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It looks and blinks*

The mail-order catalog *Die moderne Hausfrau* as a promise of problem-solving and *Joie de Vivre*

Abstract: The article deals with a specific material-cultural segment of household and home furnishings as part of everyday experience and interpretation practice. It develops the thesis that these objects and their text-image marketing serve as an externalization and hiding of basic human problem potentials which are of a social, practical, emotional and spiritual-religious nature. The focus is not on problems but on solutions. This strategy is analyzed as functional regarding the regulation of vital issues and, thus, interpreted as part of a popular emancipatory everyday strategy: Always look on the bright side of life! Due to the breadth of needs mentioned above, cultural studies approaches which are influenced by folklore and religious studies cooperate and identify the popular everyday aesthetics style using the example of the mail-order catalog *Die moderne Hausfrau* ('The Modern Housewife'), which has existed since 1967. You will find everyday household helpers, such as decorative items around the kitchen, home, garden and cemetery, in this low-price range of goods. The products are promoted in a mix of information, visualization and entertaining narrative framing, which is typical of this market segment and which we conceptualize as enchantment and a promise of problem solving. The essay includes, as a contribution to research into material culture, references to living space, wall decoration and popular culture research, as well as religious economics and aesthetics.

Keywords: everyday aesthetics, home decor, popular religion, material culture, mass taste, mail-order catalog

1. Everyday aesthetics and material culture

With what sorts of objects do people surround themselves in their homes? What things do they select as being suitable, useful or beautiful? These seemingly harmless questions concern everyday material culture which we deal with in the household furnishing sector that does not explicitly promote itself as high-quality or focusing on design or quality, but as cheap mass merchandise that finds its way to the customer via marketing routes such as teleshopping, 1€ shops, street trading or mail order. Our aim is to contribute to the cultural analysis of the everyday aesthet-

* German version in *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 2019, 115 (2): 216–237. Translated by George Low.

ics of use among wide sections of the population (König 2003; König and Papierz 2013). We hope to advance analytically into an area beyond the eloquent bourgeois practices of articulation and autothematization by examining the nature and commercial exploitation of this material-cultural segment.¹ It is relatively difficult for phenomena far below the threshold of bourgeois perception to become a topic of investigation even in the German academic discipline *Volkskunde* (European Ethnology), with all its frequently discussed terminological variations, in the sense of the *dgv* (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Volkskunde* – ‘German Association of Ethnology’) and/or *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*, referred to in the following as ‘the discipline.’ This is particularly true when we are dealing with nonmigrant environments far below the average economic level which cannot be subsumed under the heading of youth culture (Warneken 2019). It is true that the subject can look back on a long history of investigations into mass cultural, lower-class phenomena and boast relevant studies in the recent past (Ege 2013; Wellgraf 2012) and even in the most recent past (Götz 2019). Nevertheless, gaps remain, possibly related to the socio-cultural position of the discipline itself – once referred to by Bausinger (1994: 4) under the heading “We petty bourgeois” – together with all the related efforts to distinguish and promote itself.

We will, therefore, focus by way of example on the range of products (or rather on selected items from the years 2012 to 2018) in the popular mail-order catalog *Die moderne Hausfrau* (‘The Modern Housewife’; hereafter: DmH) from the catalog company Walz GmbH (hereafter: Walz), which we consider to be both informative and typical of a particular style of mass culture because it has existed and been successful for years.

Based on this empirical example, we will develop hypotheses for the everyday cultural significance of this style. In this context, it is important to avoid two reductions: The functionalist one and the aesthetically disparaging one. Therefore, we will not adopt any functionalist view of human behavior which would rashly interpret the use of the object as exclusively compensatory, for example, to overcome uncertainty and contingency; rather we see the social practice in its diverse situative embeddedness as entertainment, enjoyment, pleasure, play and much more. In addition, it would be tempting, against the background of the description and presentation of the products offered in DmH, to discredit or mock the range of items to be examined from an aesthetic or practical point of view. Most of the goods on offer are cheap, often manufactured from synthetic materials and intended for a relatively short life-span. In view of the motifs, colors and shapes, everyday classifications, such as kitsch, junk and schlock, immediately suggest themselves. We will, however, avoid these judgmental terms derived from the distinctive point of view of the intel-

1 This text is the result of a lengthy discussion process; we are grateful to Konrad Kuhn for instructive tips.

lectual middle classes and will, instead, examine DmH as a significant example of a widespread present-day consumer and material culture. We will offer interpretations concerning the significance of the practices connected with these objects using a combination of ethnological and religion-based approaches. The connection of these scientific approaches is a reaction to the observation that practical everyday solutions and decorative and, in the widest sense, spiritual and religious motifs (e.g. motifs of dwarfs, the Virgin Mary, angels or Buddha) are interwoven.

We will focus on an interpretation and experience horizon that is, above all, implicit. The problems addressed in the range of products are extremely diversified, ranging from tight trouser waistbands to the loss of loved people. What is striking is that the presentation of the goods does not express difficulties but presents solutions – we refer to this style as dethematization. That it operates so ordinarily, casually, subtly and, to a great extent, unthematically represents a challenge for this investigation. At the same time, it is precisely this factor that makes it interesting, because it sheds light on a real living environment that is generally not specifically considered and, simultaneously, this dethematization of the problems that occur in everyday life represents one of its strategies. Since only rough user data are available at present, we would like to reconstruct from an analysis of the product range and their commercial exploitation in the combination of text and images in the catalog, a related style of everyday aesthetics and its state of mind from implicit indications. Our approach, therefore, bases itself on the seller's side not on the buyer's, which would have required the methodologies of the fields of marketing, social background or reception.² This results in an important reservation: Whether the use of the products and the way the catalogs are read really lead to the effects mentioned by the seller (with how many buyers and to what extent) remains hypothetical here.

