On August 13, 1961 the first rolls of barbed wire were stretched across the demarcation line dividing the sectors of the Soviet and Western allies in Berlin. Over a quarter of a century later and greatly fortified, the Berlin Wall is one of the most prominent structures in the landscape of the two Berlins. Its prominence, however, is perceived and experienced differently by East and West Berliners.

The Wall in West Berlin defines and frames the physical landscape. Colorful and approachable for most of its approximate 100 miles, it provides Sunday strollers and tourists with a unique walking route along the borders of the city. Scattered along its length are various look-out towers for those interested in seeing the "other Berlin" and memorials marking where people lost their lives attempting to escape to the West. The prominence that the Wall enjoys in the physical landscape, however, is largely supported by the media and tourist industry. It obscures the fact that the Wall has more or less disappeared in the "cognitive landscape," i.e., in the socio-political consciousness of the average West Berliner. With the exception of special events and holidays, when West Berlin politicians evoke the Wall as symbol, it has become everyday. And in becoming everyday, it has been more or less forgotten. Reflective of a widely shared sentiment.

A shorter version of this essay was presented at the Traditional Humor Conference in Sheffield, England on August 2, 1988. I would like to thank Elliott Oring for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay. All jokes and citations have been translated from German into English by the author.

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are the words of one West Berliner: "It's just not a topic anymore. It's there and we live with it."

The Wall in the other half of the city has also become everyday and people have likewise learned to live with it, although under different circumstances and in different ways. In East Berlin the Wall has become more or less invisible as a physical structure. Tight security of the "border area" (an elastic concept ranging from a few meters in the inner city to several kilometers in the country) prevents East Berliners from seeing the Wall, let alone walking its length or spraying it with graffiti. There are no look-out towers providing a view to the West, and certainly no markers indicating where people have escaped. The "invisibility" of the Wall as a thing has, however, sustained its viability as an idea. The Wall in the West is visible, everyday. It is not a topic. The Wall in the East is invisible, everyday and a topic—which is very much taboo. These differences play a significant role in the shaping of political consciousness and subsequently of political humor.

The Berlin Wall serves as a useful point of departure for the study of political humor. It is a unique physical and political structure dividing a city and people, yet shared by both. As the border between two political systems, the Wall provides a locus and catalyst for folk-
loric expression in two radically different contexts. This paper examines how the Wall is treated as a subject of humor in jokes and graffiti in East and West Berlin. I will begin with a few observations about political humor in the two Berlins.

1) There are very few "Wall" jokes in West Berlin. Political jokes tend to focus much more on West German Chancellor Kohl, the Christian-Democratic Party, or current political issues. The few jokes in West Berlin that touch on East/West relations rarely focus on the Wall per se. Rather they tend to highlight the deficiencies of communism, or denigrate the Party leaders.

2) There is, on the other hand, a tremendous amount of graffiti in West Berlin, with the concentration of graffiti thickest in the center of the city. The content of most graffiti tends toward the political or personal statement. However, some of the graffiti deals humorously with the subject of the Wall or divided Berlin and will be considered "visual" political humor.

3) "Verbal" political humor, i.e., jokes about the Wall, enjoy a much greater popularity in East Berlin. Of course, with regular traffic across the border and easy transmission through the media, it is difficult to determine whether a joke is indigenous to East or West Berlin.
For the present purposes, my distinction is based not only on where they were collected, but where the jokes are generally known and told.

4) And finally, in East Berlin there are few graffiti to speak of and certainly none on the Wall. As already mentioned, the Wall as a structure is not accessible to East Berliners, and is therefore not a medium of folkloric transmission in East Berlin.

Now several questions arise: What are the necessary conditions for the creation, transmission and survival of political humor? What are the reasons for differences in humorous communication in East and West Berlin? How does a joke culture relate to socio-political culture?

In reviewing the scholarship on political humor one discovers some interesting trends. Studies have focused primarily on the content and function of political jokes in the totalitarian state (Orbdlik 1942; Gamm 1963; Drozdzynski 1974; Röhrich 1977; Banc and Dundes 1986). Most emphasize repressive political conditions as a prerequisite for political humor and identify its function as a source of relief or a form of resistance. Rarely, however, are such conclusions supported by empirical evidence of the joke’s use in social or narrative contexts. As a consequence, they have often served to advance ideological biases, rather than our understanding of political humor.
In many ways, however, it is understandable that studies of political humor have attempted to identify its function. One of the most significant studies of the joke is Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, which illustrates the interrelationship of aggression, inhibition and a joke's function. Although Freud did not mention the political joke specifically, his discussion of the hostile joke does indicate a tacit recognition of its political potential. He writes that "tendentious jokes are especially favored against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority. The joke then represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure" (Freud 1960:105).

