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# *Mauerpark: Berlin's gentrifying scene park*

## **ABSTRACT**

*Mauerpark (Karsten, 2011) is a documentary film shot in Berlin's most notorious park in Prenzlauer Berg in the summer of 2009. It portrays diverse protagonists – artists, musicians, activists, performers and visitors – who frequent the park and participate in its array of activities, such as mass karaoke, flea market, outdoor basketball and other recreational sports, performances, arts, music, etc. Through their narratives, the park is presented as the last public space in Prenzlauer Berg that has not yet been completely gentrified and allows for sub- and countercultural, unregulated creativity and leisure. This article examines Karsten's film and the gentrifying landscape of the New Berlin.*

In Berlin, I live near Mauerpark – a stretch of land where the Berlin Wall used to stand. Now there is a flea market. No one knows anymore where exactly the Wall used to stand, left of the flea market or right of the flea market. Even though Mauerpark is mentioned in every city guide for the capital, it offers very little to see. It is not a park, and there is no Wall; it is an invisible sight, typical for Berlin.

(Kaminer 2011: 241)<sup>1</sup>

*Mauerpark (Karsten, 2011) is a documentary film shot in Berlin's most notorious park in Prenzlauer Berg in the summer of 2009. It portrays diverse protagonists – artists, musicians, activists, performers and visitors – who frequent the park and participate in its array of activities, such as mass karaoke, flea market,*

## **KEYWORDS**

Berlin  
post-Wall  
documentary film  
Mauerpark  
gentrification  
urban space  
techno scene

1. Wladimir Kaminer:  
[i]n Berlin wohne ich am Mauerpark, einem Streifen Erde, auf dem früher die Berliner Mauer stand. Dort ist jetzt ein Flohmarkt. Niemand weiß inzwischen mehr, wo die Mauer genau stand, links vom Flohmarkt oder rechts vom Flohmarkt. Der

Mauerpark wird zwar in jedem Reiseführer der Hauptstadt erwähnt, bietet aber wenig Sehenswertes. Er ist kein Park, und es gibt da auch keine Mauer, es ist quasi eine unsichtbare Sehenswürdigkeit, typisch für Berlin.  
(2011: 241, my translation)

outdoor basketball and other recreational sports, performances, arts, music, etc. Through their narratives, the park is presented as the last public space in Prenzlauer Berg that has not yet been completely gentrified and allows for sub- and countercultural, unregulated creativity and leisure. Rather than focusing on spaces, facades, and disappearing traces, Karsten documents the narratives of the inhabitants of the now-gentrified Prenzlauer Berg who frequent the park on a regular basis. However, unlike the creative-class professionals and protagonists portrayed in films such as *In Berlin* (Ballhaus and Cappellari, 2009), *24h Berlin* (Heise, 2009) and *Berlin Song* (Schueppel, 2008), *Mauerpark* (Karsten, 2011) tells the stories of un- or underemployed and retired people, community workers and artists, former punks, international musicians and painters, jugglers, karaoke organizers, local youths, as well as the legendary Techno DJs Tanith and Motte, and the Russian-born author Wladimir Kaminer. The film is a snapshot of the park in the course of one summer with diverse sounds, vignettes, performances and narratives. The structure of the film is constructed from a collection of interviews and images of the park and the various leisurely activities that take place there on the weekends. The film's three-act structure is divided thematically: the first act focuses largely on the history of the park; the second act presents the various activities that sprung up there and attract a variety of artists and musicians; and the third act addresses the discontents, criticisms and longings of the protagonists in light of the future gentrification of the park. This analysis of *Mauerpark's* themes of history, gentrification, and longing focuses on the reactions of Berlin inhabitants to the spatial transformations in the New Berlin and Prenzlauer Berg. While many of the protagonists are critical of the looming gentrification of the park, through their narratives we also get a sense of the various longings associated with the complex re-construction and re-branding of the New Berlin. Karsten's film touches on the themes of spatial transformations, gentrification and nostalgia for the pre-gentrified and pre-reconstructed Berlin of the early 1990s, and offers another glimpse into the elaborate web of Berlin's post-reunification identity mosaic. The film is one of the most illustrative documents to date of the subjective views about the urban re-development, gentrification and its effects on Berlin's inhabitants that reveals a great deal about the ways in which the New Berlin has been transformed and re-branded. By drawing on theoretical work on urban cultural scenes by Will Straw and Alan Blum, this article looks at the ways in which the utopian and nostalgic impulses have been intertwined in the New Berlin and projected onto places such as Mauerpark.

The opening scene presents a view of the park from above the adjacent stadium (Figures 1 and 2). We can make out the Fernsehturm (TV tower) in the



Figures 1 and 2: Film stills: Mauerpark, opening scene, 2011. © Dennis Karsten.