We will focus on the presentation of the product range in the media and on the individual characteristics of the items on offer. The advertising strategies of the seller, the linguistic form, linguistic pragmatics, the image program and the practice of 'reading' the catalog are important and accessible points of reference. We assume that it is not just the purchase and use of the products offered that are effective practices in everyday culture but – even before that – leafing through the catalog, looking at it and reading it, and the style of everyday aesthetic that is to be identified here is established both in the actual and the imagined use of the items. We presume that the product range on offer can be marketed successfully precisely because it meets the demands of popular practical, social and emotional situations accurately. We develop the hypothesis that the mail-order catalog DmH can be seen as a promise of holistic problem-solving and as a regulator of specific feelings and,

2 The few empirical studies available reveal discrepancies – sometimes considerable ones – between the range of products offered and the actual furnishings of living rooms (cf. Schilling 2003: 148).

therefore, finds a grateful reading public in a world full of demands for action that can easily be perceived as excessive.

The subject to be discussed here continues thematically a whole series of ethnological and religious discourses for which some relevant literature is cited. The investigation into material culture (König 2003) examines things as a perspectivation of human action; such a program was also the focus of research into wall decoration, which has now almost completely gone out of fashion (Brückner 1973; Schilling 1971, 2003; Tübinger Wandschmuckforschung ('Tübingen Research into Wall Decoration') 1970). Questions of the representation and presentation of privacy and status are investigated by home research (Katschnig-Fasch 1998); research into popular piety (Knoblauch 1991, 2009), into religious material culture (McDannell 1995; Morrow Long 2001) and cultural economy (Koch 2014). All these approaches aim – on different levels – to establish the meaning and the personal modulation of the related questions of life, values, social relationships and cosmologies, as depicted by Miller (2010) using material cultural case vignettes. Our approach is also related to the examination of popular everyday aesthetics (Gyr 2012; Maase 2010; Morgan 2012) with their questions concerning pleasure, decor and consumption. The wide range of items presented in DmH results in a wide range of scientific connectivity options. In this essay, we will concentrate on the connections to research into piety, popular everyday culture, and consumption and material culture.

We will proceed as follows. Firstly, we will consider the catalog as a genre, position it in contrast to other publications, such as *Manufactum* and *Grüne Erde* ('Green Earth'), and present it both as a source and a medial everyday form of practice (chap. 2). We will then develop hypotheses from models from our discipline concerning the function and usage of such a catalog, focusing on consumption identity, everyday competence experience, privacy, contemporary spirituality and material culture (chap. 3). We will define these theses more precisely based on examples from DmH and using them, we will explain the practical, social and emotional neediness already mentioned (chap. 4). From this, we will draw consequences for the creation of a specific everyday aesthetic style of problem solving (chap. 5).

2. *Die moderne Hausfrau* – a catalog for all eventualities

2.1 The mail-order catalog – a dying breed?

"Brilliant things. Guaranteed cheap"³ – For years *Die moderne Hausfrau* has been successfully using this slogan as its subtitle.⁴ The mail-order catalog has been pub-

3 "Geniales. Garantiert günstig."

4 Ironically enough, a first glance at the title page of the catalog reveals that the name *Die moderne Hausfrau* ('The Modern Housewife') appears totally outmoded – particularly the combination of the traditional female role ascription and the pretension to modernity. Walz informed us that internal

lished by the catalog company Walz GmbH from Bad Waldsee in Upper Swabia since 1967. Following several takeovers, the firm is currently a subsidiary company of the Apollo Global Management Group in America. Its services include online marketing and the sale of individual items via teleshopping. The cheap range of products, which varies slightly according to the season, covers household items, interior furnishings, health and the garden. The almost 1,000 articles generally cost between €5 (c. \$5.60) and €15 (c. \$17), occasionally up to €50 (c. \$56), and only in exceptional cases up to €100 (c. \$113). The catalog is well-known for its collection of unusual products, ranging from the practical, through the unusual, to the superfluous. Next to special household appliances for mounting and fixing or cleaning, there can be found low-tech gadgets and problem-solvers, such as a zipper repair kit, an adapter for different light bulb fittings, a pen for touching up scratches on furniture or reading glasses with a built-in light. The catalog offers a wide range of items for interior design; we will focus specifically on these in this article. The products are developed or produced specially but are discovered at fairs all over the world, put together to form a line of merchandise and then marketed via mail-order trading. An essential element is that the items are advertised and commented on in the catalog by specially written short texts that frequently comment on or extol the items on offer tongue-in-cheek. Walz themselves claim “cult status”⁵ for the catalog; as long ago as 1997, the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* made it the subject of a report, which is still worth reading today: “Ruthlessly useful.”⁶ As regards the buying public, the article detects a tendency towards “the older generation” from all social classes; the key to success lies in finding products “that are useful and in some way amusing.” Walz recently confirmed to us that the average age of the predominantly female (80%) readers and buying public is 65. Among them can be found a high percentage of unattached people; in addition they possess comparatively limited financial means (“a low budget”). The proportion of e-commerce is only 23%, which means that the catalog, which has a circulation of 2.2 million in six European countries, represents the principal method of communication, which, in addition, prompts the majority of the online purchases.⁷ Overall, the range of articles appears to be a remarkably heterogeneous collection of diverse products of widely differing value regarding decorativeness or usefulness. There are objects on offer which many peo-

discussions had frequently taken place about whether to change the very well-established name but that such a change was not being considered at the moment.

- 5 <https://www.versandhaus-walz.de/die-moderne-hausfrau.html>, accessed on December 11, 2019.
- 6 “Gnadenlos nützlich.” (Morch 1997). This article also quotes representatives from Walz who describe the buying and selling strategy. They give the circulation of the catalog as 2.5 million and the number of Schnarch-Ex-Clips (nose clips to prevent snoring) sold annually as between 10 and 20 thousand; these figures illustrate the catalog’s remarkable scope.
- 7 Email communication from Walz on 17.12.2018.

ple never knew could even exist. Consequently, even the company's representatives mentioned in the report in *Die Zeit* that "the demand is awakened by the catalog."