Drawing on Freud's psychofunctional thesis, scholars have found a correlation between the notion of "obstacle" and repressive political conditions. This has often led to the equation of the political joke with the joke in the totalitarian state, either through choice of research area or through tacit political assumptions. Lutz Röhrich suggests:

The fewer the outlets for expressing political opinion, the more cutting and offensive the political joke. It has been said that political jokes have their good and bad times, whereby the bad times are good for the joke and vice versa. In any case, the political joke thrives best in dictatorial and undemocratic conditions. The powerless are able to conquer the powerful with laughter (Röhrich 1977:210, my translation).

Banc and Dundes have noted that "political jokes protesting the suppression of civil liberties are remarkably flexible, and they are often equally applicable to both right and left wing totalitarian regimes" (Banc and Dundes 1986:9). This statement characterizes research on the political joke, with emphasis on totalitarian states and a relative neglect of political systems between the two poles. The political scientist Charles Schutz has discussed the role of humor in the political history of democratic societies with a focus, however, on "humor in politics" (Schutz 1977).

One of the earliest studies of political humor was Antonin Orbdlik's analysis of gallows humor in Nazi occupied Czechoslovakia. Orbdlik maintained that gallows humor functions to "bolster the resistance of the victims and, at the same time, it undermines the morale of the oppressors" (Orbdlik 1942:716). Another excellent study of the joke in the totalitarian state was Hans-Jochen Gamm's *Der Flusterwitz im Dritten Reich*. Focusing on the content and context of the political joke, Gamm discovered that the motivations for telling jokes were
very obscure. The content of anti-Hitler or anti-Nazi jokes often revealed an insider knowledge of internal events within the Nazi power structure, suggesting that political jokes were not necessarily a sign of political opposition (Gamm 1963:23).

Several studies of political humor have emphasized its function as a weapon or form of resistance. Hannjost Lixfeld, writing on jokes and aggression, has observed that: “the catch phrase that jokes are a weapon certainly applies to the political joke, especially those found in totalitarian political systems” (Dow and Lixfeld 1978/1986:229). In their collaborative study on Romanian political jokes, Banc and Dundes have suggested that jokes are “veritable fictional bullets firing a constant barrage at a repressive system and its leadership” (1986:14). They have interpreted the political joke not only as a form of resistance, but also as a mechanism for coping: “It is, in fact, partly these jokes which make it possible for oppressed people to survive” (1986:13). Unfortunately these statements are not supported by the contextual information or empirical data.

A few studies have successfully avoided the totalitarian-functionalist argument. Bernd Jürgen Warneken’s article on the “socially critical joke” cautions that the motivations behind what he terms the “rejection joke”—a joke rejecting a political party or leader—in the totalitarian state are often unclear and should not automatically be equated with resistance (Warneken 1978:20–39). Victor Raskin’s script-based semantic theory has allowed him to circumvent the issue of function and see the political joke as “the opposition between the script for what the political leaders or groups are supposed to be and the script for what they actually are” (Raskin 1985:222).

My intention in this paper is not to refute the psychofunctional theory or to deny that the political joke is found more frequently in a repressive political system. Rather I hope to challenge “humorologists” (Apte 1988:5–25) to forge beyond what has often amounted to a simplistic application of the functional theory to political humor. I suggest that we look to the specific social-political context of the joke and identify the relationship between joke structure and joke context. It will not be surprising to find that the conditions for political humor are very much context-specific. What may prove surprising, however, is that the standard political labels of “totalitarian” or “democratic” not only fail to adequately identify the defining conditions for political humor, but obscure the relationship between genre and context.

Let us first consider the structure of the joke. Incongruity has been considered by many to be the cornerstone of humor (Kant 1892;
Schopenhauer 1907–9; Bausinger 1980; Oring 1987). According to the incongruity theory, the basic structure of the joke revolves around the conflict between norms, and the incongruous union of two distant ideas or meanings. Hermann Bausinger has identified four criteria which determine the quality of the joke: the distance between normative spheres, the significance of these spheres, the intelligibility of the referent, and the punch-line (Bausinger 1980:140). The humorous effect of the joke is directly related to the degree of distance or conflict between and significance of these normative spheres. Moreover, these two factors point to taboo, which is essential in the creation of humor. The greater the social resistance that meets with the joke, i.e., the stronger and more valid the taboo that is attacked, the greater its humorous effect (Bausinger 1980:141).

Elliott Oring has suggested that humor involves the “perception of an appropriate incongruity—that is, the perception of an appropriate interrelationship of domains that are generally regarded as incongruous in a particular frame” (Oring 1987:277). The perception of an appropriate incongruity requires the recognition of cultural conflicts or incongruities articulated in the joke text. A similar perspective is shared by Mary Douglas in her observation that, “a joke cannot be perceived unless it corresponds to the form of social experience . . .” (Douglas 1975:100).

The socio-political contexts of East and West Berlin prove to be significant in shaping divergent joke cultures. In East Berlin the distance between normative political spheres is great, as is the significance attached to them. Rhetoric of the German Democratic Republic equates socialism with morality, and capitalism with corruption and imperialism. The Berlin Wall is the “anti-fascist protection wall,” constructed to protect socialism against the imperialistic politics and corrupting influences of the West. For citizens of the German Democratic Republic it effectively enforces the distance between the two political spheres. The “other” Berlin is taboo, often attainable only through the media or occasional visitors from the West.