Figures 3 and 4: Film stills: Mauerpark, the stadium behind the park and Wladimir Kaminer, 2011. © Dennis Karsten.

background, but it is blurry – only the centre of the image, the park, is in focus. The first shot shows us the front entrance of the park along Bernauer Straße, the second shows the middle stretch of the park and the third shot shows the back end of the park along Kopenhagener Straße. Each shot is focused only on the centre of the frame. Right away, we get visually drawn into the microcosm of the park – the urban landscape of the New Berlin around it is not the focus of the narrative, but it does symbolically linger in the background and even encroach on the park. Once the setting is established, the camera begins to zoom-in on the people who gradually fill the park and gather around the amphitheatre where the mass karaoke takes place. Here, Karsten presents us with the narratives of Berliners who frequent the park and live in the neighbourhood. The first protagonist, Frank, a retired and formerly unemployed Berliner, is introduced sun bathing in the park. He tells us about the viewing platform that used to stand on the West side of the Wall for people to climb and look over into the East. Right away, we get a historical dimension of this space; as any other place in Berlin, this park has historical significance beyond its multiple present functions. Its history is tied to the Cold War, division, reunification and, finally, to gentrification. The second protagonist, Michael, who used to be a scaffolding construction worker, continues the historical narrative of the park by recalling the border zone and his dismantling of the viewing platforms and throwing the debris into the no-man's-land because he felt angry at being watched by the people on the West side of the Wall.

The third protagonist, Horst, a community worker who clears the garbage in the park, and who used to live in Bernauer Strasse, recalls a person jumping from the roof of his building into the West after the Wall was built, accidentally missing the safety net below. The narrative continues to alternate between the three speakers, connecting their stories into a narrative of the park's history, and locating their trajectories on either side of the Wall.

Then Karsten introduces the comedic perspective of Wladimir Kaminer, who came to Berlin from Moscow right after the Wall fell, settled in Prenzlauer Berg's Schönhauser Allee and has been writing about the city ever since (Figures 3 and 4). He sarcastically comments on Berlin's relationship (or lack thereof) to history:

this town makes nothing of its own history. The Vietnamese, for example, rebuilt and enlarged their war tunnels. Lots of Americans are interested in the details of the Vietnam War. They fly to Vietnam as tourists and want to see the tunnels, which the soldiers from North Vietnam

2. See Kaminer's description of the park in his *Ich bin kein Berliner: Ein Reiseführer für faule Touristen*

Der größte Berliner Grillplatz befindet sich nämlich nicht im Westen, sondern direct vor meinem Fenster and der Grenze zwischen Wedding und Prenzlauer Berg. Eigentlich leben wir hier in einer paradisischen Landschaft, dort, wo früher die Mauer verlief. Heute ist an Stelle des ehemaligen Todesstreifens eine Parkanlage mit mehreren Kinderspielplätzen entstanden. Es gibt also viel Grün vor unserem Haus. Wenn das Wetter gut ist, öffne ich alle Fenster, dann riecht es in der ganzen Wohnung – aber nicht nach Blumen, sondern nach Grillwurst. [...] Ungefähr in der Mitte unseres Grillplatzes verläuft eine unsichtbare Mauer, die West – und Ostgriller voneinander trennt. Die Bewohner aus dem Wedding grillen auf der westlichen Seite des Platzes. Es sind in der Regel große türkische Familien, bestehend aus zwei Männern, fünf Frauen und zehn Kindern. Das Grillen scheint bei den Westgrillern eine heilige Zeremonie zu sein, es gleicht einem Opferfest. [...] Auf der östlichen Seite grillen alte Studenten. Sie versammeln sich auch gerne in großen familienähnlichen Gruppen – fünf Männer,

had dug. But the American tourists don't fit into the tunnels because they were dug for Vietnamese soldiers. So the Vietnamese enlarged and extended them, added snack bars and amusements that the Americans are familiar with, so they wouldn't feel strange underground. And it works! That's the right way to handle the history of one's country! What do the Germans do? They dismantle everything. Throw the stones away, and pretend nothing happened.

(DVD subtitles)

Kaminer's sarcastic comparison lightens the tone of the film and mirrors the humorous tone of his Berlin books, where he often ironizes the process of urban transformation in Berlin since reunification. In his book, *Ich bin kein Berliner: Ein Reiseführer für faule Touristen* (*I'm Not a Berliner: A City Guide for Lazy Tourists*), Kaminer describes Mauerpark as 'the largest grill-site' of Berlin, with unconventional family units, multicultural and diverse characters, and many jugglers (2007: 121–22).<sup>2</sup> Karsten juxtaposes Kaminer's anecdote of 'dismantling' history with the heavy history of division and reunification played out in this part of Berlin. Formerly divided between the Soviet and the French zones, the 'Wall-park' was part of the no-man's-land and the death strip that ran between Prenzlauer Berg and Wedding, established atop the stretch of land formerly designed for the freight trains of Nordbahnhof, which ceased to be operational in 1985.<sup>3</sup> The only remaining trace of division is the brick back-wall that still runs along the stadium and is covered in graffiti and street art. Shortly after reunification, the empty space of the former no-man's-land began to be used by local inhabitants as a public park (similar to the squatters at Potsdamer Platz), and in 1992 the Senate approved the environmental petition to use the space as a park, commissioning the Hamburg landscape architect Gustav Lange with the design. The park was officially opened on 9 November 1994, commemorating the fifth anniversary of the fall of the Wall. After Berlin's 2000 Olympic bid, the Max-Schmeling-Hall sports-centre was built just north of the stadium. Since 2004, the largely abandoned stretch of the park with the former train tracks was taken over by the interim use flea market and food stands. By opening the narrative of the park on a historical note, Karsten demonstrates that Mauerpark is not just any park, but has important ties to the history of division as well as the history of creative subcultures. Simultaneously, Karsten introduces other protagonists who do not have memories or histories of the Wall. For example, Eldar, an Israeli painter who is working on a landscape painting of Mauerpark 'for the second year in a row'; young basketball players Conny, Ali and Omar, who come almost daily to the park and find it safe because 'no one bothers you'; as well as two young female basketball players Eyi and Maike who prefer to be excluded from the basketball court when 'the boys' play to avoid being condescended to because they play 'like girls'. Karsten juxtaposes the narratives of the different generations that frequent the park – the young people who come to play sports and the older people who remember this park before the Wall fell. Through his editing, Karsten weaves their various narratives into a portrait of this urban space that has undergone significant transformations, presenting us with a diverse visual and narrative mosaic.