Although, by now, the halcyon days of the well-known everything-from-one-source catalog companies, such as Quelle, Neckermann or Otto, appear to be over or to have been superseded by, for example, Amazon, successful markets still appear to exist for smaller, specialized product ranges. The mail-order catalog generally represents a powerful method of presenting goods which boasts its own medial and cultural history and leads the potential customers to a specific reception attitude of observation with anonymous interest, as they can consider the articles away from the direct presence of a salesperson in a store (Carrier 1995: 126–144). In terms of its presence, the range of goods on offer and the pricing, DmH is definitely located far from the well-known ecological companies or those that cultivate an image of high quality, such as *GEA*, *Grüne Erde* or *Manufactum* (Bönisch-Brednich 2002). Whereas the latter clearly focus on expensive, high-class goods, created by craftsmen and characterized by an aesthetic of quality and naturalness that combines practicability, durability, simple elegance and aesthetic tastefulness, DmH follows a completely different path. Customers look in vain for concepts such as sustainability, ecological correctness, tradition, high-quality craftsmanship, regionality, nostalgia, "authenticity" or energy efficiency; the company – almost as a sort of counter-program – focuses on practicability, price consciousness, smartness, and jewelry with a completely different concept of "beauty," which is characterized in many places in the catalog as "sweet," "charming," "delightful" and "wonderful." Walz's management informed us that particularly products that contain images of cats or have cats formed or applied on them are regular bestsellers. The company's linguistic strategies in the catalog include advertising slogans which promise, above all, simplicity and practicability. "The modern housewife," followed by, for instance, "a perfect household – a beautiful life," "your best household help," "always a good idea," "1,000 things that make life easier," "always good for a surprise," "always one idea more" or "brilliant solutions."

2.2 The mail-order catalog as an immersive-receptive practice

Occupying oneself with a mail-order catalog cannot be described simply as 'reading a catalog' or 'looking at a catalog'. Both would mean regarding one form of mediality, either the textual one or the visual one, above the other. Browsing, leafing or rummaging through, rereading or omitting pages in a printed catalog is, however, a very special form of everyday immersive media reception which is structured systematically in this catalog. It would generally be too exhausting to go through the approximately 240 pages in one go. Hardly anybody could take in such a wide variety of products, visual impressions and explanatory notes *en bloc*. Nevertheless, the catalog develops a specific pull that grips and fascinates people.

In order to present this everyday cultural form of practice of browsing through a catalog more precisely, we will, first of all, document a few material cultural observations regarding the thin pages of the colorful paper catalog in A4 format and then undertake an additional investigation into what effect the mere 'assimilation' of the catalog can produce. We cannot offer our own reception research here, but we were given a first indication by the management of Walz, who told us of female(!) customers who told them on the phone when placing an order that (in the pre-Christmas period) they would first make themselves a cup of tea and light a candle before sitting down at the kitchen table to "read" the latest catalog.

To begin with, the "bargain hunters" among the customers are activated by special products that are advertised on the cover (which is made of somewhat thicker paper) and highlighted as a "crackerjack," "hit" or "special" on the fold-out pages on the inside, both at the front and at the back of the catalog. Unfolding and closing these pages means that customers have to slow down the pace at which they leaf through; this represents an initial handling with its own special character. The users of the catalog now have an optically enlarged "bargain counter" in front of them before they proceed to the inside pages. There are tempting saving vouchers; red price boxes attract the readers' attention; and the editorial by "Eva Fröhlich"⁸ – complete with photos of her – addresses the subscriber personally. Not only are the subscriber's name and address printed on the back cover of the catalog, but the name is repeated in the salutation of the editorial and sometimes on the vouchers. After this 'greeting,' the standard pages display, firstly, above all, decorative articles, before continuing with categories, such as (household) helper, bathroom, garden, cemetery, jewelry, feet, personal care and pest control. The catalog pages present the articles in boxed units, partly bounded by frames and grouped together by a common, unobtrusive background color whose transparency can, however, vary from double page to double page. Each double page has its own character, in that there are artistic aesthetic elements that 'get the product description going.' Red arrows indicate the direction of rotation, insertion and extension of, for example, telescopic gutter cleaners. 'Before and after' pictures tell the story of the successful use of a product, for example, the elderly lady who, thanks to the wedge-shaped cushion, can now see over the steering wheel through the windshield and no longer has to look through the steering wheel. A single sequence of events generally tells everyday stories, such as the photo of the person wearing a rain hood with a transparent plastic panel in front of their face ("All clear even when it is raining. Waterproof hat 'vista'" DmH D542N-234)⁹ that demonstrates a clear view. Or the crossed legs that

8 As well as being a fairly common family name in Germany, "*fröhlich*" also means happy or cheerful.

9 We cite *Die moderne Hausfrau. Geniales. Garantiert günstig.* (*The Modern Housewife. Brilliant things. Guaranteed cheap.*) D stands for the German edition, A for the Austrian one, followed by the number of the issue and the page number. The examples date from between 2012 and 2018.

plainly display the polyester Christmas socks for guests in use. A smaller photo is added to remote-controlled LED appliances showing the thumb touching the buttons of the remote control; bed-caps and thigh cushions are presented on the body; a hand is pushing the jumbo flapjack tosser under the flapjack ("The great turn in the kitchen" DmH D542N-227). Many of these familiar little stories of household scenes go towards producing a chronological elongation in the sense of a quasi-animation while browsing through the catalog. This form of perusal facilitates an analog reading experience in a retro style that ergonomically and sensually is completely different to surfing on the Internet. However complex the catalog may be, its world is self-contained: No hyperlinks lead to the outside world. Search and discovery experiences are initiated whose nature is reminiscent of the receptive modalities when looking at children's 'Wimmelbooks'.¹⁰ Occupying oneself with Wimmelbooks may be familiar to many customers from their childhood and schooling; in reading matter research, this form of children's literature is characterized as being particularly playful and immersive (Rémi 2011: 129–131, 2018: 161–162).

