

Window Shopping in the (Evil?) Empire

David Hlynsky

I shop comfortably, mindlessly, compulsively; sometimes purposefully; often in a daze. I scrutinize merchandise with the privilege and prejudice of a Westerner. Consumption is my cultural responsibility and patriotic duty. This cornucopia is my birthright and I understand it well.

Shopping synchronizes my heartbeat with the rhythms of industry. It teaches me my place in the social hierarchy. It initiates me into my many temporary tribes. Watching television is shopping, just as reading the news is shopping. I shop for information and knowledge. I shop for validation. Meeting people is shopping. I shop for human contact. Travel is shopping. Shopping is choosing a momentary self out of a ceaseless catalogue of disposable identities. I shop for experiences; for travel and entertainment; for social associations and interactions. Some kind of shopping must always precede choosing. To not shop is to not pay attention.

I shop for things, too. We all shop for things; for food, clothing and furnishings; for health, shelter and culture. It's difficult to list very many personal possessions, which haven't first been presented to me as desirable commodities. Watching a presentation is shopping. Shopping is not necessarily buying—but the simple act of opening one's eyes in a city is always a will to shop.

Even the few things I invent for myself as an artist are coloured with the belief that they are more special than the things I once shopped for. Sooner or later I always shop for an audience. I shop to find them. I shop for ideas to show to them.

The unfettered torrent of consumables is the root pressure sanctifying the Western marketplace. "Consumer choice" is marketer's jargon. "Free market economy" is the dogma. This sanctification of shopping is an implicit permission to satisfy as much appetite as I am worth. Or at least as much as I can get credit for. I absorb the myth of self-determination and dispose of its physical evidence whenever the scene calls for a costume change. Fashion beats a fast drum. And fashionable gadgets are built to conquer last year's fashionable gadgets in some mechanically

macabre, Darwinian roulette. Green-eyed computers litter the curb-side. When my arms are full, I am encouraged to throw away as much as I can carry. Shopping will never stop.

My public identity is a synthesis of possessions and experiences I once went shopping for. But the steady momentum of my habitual shopping has also channelled me into a narrower canyon of choice; a self-limited future. I can't afford to buy everything, after all. Shopping demands that I proclaim my tribal allegiances. The data farm quietly tends to my further cultivation. Shopping has made me more conservative—more fixed—comfortably less mercurial.

Between 1986 and 1990, I made approximately 8,000 colour images on the streets of Communist Europe. I purposely avoided dramatic moments and newsworthy events. In a cityscape without commercial seduction, banality seemed to signify everything. At first I was interested in simple pedestrian traffic. Later I doggedly documented hundreds of store windows. These seemed to signify the real difference between East and West. Without the garish ad campaigns of the West, these streets felt more neutral... devoid of trumped up and pumped up urgency. But for some Western visitors, these windows may have seemed uncomfortably vacuous; scary enough to rationalize the Cold War.

If I had been born in Eastern Europe in the middle of the twentieth century I might have read these windows more pragmatically; perhaps even critically. Through chronic shortages and stock-room pilfering, window-shopping had been distilled down to its more pragmatic essence; surveying the leftovers. Even a faint whiff of the Western carnival must have been excruciatingly tantalizing to the young; and the black market offered much to sniff about. And so, through some accumulated erosion of faith (and a systemic current of sabotage), these Communist windows began to symbolize a quagmire of bureaucratic inefficiency.

In those dying days of the Cold War I saw a vast, ad hoc museum of a great failing utopia. The Socialist dream had been made fragile by a simple but terminal misreading of human desire. Suddenly in 1989, this museum closed without fanfare or notice. History rightly marks that moment by what was born rather than by what fell away... but what did fall away?

Soviet culture was serviced and supplied by a single, no-name producer; the State. Without competing corporations, the need for advertising and packaging was reduced to almost none. By contrast, the Western urban landscape is an ever-changing canvas of machismo, fantasy, irony and sex due entirely to the cunning efforts of well-paid, commercial artists. Their task is to paint somewhat arbitrary but exaggerated distinctions between one bunch of bananas and the next. As the Medicis funded the visual culture of the Renaissance, Madison Avenue has almost single handedly cre-

ated the visual culture of late Capitalism. Holy logos, Bat Girl! Fine artists may bristle at the thought, but their more mercenary commercial cousins do get paid a lot better for a day's work-and have a much larger audience. Branding is their only important task. Westerners shop to pay top dollar for the privilege of wearing heraldic designer advertisements on their chests, defending the Kingdom of Tommy against the Kingdom of CK. Generic designs are relegated to the bargain basement. To the Western shopper, Soviet consumer culture was so notoriously nowhere precisely because it was so blatantly NO NAME.

My pictures of Soviet-era store windows describe a culture supplied with generic products; a landscape without advertising. Here the graphic artist's task was not branding but labelling. The creative challenge of getting or keeping consumer attention was not even part of the equation. In a marketplace of only generic products, the excitement of shopping itself was almost flat-lined. The experience barely resembled its over-stimulated, Western counterpart.

Consumer shortages were announced through the grapevine as were the sudden arrivals of new inventory. Neighbours stockpiled whatever they could and traded goods, person to person. Advertising was replaced with rumour and gossip. Social skills, personal connections and diligence did ultimately stratify East Bloc society into relative levels of wealth and comfort. Shopping was not nearly as important as strategic networking. I was surprised to find Western books and music in the homes of East Bloc artists. These same books and music would have been difficult to find in suburban North American shopping malls; not because of short supply but because of disinterest and the aggressive distraction of mainstream plonk. And if suburban malls ignored some of the most interesting manifestations of Western culture itself, they were almost totally blind to East Bloc culture as well. Could it be that a clumsy marketplace stimulated East Bloc intellectuals to become more cagey shoppers? Repression does what the appetite. Does the flood of fluffy stuff in Western malls dull suburban senses? Secret Agent 007 definitely did not spill the answer to this one.