In West Berlin the significance and distance between the two spheres is also considerable. The West is equated with freedom and material well-being, the East with oppression and deprivation. The physical distance between normative political spheres, however, is minimal. Or at least it is a matter of personal choice. The “other” Berlin is not taboo; the Wall is permeable, surmountable. West Berliners move through normative spheres with relative ease; the crossing of the border has become a routinized and relatively efficient
experience. This situation has made for a relative pluralization of norms (in contrast to East Berlin), and a weakening of the distance between political spheres. The decline in the political joke culture in the West is integrally related to this pluralization of norms noted by Bausinger (1980):

> Pluralism makes for frequent intersections [of norms], but it also makes the intersection more boring and harmless; they are still funny, but the tension is missing in the humor, which only results from important opposites (147).

Historical experience and the socio-political structure of the two Berlins have created two very different contexts for the communication of humor. Mary Douglas has noted that “the social dimension enters at all levels into the perception of the joke. Even its typical patterning depends on a social valuation of the elements” (Douglas 1975:97). Out of the different contexts of the two Berlins have emerged different forms of expression. Let us look now at specific examples of political humor and begin with East Berlin jokes.

**Jokes**

The following political jokes were recorded during fieldwork in East Berlin or the German Democratic Republic between September 1987 and June 1988. Explicitly or implicitly, their subject is the Berlin Wall, with themes ranging from the reasons for its construction and the stupidity of the border guards to escape wishes and attempts. I will discuss two main categories: jokes which focus on the Wall as contradiction, and those which articulate escape wishes.

I. *The Wall as Contradiction*

The first two jokes were told to me by an East German who served as a guard on the German-German border during his eighteen-month military conscription. These jokes were told in his circle of soldiers and border guards. The first joke patterns itself after the Ostfriesen (East Friesan) joke cycle, the generic ethnic joke cycle in West Germany equivalent to the Polack joke in the United States. It adapts the West German joke cycle to East German circumstances.

> *Warum sind die Ost-Berliner blöder als die Ost Friesen?*
> *Sie haben sich eine Mauer gebaut und sich auf die falsche Seite gestellt.*
Why are the East Berliners dumber than the East Friesans?
They built a wall but placed themselves on the wrong side.

This joke highlights the incongruity between the reasons for building the Wall and the fact that most people secretly desire to be in the West. It suggests that even those responsible for its construction wanted to be in the West but through their own incompetence managed to get on the wrong side. The construction of the Wall is ridiculed as a mistake. On the folk scale of stupidity, the East Berliners surpass the East Friesans.

The second joke revolves around the incongruity between political rhetoric and actual fact. Its effect is macabre because it only states a generally held truth. As this example indicates, contradiction is only one of several elements necessary in the creation of humor.

Wo ist beim guten Grenzsoldat der Warnschuß?
Im zweiten Magazin ganz hinten.

When does a good border guard fire the warning shot?
At the end of the second clip of ammunition.

The incongruity resides in the claim of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) that the “shoot to kill” command has been abolished in favor of a more humane policy of issuing warning shots when attempting to prevent refugees from escaping across the border. Nonetheless, and this is perhaps the element of contradiction and humor for border guards, the successful prevention (regardless of means) of an escape is rewarded with immediate vacation for the border guards involved. The failure to prevent an escape, however, is punishable with demotion or possible imprisonment.

The next two jokes highlight the incongruity between popular perceptions and the state rhetoric used to justify the building of the Wall.

Warum ist die Berliner Mauer, als Schutz des Sozialismus, überflüssig?
Ohne die Mauer würde sich kein Mensch entschließen, nach West-Berlin zu flüchten.

Why was it foolish to build the Wall in order to protect socialism?
If it weren’t for the Wall no one would want to escape to the West.

The joke suggests that the Wall is the cause of the problem, rather than the solution. Despite the GDR’s claims that the Wall was built to protect socialism, the joke reveals that its main purpose was to prevent
East Germans from moving to the West. The disjunction between the joke question and response highlights the incongruity between political rhetoric and popular perception.

According to East German rhetoric, the Berlin Wall is the “anti-fascist protection wall,” constructed to defend the socialist state from the imperialistic designs of the capitalist West. The extent to which this explanation for the building of the Wall is rejected by East Germans is evident in the following joke:

An American comes to (East) Berlin, goes to a taxi driver and says “Can you drive me through Berlin?” “Sure, I can.” They drive around, he shows him Alexanderplatz, Prenzlau, shows him Weißensee, shows him all the things worth seeing. Then the American says, “I have a question. Where is the ‘anti-fascist protection wall’?” “What? Don’t know it.” “Uh, here (they) say ‘anti-fascist protection wall’.” “Don’t know it, sorry.” The driver shows him some more of Berlin, and then always, “But where is the anti-fascist protection wall?” Finally they drive past the Wall, and the American jumps—he cries out, “Halt, halt. Stop, stop, stop!” Jumps from the car, “Here is the anti-fascist protection wall!” “Huh, what’s that? Hey, that’s the Berlin-Rostock highway hanging up to dry.”