This manner of being led into contact with the products in the catalog, therefore, causes a high degree of absorption in action. Another strategy is the unpredictability of the groups of products as the customer browses. Despite the general categories, the range of products is presented in a largely unsorted order. Thus, cookie tins and slippers, suction pads and adhesive label printers can variously be found in the categories decorations, kitchen or helps. In this way, each page is a cognitive challenge for everyday sorting and tiring for our orienting predictions and even reduces them to absurdity to such a degree that the absorption is increased. It is taxing to come to terms with the catalog, however simple and playful looking at, reading and leafing through it may appear at first sight.

3. The taste of the masses, dissolution and material culture – interrelationships and concepts

3.1 The taste of the masses and everyday aesthetics

The tradition in the discipline of dealing with aspects of the taste of the masses is a long one, albeit with several interruptions. People have repeatedly demanded that the preferences in taste of wide sections of the population should be investigated, but these demands have been met with varying intensity and occasionally with a certain bourgeois bias. As far as the examination of goods from mail-order companies is concerned, the most important one in our context is an article by Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich (2002), which deals with the *Manufactum* catalog, the counterpart to *Die moderne Hausfrau* for the educated classes. In her article, Bönisch-Brednich

10 Wimmelbooks are mere picture books that assemble multiple scenes of people's interaction at the same time on one side. "Wimmeln" ("be crowded") means this synchronicity of episodes.

defines the characteristics of the marketing logic implemented there, points out the great importance of the catalog presentation (Bönisch-Brednich 2002: 152–159) and can make clear how the supporting of the goods by means of history and stories is a central element in the establishing of an exclusively middle-class style of consumption. In the theory of her argumentation, however, a pattern of explanation is dominant – doubtless expediently – that conceives of questions of taste as being questions of environment and interprets them in terms of Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus” as being primarily a sign of distinguishing and self-assurance (Bönisch-Brednich 2002: 151, 160, 161). We propose to tread a different path, because we assume that such a theoretical framework would not do justice to the specifics and the point of *Die moderne Hausfrau* that interests us here. Points of presentation and communication with guests are also important for these products – the catalog repeatedly refers to this with phrases such as “Your visitors will be impressed” – but not primarily with a socially distinguishing purpose. The cheap plastic goods on offer here are not suitable for classic boasts of quality and games of distinction of the bourgeois. What is more important is the ‘amusing’ element already mentioned just after note 5 – an audience is not a disadvantage here – and the immediate pleasure of the owner in the objects themselves; be it the practical cleansing tool for cleaning underneath and inside windows, the slippers with cat’s eyes or the glittering fairy lamp. The discipline deals with such items either not at all or only gingerly. Ueli Gyr (2012) has demonstrated this aptly in a survey. When it does, terms such as kitsch, trinkets, trivial or mass culture continue to be found, which all include a more or less pronounced pejorative element, even though, in any given case, this may not have been the intention.

Even the research into wall decoration, which was carried out several decades ago initially with a certain enthusiasm, was – even though it was not really interested in aesthetic judgments – based on an enlightening objective, critical of ideology, and attempted to decode implicit messages and power constellations or aimed at functions of self-expression, representation or differentiating one’s environment (Katschnig-Fasch 1998: 182–212; Tübinger Wandschmuckforschung 1970). Even though the early works of Wolfgang Brückner (1973) and Heinz Schilling (1971) similarly made determined attempts to avoid aesthetically judgmental approaches, (Schilling 2013: 134–155), it cannot be denied that a certain tendency to downplay the matter can be found even retrospectively in the adage “decoration not shock”¹¹ (Schilling 2013: 147–149) and the opinion in the summary that the decorative articles examined were harmless and risk-free.

Even Ueli Gyr, who, citing the media scholar Jürgen Grimm (1998), advocates vehemently taking kitsch seriously as “a sentimental mode of experience” (Gyr 2012:

11 “Schmuck statt Schock.”

45) and calls for functional everyday analyses far removed from judgments concerning taste, at the same time, retains the term kitsch and cannot totally free himself from the pejorative semantic which terms like simulation, imitation or deception bring in their wake (Gyr 2012: 50–52).

To the present day, therefore, practices of pleasurable and affirmative surrender to such aesthetic everyday joys continue to be critically addressed by the discipline from the perspectives of escapism, numbing, seduction or late capitalistic ‘opiates consumption’ and, ultimately, described using the paradigms of deficit and passivity. The fingers with which the discipline probes the matter remain strangely conceptional and move terminologically gingerly. We, by contrast, want to inquire into the subjective gain, enjoyment and usefulness of the practice of everyday aesthetic perception and, in this way, follow Kaspar Maase, who has repeatedly (Maase 2005, 2010) demanded that the immediate experience of aesthetic happiness in everyday circumstances be discussed without a reflex rejection reaction. In the sense of ‘positive anthropology,’ he follows Sherry B. Ortner and proposes not only analyzing “the growing pleasures and proliferating practices of aesthetic experience” (Maase 2019: 148) from a critical perspective but also taking them seriously and accepting them as a component of and a precondition of a “good life for all” (in this case, at least for the readers of the catalog).

