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Slumming with Cindy: Class, Precarity, and Performance in Cindy aus Marzahn’s Trash Comedy

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ABSTRACT

The restructuring of unemployment and welfare benefits under Hartz IV hit former East Germans already suffering economically since unification particularly hard, forcing many into a condition of precarity for which the governing ideology held them responsible. Frustrated in her search for suitable work, Ilka Bessin adapted the self-management model advocated by the reforms to transform her story of marginalization and failure into a comedy success as Ossi trash princess Cindy aus Marzahn. Cultivated by commercial television, Bessin’s Cindy was a product, purveyor, and critic of Germany’s neoliberal economic policies, illustrating the fraught, collusive relationship between politics and popular culture.

I have a bad case of Alzheimer bulimia. You can laugh if you like, but I don’t believe you know how shitty it is when you stuff yourself the whole day and then forget to puke in the evening.

–Cindy aus Marzahn¹

East German, overweight, and unemployed, Ilka Bessin was one of unification’s losers until she decided to capitalize on her oversized body and personality and dish out her down-and-out experiences as comedic fare. Bessin’s invention of Cindy aus Marzahn, the crude, unrestrained trash princess from the projects, was simultaneous with the enactment of the so-called Agenda 2010 labor and welfare reforms under the Schröder government that disproportionately affected the population in former East Germany. By selecting a name associated with East German and underclass taste, Ilka Bessin’s “Cindy” was an immediately recognizable class stereotype for German audiences, visually underscored in her early performances by her character’s bulky

silhouette, ill-fitting clothes, garish make-up, gaudy earrings, and messy, fake blond hair. After her debut in a Quatsch Comedy Club competition for best new talent in 2005, Cindy aus Marzahn evolved into a spectacularly successful brand of trash comedy with four solo programs between 2007 and 2016, three comedy series on commercial television, six comedy prizes, and scores of television appearances. As her fame grew, Bessin transformed Cindy’s stage appearance from slovenly to trash chic with her trademark pink jogging suit, sneakers, and curly blond wig adorned with a bountiful pink posy. In assessing Cindy aus Marzahn’s rise as a comedy star, her popular appeal, and her unexpected retirement in 2016, it is necessary to examine the key elements of the sociocultural environment that inspired her and served as the platform for her popularity: unemployment reform, the decline of the working class, the fear of downward mobility among the middle class, preconceptions about East Germans, the marketing of trash TV and Proll (pleb) comedy, and a widening divide between intellectuals and lowbrow opponents to bourgeois culture.2

The German comedy boom in the 1990s began with the establishment of the Quatsch Comedy Club in Hamburg in 1992 and the launch of Samstag Nacht, a German version of Saturday Night Live, on the private TV channel RTL in 1993.3 The boom led to an increase in comedy shows on commercial television, as well as an expansion of live stand-up programs. In 1997, ProSieben produced the Quatsch Comedy Club television show moderated by Thomas Hermann, and in 2002, the popular club opened a branch in the Friedrichstadt-Palast Berlin. The Quatsch Comedy Club has earned a reputation for encouraging new stand-up talent and now has venues in Hamburg, Berlin, Düsseldorf, and Stuttgart. With the higher demand for comedy, performers of diverse backgrounds were drawn to the stage. Since the 1990s, stand-up comedy in Germany has served as the medium for exploring, downplaying, and parodying concerns about multiculturalism, integration, and unification, but unemployment and welfare were not enthusiastically embraced as comic material until Bessin developed her signature style of populist precarity as Cindy aus Marzahn. I use the term populist precarity here to characterize Bessin’s blending of ethnic and class stereotypes with sarcastic critiques of state-sanctioned employment initiatives garnished with references to consumption, branding, and trash television.

In the discussion to follow, background on the Agenda 2010 reforms initiated by the Schröder government, in particular the Hartz IV provision merging unemployment and welfare benefits, serves as both context and segue for a brief analysis of the East German as Other in unified Germany. Cindy aus Marzahn’s underclass and Ossi roots in combination with her undisciplined body were key elements in a postunification form of class comedy hinging on real and perceived economic and cultural differences. A closer look at the evolution of Cindy aus Marzahn in her solo stage shows reveals a shift in emphasis from her insolvent origins to the fairy tale caricature of her material success as a ghetto princess. As Cindy, Bessin parodied
and reinforced stereotypes about welfare recipients and embodied the vulgarity and excessive appetites of the underclass, yet the fame she achieved suggested that the system that oppressed her was the path to opportunity. Bessin credited her success to her embrace of ugliness, her ability to empathize with ordinary people, and her belief that she was giving her audience a voice. Drawing on studies of class representation in the media and women in comedic performance, I will evaluate how Bessin’s career as trash comedy princess served as a paradoxical endorsement of the status quo as well as a challenge to the system that catalyzed her success, an uneasy relationship that culminated in Cindy’s retirement in 2016.

**Agenda 2010, Hartz IV, and the Demise of the Working Class**

In his 2009 analysis of how poverty has been studied and represented in the Federal Republic, political scientist Christoph Butterwegge traced the origins of the problem back to the currency reform of 1948, crediting Ludwig Erhard as the architect of an economic policy that promised prosperity for all through individual initiative and responsibility in an atmosphere of economic freedom but limited state support. The combination of the Cold War and the apparent heady success of the economic miracle further undermined attention to differences in access to capital, while references to class and poverty were denigrated as communist. With the economic crises of the 1970s and 1980s, the West German government took measures to stimulate the economy and lower labor costs by cutting social welfare programs. In the early 1980s, the coalition government of the CDU and FDP pushed forward a neoliberal economic agenda, including the reduction of unemployment and welfare benefits and the acceptance of poverty for part of the population as a consequence of these policies. By the mid-1980s, the spread of poverty as a result of long-term unemployment affected millions of families. Public and academic discourse on poverty emphasized background and milieu rather than class, making it more difficult for those affected to develop solidarity through class consciousness.