The taxi-driver substitutes the absurdity of the state’s claim for what he considers to be a more plausible explanation, which is absurd in itself. Surely after 27 years, the taxi-driver would expect the “highway” to be dry! The point revolves around the substitution of one absurd explanation for another. This joke also indicates just how invisible the Wall is for East Berliners. Not only did the taxi driver not recognize the landmark by its ideological justification, but he also did not include it on the sightseeing tour for his passenger. In West Berlin, the Wall is an integral part of the tourist package.

The following riddle-joke points to another incongruity. With the exception of special events or family occasions, East Germans are
prohibited from travelling to the West. Once they have retired, i.e. are no longer productive members of the work force and a loss to the State if they should decide not to return, they are allowed to travel to the West.

Wer ist im Renten-Alter und darf trotzdem nicht nach Berlin-West?
Die Berliner U-bahn.

Who is retired and nonetheless is not allowed to travel to West Berlin?
The East Berlin subway.

Because public transportation from one sector of Berlin to another was the most common means of escaping to the West before the Wall was built, subway lines between East and West Berlin were severed in 1961. Despite its age, the East Berlin subway still is prohibited from reaching the western half of the city. The riddle-joke hinges on the incongruity that not everything or everyone that is old is allowed to travel to the West.

The last joke in this category requires an explanation as to its performance context and likely origin. It was performed in Die Distel (the Thistle), an East Berlin cabaret, which has been distinguished with the “silver medal for patriotic service” (Jaeger 1984:87). The Thistle is considered by most East Berliners to be very “red” and indeed the State plays a very active role in the formulation and propagation of political humor. Werner L., an ex-East German now living in West Berlin, explained the role of the Party in the creation and dissemination of political jokes:

Most political jokes in the GDR do not originate with the folk, but are consciously developed at Party schools and institutions. They are then skillfully introduced to the folk, at beer tables and in small social gatherings, and from there they travel by word of mouth . . . In order to keep the people and popular sentiment in control the Party creates political jokes, which allow the Party to develop the proper ideological stance and norms, in order to control the situation. And the jokes, which allow people to let off steam, also serve the purpose of quieting them.

According to the East Berliner whose mother had heard this joke, the Thistle is where Party honchos and comrades go for a “harmless” laugh. But the humor is hardly what one could call harmless, as the next joke reveals.
There is virtually no environmental consciousness in the GDR. As a result, air pollution—caused by a combination of car exhaust, industrial waste and coal-burning ovens in old Berlin buildings—often rises to very dangerous levels in the winter months. In such instances, smog alarms are issued in West Berlin to warn residents of dangerous pollution content in the air and to restrict private transportation. East Berlin, the main producer of the pollution problem, does not issue smog alarms.

*Warum gibt es keinen Smog-Alarm in Ost-Berlin, wenn es einen in West-Berlin gibt?*  
*Unsere Grenzen sind dicht.*  

Why is there no smog alarm in East-Berlin when there is in West-Berlin?  
Our borders are tight.

The humor resides in the absurd claim that the border's security system is able to contain air. The joke would appear to ridicule the indefensible claims of the East German government. The audience laughs at what it believes to be a social critique in the disguise of a joke. And perhaps on one level it is. On another level, however, the audience in the Thistle is given a subtle and simultaneous injection of ideology. Freud has demonstrated how this occurs. Jokes offer a relief from "the pressure of critical reason" (Freud 1960:126). The technique of the joke guards against rejection or criticism of its content: "We are inclined to give the thought [Strachey's emphasis] the benefit of what has pleased us in the form of the joke; and we are no longer inclined to find anything wrong that has given us enjoyment and so to spoil the source of a pleasure" (1960:132).

The preceding joke conveys two messages: First, that the Wall prevents air pollution originating in West Berlin from reaching East Berlin. (The GDR denies responsibility for the pollution problem.) The joke, therefore, transports a falsehood about the pollution problem. Moreover, it supports the East German claim that the "anti-fascist protection wall" protects socialism from the polluting, capitalist West. Second, the joke serves to depict the Berlin-Berlin border as impenetrable and insurmountable. This is an impression that the East German government takes great pains to create—as is evident from the rule of silence in the media about escapes from East Berlin or the German Democratic Republic.
Performance context has a radical effect on the perception and appreciation of humor in East Berlin. The audience in the Thistle knows that satire and criticism are acceptable in the context of the cabaret. The same joke in another context may have a very different effect. As one East Berliner, complaining about the Thistle, said to me: "The same people who will be in there [the Thistle] slapping their thighs with delight will look askance at you when they hear the very same joke on the street." Elliott Oring has referred to this as the various "performance meanings" of a joke, i.e., specific meanings and perceptions of humor "in relation to particular tellers, audiences, settings, and interactions" (Oring 1987:278). The very unambiguous context of the Thistle clarifies the ambiguity or incongruity of the preceding joke. In other words, the performance context makes the performance meaning explicit.