3.2 Dissolution of the religious and ‘re-enchantment’

Several products inspired by religion are also to be found in DmH: Figures of Buddha, Zen gardens, dwarfs, trolls, elves and fairies from popular nature piety, Christian motifs of crosses, pendants, rose of Jericho, figures of the Virgin Mary, grave decorations and, above all, angels that are supposed to provide special support. These figures from the Christian tradition have become extremely popular in the last few decades and have, in part, become totally divorced from any Christian connection and become completely independent or embedded in the stock of New Age cosmology and alternative spirituality (Murken and Namini 2007). The following example can be found on a double page concerning the care of graves: “I will never forget you! That is the comforting message of the angel ‘Longing’ which will stay with your loved ones even when you have to go home” (D514–46). Or: “We will not leave you alone! That is the joyous message of the necklace ‘Guardian Angel’! The adjustable necklace is 20 inches long [...] The chain and the angel are of nickel-free metal and divinely beautiful” (D571–116). Similarly: “Give yourself an angel as a present! You will be accompanied by a good spirit night and day. A very beautiful embodiment of this is the angel made in china for the rose candle” (D571–97). Products are presented as symbols, with a specific reference to being accompanied round the clock: “Night and day” stands for a holistic and, nevertheless, simply manageable

everyday phenomenon. This protection also exists in a secular¹² variant, such as the good luck charm 'Night watchman Sweet Dreams' (A532–145), a little figure in a white monkish habit, with a bulbous nose and a lantern. Some of the products in *Die moderne Hausfrau* which are located in a gray area between the magical, the religious and the spiritual can be classified as 'base mythology'. These include figures such as the Easter bunny, dwarf and guardian angel, and customs linked to them are not restricted to a specific class or level of education but are part of the popular shared imaginary (Heimerdinger 2010; Korff 1995: 80).

DmH, therefore, presents a challenge from the point of view of the science of religion, because here the "Dissolution of religion in the religious" (Knoblauch 1991) can be seen very clearly. It is not, however, the task of the science of religion to determine to what extent objects are still to be regarded as religious or purely as decorative. We do not comprehend religion as being functionalist, for example, as a premodern 'relic' or as compensation for the incomprehensible. Instead, from the perspective of the science of religion, religion/religious/spiritual is for us a purely historical heuristic concept and will be examined in terms of a cultural phenomenon as an aesthetic social practice. In the secularization paradigm, one of the many forms of privatization and the new social form of a this-worldly, private and 're-enchanted' religion is described as the dissolution of religion (Knoblauch 1991: 9). Re-enchantment occurs frequently precisely in the material culture by ascribing support, consolation and strength to products through the new context of consumer societies, as can be seen from our angels and good luck charms. Dealing with emotionality and religiosity is to be seen as an implicit style of perception and practice which remains below the threshold of articulation that is so important for the "logocentric culture of the elite" (Maase 2005: 289). We do not, however, interpret this pattern of behavior and the absence of an elaborated rhetoric of self-declaration as passive avoidance due to a lack of cognitive ability, as Schilling (2003: 151) intimates, but rather as a practical option without any definite character of commitment.

Privatization is also an important point of reference for our catalog, where homely privacy is addressed with the words "everything for the well-cared for home" (D534–81). Thomas Luckmann distinguishes between various "levels of transcendence" in *Die unsichtbare Religion*, depending on how far an event leaves the everyday world behind it (Luckmann 1991). These range from experiences of a 'little' transcendence of obliviousness when gazing at a mountain range to conditions of ecstasy in the context of a religious event and the sacrosanct. Almost as a counter-program, DmH well-nigh permanently and indefatigably utilizes nontranscendent experiences: "Practical" and "simple" are the most frequent markers of this, so that

12 In as far as one wants to use this term at all, because in this context the mythological and the religious appear so strongly de-semanticized that it hardly seems to form an antithesis.

a scientific sociological understanding of religion is not relevant here. An impressive example of how a barely endurable emotion is converted into action is the text for a tombstone angel: "Big words aren't always necessary. A little gesture by the graveside often says more. Like this decorative angel which can be planted in the ground quite simply by means of the wire stick" (D534–123). This decolossalizes the burden of pain at the loss and guides the emotional state towards an acting out. Only individual problems are focused on in homely privacy and, consequently, this dynamic can no longer be distinguished from a total subjectivization of the approach to life. This form of privatization of religion has also been described as laicization, which manages without religious experts. In analogy to this, the readers of DmH become their own plumbers, gutter cleaners, backscratching assistants and document shredders. The common denominator of these various phenomena is the moment of empowerment and the increase in agency on an individual level.

Colleen McDannell (1995: 163–197) considers the "rhetoric of bad taste" in the "kitsch" of Christian material culture in the USA since the 19th century and she is (together with Morrow Long 2011) one of the few people to also analyze mail-order catalogs from suppliers of specifically religious articles as a source. In the history of religion, devotional items such as good luck charms, traditional Christmas figures, jewelry, Easter symbols or holy water containers are associated with the intensification and cultivation of both positive and negative feelings and the attribution of powers (Morgan 2012). Not infrequently, they move between religion and popular culture in such a way that dichotomies such as religious – profane no longer apply. Morgan, too, is opposed to classifying the commodification of religious icons at Christmas, for example, simply as the loss of the religious content but as a form of material performance.

In this sense, the economics of religion has also concerned itself recently with the aesthetic of religious articles. Focusing on devotional items, pilgrims' souvenirs, clothing, children's toys, 'halal' goods, etc. (Koch 2014: 131–163), it demonstrates, for example, the ambivalent and diverging relationships and dynamics of the branding of 'Islamic' products (Shirazi 2016). Most of the product descriptions in DmH are formulated as a sort of instructions for use. By means of this strategy of individualized acquisition, the marketing text anticipates the consumers using the products and instructs them in how to use them, thereby constituting them as co-producers, as 'prosumers' of the usefulness of the products. Examples of this are the tombstone for animals that can be given an individualized inscription (D530–88) or the hanging dwarf Elmar (D571–67):

What can we learn from 'Elmar'? Quite right; he wants to show us that 'letting go' isn't so difficult. So hang up the hanging dwarf 'Elmar' in a prominent place on your favorite tree right away, so that he can remind us of this every day.

Against this background, the question arises to what extent maxims or mental hygiene are delegated to decorative objects as placeholders or substitutes for sense, to be made use of as and when necessary and to permanently materialize this dimension of life symbolically within one's own four walls, or to consummate it, or even not to have to consummate it any longer.

4. Problem-solving promises

For all the heterogeneity and range of articles offered in DmH, certain patterns and mechanisms can be detected regularly: The creation of operability ("simply practical"), responses to the social desires for conviviality and being-seen, and emotional longings.