Human geographer Bernd Belina’s work on poverty and nationalism in Germany supports Butterwegge’s conclusions, but presents an even more radical argument. In his article “Germany in Times of Crisis,” Belina suggests that the “victims of state-crafted mass impoverishment are othered and referred to as foreigners or the poor and are blamed for not only their own misery, but also for the problems of ‘Germany.’” Reform to unemployment and social welfare laws have played a key role in increasing Germany’s economic competitiveness, but the reverse side of this apparent prosperity is a marked decrease in the standard of living as well as prospects of suitable employment for Germany’s working class. Belina’s discussion of negative attitudes toward the poor is corroborated by studies of media representations of the underclass in the United States, where neoliberal policies have stressed privatization and personal responsibility since the 1980s. Sociologist Diana Kendall’s research on
how American media represent wealth and poverty reveals an overwhelming tendency toward dismissive portrayals of the poor, unemployed, and welfare recipients, who are depicted as responsible for their own condition because of ineptitude or laziness and who are encouraged in their bad habits by indulgent social welfare policies. The idea that social welfare breeds dependency or creates a class of spongers is prevalent in German media, particularly in the 1990s in reference to immigrants and asylum seekers, but also in reference to East Germans after unification. Butterwegge notes that the mainstream media did its part to characterize both refugees and East Germans as ungrateful parasites who were enjoying more than their fair share of social benefits.

The social and financial costs of unification dramatically affected the face of poverty in Germany, which has risen exponentially since 1990. According to Butterwegge, the level of poverty in the GDR was underestimated and increased after unification because East Germans were less informed about what benefits they were eligible for, less likely to ask for assistance, and more likely to be ashamed if they were unemployed. Political scientists Elena Buck and Jana Hönke describe Ossis as “pioneers of precarity,” noting that East Germans were both the model citizens and ideal victims of the economic reforms. While East Germans were among the hardest hit by a wave of unemployment following unification, they were also seen by some policy makers as the avant-garde of the new self-management era because of their training, flexibility, and willingness to work for less. As a result, East Germans became paragons of the unemployment policy reforms from the perspective of those profiting from cheaper labor costs, but as a group East Germans were also the biggest economic losers, unable to lift themselves out of the cycle of short-term, low-wage jobs and Hartz IV support.

The Hartz IV reforms were implicitly designed to depress wages and generate a profusion of low-wage jobs under the auspices of decreasing unemployment. The depression of wages was considered at the macrolevel as a justified price to pay for a more competitive economy, but the result was a devaluation of labor, expanded opportunities for worker exploitation, and an increase in numbers of long-term unemployed. The preponderance of East Germans among the unemployed and underemployed was a direct consequence of a shift in emphasis away from the elimination of both unemployment and underpaid or unsustainable employment to a focus on the responsibility and obligation of the unemployed to find and accept any type of work at a minimal cost to the state. In 2015, Stefan von Borstel reported that nearly three million Germans had become “Dauer-Hartzer” (chronic recipients of Hartz IV), remaining unemployed for four years or more. According to von Borstel’s statistics, the highest percentage of long-term unemployed live in the eastern German states of Sachsen-Anhalt, Berlin, Brandenburg, Sachsen, and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern.
Ossi as Other and the Media Cultivation of Trash

Assessing the status of East Germans in German society in 2003, Toralf Staud referred to Ossis as the new Turks, classifying them as migrants who became part of a different country without even moving. The perception of East Germans as foreign or “other” to West Germans is the stimulus for Rebecca Pates’ and Maximilian Schochow’s volume on the East German as symbolic foreigner, which investigates how the Ossi as a social construction was generated through processes such as normalization, essentialization, and ethnicization. Pates notes that the term Ossi had an ethnicizing effect in allegedly unified German society, solidifying the identity of the West Germans as the norm set against the deviant, unassimilated East Germans.

Five years after unification, political scientist Marc Howard made a case for an East German ethnicity in order to dispel “the myth of natural unity” and to better understand the “deep social split within Germany.” Howard surmised, however, that the qualities that distinguished East Germans as an ethnic group in 1995 would likely disappear over time. The resilience of negative perceptions of Ossis nearly three decades since unification as well as the persistence of economic disadvantages in many of the eastern German states, however, evidence a lingering divide between East and West with concrete social and economic consequences.

In the comedic world of Cindy aus Marzahn, it was her status as an Ossi and Hartz IV Proll Prinzessin (pleb princess) that created a link between perceived ethnicity and class, where Ossi is conflated with Hartz and all the negative associations that accompany media representations of the poor. The vulgarity of many of Cindy aus Marzahn’s routines, showcased in her crude sexual jokes (particularly about the size of her genitalia) and profane language, as well as her celebration of her voracious appetite (sometimes requesting food from the audience and eating it on stage) in combination with her substantial frame extend the connection from ethnicity and class to gender and sexuality, where her sexuality is interpreted and presented as an attribute of her class and coded as excessive or perverse in comparison to the presumed middle-class norm.