The strict distinction between appropriate and inappropriate, i.e. safe and unsafe, contexts of performance for political jokes was confirmed by Werner L. He attributed the popularity of political humor in the GDR to the pleasure of doing something verboten, of criticizing the government and socio-political conditions. Of course, not all performance contexts are as clearly defined as the Thistle and the telling of political jokes is not without its dangers. Although private joke telling most often occurs in the safe context of family, friends, and Gleichgesinnte ("like-minded people"), even that does not guarantee a similar appreciation of the humor. For an excellent discussion of the dangerous consequences of telling a political joke in the totalitarian state, see Burt Feintuch's article on Milan Kundera's The Joke (Feintuch 1987:21–35).

II. Escape Wishes

Many "Wall" jokes focus on escape wishes or attempts. The setting of the first joke is on the Wall, the would-be refugee is in the act of trying to escape to the West.

Grepo ist verblüfft über seine plötzliche Wendung und fragt, "Dreimal habe ich Dir befohlen 'runterzukommen. Warum bist Du erst 'runter gekommen als ich sagte im Westen ist auch der Sozialismus?" Der Mann antwortete, "So ein Wirrwarr möchte ich nicht ein zweites Mal erleben!"

An East Berlin border guard comes upon a man climbing over the Wall. "Come down, comrade," he says "That is verboten." The man on he Wall ignores him and continues to climb. "Come down, comrade," the border guard insists, "That is a crime against the German Democratic Republic." The man continues to struggle over the top. Finally the border guard says, "Come down, comrade. You know there is socialism on the other side of the Wall as well." Upon hearing this, the man climbs down with a disheartened look. The border guard is puzzled by his sudden change of mind and asks, "Three times I ordered you to come down. Why did you finally obey when I said socialism was in the West too?" the man replied, "Such a mess I don't want to experience twice in my life!"

This joke is interesting because it minimizes the dangers involved in attempting to climb the Wall. Unlike the joke about the warning shot of a good border guard, this joke depicts the guard in a wise, brotherly fashion. Moreover, the implied message of the joke is that attempting to escape is pointless, because it is not any better in the West.

Political leaders often figure in the jokes about escape. The next joke features Walter Ulbricht, former General Secretary of the Communist party and head of state in GDR. It was Ulbricht who, with authorization from Krushchev, ordered the building of the Wall.

Ulbricht ist im Restaurant. Da die Kellnerin, die ihm bediente, hübsch war, sagte er ihr, sie dürfe sich etwas wünschen. Sie überlegt und sagt, sie wünscht sich, daß er die Mauer einen Tag aufmacht. Geschmeichelt, blinzelt er ihr zu und sagt, "Sie sind schlau! Sie wollen nur mit mir alleine seine!"

Walter Ulbricht was eating at a restaurant. Because the waitress who served him was very pretty, he said he would grant her one wish. She thought for a minute and said she wanted him to open the wall for one day. Ulbricht winked and said, "You're a clever one. You just want to be alone with me!"

A variant of this joke was recorded by Roger Abrahams and Charles Wukasch in a 1967 article on political humor in East Germany. They classified the Ulbricht jokes into three categories, with this particular joke an example of "unpopularity with the people"—more specifically, unpopularity of the regime (Abrahams and Wukasch 1967:8).
The humor of this joke resides in Ulbricht’s translation of a political demand into a sexual overture. His overestimation of his sexual appeal prevents him from recognizing that her request expresses a covert desire to flee to the West. He does, however, recognize the political consequences of opening the Wall, as his response tacitly acknowledges. Nonetheless, he interprets her request in sexual terms and fails to recognize its intended motive.

The often desperate attempt to find an escape route is illustrated in the last two jokes. Both involve a play on the German word *Loch* (hole). The first is an announcement appearing in the paper, offering to exchange living quarters. The ad reads:

*Tausche komfortables, luxuriöses Einfamilienhaus gegen Loch in der Mauer.*

Swap comfortable, luxurious single-family house for hole in the Wall.

The humor revolves around the double meaning of “hole”—as in “hole in the wall” or sub-standard living conditions, and *literally* “hole in the Wall” as escape route to the West.

The last joke is somewhat difficult to render into English in that it revolves around the articles of gender in German. The humor is lost if *der, die, and das* (male, female, and neuter gender) are simply translated as “the.” I have, therefore, kept the original German articles in the joke text.


A German professor was walking along the wall mumbling “der, die, das wall, der, die, das wall.” A guard yelled out “Stop! Stay where you are! German border police!” The professor looked up absent-mindedly. Two border guards approached him and demanded his identification papers. “What are you doing here? Get away from here!” “Well, I have a problem.” he said. “What do you mean a problem?” “My students ask me, is it der wall, die wall, or das wall? Is it male, female, or neuter
The guards were puzzled and said, “As a German professor you ought to know that! Of course it’s die wall—it’s gender is feminine.” The professor jumped up and down, “Hurray, hurray! I was right after all! Then there must be a hole here somewhere!”