Following the history of urban division, the film's narrative turns to the years of reunification, as Karsten introduces several members of Berlin's Techno scene, including DJ Tanith, who mentions the 'Twenty Years of Techno' celebration at *Tresor*, and reminds us that

actually, it's 21 years already. Since 1988, there was Acid House; I was a DJ in the *UFO Club*, and then at *Tresor* in 1991. Since the Wall came down, Berlin became a Techno city. And I was there from the beginning.

(DVD subtitles)

In another documentary film, entitled *We Call It Techno* (Sextro and Wick, 2008), Tanith traced the beginning of Berlin's Techno culture to 1990 with the 'Tekknozid' raves that preceded the first 'Mayday', which took place in Berlin in 1991.<sup>4</sup> Another Techno legend, the 'father of the Love Parade'<sup>5</sup> and native West-Berliner Dr Motte (formerly known as DJ Motte), who is now known for 'supporting initiatives to preserve cultural spaces in Berlin' (de Picciotto 2011: 285), refers to the free spaces of the former East Berlin where the Techno scene was born:

we were lucky that we got a second city after the Wall fell. That's why there were so many free spaces, and that's how the Techno scene developed. It was a parallel development, the free spaces, and the newly emerging music.

(Figures 5 and 6) This exploratory time in Berlin's history, which Danielle de Picciotto, the co-founder of the Love Parade and Motte's girlfriend at the time, also referenced in her memoir as a time when Berlin's sub-cultures were forged in its voids and abandoned industrial sites (de Picciotto 2011: 75), has only recently begun to be explored in Berlin films and literature. Within the Berlin documentary canon, the exploration of Berlin's Babylonian sub-cultures can be traced to 2009 – the year that sparked collective reflexivity and examination of reunified identities. Spatial transformations play a particularly important role in the narratives and histories of Berlin's Babylonian years, just as they do in Prenzlauer Berg and Mitte, both of which used to be in the former East and have now been completely gentrified.

The Techno scene emerged out of the liminal spaces of the reunified Berlin just before the re-construction of Mitte and other central districts had begun. As Hito Steyerl demonstrated in her film *Die leere Mitte* (*The Empty Middle* 1998)<sup>6</sup> with the squatters at Potsdamer Platz, and as de Picciotto showed in her memoir, the displacement of the sub-cultural entrepreneurs and artists from Mitte and eventually other central neighbourhoods was a gradual process that coincided with the re-construction, branding and gentrification of the New Berlin.<sup>7</sup> Diedrich Diederichsen, in his 1999 book, *Der lange*

drei Hunde,  
zwei Frauen,  
ein Kind. Ihre  
Grillausstattung  
ist asketisch: ein  
paar Kisten Bier,  
eine Gitarre und  
ein Spielzeuggrill  
für Magersüchtige  
zum Preis von vier  
neunundneunzig.  
Sie sind ganz sicher  
keine Gourmets,  
dafür können  
ihre Frauen alle  
jonglieren.

(2007: 121–22)

3. For more information, see <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mauerpark>. Accessed August 2014.
4. *We Call It Techno* (Sextro and Wick, 2008), <http://documentarystorm.com/we-call-it-techno/>. Accessed August 2014.
5. See Dr Motte's website, <http://www.drmotte.de/xclrmpfst/#2013/01/21/biography/>. Accessed August 2014.
6. *Die leere Mitte*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffg4EafY7al>. Accessed August 2015.
7. This process culminated with the closure and eventual relocations of clubs such as Tresor in Mitte, Kiki Blofeld in Kreuzberg and the closure of Club der Republik in Prenzlauer Berg.



Figures 5 and 6: Film stills: Mauerpark, graffiti-covered back-wall and Dr Motte, 2011. © Dennis Karsten.

8. Wikipedia defines a black hole as 'a region of spacetime from which gravity prevents anything, including light, from escaping' (for more, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black\\_hole](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_hole). Accessed August 2014).