Downtown shoppers in big Western cities do have an enormous range of choice. Our big cities seem populated by a myriad of small tribes while suburbia remains more homogenous. As I said at the start, the urban cornucopia is my birthright and I understand it well. What was mysterious to me during my Cold War travels was the nature of consumer culture in the enemy camp. If branding is the Western model and labelling was its Eastern parallel, what were the differences in the art of display itself? This is where my fascination with East Bloc windows begins.

Labelling starts with typography. It was easy to navigate East Bloc commercial landscapes by learning a few words of signage: "meat," "poultry,"

“milk,” “grocery,” “sport,” “fashion,” “restaurant,” “hotel.” Some stores were announced only by pictographs. Generic labels for generic purchasing experiences.

But even in a repressed marketplace, the act of shopping can be a joyful experience. The hope of having is more pleasant than the disappointment of not having. East Bloc markets frequently projected pleasure through cartoon mascots, cartoon products and cartoon images of nature. Western advertising does much the same but with the turbo-charged stamina and vigour of an Ever Ready Bunny.

These windows also contained tangible evidence of the storekeeper’s personal pride or abject lack of it. Some shops were very tastefully presented to pedestrians. Others were simply matter-of-fact. Some were hopelessly ill designed. Perhaps a few were recklessly ironic. But my point is that I seemed to find evidence of shopkeeper’s touch and personality in all of these windows.

Without an overarching ad machine to design seductive, point-of-purchase displays for these shops, the shopkeeper was often left to his or her own artistic devices. These talents were uneven to say the least. Many storefront displays embellished product presentations with craft paper cut-outs of child-like joyousness. Butterflies and flowers. Imagine your grade two teacher moonlighting as an art director.

In other windows, the art of collage became more intellectual. Student portraits poured through an hourglass. A druggist used poster paint and collage to remind passers by that their bodies were temples of nature and that they ought to refrain from drinking and smoking. Some windows had the echoes of Constructivist design or awkward references to Art Nouveau. Others leaned toward Modernism and in a few cases Socialist Realism. Sexual innuendo was extremely rare but not, I think, because of some puritan modesty. There was porn in the magazine kiosks in Budapest and a Casino floating on the Communist Danube. It seemed that sex wasn’t employed to sell anything but itself. In Prague, a black and white photo of women getting their toenails filed announced a pedicure shop; no glamour implied. In a rare instance, a cartoon figure of a neo-classical woman in a Moscow juice store has allowed her toga to slip revealing a single bare breast. But the signage above her head proclaims a seductive pair of questions and their rhetorical answer. “Ambrosia? Nectar? (no, it’s) Juice!” Was it sexy? Yes, but the copy line was an obvious and ironic inversion of capitalist marketing strategy; the reduction of expectation rather than its inflation. How many times have I been mesmerized by a trip to the Mall only to return home feeling conned by my purchases? I never felt conned in East Bloc shops and I must confess a cer-

tain guilty pleasure in shopping a landscape so devoid of glitz and seduction. But then again, I always had the luxury of a passport to elsewhere.

These windows also contain evidence of traditional craft and mundane labour. A large percentage of shop windows were backed with lace curtains, perhaps a carry over from nineteenth century European taste. There were few mannequins but many bits of flat art. Things seemed perpetually suspended from visible strings and wires. Window frames had decades of cracking enamel and varnish. Windowpanes were carelessly splattered with drips of paint. Stonework was chipped and cracked. While these were evidence of sloppy workmanship and a poverty of building supplies, they also formed the patina of human occupation. Western commercial aesthetic strives to keep as much of its face sparkling and new but that alone ought not justify our pity for an urban landscape more scarred by the human touch. Wear and tear is nothing to be ashamed of.

Once upon a time in the Cold War we tempted global suicide over the content of our respective shop windows. Perhaps I'm too cynical. Clever dramatists called it a fight for freedom. But that too seems like spin from a beltway speechwriter. As it happens, the East Bloc collapsed not because it was entirely "evil" but because its own marketplace of ideas and things finally ran out of promise. Compared with other political revolutions, the disintegration of the Soviet Empire was relatively painless. Even without a formal democratic process, the people simply decided to try a different experiment. It was not so much a victory for cowboy brinkmanship—it was a miracle of collective self-respect.

For now at least... and for better or worse, the freedom to shop is billing itself as one of the grandest freedoms of all. But that chapter is far from over. The Information Age is still new. Will the coming flood of electronic expression celebrate the multiplicity of human experience? Will information keep our collective needs in balance? Or just pave the imperial horizon with more franchises and parking lots? How much growth can our global environment afford? How many costume changes can our identities endure? During an age when our own systemic gluttony is our most formidable enemy, it might be useful to reflect on a place where shopping was less frenetic. But have no fear. That reflection will probably change nothing.

Eastern windows are already filling with the Western simulacrum... a new utopia built of flash and seduction. But, contrary to myth and propaganda, the East Bloc windows I photographed were far from bankrupt. Lack of market competition produced an urban landscape that felt stripped of fluff; an uncommon inventory of our most common human needs. Beneath the skin of ideology, we're all shopping for the same basic stuff. That knowledge alone ought to have brought us together in peace.