The interesting aspect of this joke is the ascription of human-sexual attributes to a political boundary based on the literal interpretation of a linguistic feature. The symbolic equation of escape to the West with sexual penetration or violation, however, is not entirely misplaced. According to East German law, escape to the West is a punishable act of “border violation”—a crime which, if the escape attempt has failed, generally involves a minimum of one year imprisonment. Another joke has the aged wife of Walter Ulbricht placed on the border as a deterrent to escape, with the punch-line Sie ist so alt, da steigt keiner drüber! (she is so old, no one will want to get on top of her). It is interesting that both State and popular perceptions of escape to the West draw upon the symbolism of sexual violation. Another form of “border violation”—initiated from the West side of the border—is the writing of graffiti on the Wall.

**Graffiti**

By its very nature the act of writing graffiti on the Wall signifies politically aggressive behavior, although this need not necessarily be the foremost motivation for the graffitist. The writing of graffiti is a violation of the German-German border and the defacement of East German property. Moreover, through subsequent refortification of the border, the Wall does not reflect the actual boundary between East and West. It is often set back as much as ten feet from the actual demarcation line. The graffitist, therefore, is invariably on East German territory when perpetrating the “crime.” In this context, all graffiti acquire political significance, regardless of content. The writing of graffiti on the Wall has concrete political implications and is punishable. Many graffiti writers are no doubt aware of the dangers and implications of their actions. Several legends tell of unfortunate individuals who “disappeared” after being discovered and arrested by East German border guards.

The question arises: Who writes graffiti on the Wall and what role does graffiti play in the communication of humor? As the writing of graffiti is usually anonymous and clandestine, it is difficult to know precisely who writes graffiti. Based on the diversity of language and
content, I believe that non-Berliners, i.e., tourists and other visitors to the city, are the main producers of graffiti. None of the Berliners whom I interviewed have admitted to writing graffiti on the Wall. For non-Berliners, the Wall is primarily a tourist object and it would seem that writing graffiti on the Berlin Wall is “the thing to do” for visitors to the city of a specific age-group. Items of graffiti often attest to the artistic presence of various tour groups and school classes at the Wall.

Another question we must consider is the nature of humorous communication in graffiti. Graffiti on the Wall, i.e., “visual political humor,” falls into two main categories: 1) reproduction of a joke’s punch-line, and 2) the incongruity between the graffito (text) and the Wall (context).

The first category raises some questions. Why is the joke punch-line reproduced in graffiti? Is the extracted punch-line funny, i.e., does it achieve the same comic effect in graffiti form, without its full narrative structure? What differentiates the visual punch-line from its verbal counterpart? Can one even speak of humorous communication if the sender (graffito writer) does not provide the receiver (audience) with information necessary for the communication of the message?

I. Graffiti as Visual Punch-Line

Let’s turn first to the reproduction of the joke punch-line. The first example, SED = Selten Etwas Da, translates as “SED [the Socialist Unity Party, which is the ruling organ in the German Democratic Republic] equals rarely anything there.” This clever redefinition of the Party acronym aligns itself with other East bloc political jokes about food and supply shortages (Banc and Dundes 1986:58–68). Missing is the joke introduction “What is the meaning of ____” or “What does ____ stand for?”—which would be essential in the verbal communication of the joke. This example, however, contains all the necessary information to make the joke intelligible. The referent, the SED, is clear. Its inversion forms the punch-line and, for the speaker of German, the communication is complete.

The second example of visual political humor was collected immediately next to the first, in a residential and somewhat secluded area of Berlin. These are the only two items of humorous graffiti I have found located next to one another. Their promiximity and the fact that both are written in black spray paint would almost suggest something of a limited joking session with the spray can.
Rarely are graffiti on the Berlin Wall in dialogue with each other, which would suggest that, with the exception of elaborate works by local artists, writing on the Wall is preplanned and hurried. There is little of the chain graffiti that has been observed in bathrooms, on desktops or other public places where individuals sit in leisure and consider and respond to the philosophies before them.

_Honni mach das Licht aus_—translates as “Honni [referring to Erich Honecker, the current head of state in the GDR] turn out the lights”—may seem at first more puzzling than humorous. The humor is not immediately clear; only the passerby who has previously heard the joke will recognize the reference to, or paraphrase of, the punch-line. This example and an English variant, “Last one out turn off the lights,” are the extracted punch-lines from a joke in which Ulbricht returns from vacation to a deserted Berlin with all the lights ablaze to find a note at the Brandenburg Gate with the message, “Last one out turn off the lights.”