9. Slavko Stefanoski, quoted by Gutmair:

Die Love Parade war ein Traum. Die Menschen saßen wie Blumen auf den Straßen. Es war eine Kultur, ein Traum von einer besseren Welt, durch Internet, durch Frieden, auch Sex. Das klingt vielleicht idiotisch, aber es war eine Bewegung, eine Weltanschauung. Wir haben im Zentrum der Welt gelebt.

(2013: 207, my translation)

*Weg nach Mitte: Der Sound und die Stadt (The Long Way to Mitte: The Sound and the City)* referred to Berlin's Mitte as the centre of the new capital of a new Germany, and at the same time also as the 'black hole of subcultures'.<sup>8</sup> He stated that everything that was created in the post-Wall decade in terms of alternative lifestyles, art, music, fashion, counterculture and political activism, was concentrated around the sub-cultural trend spots and 'electronic utopias' of Berlin (Diederichsen 1999: 3). He described Mitte and Potsdamer Platz of the 1990s as theme-park 'Metropolis' (Diederichsen 1999: 31), while the hopes that had been projected onto the new music that accompanied the urban transformations through the Love Parade and the newly emerging club culture ('the first German night-life scene that was not only connected to the international developments in music, but influenced them') were in many ways attempts at forging a common identity (Diederichsen 1999: 48, 32). Diederichsen takes Motte's link between Techno culture and urban space to another level by connecting it to social and cultural identity construction. This music culture of the Techno scene, according to Diederichsen, aspired to 'reconceptualise the world, without relying on any recognizable sound-references as in the competing hip hop culture' (1999: 33), as well as to break with all established cultures and create radical new beginnings. Diederichsen reminds us that the illusion of this type of new beginning is not only possible in art, but also necessary for the creative imagination, while in politics, it remains rather a far stretch (1999: 33), echoing Brad Prager's assertion that utopian impulses often remain in the aesthetic realm (2010: 360, 380). Diederichsen defines pop-music as a 'cultural space, in which inner states and feelings are translated more directly into recognizable and specifically coded signs', and that 'this process takes place in a public, urban setting' (1999: 54). His analysis of Berlin's era of Techno and new beginnings parallels other descriptions of this time, for example Slavko Stefanoski's descriptions of the Love Parade,

the Love Parade was a dream. The people sat like flowers in the streets. It was a culture, a dream of a better world, through internet, through peace, even sex. Maybe it sounds silly, but it was a movement, a world-view. We lived at the center of the world.<sup>9</sup>

His portrayal of the Love Parade – the Techno scene's most celebrated annual festival – as a dream, a movement and a world-view reveals just how influential and powerful the parallel developments of free spaces and new cultural creativity was at the time. The utopian impulses of the early 1990s evident in Berlin music, art, literature and culture have largely subsided in the New Berlin; however, the need to narrate and document this utopian epoch has only increased.

Despite its lack of order and regulations, de Picciotto described the post-Wall time of the early 1990s as peaceful and marked by a strong sense of community and hopefulness:

not being confined by the usual regulations the residents took over the responsibility of deciding how to go about things and although property was taken over, it was property that had no official owners. [...] The epoch of bedlam after the fall of the Wall was one of the last times in which I experienced true comradeship among a large mass of people, with nobody pushing or enviously watching others, curiosity and

tolerance reigning strong, with a communal sense of having achieved the impossible and helping each other to acclimatize.

(2011: 77)

10. *The City* (Park, 1996) quoted in Burns (2000: 72).

She also described this time as a 'Babylonian state of life' that 'seemed to foster a certain state of mind', and 'in contrast to what advertising agencies preach, [Berlin was] about breaking down boundaries, building new bridges, discovering something untouched, unnamed, unpredictable', and attracting people who 'were interested in nonconformity' (de Picciotto 2011: 261). This is one of the main distinctions between the inhabitants of post-Wall Berlin and those of the New Berlin, where very little is left that can be described as nonconforming. Her claim echoes Robert Park's notion that 'the city is a state of mind. [...] The city is not merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the vital processes of the people who compose it'.<sup>10</sup> Berlin's post-Wall (Babylonian) spaces had a powerful and lasting effect precisely because they also represented conceptual voids that could be filled with creative ideas of individuals and artistic groups whose common interest at the time was centred on nonconformity. This emotional composition of empty urban spaces is at the heart of what I call 'nostalgia for Babylon' – it is not so much the disappearance and transformation of the physical spaces themselves that provokes longing, but rather the 'states of mind', the utopian possibilities, and visions of future determination that were projected onto these spaces and voids, which now generate nostalgia.

At the same time as the creativity and camaraderie developed in the 1990s, as de Picciotto described, Berlin was also being transformed by investors who 'decided that it was time for the city to get rid of its uncomfortable past' (2011: 159). This echoes Kaminer's sarcastic remarks about the disposal and dismantling of historical traces. In the film Kaminer adds,

what I found here was a kind of anarchy, where the state was stepping back, and people were either doing nothing or building a new, alternative blueprint for their life. Huge empty spaces developed out of the collapse of the system and the fall of the Wall. That's Mauerpark.