The connection between class and taste in images of the proletariat is explored in sociologist Beverly Skeggs’s monograph on Class, Self, Culture, in which she analyzes representations of the working class as well as its commodification through merchandising. Skeggs asserts that the working class is frequently portrayed “as excess, as waste, as authenticating, as entertainment, as lacking in taste, as unmodern, as escapist, as dangerous, as unruly and without shame.” In reference to Cindy aus Marzahn, Thomas Bellut, the director of the public television channel ZDF, acknowledged in 2013 that intellectuals who otherwise evinced revulsion for Bessin’s comedy creation nevertheless saw her as both honest and authentic. Authenticity is accorded a high market value in performance, yet can also be an essentializing
feature because of its equation with a certain naturalness and what Skeggs calls “spatial fixity” in relation to the working class. Bessin made conscious or intuitive use of this concept of “spatial fixity” by naming her character “Cindy aus Marzahn,” where Marzahn aroused the fears of downward mobility, racism, and unmodernity attributed to the poor and working class, while “Cindy” served as a banner for the Americanized names stereotypically favored by East Germans and the West German underclass. In both instances, the preference for Americanized names has a capitalist cachet. In the case of East Germans, choosing such names during the GDR years was an act of protest against communist ideology, while for the West German and post-Wall underclass, Americanized names invoked the material wealth and lifestyle advertised in American media products on German commercial television.

Working-class women in particular are frequently represented in the media as embodied excess and vulgarity, where fatness and fertility are associated with “irresponsibility and lack of care for the self” in contrast to middle class respectability, self-discipline, and taste. Here Skeggs’ analysis of the divide between the working class and the middle class based on physical appearance and taste overlaps with Kathleen Rowe’s discussion of the grotesque in her study of gender and laughter. For Rowe, the difference between the “grotesque body” and the “bourgeois body” rests on the former’s exaggeration of “its processes, bulges, and orifices” in comparison to the latter’s attempt to conceal those elements. Bessin’s Cindy aus Marzahn exemplifies the grotesque body while also foregrounding class stereotypes. Class serves as both a moral category and “a form of cultural property,” where members of the working class are represented as the necessary outsiders in the relational construction of class differences.

Cindy aus Marzahn’s oversized figure and appetites mesh with the associations of excess attributed to working class and white trash women, associations encouraged by the middle-class lens adopted by German feuilletonists concerned about Cindy’s vulgarity and lack of taste, and anxious about her popularity. Cindy’s comedic style appealed to a broad age demographic, from teenagers to retirees, all of whom seemed to revel in her undisciplined body and her affront to bourgeois respectability. A visual inspection of the audience in recorded programs from her live shows and TV appearances indicates that the majority of her fans are white Germans of middle class background. Their visible enjoyment of the performance and their participation in the program despite or because of their class expectations is an act of slumming with Cindy, as if they were discovering their inner Proll and find it liberating in some way.

Bessin’s characterization of Cindy aus Marzahn as the brash and voracious princess of the projects can be read as a manifestation of the female grotesque serving as a vehicle for parody and social critique in comedic performance, but here the lines between parody, masquerade, and authenticity become blurred. The representation of stereotyped characteristics of ethnicity and class is not necessarily subversive,
and can serve to both commodify and perpetuate negative perceptions that reinforce the status quo. In *Performing Marginality*, communication scholar Joanne Gilbert examines the connections between stand-up comedy and carnival, arguing that in both cases there is an expectation that the audience will witness and participate in symbolic violations of the established order. For Gilbert, the performance of marginality does not destabilize the status quo, but helps to maintain it. In this vein, it is important to contextualize the idea of slumming with Cindy within the arena of comedic performance, where fans in the audience adorned with Cindy accessories become part of the spectacle. While some may identify with her character and simply want to display their loyalty and adoration, others don the signature hair posy, pink sweatshirt or plastic tiara in a self-consciously ironic fashion, thereby simultaneously embracing and defying their class affiliation.

**The Birth of Cindy aus Marzahn: The Ossi as White Trash Princess**

The negative stereotypes about the underclass and *Ossis* encouraged by the media provided the context for Ilka Bessin’s comedy creation, while her own experiences of long-term unemployment contributed to her self-understanding as the representative of the Hartz IV population. Bessin was born on November 18, 1971 in Luckenwalde, a small town in Brandenburg about fifty kilometers south of Berlin, where her father was a truck driver and her mother worked in a shoe factory. Bessin’s childhood dream job was to be a clown, but she was trained as a cook. Before the Wende, Bessin worked in the kitchen of a roller bearing factory in Luckenwalde, where she served food to some 750 workers. After unification, Bessin and both of her parents lost their jobs. Bessin completed a second vocational degree in hotel management, but was unable to find permanent work. Her frustrating employment search and her dependence on welfare eventually became the foundation for her business plan as a comedian. In the process, Bessin invented a past for her character festooned with plebeian clichés and a Marzahn origin story in the projects instead of the more suburban tranquility of Luckenwalde. With her rising popularity, Cindy’s image became associated with her adopted Berlin neighborhood and did little to enhance its shabby reputation. Instead Bessin’s characterization of Cindy reinforced Marzahn’s association with tenement housing, poverty, and unemployment.

In a 2007 *Spiegel* article about Bessin’s emergence as a comedy star, Nils Klawitter describes how after four years on the dole Bessin requested funding to become an “Ich-AG” with her comedy figure Cindy aus Marzahn, but the job center turned her down, retorting that they would not finance every silly idea. Ich-AG funding, whereby entrepreneurial unemployed can apply for support to establish themselves through self-employment, is part of the self-management principle underlying the Hartz IV reforms. By characterizing her comedy persona as a single mother on welfare, Bessin tapped into middle class disgust and disdain for that particular group and working
class women in general. In Kendall’s study of how class is represented in the media, the woes of welfare mothers were attributed to their race, simpleness, laziness, hyperfertility, and bad parenting. Bessin’s transformation of these stereotypes into comedic attributes embodied by a self-styled trash princess makes it difficult to disentangle parody, commodification, and identification. Cindy aus Marzahn’s gag about collecting Hartz VIII (two times Hartz IV plus child support) reflected welfare mother stereotypes, yet Cindy herself was embraced with warmth, affection, even admiration by her fans.

