City Spaces and National Identity

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In the streets and spaces of Berlin, the past is said to be part of the present. Moreover, to take Andreas Huyssen’s argument even further, Berlin’s past has been mediated to the global spectator through cinematic representations of its topography. Certain images and scenes remain in our collective cinematic memory: Homer and Cassiel walking through the void of the no-man’s-land around Potsdamer Platz in Wim Wenders’ Wings of Desire (1987). Wenders focused on the West-Berlin topography of division due to the fact that he could not obtain the permission of East-German officials to film in East Berlin at the time. Another “cinephilic moment” would be Lola running over the re-opened Oberbaumbrücke (the bridge that used to connect East and West Berlin, and which remained non-operational during the years of division) in Tom Tykwer’s Run Lola Run (1998) — one of the first cinematic endeavours in reunited Berlin to transgress between East and West. Another well-remembered example would be a computer-generated statue of Lenin, carried by a helicopter above the Karl-Marx-Allee to the astonishment of Christiane Kerner, who missed the German Reunification while lying in a coma, in Wolfgang Becker’s Goodbye Lenin! (2003). And finally, the global spectator is well familiar with the image of the former STASI (GDR secret police) officer, Gert Wiesler, delivering advertisement brochures to mailboxes along the post-wall Karl-Marx-Allee in Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck’s The Lives of Others (2006), the first German film to address the GDR past in a non-satiric form.

Through these cinematic narratives, a new, virtual city map can be drawn. Not only do we perceive the streets, buildings and spaces of Berlin in their historical dimension, we can add a fictionalized cinematic dimension which nonetheless communicates the complexity of the city’s psyche. But what does it mean to perceive Berlin through a cinematic dimension? We take pleasure in precisely this kind of crossing of fictionalized and historicized topographies because it allows a more fluid narrative and thus a more subjective and immediate engagement with space. Through such identification, we personalize what is otherwise foreign or abstract space. As the aforementioned iconic images enter our cultural memory, they align themselves next to historical images and become a part of our subjective visual culture. Thus, factual history does not exist in a hierarchical relationship with cinematic history. Rather, the two complement each other, as one flows into the other, and they exist as merged streams of dialogues. The individual’s engagement with the city, facilitated by multiple perceptions of space, gains more meaning in light of Nicolas Bourriaud’s concept of “relational aesthetics,” by which he means that artistic practices establish relations between...
people and the world, by way of aesthetic objects. I would argue that film, much like art, is also capable of facilitating relational engagement with space. In this paper, I am interested in examining the dynamic dimension of Berlin’s public space and how it has on contemporary questions of German identity. Recent films set in Berlin and engaging with Berlin topography and history shift the camera focus, perhaps not surprisingly, towards the East. Streets and locations in these films reflect the changes in the city’s fabric. So, what do these films say implicitly by locating their narratives in the East, and more specifically around Alexanderplatz? And how do viewers identify with the spaces portrayed?

Perhaps one might view this focus on former East Berlin as a wish for the ‘closed’ and ‘enshrouded’ past, or perhaps a projection of the wronging of spaces and streets, and like the Karl-Marx-Allee, within the new discourse and landscape of post-reunification. Thus, streets and urban spaces situated the narrative of division and identity. Rather than looking at “postmodern interconnectability” and fragmentation of urban space in Berlin, I am interested in the ways in which urban space is inscribed with specific cultural and historical meanings and how active spaces are in identity discourses. According to Clarke, Berlin films of the 1990s portrayed the Deleuzian concept of ‘any-space-whatever’ (which is a way of seeing postmodern landscape as an impersonal, interchangeable, capitalist and dehumanizing space). Clarke interpreted the concept to mean that the city spaces were divided from their social and historical context, and consequently, sites of identification for places belonging for the film’s protagonists.¹ I believe this argument no longer applies to the more recent Berlin films, which could underwrite the changing role of Berlin itself. Throughout the 1990s Berlin was better known as the largest construction site in Europe. By the late 1990s, with the gradual completion of large construction projects and the social move from GDR to Bonn, Berlin began to function as a capital. One of the obvious challenges it faced was finding a way to make its inhabitants of its former divided parts feel like citizens of one nation. A physical and symbolic move from the streets of Berlin (from West to East), restoring its centre and adjacent districts to their pre-war glories. It is perhaps unsurprising that Berliner Landleben Run Run Run (in 1998), Berlin films try to capture glimpses of the city’s eastern topography in a way that re-introduces questions of cultural identity, while breaking with the anonymity and emptiness of spaces interpreted in the Berlin films of the 1990s.