4.1 Simply practical – the creation of operability

The targeted problem fields are as commonplace as they are unspectacular and for that precise reason of elementary significance. In most cases, it is a question of dealing with dirt, untidiness, monotony, confined spaces or the lack of space, cold, damage, or the lack of strength, dexterity or competence, also mourning, the desire for stability and meaning and consolation. By analogy, the products promise to provide appropriate remedies; they are to help establish cleanliness, tidiness, variety, storage options, warmth and insulation, or represent, in the widest sense, tools that provide assistance for repairs or dealing with unpleasant, tiring, advanced motoric or complicated tasks. It is typical of the entire marketing of the range of products that the everyday challenges in question are presented from the point of view not of the deficit but of the solution. It is not the limitations and shortcomings of people (a lack of skill, visual, motoric, auditory or other impairments) or of their environment (confined space, dirt, loneliness, poverty, mourning) that are placed in the foreground but the smart solutions available. A graphic description of this is the egg separator "*Rotz-Nase*" ('Runny Nose', Fig. 1).

Many people have difficulties separating eggs. Either because they never learnt to do it properly or because they have become too old to do it – if bits of eggshell or small quantities of egg yolk get into the egg white, success of the baking operation is endangered. But this is not specifically mentioned in the description of the article. The focus is on the useful gadget that not only supports the task to be carried out but, into the bargain, provokes a harmless, even flippant chuckle with the 'cold effect' when the egg white oozes thickly out of the nose. It is of no importance how successful or practical one considers this article to be in the last analysis – for €8.99 [c. \$10.20], the everyday problem has been provided with an "amusing" and "genuinely practical" solution which is, in addition, dishwasher-safe. The trials of everyday life have been outwitted, and, with the humoristic bonus, the gadget

„Ei, Ei, Ei – du wirst getrennt!“

Dieser Ei-Trenner ist nicht nur sehr amüsant, sondern auch echt praktisch: Einfach das Ei oder mehrere Eier aufschlagen, in den „Kopf“ geben und dann zusehen, wie das Eiklar durch die „Nasenlöcher“ ausgegossen wird.

Das Eigelb bleibt im Kopf zurück. Keramik, 9 x 9 x 8 cm. Spülmaschinengeeignet.

Rotz-Nase
Nr. 6366.708.541 nur **7.99**

auch für mehrere Eier gleichzeitig verwendbar

Fig. 1. Egg separator (D541-37)

als Einkaufs-Chip verwendbar

„Ich beschütze dich auf allen Wegen!“

Das ist die gute Botschaft des Schlüsselrings „Schutzengel“! Seine schöne Machart aus Edelstahl liegt sehr gut in der Hand. Der herausnehmbare Engel ist als Einkaufs-Chip verwendbar. Ø ca. 4 cm.

Schlüsselring „Schutzengel“
Nr. 0471.475.517 nur **8.99**

Fig. 2. The angel can also be used as a supermarket trolley chip. Added usefulness, protection and practicality go hand-in-hand. (D517-74)

makes the aspect of everyday practical awkwardness, which in the end is the motivation behind this helper, fade away. The solution is objectivized and to hand and is reliably available if and when necessary. Even though it is, of course, clear that the basic problem, difficulties separating eggs, is a relatively minor one.

A further really practical object is a key-ring talisman in the form of a guardian angel, which also contains a supermarket trolley chip (Fig. 2): “I will protect you on all your journeys.’ That is the good message of the key-ring ‘Guardian Angel.’ Made of stainless steel, its beautiful styling is comfortable to hold in your hand. The detachable angel can be used as a supermarket trolley chip. Diameter c. 4 cm [c. 1.5 in]” (D517-74). The additional value is created by its additional usefulness. We speak of a lucky charm or an amulet if a permanently available source of strength and consolation or a protection against harm can be carried with one with this object in one’s pocket.

4.2 Social needs: Capable of acting and conviviality

Those objects that reflect social needs or social predicaments are, to a certain extent, connected with the practical and concrete problem-solving promise but lead in a somewhat different direction. A large number of the products on offer are not specifically advertised as items for the households of elderly single people and are not to be seen exclusively as such, but, taken together, they fit logically into the overall picture of elderly and often single customers with relatively little purchasing power who Walz have currently identified as being their main clientele. In this category, we find all the products that aim at the makeshift repair of traces of wear and tear, adhesives for textiles or leather that replace seams, adhesive tapes that solve fixation problems and insulate gutters, and polishes and varnishes that are meant to conceal minor damage to furniture surfaces. Similarly, many mechanical and chemical aids that are intended to help with blocked drains without having to unscrew the pipes. Household utensils that are clearly meant for one-person households: Small storage containers or tiny dish racks, for example. And, finally, all the articles that, in the widest sense, contribute to safety and security, that prevent doors and windows from slamming (clamping devices), ward off uninvited guests or dangers (front door peepholes and door chains, warning lights and floodlights, smoke detectors) and protect one's possessions (small safes). The objects offered create or, at least, promise moments of safety and security, the ability to act and, in the widest sense, the establishment of agency.

In addition to that, the qualities of thrift, conservation and efficiency are central elements of many products. Examples of these are protective items for edges, corners and floors, clips for squeezing tubes, containers for storing small quantities of left-over foodstuffs, simply constructed multifunctional tools that can allegedly be used "for almost everything," and dirt traps for radiators, cupboards or windows. Advertisements for these objects consistently employ arguments that they increase comfort and reduce costs (e.g. draft exclusion) but not that they are ecological or sustainable. We interpret this as another clear reference to economically relatively weak customers or to elderly ones who actively possess the classic postwar virtues. That these products are aimed at a largely female clientele, as Walz tell us, is clearly reflected not only in the title of the catalog but also in the scenic illustrations which predominantly feature female models.