Kaminer's portrayal of the Babylonian Berlin echoes Dimitri Hegemann's description in *Sub Berlin – The Story of Tresor* (Künzel, 2009) of the early 1990s and the anarchic creativity sparked in the voids and abandoned spaces of the former East Berlin. Here Kaminer equates Mauerpark with the freedom culture of Berlin's Babylonian voids. Moreover, creating alternative blueprints for life is a highly creative enterprise and usually happens after revolutions, social or individual upheavals and emotional transformations. Thus the artistic and entrepreneurial creativity spurred by the fall of the Wall is perhaps one of the most powerful transformative forces in the cultural history of contemporary Berlin, generating new directions in music (Techno), film (*Berliner Schule*), art, fashion, architecture, entertainment, etc. Following Kaminer's description of Mauerpark at that time, another protagonist, Sylvio, explains the notoriety of the park during its early years:

in the late 1990s Mauerpark was a notorious place, always in the newspapers, and the police was always here, to bring order. *Walpurgis Night* riots were also notorious, which now quieted down. Before, it was survival of the fittest. No one really wanted to come here anymore.

11. The New Yorker Ralph Martin, who moved to the 'creative capital of hipness' (2009: 13) of the New Berlin for love and wrote his book *Ein Amerikaner in Berlin: Wie ein New Yorker lernte, die Deutschen zu lieben*, described his first impressions of Prenzlauer Berg punks as follows:

Die erste Strassenszene, die mir auffiel, war eine Horde Punks mit Unmengen Piercings, die an der Ecke Eberswalder Strasse und Schönhauser Allee an einer roten Ampel standen und geduldig warteten, bis es grün wurde. Auch das war neu für mich: In New York gab es längst keine Horden von Punks mehr, und niemand, wirklich niemand – und am allerwenigsten einer von den paar übrig gebliebenen Punks – blieb an einer roten Ampel stehen.

(2009: 14)

Especially not the people who newly moved here, and there were conflicts of interests. Now it has all blended in.

The gradual tapering off of the anarchic energy and violence of the early years can also be seen in the second act of the film, when Karsten introduces Olli, a former punk who now teaches juggling workshops for kids and adults. Through the narratives in the first act of the film, the protagonists present the different transformations of the park and by extension also of Berlin since the fall of the Wall. These transformations were not merely topographical, but social and cultural as well. The first act concludes with visual vignettes of people dancing to hand-drum beats (much like at the tam-tams in Montreal); the basketball players leave the court as the dusk sets in, and we see evening and night shots of the park, fire jugglers and musicians. This first visual interlude is followed by the images of a sunrise, shot in time-lapse photography.

The second act moves thematically from the history of the park to focusing on the diverse artists, performers and musicians, their activities in and around the park, as well as the space and culture of the park as a scene (Figures 7 and 8). Narratively and chronologically, the second act moves the stories of the protagonists from Berlin's past to its present. We see the flea-market vendors arrive and set up their stands. Several street artists are covering rocks with golden foil. We see jugglers, a punk-couple kissing and a bagpiper, before being introduced to Olli, the former punk who tells us: 'I'm usually the first one here! I came to Berlin in 1980. I'm an original punk. I came for squatting and the music. Now I hold workshops for kids and youth, teach them juggling and a summer school program'. Olli self-mythologizes his identity as the 'original punk', taking us back to a time even before the Techno culture emerged, to the days of Punk culture and squats, all of which has now been incorporated into and sub-contained by the creative economy and branding mythology of the New Berlin and the gentrified Prenzlauer Berg.<sup>11</sup> Karsten then introduces us to Leona, Tommy and Natty, the English-speaking fuck-for-forests activists, who fundraise to preserve the environment by inviting people to send 'naked photos or sex photos, or videos' for their website, and are 'looking for sexy people in the park to talk to and to flirt with'. Despite its gentrified appearance, the New Berlin, is still, somewhere at its heart, the 'Hauptstadt des Hardcore' ('the capital of hard-core'), as Nils Minkmar put it in Claudius Seidl's 2003 anthology (2003: 27). Simultaneously, we are shown Dr Motte's turn-table-sign that reads 'Mauerpark is our park', while he plays electronic music in



Figures 7 and 8: Film stills: Mauerpark, punks and jugglers, 2011. © Dennis Karsten.

the park and people dance in the middle of the day. Punk jugglers, anarchic environmentalists and Techno activists are all part of Mauerpark's bohemian imaginary and its scene.

As part of an interdisciplinary research project entitled 'The Culture of Cities' that focused on Toronto, Montreal, Berlin and Dublin, Alan Blum and Will Straw developed new ways of theorizing urban (sub)cultures in terms of scenes. In his 2004 article on 'Cultural Scenes', Will Straw interpreted the notion of scenes 'to account for the loose boundaries which surround urban cultural activity and the complex relationships of this activity to broader patterns of social life within cities' (2004: 422). He examines cultural activities such as music, which he believes 'do not simply inhabit scenes, but work upon the social and institutional foundations of cities so as to produce distinctive complexes of knowledge and behaviour'. He noted that,

*Scene* designates particular clusters of social and cultural activity without specifying the nature of the boundaries which circumscribe them. Scenes may be distinguished according to their location, the genre of cultural production which gives them coherence or the loosely defined social activity around which they take shape. *Scene* invites us to map the territory of the city in new ways.