Unless the receiver of the intended message knows the joke and can recall it when reading the graffito, the communication of the message as a joke has failed. The extracted punch-line remains an enigmatic statement. And how effective is it when the receiver possesses the necessary information to understand the graffiti? As with most examples of humorous graffiti, the effect is severely restricted by the lack of a joke technique leading up to the punch-line. In this particular example, the effect is all the more obscured by the lack of information identifying the referent. At most, there is perhaps what Freud has referred to as the pleasure in the “rediscovery of something familiar” (Freud 1960:122) when the reader suddenly recognizes the punch-line of a joke in the graffito.

The renaming of an acronym is a common joke technique in Wall graffiti. The correct signification of the acronym on the part of the audience is assumed. The familiarity of the acronym allows for a humorous inversion which is achieved quickly and with little introductory explanation. DDR = _Drei doofe Russen_ translates as the “German Democratic Republic is equivalent to Three dumb Russians.” Other variants include _die doofe Reste_ (“The stupid rest”), _Deutsches Demokratisches Russland_ (“German Democratic Russia”) and _Deutscher Dreck Republik_ (“German Dirt Republic”). The playful inversion of acronyms is one of the most frequent types of humorous graffiti. This no doubt derives, on the one hand, from the joke techniques of brevity, familiarity and inversion. On the other hand, performance
imperatives—aspects which range from (believed) danger to cramped writing conditions and increasing shortage of space—also are significant factors in the length of the graffiti text.

*Ich bin die Autobahn Berlin-Rostock: Erste Management Fehler—Nun steh ich hier* translates as “I am the Berlin-Rostock highway—first management error and now I am here” and is obviously related to the verbal narrative discussed earlier. Space constraints clearly curtail the full joke narrative, and without the description of the “anti-fascist protection wall” as a counterpoint to the taxi-driver’s explanation, a literal rendering of the joke point (if we assume the graffitist knew the verbal narrative) would make little sense in graffiti form. The graffito, therefore, must draw upon another source of contradiction, which can be expressed succinctly.

The Wall is signified as the Berlin-Rostock highway in both verbal and visual form. However, whereas the joke highlights ideological absurdity, the graffito emphasizes management error. The Wall is a mistake, a highway accidentally put in the wrong place. Although the graffito form departs considerably from its verbal counterpart, it is still intelligible and amusing in itself. In contrast to “Honni, turn off the lights,” it offers a complete and independent message.

Another implicit element of humor in the preceding joke revolves around the irony that the Wall is probably the smoothest stretch of cement in German Democratic Republic. The highways are notoriously bumpy and uneven, and, as the joke suggests, remain so due to management error.

The next item of graffiti *Schwarz = Zukunft; Rot = Gegenwart; Gold = Vergangenheit* is not easily recognizable as the visual punch-line of a joke. Nor is its humorous intention easily understandable, because—with the absence of the introduction—its referent is not clear. In graffiti form it reads: Black = Future; Red = Present; Gold = Past. Black, red, gold are the colors of the German flag. However, they are the colors of both German flags—of both the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany. Unlike the graffito, however, the verbal narrative names the specific referent, claiming that the meaning of the colors for the East German flag reads precisely in reverse historical order. Black is their future, Red or Communist their present, and Gold was the past. The graffito, however, does not specify its referent, thereby flawing the humorous communication of its message. It is not clear which German flag is meant. Of course, one should not exclude the possibility that the referent is
intentionally ambiguous with the purpose of suggesting that the statement is true of both Germanys.

II. Graffiti as the Incongruity between Text and Context

The second category of humorous graffiti involves the incongruity between text and context. The first example Ausfahrt Freihalten translates as "Keep the Exit Clear." The incongruity, of course, is that there is no exit at this point in the Wall. Moreover, the Wall's tight security makes it improbable that this spot in the Wall will be needed for an exit. The interesting aspect of this graffito is that the message is a very common everyday sort of sign. It is posted on many doors and entrances, and is not humorous in itself. With the Wall as its backdrop, however, it becomes funny. The incongruity of the union of text and context—and the distance between normative spheres—creates the humor. The text is common, it is everyday. The context, the Berlin Wall, however, is uncommon, it is unique. It is this surprising juxtaposition of the common with the uncommon which creates the humor.

There is another tacit dimension of humor in this example. Property owners, i.e., the people who use the driveway or exit, are generally responsible for posting the "Keep the Exit Clear" sign. The East German government or border guards clearly are not the authors of graffiti—and certainly wouldn't write this message if they were! Who, then, in the East would want to have the exit clear? Anyone planning to escape. Of course, if the escapee were able to write this message on the West side of the Wall, he/she would have already made it successfully to the West and would not need to post a sign requesting to keep the exit clear.