By looking at the portrayal of Karl-Marx-Allee in Goodbye Lulu! and The Lives of Others, I will demonstrate how this particular space is shaped by visual, textual and ideological transition through the narratives of division and reunification. Wolfgang Becker used the Karl-Marx-Allee as a primary location for Goodbye Lulu! (2003) and The Lives of Others (2002). In The Lives of Others, Christiane Kern, from a fatal shock after a long coma; her son, Alex Kerner must keep her from learning that her beloved nation of East Germany as she knew it has disappeared. The apartment building Kern lives in is located at (Behrenstr. 21) right behind the Karl-Marx-Allee. We see documentary footage of a military parade celebrating the 40th anniversary of the GDR (on October 7th, 1989) along Karl-Marx-Allee—East Berlin’s most prominent street. In his film, Becker explores the possibility of a different historical unfolding. The use of documentary footage from the years 1989–90 allows the audience to re-live and reconstruct the events of German reunification, which was a period of intense conflict caused by the new political and social reality in reunified Germany. The film is ultimately about the possibilities of a new construction of identity. Karl-Marx-Allee (the ‘first socialistic street of East Germany,’ built in Stalinist/neoclassical style) is where Becker locates his discourse of unification. The street stands for the intersection of the socialist past and the post-unification present, a place that is open-ended and everyday life. By locating the story of the Kerner family in close proximity to Karl-Marx-Allee, Becker draws our attention not only to the street’s significance to East Berlin before reunification, but also to the city’s relationship with change. Becker makes extensive use of fast-forwarded frame speed to signify how quickly changes occurred in the city during the first months of reunification. One can also argue that the intro of 1990, the film has a strong present-day concern with changes sweeping the city. Just as the changes become increasingly apparent all around Alexanderplatz, Karl-Marx-Allee is also bound to be repopulated with large hotels, restaurants and retail chains. In the face of this eventuality, capturing the street on film can perhaps be seen as an attempt to virtually preserve it.

In The Lives of Others, FlorianHenckel von Donnersmark presents the street as a transitional space that connects the private and public life of the Ramelow family in their ‘first-class’ socialist workers’ domain. In the movie that the public life is ‘killed’ together with socialist topography, mediated to us through this film. If we then juxtapose or superimpose that cinematic image with a different image of Berlin, we can trace the shadow of the past place but at a different time, we begin to see different dimensions of that space and how it exists in time, thereby contributing to the creation of meaning connected with that space. We consider, for example, when Michaelangelo Longo wanders through the city in 1984 in a totalitarian city (layer 1), he is shown the bookshop in the film for the fall of the wall (layer 2), and we may observe as he engages urban background and he interchange his identity (layer 3). Unfortunately, the bookshop has now been revamped of books and is being used as office space, in which itself can function as a sign of that space’s current identity (layer 4). Because cinematically-mediated urban space is communicat ed to us by way of a narrative, which evolves emotional identity, that layer remains the strongest in our perception of space. In addition, it can be said that the street in The Lives of Others can be read as what Joyce Davidson and Christine Milligan call the “emotive spatial (heteronorm),” which states that “emotions are understandable—tresensible—only in the context of particular places.” Furthermore, “place must be felt rather than seen.”² The relationship of a person to space of space emerge only via movements between people and places.”³ In Donnersmark’s film, Berlin becomes a place as it is, a place to beckon to, a place where you feel the presence of Berlin feels and looks real. It invites us to contemplate its topography, its history and its relationship to its people. Thus we perceive the city as a cumulative, multilayered, and fluid creation with a dynamic and complicated urban landscape, structured and manipulated for our perception. Cinematic streets and urban topography caught on film bring particular attention to multiplayer of identity. Since our relationship to the city is always subjective, it is perhaps interesting to ask, what kind of implications do our subjective readings of the city have on our city? On the people who live and work there? And on the people responsible for restructuring and recreating the city? Recent Berlin films engage in a discourse of German identity, precisely because of this reason. One cannot imagine the film as the city, and cinematic space is not a ‘blank and empty postmodern wasteland.”⁴ Rather, the recent filmic representations of Berlin re-establish a cultural context and signification directly connected with the current identity crisis. Reunification has been painted in large strokes as something that needs to be overcome and swept away in our perception of the street, one building at a time). But perhaps we need to take some time to understand the process, which is what the recent Berlin films all have in common. Once the spaces of division have been divided, once the lines are crossed, once the citizenship is lost itself? These films seem to remind us: we move through the city so quickly, that we no longer notice the changes. Certain streets have a physicality, a memory of the old and new. Berlin-Mark-Booxske (as Wesle does in the film), in the same aspect of the apartment block where the Kerner family lived, and where the military parades took place prior to 1989, and to think, what do those spaces mean today?


Notes
1 Andreas Huyssen, Profane Poets: Urban Nakanpolyss and the Politics of Memory (Stanford University Press, 2000), 24
3 Jan Assmann, Religion and Cultural Memory (trans. by Rodney Livingstone, Stanford University Press, 2006), 24
4 Jorg Heise, “Good Circulation,” in Firon (No. 9, April 2003), pp.79-83. ⁵ Moxeal Sekler, TVF Video, “Unlocking the Wall” in German Cinema Since Unification (London: Continuum, 2006), 163.
7 Andreas Huyssen, Profane Poets: Urban Nakanpolyss and the Politics of Memory (Stanford University Press, 2000), 24
8 David Clarke, “In Search of a Home: Filming Post-Unification Berlin,” in cinema 38

9 David Clarke, “In Search of a Home: Filming Post-Unification Berlin,” in cinema 38

10 David Clarke, “In Search of a Home: Filming Post-Unification Berlin,” in cinema 38

11 David Clarke, “In Search of a Home: Filming Post-Unification Berlin,” in cinema 38

12 David Clarke, “In Search of a Home: Filming Post-Unification Berlin,” in cinema 38

13 David Clarke, “In Search of a Home: Filming Post-Unification Berlin,” in cinema 38

14 David Clarke, “In Search of a Home: Filming Post-Unification Berlin,” in cinema 38