Bessin’s breakthrough in the live comedy scene was due in part to support from Jörg Grabosch, founder of Brainpool, which has been instrumental in launching other comedy successes, among them Stefan Raab, Mario Barth, Oliver Pocher, and Bülent Ceylan. For Grabosch, Cindy’s appeal stemmed from a mix of identification and alienation. Some of her fans saw themselves in her, while others used her as a negative exemplar, comparing themselves favorably against her image. In her clichéd representations of the East German underclass, Bessin indulged popular prejudices, not only by reproducing them but also by confronting her audience with their own preconceptions. The ambivalence of exaggerated stereotyping in comedic performance reflects the mutable character of comedy as social critique where prejudices may be confirmed for some and parodied for others. When asked in a 2010 interview with Alexander Kühn whether her Cindy character fostered negative stereotypes about welfare, Bessin countered that Cindy was raising awareness and giving Hartz IV recipients a voice. From Bessin’s perspective, part of Cindy’s attraction and that of other trash comedy figures was that they are regarded as unpretentious and of the people. In the interview, Kühn referred to Cindy aus Marzahn as an icon of the underclass and asked Bessin if she felt embarrassed by the wealth she had acquired through the success of her comedy character. In response, Bessin described her strenuous schedule and how she worked fifteen to sixteen hours per day, partly motivated by fear of becoming poor again. Bessin denounced the vicious cycle of state-sponsored and -condoned precarity, citing the limitations of the monthly Hartz IV allowance (364 Euro in 2010) and how it kept those on welfare from rising above their circumstances. With forty Euros per month allowed for clothing and shoes combined, for example, it is hard to imagine how one could manage to dress appropriately for a job interview.

While media treatment of Bessin’s shows was frequently dismissive of the comedian’s talent and intelligence, and perplexed that audiences found her brand of trash comedy amusing, some journalists wanted Cindy to utilize her popularity more directly as a political spokesperson for the underclass. Others, such as Henryk Broder, were much less sanguine about her political potential. Broder was impressed by Bessin’s chutzpah and her embrace of ugliness, but asserted his own social superiority by describing her as the humor queen for an endangered underclass that desired
What emerged over time was a widening gap between citizen Bessin and comedy figure Cindy, a fact that contributed to Cindy’s eventual retirement. For Bessin, one of the causes of long-term unemployment and growing numbers of citizens dependent on Hartz IV is the devaluation of labor, where wages for jobs offered to Hartz IV recipients are often less than what they would make on welfare support. She criticized the job center model and offered some suggestions on how to improve the system by providing services (such as a low-cost hair salon or help with drafting application letters) that would actually aid the job seeker in finding suitable employment.

Bessin’s own experience sheds light on how the social welfare system works against those who are temporarily in poor health or down on their luck—she was fired from her job while on sick leave. Her subsequent success as the princess of precarity and her rags to riches trajectory, however, served to both endorse the self-management/self-liberation model and critique how cuts to social welfare generate conditions of chronic poverty. Bessin’s emergence from privation through the unlikely medium of comedy exemplifies Kendall’s concept of “exceptionalism framing.” By focusing on individuals who were able to raise themselves up from the bottom and achieve success, the exceptionalism framework underscores the responsibility of the underclass for their own condition, while ignoring the structural issues and systemic problems that create the conditions for poverty or homelessness or long-term unemployment. The fact that Cindy aus Marzahn was an Ossi drawing on Hartz IV support also made her a convenient decoy away from broader and deeper economic ills. On the one hand, she fit the stereotype and served as a projection screen for deflected fears of decline among the middle class; on the other, her success story offered a message of hope to those at the bottom of the social ladder.

Performing Cindy
After winning the best new talent competition at the Quatsch Comedy Club in Berlin in 2005, Bessin went on to develop her first solo stage show, Schizophren—ich wollte ‘ne Prinzessin sein (Schizophrenic—I wanted to be a princess). Schizophren premiered in 2007, followed in January 2010 by her second solo program, Nicht jeder Prinz kommt auf’m Pferd (Not every prince comes on horseback). From 2007 to 2009, Bessin appeared in six episodes of the improvisational comedy show Schillerstraße (Schiller Street) on SAT.1. Because of her solo stage successes and her growing popularity as a comedian, RTL gave Bessin her own TV show in 2009, Cindy und die jungen Wilden (Cindy and the young wild ones), with thirty-two episodes ending in November 2012. Bessin left RTL in 2012 to comoderate the now defunct ZDF program Wetten, dass. . . ? (Wanna bet?) with Markus Lanz. Cindy’s fame as Proll comedy queen reached the United States after New York Times reporter Nicholas Kulish published an article on her in December 2012. In 2013, Cindy aus Marzahn
switched her network affiliation to SAT.1 and agreed to serve as comoderator with Oliver Pocher for the trash TV show *Promi Big Brother*. Despite that show’s disastrous ratings, SAT.1 remained hopeful that Cindy would draw more viewers with her own entertainment show, *Bezaubernde Cindy* (Enchanting Cindy). Bessin premiered her third solo stage program, *Pink is bjutiful*, in 2013. A year later she was invited to perform at Caroline’s on Broadway in New York, where the audience consisted predominately of German expats. From 2014 to 2015 Cindy hosted another show, *Schwarz Rot Pink* (Black red pink), which ran for two seasons on SAT.1. By 2015, Cindy aus Marzahn was a widely recognized celebrity, but her popularity as a comedian appeared to be waning.58 Tireless and hardworking in promoting her comedic alter ego, Bessin went on tour with her fourth and final stage program, *Ick kann ooch anders* (I can also be different) in 2015–2016.

