

BAUSTELLE BERLIN

Post-Reunification Voids

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POST-WENDE BERLIN of the early 1990s was both an uncharted territory of squats and bohemian communities, and a city of disorder, dislocation and disorientation. 1989–90 was a time when, as Svetlana Boym reminds us,

East German police no longer had power over the city and West German police had not yet taken control, so Berlin's abandoned center became a kind of utopian commonwealth of alternative culture with Oranienburger Strasse [and Kunsthaus Tacheles] at its core.

This period of massive reconstruction has been immortalized in a number of fiction and non-fiction films. Much like the rubble films of post-war Berlin, the city's second Zero Hour shows its protagonists against the backdrop of industrial and urban ruins, fields, wastelands and construction sites, trying to make a living and build a life in a city exposed to the Eastern European black market economy and criminal creatures of the night.

A city marketing campaign in 1996 announced on large billboards all across the

city: 'Berlin wird' (Berlin is becoming). Andreas Huyssen rightfully asked, 'becoming what?', pointing out the verbal void in the ad. The collective message of such Berlin films of the 1990s as Michael Klier's *Ostkreuz* (1991), Wim Wenders' *In weiter Ferne, so nah/Faraway, So Close* (1993), Wolfgang Becker's *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle/Life is All You Get* (1997), Tom Tykwer's *Lola Rennt/Run Lola Run* (1998), and Andreas Dresen's *Nachtgestalten/Nightshapes* (1999) is that Berlin is not a safe place. On the contrary, everyday survival is a struggle, and any attempt to build a home and achieve a sense of belonging is confronted with difficult challenges. David Clarke interpreted the Berlin films of the 1990s as a continuous search for a home in the postmodern urban wasteland of the Deleuzian any-space-whatever (interchangeable and fragmented urban space).

What these films also reveal is a new relationship to time. Having fallen into a kind of *Dornröschenschlaf* à la Sleeping Beauty during the 28 years of division, in the new Berlin time becomes critical. Lola's three attempts to run from the former East to the West in twenty minutes are filled with symbolic references to ticking clocks, watches, and pounding techno beats. It is as if her existence, and, as a result, that of all the other protagonists, depend on beating the clock by running through the torn city, whose core is still under construction. Similarly, the angel Cassiel, the protagonist of Wenders' sequel to *Himmel über Berlin/Wings of Desire* (1987), is determined to do good and to help people in the city that has seen it all and is now a bustling centre of sleaze, but he is continuously veered off course by the devil incarnate, Emit Flesti (Time Itself), who tells him: 'They say time is money, but time is the absence of money.'

This urban interchangeability, fragmentation, and corruption begin to transform in the new

Opposite 24 Hours Berlin (2009) / Below text here (Photos by Katrina Sark)



millennium films, such as Becker's *Goodbye Lenin!* (2003), Dresen's *Sommer vorm Balkon/Summer in Berlin* (2005), and Henckel von Donnersmarck's *Das Leben der Anderen/The Lives of Others* (2006). Berlin is increasingly represented as a city of rebuilding and remaking – whether the fictional reconstruction of reunification in *Goodbye Lenin!*, the rebuilding lives and narratives after the STASI archives have been made publically accessible, as in *The Lives of Others*, or constructing make-shift communities and relationships of convenience against the backdrop of Prenzlauer Berg gentrification in *Summer in Berlin*.

There is also a canon of documentary films that captured Berlin under construction, perhaps most memorably in Hubertus Siegert's *Berlin Babylon* (2001) – a close-up portrait of the construction sites around Potsdamer Platz and the urban planning debates of the 1990s. Eric Black and Frauke Sandig's *Nach dem Fall/After the Fall* (2000) portrays urban historian Brian Ladd cycling along the construction sites next to the Reichstag and Potsdamer Platz and commenting on the unmarked sites of Hitler's

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bunker: 'The desire to forget the past can manifest itself in an effort to destroy its traces.' Thomas Schadt's *Berlin: Sinfonie einer Gro stad/Berlin Symphony* (2002), an homage to Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Gro stad/*

Berlin: Symphony of a Great City (1927), was shot in black-and-white on 35 mm film and features images of voids and construction sites (such as the Holocaust Memorial as an empty lot), and can be seen as a precursor to Michael Ballhaus and Ciro Cappellari's *In Berlin* (2009), in which politicians and city inhabitants are shown going about their daily lives. The style of filming a day in the life of the city also structures Volker Heise's massive compilation *24h Berlin: Ein Tag im Leben/24 Hours Berlin* (2009). Marco Wilms' *Mittendrin/In the Middle* (2003) documents life in Berlin 'when the old powers have left and the new ones have not yet stepped in'. Dominik Graf and Martin Gressmann's contribution to the collection of short films *Deutschland 09/Germany 09* (2009), entitled 'Der Weg, den wir nicht zusammen gehen' (the path we do not walk together), features images of abandoned buildings and structures all over Germany, including Berlin, and presents a nostalgic view of architectural deterioration and decline. Cynthia Beatt's *Invisible Frame* (2009) features two filmic traces of the Berlin Wall and the voids and no-man's-lands around it, one from 1988 and one from 2009.

As Andreas Huyssen pointed out, 'the void in the center of Berlin will have been filled. But memories of that haunting space from the months and years after the Wall came down will linger.' Huyssen reminds us of Daniel Libeskind's 1992 proposal to leave Potsdamer Platz as a historical void:

Rilke once said that everything is already there. We only must see it and protect it. We must develop a fee for places, streets, and houses that need our support. Take the open area at Potsdamer Platz. I suggest a wilderness, one kilometer long, within which everything can stay as it is. The street simply ends in the bushes. Wonderful.

The notion of voids as something to be protected and memorialized is reaching its peak in Berlin today. Yet in a globalized economy, we conceive of voids only as temporary, makeshift, undeveloped space. Leaving a void un-capitalized (either for profit or for memorialization) is simply unimaginable today. The voids are being filled, construction and gentrification projects continue to reach completion, but images and memories remain. ♣

