgenoschsis Kunst in Leipzig, DE. There are notations and descriptions which are specific to some of these exhibitions.

Here is a [link](#) to some of portraits, and the film. I have total about 75 portraits, and hundreds of "establishing" photographs.

Contents (Hamburg):



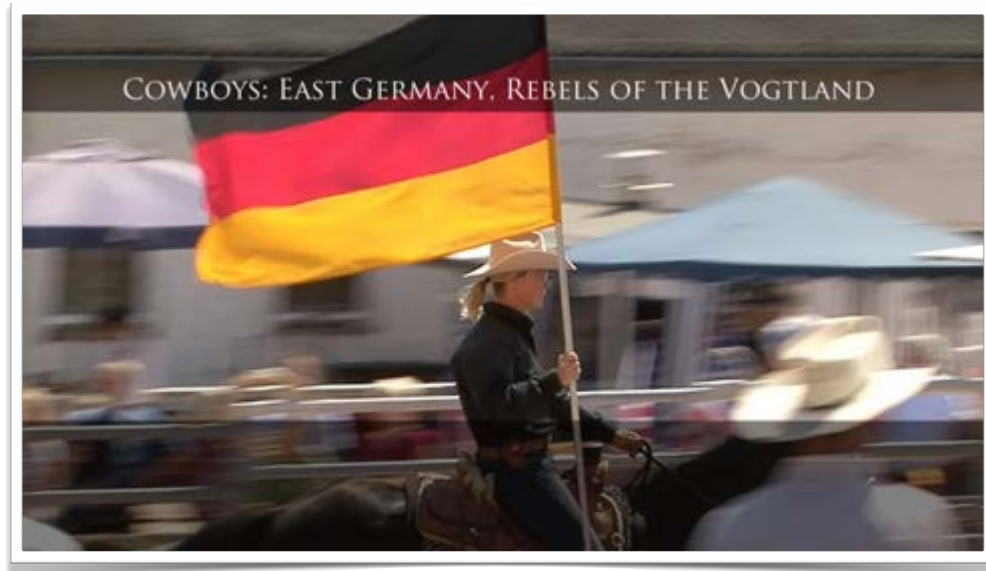
Size and display example: Hamburg



Contents (Texas Folklife):

8 framed images, size 28.5 x 22 (loan from Wittliff) (the 8 shown)

1 framed image, size 32.75 x 26 3/8 (loan from Wittliff) (far left image)



2 framed, size 20 x 24



2 framed panels with 3 images ea., horizontal, size (of matte) , 20 x 34



2 panels of 12 images ea., either framed like a window, or hanging unframed and cascading down and held with some sort of non-marking clips, or wire, or attached directly to the wall with some "non-stick" something-or-other, (3 wide, 4 down), size of ea. image: 6 x 8.25; total size TBD



1 framed panel with 8, 4x5 contact prints, horizontal size (appx), 40 x 7 7/8



4-8 framed images, size (appx.) 11 x 14, with handwritten text from subjects (could be any of the images below; also see sample)



1 framed landscape of the "Vogtland," size 28 x 22



2 framed images (small), one of artist as boy (dressed as cowboy), and one working in the field (near guest book)





Add'l ideas in the exhibit:

1 full-length, framed(?) mirror, with cowboy hats, chaps, belt sitting nearby, inviting people to explore their cowboy identity. (Interactive)

1 (possible) polaroid camera with film next to mirror and props, with book to past the polaroid into and write about their "cowboy identity," i.e. what "cowboy" means to them

1 screen with looping Cowboy's films