For the purpose of my analysis, I have relied primarily on the official recorded versions of Bessin’s stage programs, beginning with the 2008 recording of *Schizophren* from a live performance in Chemnitz. In *Schizophren* Cindy makes ample use of fat jokes and self-deprecating humor while also capitalizing on her East German background in the projects of Marzahn. Standing before the audience wearing an unruly blond wig, oversized earrings, lurid make-up, and a sweatshirt with her trademark phrase “Alzheimer Bulimie” too small to cover her bulging midriff, Cindy wields her bulk as a provocation to genteel sensibilities. Early in the performance, she approaches the edge of the stage to point out to spectators in the front row that their placement is “extremely shitty” because she occasionally lets herself fall into the audience.59 She aligns this observation with the social abhorrence of fatness as the embodiment of the grotesque when she informs her viewers that the punishment for stagehands who make any mistakes during the show is to have sex with her.

The scenery for *Schizophren* evokes the prefab tenements characteristic of Marzahn, albeit foregrounded by lush artificial grass and bright yellow sunflowers. In an interview included in the DVD, Bessin explains the two-fold intention behind the set design. On the one hand, the synthesis of tenement and park counters stereotypes about life in Marzahn as monochromatic and gray. On the other, the apparently incongruous juxtaposition of urban tristesse and verdant flora underscores the schizophrenia in the title—*Plattenbau* (tenement) and princess—and implies the path from the one to the other involves traversing green fields. It is a path strewn with obstacles and rejection, however, and Bessin draws on a combination of sympathy, aggression, and bawdy vulgarity to convey her material. From the very outset, the comedian undercuts any expectations of high entertainment by singing the opening song with exaggerated boredom, making no effort to demonstrate either enthusiasm or vocal skill. The parody of performers who overrate their singing ability and inflict their ambitions on the audience is obvious, with the link between performance and punishment underscored in Cindy’s welcoming statement: “Herzlich Willkommen
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zu meinem acht-stündigen Programm Komedy statt Knast” (Welcome to my eight-hour program, stand-up instead of the slammer). The amplification of the program length is intended to convey the power of the performer and her control over a captive audience. At the Chemnitz show, she even asks a stagehand if the doors to the arena are locked so no one can leave, commenting wryly that after all everyone had paid admission.

For the Chemnitz performance of Schizophren, Cindy is clearly on home turf, with an audience pumped up for the show, familiar with her persona and routine, and prepared to laugh at almost anything. In the interview bonus track, Bessin notes that it was important for her to have an East German audience for the official video recording of the show because she could count on certain reactions to her routine from GDR insiders. Throughout the program, Cindy interacts with the audience using a mixture of indulgence, ridicule, and bravado communicated through her Berliner Schnauze, an unvarnished, street-wise mode of speech known for its gritty common sense and deft comebacks. She peppers her monologue with pop culture references and assumes lowbrow affinities with her fans not only in the coarseness of her humor but also in her allusions to RTL programs such as Deutschland sucht den Superstar (DSDS, Germany searches for the superstar) and Dschungelcamp (Jungle camp). With the state of Saxony emerging as one of the more economically depressed areas since unification, the population of the region is a prime target for RTL’s trash TV offerings and the Chemnitz audience responds knowingly to Cindy’s allusions.

In segments of the show where she reminisces about her GDR origins, Cindy emphasizes her outcast status by describing a neglected childhood. She jokes about her mother’s repeated attempts to dispose of her, either by putting her out with the trash, leaving her in a shopping cart, or by removing the number from their tenement apartment so that Cindy could not find her way home. Regarding the effectiveness of her mother’s strategy, Cindy maintains that the garbage men usually took her along, because one didn’t separate trash in the GDR (“zu Ostzeiten hat man nicht getrennt”). Cindy’s reference to herself as garbage is only self-deprecating on the surface, however, because her comic persona seems to be unaware of how it reflects on her. As a trope, the conscious choice of comparing herself to trash is a social commentary on how people of her background and appearance are perceived and discarded by society.

Maternal rejection serves as the segue to an extended sketch on Cindy’s social and economic rejection, manifested by Cindy’s long-term unemployment and her efforts to find work through the “Job Center.” Cindy begins the sketch by announcing that she’s been unemployed for twelve years and is now receiving Hartz VIII. She complains that the worst thing is the dismal quality of afternoon TV shows, something she advises German networks to address because of the sizable audience of some fourteen million unemployed. The fact that the Arbeitsamt is now called the “Job
“Center” is greeted with the ironic comment that economic recovery has arrived. For the critical viewer, this aside cuts in two directions: as a jibe at the proliferation of Americanisms in German advertising and as an assertion that Germany has adopted neoliberal American attitudes toward social welfare and unemployment. In the sketch, Cindy describes her initial enthusiasm and hope of finding a position that would appeal to her creativity and desire to work with people while also having a measure of responsibility. After hours of presenting herself to different personnel at the center, she finally meets her advisor, Frau Brutknecht, who suggests that with Cindy’s wish for creative work and responsibility she should get a dog.