The many problem-solving tools for all conceivable situations in life promise a state of being prepared and equipped for all contingencies and, thus, having concrete escapes from diverse forms of helplessness. This pattern is repeated consistently in the interior decoration sector. Particularly conspicuous are a range of products which shield the home from any unwelcome gaze from outside (curtains, small screens and window decoration) and, at the same time, furnish it on the inside and in some way enliven it.

The garden is turned into a menagerie of artificial stone with meerkats, elves, gnomes, dwarfs, flamingos, owls, etc., which raises the question what these motifs from “base mythology” externalize and stage on a psychological level. Do they have a comforting effect by reminding one of one’s first animal books, i.e. a coping achieved by means of the aesthetic strategies of idealization, and with elves and suchlike, a coping of enchantment? Or is the underlying element the need of the frequently elderly and single customers for communication, which has already been mentioned, and the desire to make the cozy home cuter by decorating it with a cuddlesome material culture in order to escape as far as possible from one’s onerous existence? The title of this paper “It looks and blinks” reflects DmH’s striking strategy of offering items of everyday life with faces or a blinking (and, therefore, seeming) communication.

In addition, the style of humor that pervades DmH’s advertising texts is tongue-in-cheek, smart and amusing, never inscrutable, ironic, black, suggestive, biting or nasty. Sometimes, the humor is reminiscent of the mischievous style of Heinz Erhardt, the popular German humorist of the 1950s and 1960s, or the typically ‘cheerful’ tone of German postwar entertainment, often criticized for being escapist and playing down problems (Zehrer 2002: 74–76, 133). This also serves to regulate the explosive power that interpersonal relationships can have and is a counter-program to the serious and even onerous nature of life. This basic atmosphere can defuse loneliness and be useful as entertainment. This overriding aim is also served by witticisms, proverbs, words of wisdom, puns and phraseology that are reminiscent of the linguistic customs of postwar society.

4.3 Emotional needs: Love and indulgence

Finally, the emotional need for love, harmony and enchantment must be emphasized. We have already discovered a great deal about the emotional household on offer. The style of humor establishes a very specific form of emotional security and protection; courses of action are offered to counter paralyzing mourning; good luck charms and simple symbols such as ladybugs or four-leaf clovers represent protection and happiness. Even objects intended purely for ornamental purposes, such as the decorative cats “Motherly love” (D535 N-73, made of artificial stone for € 5.99 [c. \$ 6.80]), with the key words ‘love,’ ‘mother,’ ‘heart,’ ‘charm’ and ‘tenderness,’ aim at the same intensive affirmative decor with feelings with positive connotations.¹³ The object can be regarded as the reflection of a program of emotional longing, which

13 The cats and kittens in the catalog are deserving of an article of their own. As early as 1961(!), with the example of a coffee pot in the shape of a cat, Bausinger (1961: 150–151) drew attention to the “catification” of objects of daily use. He discusses this phenomenon with the concept of sentimentality and links it – absolutely pejoratively – to the terms kitsch (in quotation marks) and ostensibility (without quotation marks).

2 Höhe 36 cm

1 Höhe 29,5 cm

„Wir verzaubern Frühlingsnächte!“

Diese beiden Elfen sind nicht nur betörend niedlich und ein wirklich magischer Blickfang – sie sind auch wetterfest! Eingebettet zwischen Ihren Lieblingspflanzen, auf Balkon, Terrasse oder im Garten verzaubern sie täglich aufs Neue! Und das nicht nur am Tag: mittels einer Solarleuchte strahlen und leuchten sie nachts mystisch in zarten Farben – ein echter „Sommernachtstraum“, auch im Frühling! „Melanie“ hütet Ihre leuchtende Kugel, „Sabine“ die feinen Leuchtblüten. Kunststein, Glas und Kunststoff. Lieferung inklusive Batterie!

1 Solar-Elfe „Melanie“
18 x 17,5 x 29,5 cm
Nr. 6325.726.514

2 Solar-Elfe „Sabine“
20 x 13 x 36 cm
Nr. 6325.734.514 je **19⁹⁹**

Fig. 3. “Solar elf Melanie” and “Solar elf Sabine” (D514–51)

needs neither content-related ambivalences nor references to questions concerning the excellence, high quality or artistic sophistication of the object. What is certainly relevant is the interaction between displaying something and enjoying it oneself. Both these aspects can be clearly seen, and they resemble each other in an elementary communicative mechanism that seems to function even in the inanimate world: Where people look, people look back.

Enchantment and magic in terms of being equipped with a diffusely transcendent added aesthetic value are further strategies of calming emotionalization, silence, dreaming and floating away. These emotions are bought into the cozy home most probably by products that derive from religion or ‘base mythology’, such as fairies,¹⁴ elves and gnomes: As a cheeky delicate flower-girl elf or as a “wonderful Halloween witch ... LED pumpkin aunt ‘Martha.’”¹⁵ The “Solar elves” Melanie and Sabine (cf. Fig. 3) are a good example of how differing motifs are interwoven.

The advertising text with the attributes tantalizing, magical, mystical and delicate also atmospherically cites the highly-charged spring nights, coupled with a reference to Shakespeare’s *“A Midsummer Night’s Dream,”* which does not, however, fit with spring. Naked limbs and girlishly prepubescent femininity do not become

14 They are currently experiencing a general popularization and diversification, for example, in the form of a pacifier fairy (cf. Heimerdinger 2010).

15 D530–60 china doll Rosalie; D530–33, for the popularization of Halloween (cf. Knoblauch 2009: 246–247).

linguistically tangible, but they are included in the delicacy and the general magic of the figures. The LED light-play is also coupled both with the idea of a mystical aura and with the impact of an ornamental effect in the darkness.

The governance of the gaze comprises several elements: Controlling the gaze to exclude unwelcome glances from outside and simultaneously staging eye-catchers and desired products that look back at you and, in this way, establish an intimate partnership of gaze in the interior of the home.