(Straw 2004: 412, original emphasis)

Berlin's Mauerpark can be described as a locational scene, frequented by different members of its various cultural, artistic and musical scenes, as well as by newcomers and tourists. Furthermore, Straw found that 'the most commonly identified scenes are those associated with music, for a variety of reasons. The production and consumption of music lend themselves more easily to a mobile urban sociability than does involvement in other cultural forms' (2004: 413). Straw's analysis of music scenes lends itself not only to understanding the role of (Techno) music in post-Wall Berlin, but also to the significance of cultural trend-spots such as Mauerpark – a meeting place for artists and musicians from the Punk, Techno and contemporary music scenes (which, just like the New Berlin itself, are very internationalized). Much like Montreal's disco culture of the 1970s, that according to Straw 'was a *scene* in part because of the intense public theatricality that came to surround it', and because it 'produced new forms of cultural brokering, small-scale entrepreneurship and collaboration within social and professional networks that took shape on the fringes of the mainstream music industry' (2004: 418), so too was Berlin's Techno culture of the 1990s marked by theatricality and performance (especially during the Love Parade), as well as by cultural brokering. Karsten evokes the entrepreneurial and performative spirit of the Techno era throughout the film. Presenting Mauerpark as a scene, which not only contains historical significance, but also the heritage of cultural and subcultural scenes through his various and diverse protagonists, allows him to craft a more detailed portrait of this space that is undergoing continuous transformation.

Music plays a key role in Karsten's film, mediating not only the diverse sounds and music genres experienced in the park, but also contextualizing, complementing and even guiding the narratives of the protagonists. The whole soundtrack is composed by the international musicians who regularly



Figures 9 and 10: Film stills: Mauerpark, park as scene and the Israeli musician Gabriel, 2011. © Dennis Karsten.

12. Micha Schmidt:

Mein Berlin. Stadt  
der Süchte. Immer  
wieder komme ich  
zurück. Sehnsucht.  
Nach der  
Anonymität. Nach  
dem versteckten  
Sex. Nach den  
Menschen im  
Kaufhausgedränge,  
dem ich immer  
wieder entfliehe.  
Nach den alten  
Häusern im  
Prenzlauer Berg,  
nach der anderen  
Art zu leben...  
(1999: 150, my  
translation)

perform in the park (Figures 9 and 10). We are introduced to Gabriel, a musician from Tel-Aviv, who performs in Mauerpark because ‘you can’t find a job in Berlin as a foreigner’. He resembles a modern-day hipster-punk, with his asymmetrical haircut, piercings and large thick-framed glasses. He is a singer-songwriter, who performs to smaller audiences because he cannot compete with the bands that play with amplifiers in the park, and sings politically charged songs. Gabriel is a freelance musician, rather than a member of the institutionally employed creative class, as some of the protagonists of *In Berlin* (2009). If anything, he is a creative member of Berlin’s contemporary music scene, and as Straw noted, ‘scenes take shape, much of the time, on the edges of cultural institutions which can only partially absorb and channel the clusters of expressive energy which form within urban life’ (2004: 416). Karsten’s film portrays the international musicians who are part of Mauerpark’s still-independent and still-ungentrified scene, and incorporates their music into the film’s soundtrack, thereby distinguishing them from the members of the gainfully employed creative classes portrayed in *In Berlin* (2009). Karsten also introduces Joe, the outdoor Karaoke organizer from Dublin and a former bike courier, who attracts thousands of people to Mauerpark on the weekends to sing Karaoke at the open amphitheatre (nicknamed the Bear Pit) in the middle of the park. Throughout the remainder of the film, Karsten continues to introduce various musicians, demonstrating just how international the independent music scene of Berlin has become (as documented in *Sehnsucht Berlin – The City Named Desire* [Zach, 2009]), and illustrating that by 2011 the New Berlin has indeed been transformed into the ‘Berlinternational’ city that the urban marketing campaigns proclaimed it to be.

At the same time, Karsten presents Fabian, a graffiti artist, who is creating street art on the brick wall of the park and informs us that ‘if you’re lucky the graffiti will stay for a week, if you’re not lucky only a day’; and Iban, who after talking to a Venezuelan junkie, states, ‘this is what Berlin is like. How many damaged people are we in Berlin?’ Iban and the junkie are also part of the yet-un-gentrified Mauerpark (Figures 11 and 12). These protagonists echo Micha Schmidt’s description of the city in his short story, ‘Steffen geht über die Schönhauser’ (‘Steffen Walks Across Schönhauser’) (1999), where he describes Berlin as a city of addictions and longings:

my Berlin. City of addictions. I keep coming back to it. Longing. For anonymity. For the hidden sex. For the people crowding in the shopping-centers that I constantly try to escape. For the old buildings in Prenzlauer Berg, for another way of living.<sup>12</sup>



Figures 11 and 12: Film stills: *Mauerpark*, the fence separating the two sides of the park and Iban, 2011. © Dennis Karsten.