Cindy’s material in *Schizophren* covers a wide spectrum of marginalized groups and individuals through jokes playing on stereotypes about East Germans, multicultural identities and expectations, wannabe superstars, and her own love life and career aspirations. In an anecdote about her latest boyfriend, Hassan, Cindy manages to combine a parody of multicultural performance with a critique of cultural ignorance. Hassan is allegedly an Italian who worked in a Chinese restaurant where the workers only spoke Greek. This buffet of ethnicities is further enriched by Cindy’s projection of stereotypes about Muslim men onto Hassan when she notes that she had few opportunities to interact with him because she was always walking ten meters behind him wearing a headscarf. Cindy’s cocktail shaker approach to mixing multicultural masquerade and misconceptions gives the audience little opportunity to reflect on Hassan as a construct, and she quickly moves on to an anecdote about her girl band “Platten Pussies” (Pussies from the projects) and the group’s hit song, “Cindy aus dem Block” (Cindy from the block), for which she claims songwriter credit. The song title references Jennifer Lopez’s 2002 hit “Jenny from the Block” about Jenny’s rise from the projects to stardom, a trajectory that Cindy parodies. The clumsy rhyme and vacuous content of the lyrics (“Ich bin Cindy, Cindy aus dem Block. Aus Marzahn zum Megastar. Ich bin ein Superstar und das war ein Schock”—I’m Cindy, Cindy from the block. From Marzahn to megastar. I’m a superstar and that was a shock) riff on Lopez’s hit but also lampoon the talent searches popularized by private television while underscoring the lowbrow quality of Cindy’s cultural production. Cindy’s subsequent juxtaposition of a kitschy self-affirmation song about believing in yourself with a joke about hawking her latest nude calendar for thirty-six Euros implies that she is cynically prostituting her own story for commercial gain.

In *Schizophren* as well as her other solo programs, Cindy regularly trained the spectators to participate in an overstated display of sympathy with her abject experiences, eliciting a pity response by thrusting forward a trembling lower lip, speaking with a melancholy voice, and mournfully casting down her eyes. By consciously manipulating her audience, Cindy determined when and to what degree the performance of pity would occur. Probing for sympathy as performance and the encouragement of audience participation in this spectacle may function as an assertion of female agency.
in its challenge to representational paradigms of female victimization, but can also undermine serious consideration of prejudices and economic disadvantages in a system that generally works against rehabilitating single mothers and the long-term unemployed. Furthermore, the act of training the audience to perform dramatized expressions of sympathy in combination with unapologetic reveling in vulgar jokes becomes a kind of initiation ritual into lowbrow community that takes pride in its anti-intellectualism and laughs off its denigrated social position.65

For the official recording of her second stage program, *Nicht jeder Prinz kommt uff’m Pferd!* Bessin once again chose an East German city, and the DVD release captures the live performance in the Cottbus Stadthalle in February 2011. The set design features a pink castle façade with a heart-shaped arch at the center framed by artificial roses and trees on the edges of the stage. After being introduced by the announcer over the sound system, Cindy emerges surrounded by men in pink sweatshirts and black booty shorts waving pink pompoms. The men make up the Pink Poms (cheerleaders for a lesbian-gay sports club in Cologne) and dance to the theme song, lip-synched and sung by Cindy: “Ich bin eine Frau, ich bin begehrt und nicht jeder Prinz kommt uff’m Pferd” (I am a woman, I am desirable, and not every prince comes on horseback).66 Since her first stage appearances, Bessin gradually professionalized and unified Cindy’s look—the pink velour jogging suit, the curly blond wig, the bright magenta lipstick and eye shadow, and the opulent pink blossom in her hair became Cindy’s standard uniform, with the clothing, flowers, and plastic tiaras serving as merchandising staples at her shows. Despite her more stylish vibe, Cindy treats the audience to much the same fare as in the first stage program, with jokes about Cindy’s economic circumstances, sex life, and physical appearance, all delivered with aggressive gusto and profanity that the Cottbus crowd clearly relishes. When she describes a recent sexual experience where her male partner compared screwing her to throwing a bratwurst into a gymnasium, the audience convulses with laughter. Her fans arrive ready to embrace her crude jokes and trashy humor and even bring their preteen children along. In her interactions with the Cottbus audience, Cindy polls the crowd to find out where the young children are, reminds their parents that she will be using obscenities like “Fotze” (cunt) and “ficken” (fuck), and then informs her youngest spectators that they can pick up a gift at the end of the show.67 This demonstration of beneficence can be interpreted as an olive branch to the parents who are corrupting the pure minds of their young children by exposing them to trash comedy, but also serves as a marketing strategy to groom the next generation of fans and create greater demand for Cindy accessories.

If the premise behind Cindy’s first solo program was her desire to become a princess, her goal in the second program was to find a prince. Frau Cindy brings together the spectrum of her negative attributes with jokes referencing her weight, sexual activity, and East German background in an anecdote about an encounter she
had after responding to a singles ad. Her date is bald, has bad teeth, and is hopelessly ignorant about life in East Germany. After asking if she comes from the East, he inquires if they had any meat in the GDR. Cindy opts to play up on stereotypes about Ossis and East Germany and responds that they had no meat and little else in a litany of lack punctuated by the refrain “aber wir hatten Hoffnung” (but we had hope). She mentions that watercolor sets in the GDR were just eighteen shades of gray and that she only had a stone as a friend, only to discover in the summer heat that it was actually a piece of horse manure. Despite her obvious parody of clichéd views of life in the GDR, her date believes everything, a fact that infuriates her and represents a blatant slap at Wessi prejudices and preconceptions.

Cindy’s amplification of stereotypes about East Germany is paralleled by the intensity of sexual references and anecdotes celebrating her aggressive behavior. In the midst of one of these volleys, Cindy addresses the audience as if briefly stepping out of character to comment on the depth of vulgarity and tastelessness in her program, making the audience complicit in the trashiness of the evening’s entertainment by noting that they hadn’t come to her show to hear Shakespeare. The disparaging reference to Shakespeare is repeated in her next stage program as a kind of tag line to distinguish her comedic style from more cerebral cultural fare, while simultaneously binding the audience into a cohort of lowbrow acolytes who then dutifully purchase artificial blossoms and plastic tiaras offered at Cindy’s “merch” stand to demonstrate their affinity with their ghetto princess and her brand. It is not possible, however, to draw definitive conclusions about merchandising, which does not distinguish die-hard fans from those seeking a memento from their evening of slumming with Cindy.