All in all, a multilayered and heterogeneous, sometimes even ambivalent picture of addressing loneliness and sociality can be seen throughout the catalog. Whereas some products aim either at overcoming loneliness practically (tools that replace a further human helping hand) or symbolically replacing them (eyes, whiskers and blinking signals), others aim decidedly at social situations: Every moment of displaying, impressing or amusing are conceptually designed for communal situations (with a partner) or situations with visitors (friends, neighbors, relatives).

5. Conclusion: “Decoration with Depth!”

“Decoration with Depth! Enchanting decoration, practical accessory, spiritual companion: This set consisting of a figure of Buddha, tea-light holder, bowl and glass stones is all this” (D534–81 Buddha set).

This citation from an advertising text aptly sums up the aspects that are combined in the products. Using selected examples, we have explained various characteristics of this style that DmH typically employs to sell security and well-being, and we have identified four recurring secondary practices: The combination of different areas of life, amusement, dethematization and the transformation of problem experiences into opportunities for action.

The environmental multidimensionality of the products on offer is programmatic. They claim to combine areas of life that are otherwise separated from each other by advanced specialization and sophisticated logic limited to a specific area. It is very often a question of what might be termed the framework of life – and that this framework is all right: A home, a functioning bathroom, protection against glances from outside, drafts, intruders and vermin, dealing with mourning and fear. In other words, it is a question of basic conditions of life; they occur repeatedly, we work like slaves to master them.

What does the ideal type of the private sphere, the home, look like? It is decorated and has been appropriated: My home, cozy in every season, making use of the space available, protecting material and furniture covers, and it constitutes itself by reference to being seen by others. Many articles offer a practical use, make a statement about the owner, in this way, offer an added value for social appreciation and contribute to making life more aesthetic. The beautiful object has a concrete purpose, and the practical object is at the same time beautiful and decorative.

This multidimensionality can of course be observed in other product ranges – that of *Manufactum*, for example, in which form and function are similarly intended to complement each other in ideal fashion. In this respect, DmH displays a characteristic of a process of the narrowing of aesthetics and usefulness that has been going on for much longer (Dorschel 2002). It is conspicuous in how many cases an attempt is made to combine the practical dimension with the aesthetic one: We need only think of the numerous animal figures that appear in all product ranges. And here – in contrast to *Manufactum*, for example – it is not the successful combination of form and function that is emphasized, but the far less tasteful, ‘trashy’ both-and. The formal aesthetic heterogeneity appears not as a problem but as a ‘gag.’ Walz themselves have identified the supremacy of the ‘gag’ that dictates the compilation of the product range. The articles offered are supposed to amuse in some way; if necessary, smartness takes precedence over durability; the goods target the short-term moment of surprise rather than tasteful materialism. This effect is achieved, on the one hand, by the combination of differing functional levels that we have already mentioned, which make the individual product appear amusing and, on the other hand, by the harmless and cheerful chuckle element, which is realized on both the textual level of the product description¹⁶ and the functional level of the purpose of the product: There are things that we never even dreamt of! Many products appear quaint and amusing precisely because they offer solutions to problems of whose existence many readers of the catalog may, so far, not have been aware, and if they were, then without reckoning on the existence of the possibility of a material cultural solution to them. Who would have expected a sandwich box with a spy window, a brush for dusting off the leaves of gum trees that is shaped like a pair of tongs or an asymmetrical pair of spectacles with a single lens on a hinge so that one can make up the other eye? (D533: 39, 112, 180) These helpers convey the comforting feeling that if the worst comes to the worst, one is forearmed; they permit the creation of the positive imagination of self-empowerment and the experience of control and, in this way, provide security against the hardships of everyday life.

This principle of chuckling at imponderables and problem situations is developed still further when it is applied to dimensions which can no longer be classified as mere harmless everyday problems. As we have demonstrated, this mechanism is subtly expanded to include questions of experiences of loneliness and loss and, thereby, elevated to a more basic principle. It would be an oversimplification to consider them purely from the pejorative point of view of playing-down or avoid-

16 Many of the effects we have mentioned can be found when browsing the catalog precisely in the combination of the image and the description of the article – by the way, Bönisch-Brednich similarly concludes that *Manufactum* products frequently create a far more impressive effect when combined with the relevant description than they do in the store, on the shelf or in the hand.

ance; instead, a coping strategy that is suitable for the clientele would seem to be effective here.

We have now arrived at the last and perhaps the most important strategy that is realized in DmH: Presenting simple, practical opportunities for action to counter difficulties on the most diverse levels. It is significant that the problems touched on are many and varied and that the range of products addresses them in an almost overwhelming manner. They range from practical dimensions of life (confined spaces, dirt, cold), through social (loneliness, being observed), economic, health (ailments of old age) and emotional ones (fear of burglary, mourning), as far as spiritual ones.

It seems that we can observe a correlation between a dethematization, on the one hand, and an emphasis on the functional significance (keyword: practical), on the other. A Buddha set, for example, refers to other products already mentioned – Buddha figures and gemstone bracelets – and demonstrates how the religious significance is reduced in favor of a logic of everyday practical usefulness: The elastic bracelets mean that they will fit and can be used by everybody, which makes them a suitable present for all wrist sizes. Simply put it on – done! There is no longer any need for ‘big words.’ Dethematization comes in many forms and can perhaps also be seen as a counter-program to the academic concentration on verbalization in psychotherapy, literature and science. Instead of a program of articulation, nonverbal references to the product aesthetic are offered, for example, to the animal kingdom, the artisanal, the household (for instance, practices to create cleanliness) or idyllic scenery.

Thus practical, concrete, action-oriented solutions are provided for the various demands of life; they frequently offer the prospect of more than just a solution; they promise pleasure, appreciative comments and perhaps even momentary happiness. These emancipatory components of the product range can be interpreted as empowerment. Its basis is an externalization of emotional situations and a fundamental neediness that is compensated for by means of consumer products and ornamental objects. Perhaps only for a brief moment, perhaps only in the imagination and perhaps only until the catalog is laid aside again. But that is better than nothing.

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