Durchgang vorübergehend gesperrt or "Passage temporarily blocked" is a poorer variant of the previous example. It expresses the same concept, i.e., the Wall as barrier, and also draws upon an everyday sign for the communication of incongruity. However, the distance between normative spheres is weaker, as is the technique of the joke. Passage is temporarily blocked. The humor is designed to revolve around the incongruity of the word temporary and the twenty-seven year existence of this temporary measure. As in the joke about the warning shot, we see that incongruity is not necessarily humorous in itself, especially when it is an incongruous statement of fact.
Morgen Tag der Offenen Tür or “Tomorrow Day of the Open Door” (or “Open Day”) is related, if not formally, then conceptually, to the joke cited earlier about opening the Wall for a day. The implicit reference and humor in the statement, of course, is related to the foreseeable consequences of Open Day, i.e., a mass exodus to the West.

The last two items of humor in graffiti were written in English. In/Out (of order) is one graffito, involving the imposition of one message on another. In and Out is a common contrastive pair. The “of order” in parentheses is imposed on the “out” of “In and out” to suggest that there is no “out.” Travel across the border from East to West is not in working order; the “out of order” ridicules the travel barrier as a mere technical problem. The graffito also demonstrates the classic pattern of humor, in the imposition of a second message on the first, which at the same time negates the first. Moreover, “out of order” clearly ridicules East German conditions, which often are not in working order.

And finally, East German High Jump Training Area, highlights the incongruity between the Wall’s intended purpose of preventing the flow of refugees from the East to the West, and what it has become, namely an obstacle for East Germans to overcome in their escape to the West. The graffito suggests that the Wall, and the resultant lack of freedom, are the reasons that East Germans have become such good high jumpers. This example contains a subtle reference to the professionalization of amateur sports in the German Democratic Republic, a sore point for the Federal Republic of Germany, which invariably falls behind the other “Germany” in international competition.

The superiority theory of humor would appear to explain the last two examples. Both ridicule the GDR for paradoxical circumstances, over which the West has no control. The humor of the graffiti, therefore, reverses the situation of powerlessness and inferiority, and highlights the inconsistencies and weaknesses of the other system. The writing of graffiti on the territory of the “other” could likewise be interpreted as a symbolic effort to reassert “superiority.”

In the two Berlins, political humor about the Wall is context-specific: with jokes primarily in East Berlin and graffiti exclusively in West Berlin. It would be tempting to argue that West Berlin graffiti is the inverse functional equivalent of the East Berlin joke. In other words, East Berliners tell in jokes what they cannot write, and West Berliners spray in graffiti what they do not say in jokes. However,
such an argument would require more information on the writers of graffiti and the tellers of jokes, their motivations, and the sources of contexts of humorous communication.

What then is the relationship between jokes and graffiti in the communication of political humor? The first and most obvious similarity is that both are based on principles of violation and taboo. Jokes violate boundaries of morality; graffiti violate boundaries of ownership. In the case of the Berlin Wall, jokes violate political sensibilities; graffiti violate political property and boundaries of state. Both, in being either anonymous or "disguised" forms of aggression, share an explicit potential for social critique. Jokes about the Wall highlight the paradox of political statements or conditions. Humorous graffiti on the Wall either draw upon techniques from verbal narratives or achieve their humorous effect by highlighting the incongruity between text and context.

Rainer Wehse has identified another important similarity between the two genres: "Pointedness, the punch-line, is likewise an aspired generic characteristic for other areas of the written graffiti, which draws it closer to the genres of joke, schwank, idiom and proverb" (Wehse 1984:212). The similarity of their technique—brevity and pointedness—explains perhaps why punch-lines often find their way into graffiti form.

There are of course differences in communication. Jokes are verbal narratives that require an audience for the communication of its idea and, according to Freud, for the satisfaction of its purpose: the response of laughter. The communication of a joke, therefore, is direct and personal. It is most often transmitted from person to person. The communication of graffiti is from person to object to person, i.e., the graffitist writes a text on a public surface, which will be read at a later date by numerous, unknown passersby. The communication is indirect and anonymous. Whereas the joke is social by nature, the act of writing graffiti—unless done in a group, which also occurs—is an individualistic and solitary activity.

The forms of political humor, and the contexts of their occurrence, hinge on the perception of taboo and incongruity. Taboo is perceived in East Berlin in the verbal communication of the political joke. However, verbal communication is relatively difficult to control and punish. The cautious selection of an audience—usually among family and friends—more or less guarantees that the danger is minimal. Writing graffiti on the Wall, however, is strictly taboo. And for East Germans
the consequences, let alone the problem of being unnoticed in the border area, are so great as to restrict this type of folkloric expression. Moreover, there simply is not a graffiti tradition in the GDR.

In West Berlin, although the telling of Wall jokes is not taboo, the topic is relatively uninteresting. This accounts for the absence of Wall jokes in West Berlin joke culture. However, the Berlin Wall does offer a unique and extensive space for the communication of a variety of messages, ranging from the humorous to the political and personal. Humor about the Berlin Wall appears most frequently in the colorful statements and pictures on its very surface.

To conclude, greater attention needs to be given not only to the socio-political conditions for the creation and transmission of political humor, but also to the generic interrelationships in this process. The Berlin Wall illustrates the value of studying political humor. It is a key to the relationship between political structure, social experience and folkloric expression.

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