This mixture of addictions and longings for nonconformity and new ways of living is particularly characteristic of the Babylonian spirit celebrated in post-Wall Berlin. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s Berlin was able to accommodate such longing – perhaps more than any other European city – creating its sub-cultural scenes, its Babylonian mythology, as well as the expectations that the possibilities of forging new ways of living will always be available despite the dictates of market economy. *Mauerpark*, especially in its third act, demonstrates what happens when these expectations of nonconformity and freedom are increasingly denied. The second act of the film concludes and transitions into the third act by way of a silent visual interlude, where the park is shown empty of people in the early morning.

The third and final act of the film focuses on gentrification of Prenzlauer Berg and the New Berlin, and the accompanying discontent and longing expressed by various protagonists. This act takes us from the present of the park's vibrant cultural scenes to its approaching over-gentrified future. The third act begins with a segment about garbage that overflows the park bins in the mornings. We see birds eating garbage, and garbage collectors come and get to work. Horst, the community worker who was introduced at the very beginning of the film, explains his job of clearing the park of garbage, and that he sometimes finds people sleeping in the park. Then Karsten shows different protagonists reflect on how clean or dirty the park is, and we are introduced to Joyce, a young woman, who describes Prenzlauer Berg as 'tot-sanier' ('gentrified to death'), and states that she likes that at least Mauerpark is still a bit dirty. Another female protagonist, Nada, notes: 'What I like about Berlin is that it is not as polished as Munich or other cities. I find that totally boring. That's why people come here because Berlin isn't boring' (DVD subtitles). The protagonists' remarks reflect the urban transformations that several Berlin authors have also observed in their books. For example, Annett Gröschner, a native of Prenzlauer Berg, described the difference between the former East and West Berlin neighbourhoods, and the transformations in Prenzlauer Berg as follows:

at Savignyplatz [in Schöneberg], I still felt as if the Wall had just collapsed and I had come from the East for a visit. Although in the meantime, Kollwitzplatz [in Prenzlauer Berg] doesn't look any different, but I always remember my mother's warnings, when as a teenager I painted my nails red – one first has to clean out the dirt from under the nails. Kollwitzplatz is a little like dirty, but red-painted finger nails,

13. Annett Gröschner:

Am Savignyplatz  
fühlte ich mich  
heute noch so,  
als sei gerade die  
Mauer aufgegangen  
und ich käme aus  
dem Osten zu  
Besuch. Zwar sieht  
es mittlerweile am  
Kollwitzplatz auch  
nicht anders aus,  
aber der erinnert  
mich immer an  
die Mahnungen  
meiner Mutter,  
wenn ich mir als  
Teenager die Finger  
rot lackierte – man  
muss vorher den  
Dreck unter den  
Nägeln entfernen.  
Der Kollwitzplatz  
ist ein bisschen  
so wie dreckige,  
aber rotlackierte  
Fingernägel, und  
meine einzige  
Hoffnung ist, dass  
niemand auf die  
Idee kommt, ihn  
ein für allemal  
rauszuputzen. Der  
Savignyplatz ist  
lackierter Nagel  
ohne Dreck.

(2008: 147, my  
translation)

14. Anselm Neft:

Ich öffne  
das Bier und  
beginne meinen  
Frühschoppen.  
Neben mir höre  
ich, wie eine  
junge Mutter mit  
Handtasche einer  
anderen jungen  
Frau erzählt,  
dass sie gleich  
mit Johanna zum  
Dinkelkeksebacken  
im Bioladen müsste,  
sie aber bereits  
jetzt gestresst  
sei, weil danach  
noch der Termin  
beim Licht-Gestalt-  
Therapeuten und  
morgen schon das  
Früchte-Wichteln  
in der Kita am  
Kollwitzplatz auf  
dem Programm  
stünde.

(2010: 24, my  
translation)

and I only hope that no one intends to clean it out once and for all. Savignyplatz is a manicured nail without dirt.<sup>13</sup>

The transformation and gentrification of Prenzlauer Berg, its takeover by yuppies, *Schwaben* and young families has been well documented in contemporary literature and media. The urban transformation that Gröschner notes at Kollwitzplatz reveals a sense of resistance that echoes Nast's and Selig's notions of identity loss due to gentrification, as well as Joyce and Nada's comments in the film about liking Berlin precisely because it is not as clean and gentrified as other German cities. In a more ironic tone and with less attachment to the neighbourhood, the Bonn-born comedic author Anselm Neft in his book, *Die Lebern der Anderen: Geschichten aus der Großstadt (The Livers of Others: Stories from the Capital)* satirized to what extent Prenzlauer Berg has become the centre of gentrified yuppie bohemia, writing,

I open the beer and begin my morning drinking ritual. Beside me, I hear a young mother with a handbag telling another young mother that she has to leave now to take Johanna to bake spelt cookies at the organic store, but that she is already stressed now because afterwards she has an appointment with the light-styling-therapist, and tomorrow she's planned fruit dehydration at the daycare at Kollwitzplatz.