Her jovial laughter and interactions with the audience represent Cindy’s control over her image and the power she wields over her spectators as well as the economic power her position on stage represents. She transforms herself into a parody of the princess as noblesse oblige, bestowing gifts upon her grateful subjects and indulging their desire to imitate her by marketing accessories that represent her style. Cindy’s strategy embraces middle class spectators who want to appear unpretentious by identifying with social underdogs and disassociate themselves from social inequality linked to their own complicity in upholding class differences. This in turn highlights a fascinating complexity in motivation and identification with Cindy aus Marzahn as a comedy figure and an embodied stereotype. While her underclass roots make her a heroine to some, her Ossi trash background renders her a negative exemplar for the imperiled bourgeoisie. Both sides of this spectrum are joined, however, in their recognition of Cindy’s commercial success and celebrity.

The celebration of unpretentiousness and trashiness in *Nicht jeder Prinz kommt uff’m Pferd* is reflected in exchanges between Cindy and her audience about television viewing habits with an emphasis on RTL offerings such as *Gute Zeiten, Schlechte Zeiten* (Good Times, bad Times—a daily soap airing since 1992) as well as *Bauer
sucht Frau (Farmer seeks wife—a long-running docu-soap inspired by a British show), Dschungelcamp (another British reality show knock-off), and Deutschland sucht den Superstar (broadcast since 2002 as a spin-off from the British Pop Idol and American Idol franchise). As in her first program, Cindy uses references to trash TV to create a sense of community with her audience. She mixes allusions to episodes of Goodbye Deutschland! Die Auswanderer (Goodbye Germany! The emigrants) with jokes about integration and marginalization. She justifies her right to do comedy from the margins by aligning herself with an oft-maligned group: blonde women. In the process of magnifying the obtuseness and cultural ignorance of the German emigrants in reality television, she simultaneously promulgates stereotypes about parallel societies in German cities and ridicules the realities of marginalization by linking minority comedy with dumb blonde jokes. It is difficult to argue if a deeper message lurks below this level of humor, or whether Cindy is merely preying on her audience’s presumed prejudices or belittling those who seek to arrogate minority status for themselves.

Bessin’s phenomenal success as Cindy aus Marzahn over the course of her career influenced her interactions with the press and the public. Although she speaks as Ilka Bessin in the interview included on the Schizophren DVD, she later insisted on being in character for interviews and television talk show appearances. As Cindy, Bessin inserted the voice of her self-styled ghetto princess into conversations about cultural, political, and social issues, raising her status by association even as her stage performances rehearsed the familiar trash stereotypes linked to the underclass. By taking control of her public image, Bessin was not only generating publicity for her character, but also utilizing that visibility to influence how she was perceived. In contrast to the more genteel participants in the talk show circuit, Cindy was the physical embodiment of excess, who by her very presence destabilized middle class values of appearance and comportment.

By her third solo stage program, Pink is bjutiful!, which premiered in Berlin in March 2013, Cindy’s desire to become a princess and find a prince were things of the past. The new mantra was to look at the bright side regardless of setbacks. The tone for this more uplifting message is set by the opening act, a women’s gospel choir comprised entirely of white women dressed in purple robes standing in a row in the middle of the arena floor in the Berlin Velodrom in the recorded version of the program. They sing about the princess from Marzahn and her love for her public. The choir then splits off into two single-file lines and heads for the stage, announcing that Cindy has arrived. Cindy is dressed in a pink jogging suit with a matching jacket and pants, but she looks trimmer and better groomed than in her previous programs. Her make-up is relatively restrained and she wears a bountiful pink blossom in her hair. The camera pans over the audience, revealing multiple fans adorned with similar flowers or plastic tiaras.

The comedic menu is a predictable mix of jokes about Cindy’s weight, social life,
and encounters with the “Job Center.” In this program, however, the blurring of lines between stage and reality intensifies with references to Cindy aus Marzahn’s actual job as a comoderator on the long-running and now defunct ZDF series Wetten, dass...? Near the end of the Pink is bjutiful program, Cindy announces that she is entering politics and takes out a slim, red book to read excerpts from her political platform to the audience. Although media critics of Cindy aus Marzahn suggested that she could harness her popularity to agitate for political change, what she offers in Pink is bjutiful is a combination of farce and disgust with politics as usual. After noting that one of her goals was to have retirement at age sixteen, Cindy goes on to pillory standing politicians for their high salaries and calls for a redistribution of wealth to benefit the poor. She denounces the mismanaged construction of the Berlin airport and adamantly demands the funds be put to better use, a line that receives loud applause. She also endorses a more balanced approach to aid for the needy, contending that half of the millions of Euros Germany allocates for charitable causes abroad should be invested in people at home. These populist appeals are effectively preaching to the choir and offer little in the way of substantive political critique.

The title of Bessin’s last program, Ick kann ooch anders, gestured toward a new direction, even if the tone, substance, and style of the performance remained mostly the same. Ick kann ooch anders went on tour in November 2015 and highlighted links to Cindy’s political party, Die geile Sau aus Marzahn (DgSaM, roughly “the foxy lady from Marzahn”). While party slogans such as “minimum wage according to body weight” are clearly farcical, a democratizing message also emerges, epitomized in Cindy’s announcement that all people are equal and thus she would make jokes about everyone. In the poisonous political environment of 2015–2016 that encouraged the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment and galvanized more votes for the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), Bessin infused a note of tolerance into Cindy’s persona, culminating in the finale song about how Cindy would save the world and proclaiming equality for all. These additions to her program as well as the program title itself indicated that Bessin had taken the criticisms of some media reports to heart and wanted Cindy to be more politically engaged. In reviewing the show, Andreas Brücken noted that while much of the “old” Cindy was still in evidence, the trash princess had taken a decisive stand against racism while mixing comedy with critique in her demand for better support of the elderly and children on welfare in Germany.

On July 1, 2016, Bessin unexpectedly announced that she was hanging up her pink jogging suit and would no longer perform as Cindy aus Marzahn. In a Spiegel interview, Bessin explained that after eleven years it was time to move on. Despite Cindy’s declining popularity since 2014, Bessin insisted that the drop in audience numbers had no bearing on her decision, noting that one shouldn’t play such a comedy character to death. In the interview, it is obvious that Bessin felt that her
civilian identity and her comedic alter ego were merging in a way that did not fit with Cindy’s simplistic worldview. She also recognized that her fans were not interested in a politicized Proll Prinzessin and wanted comedy rather than political satire.77

From Proll Prinzessin to Material Girl

During her tenure as trash comedy icon, Bessin both suffered and profited from her comic creation, while also influencing women’s comedy in Germany. Cindy’s image as princess of the projects paved the way for comedians such as Carolin Kebekus, who hails from the “Kölner Bronx,” portrays herself as a sexy ghetto pussy with a flair for foul language, and has been the reigning queen of German comedy since 2013.78 The popularization of trashiness has also affected so-called migrant comedy, with Turkish German Idil Baydar (stage name Jilet Aysê), hailed by the Berliner Morgenpost as the German Turkish answer to Cindy aus Marzahn.79 While vulgarity and trash talk may still be hot commodities, Cindy’s heavyweight class has largely been displaced by “pretty funny” women such as Kebekus, Martina Hill, and Enissa Amania.80 Trash TV and its attendant anti-intellectualism are alive and well, fed by continued economic disparities and a resurgence of nationalism. Commercial television continues to peddle programs catering to and shaping the tastes of the underclass, while media critics condemn trash television as inimical to integrity, dignity, morality, and personal freedom. The marketing of the Proll image thus represents an ambiguous gesture of commodified alienation, coercion, and control.

As Bessin’s Cindy moved toward more directly political positions on refugees, cultural pluralism, and employment assistance policies, it became harder to maintain her credibility as the mouthpiece for the underprivileged. Cindy’s turn from populism to pluralism can thus be read as a kind of class betrayal bolstered by her material success, but also reflects the internal contradictions of leftist political ideology where the quotidian needs of the German underclass conflict with concerns about the fate of the global poor.81 Bessin’s stint as ghetto princess made her more aware of the dysfunctional relationship between the people and politics even as she came to recognize the unsustainability of her comedic creation. After years of exaggerating her oversized form for public consumption, Bessin made her first post-Cindy TV appearance on RTL’s year-in-review 2016! Menschen, Bilder, Emotionen (People, images, emotions) as a tastefully attired brunette, her Cindy uniform symbolically hung on a coat rack.82 Although she served as a reporter for a stern TV documentary miniseries on the underclass in 2017,82 Bessin’s plans for film roles and her release of an upscale fashion line for plus-size women indicate that she has made peace with her precarious past and embraced her new class position built on wealth acquired through trash comedy. The rise and fall of Cindy aus Marzahn in the context of postunification ethnic, economic, and class tensions is part of a complex story of conflict and collusion encouraged by
neoliberal ideologies that have proven remarkably resilient. Their impact on popular culture is particularly evident in trash comedy and reality TV, where precarity and parody are part of the performance, but capital has the last laugh.

Notes
1. “Ich hab schwere Alzheimer Bulimie. Sie können gerne lachen, aber ich glaube nicht, dass Sie wissen, wie Scheiße dat is, wenn man den ganzen Tag frisst und dann abends vergisst man zu kotzen!” (All translations from German are mine). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEaa0uU7rAE.
4. Interview with Ilka Bessin, Cindy aus Marzahn LIVE. Schizophren—Ich wollte ‘ne Prinzessin sein! (Sony BMG/Brainpool/RTL, 2008), DVD.
5. Butterwegge, Armut in einem reichen Land. Wie das Problem verharmlost und verdrängt wird (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2009), 100.
7. Butterwegge, Armut, 133.
16. Buck and Hönke, 36.
20. A Heute Journal report from May 31, 2016 notes that on average, one out of every seven children in Germany is dependent on Hartz IV, while regionally the percentage is higher. See http://www.heute.de/kinderarmut-jedes-siebte-kind-lebt-von-hartz-iv-43738072.html.
30. Skeggs, Class, Self, Culture, 112.
31. Skeggs, Class, Self, Culture, 102.
33. Rowe, Unruly Woman, 33.
34. Skeggs, Class, Self, Culture, 24.
36. Rowe, Unruly Woman, 6–7.
38. Gilbert, Performing Marginality, 61.
42. Kendall, Framing Class, 101.
43. Schizophren DVD.
45. This is in line with standup comedy tradition, where the comedian serves as both “negative exemplar” and “comic spokesman.” Lawrence Mintz, “Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation,” American Quarterly 37, no. 1 (1985): 74.
46. Unfried, “Cindy und Barth.”
54. Kendall, Framing Class, 111.
59. Schizophren DVD.
60. Schizophren DVD.
61. Schizophren DVD.
62. Schizophren DVD.
63. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for noting this connection.
64. Schizophren DVD.
66. Nicht jeder Prinz DVD.
67. Nicht jeder Prinz DVD.
68. Nicht jeder Prinz DVD.
69. Nicht jeder Prinz DVD.
70. Hünniger, “Die Legende von Cindy aus Marzahn.”
71. Cindy aus Marzahn Live. Pink is bjutiful! (Sony/ProSiebenSat.1, 2014), DVD.
72. Pink is bjutiful DVD.
80. Klemenz, “Mit den Waffen einer Frau.”