(2010: 24)<sup>14</sup>

Neft ridicules the mundane daily reality of the new inhabitants who have populated the re-constructed, re-branded and gentrified Prenzlauer Berg and New Berlin, and have made the original inhabitants feel like they no longer recognize or belong in their former neighbourhoods. The stress factors that the young mother lists in Neft's narrative are precisely what Sebastian Lehmann, called 'gentrification of lifestyle'<sup>15</sup> in his introduction to *Lost in Gentrification* (Lehmann and Surmann 2012: 16). Karsten is one of the first filmmakers to address these issues of gentrification in a documentary film. His protagonists do not hold back their frustration and anger at the transformations that took place over the past several years and the continuing sweeping changes that are planned for the park, the neighbourhood and the city.

Because throughout most of its Babylonian years Berlin was bankrupt, as de Picciotto noted in her memoir, and 'could not afford the extensive overhaul it was going through', the city officials had to come up with ways of attracting outside investors. As a result, in the course of re-branding and re-constructing the New Berlin, de Picciotto and other locals have expressed their discontent with the ways their city has been transformed:

financiers coming in from the outside had decided what the capital should look like, and, using its artistic reputation, created by countless unsubsidized, non-academic artists, they decided it could be turned into a reputable money maker, offering sightseers a decent level of comfort combining with the possibility of seeing 'wild' artists, historic sites, or experiencing adventure in underground clubs. I felt we had become an urban safari tour advertised by travel agencies, exploited by restaurant chains, real estate, beer labels, cigarette brands, or advertising companies.

(2011: 236)

In a way, the Schaustelle marketing campaigns and events were not much different from the viewing platforms set up to peek over the Wall into the East, spectacularizing the Babylonian sub-cultures and scenes, much like the West used to spectacularize the East. As gentrification projects continue to sweep over the city, the anti-gentrification protests increase (Karsten included footage of a protest against the gentrification of Mauerpark in the deleted scenes on his DVD), precisely because of the encroaching nature of the New Berlin's mainstream landscape of power. In Karsten's film, Bernd, a city official, explains the official land-development plans for and around Mauerpark:

the 'Lange' plan for the park was drawn up in 1993. Half of it has been completed. The fence marks the center line. That's where the Wall was, that's the border of the borough. That's where the park ends now. On the other side the planning continues, and should have been completed by now. It's the same size again as the Mauerpark now. Another six hectares. [...] Vivico's plan is to create as many building plots as possible. Now there is a kind of compromise, where most of Mauerpark as it was originally planned will be realized, nonetheless there'll still be a wall of buildings, fencing the park in. This would turn the park into a space for the apartment owners. That would make it into a traditional park, in the classical sense, quiet, green, and unspectacular.

(DVD subtitles)

This urban development and gentrification plan would mean the end of the park as we know it, and would transform the neighbourhood even further into a residential enclave for Swabian and western creative classes.<sup>16</sup> Bernd's account is interjected by Dr Motte's explanation of Berlin's current economic and real-estate development practices:

this 'free culture' that developed here, with the bars, cafes, market, and free space, is about to be built over. It's typical of a time when Berlin was still uniting, but now they are looking for ways to minimize costs. Public spaces cost the city money. So they don't let alternative culture remain, and instead sell the land to investors. Multinationals like finance companies or property funds, and all they care about is shareholder's dividends. They want to make profit and have the shares rise. These investors search the world for places with low property prices, invest in them, and after ten years sell them for profit.

Like many other creative members of Berlin's sub-cultures and scenes, Motte and de Picciotto have first-hand experiences witnessing the urban spaces (like Mauerpark) and cultural scenes (like the Love Parade) that they helped develop being sold to international investors. To further demonstrate the growing discontent with Berlin's gentrification practices in the film, Karsten cuts to Nada, who explains that 'all around where the Wall used to be, wonderful open places developed, where it's relaxed because it was the green space of the no-man's-land. All that is being greedily chewed up and I find that bullshit'. Joyce adds, '[t]hey have to build over everything, don't they? I'm not really surprised. It's a pity. I'm curious about what will happen but I think the money will rule. It's probably all fixed already'. Nada concludes, 'I'd really like to throw some Molotov cocktails. I'd really like to get people

15. 'Einleitung: we built this city, we built this city on rock'n'roll' (Lehmann and Surmann 2012: 16).
16. Felix Huby, in his short story 'Ein Blick zurück aus Berlin' (2011: 106), noted that Swabians are the second largest 'ethnic minority' (170,000) in Berlin after the Turks.



Figures 13 and 14: Film stills: Mauerpark, musical interlude and views of the voids in the park, 2011.  
© Dennis Karsten.

to destroy the construction vehicles when they start building'. The off-camera interviewer asks her, 'You're quite radical aren't you?' She replies,

what they're doing is also radical. There are enough empty office spaces in Berlin, like the stupid *Allianz Building* at Treptower Park. It's empty, there's no one in it! There are certainly a lot of empty office buildings on Ku'damm too.

Karsten's editing between Nada's and Joyce's remarks illustrates just how impatient Berlin's inhabitants have become with its re-construction and re-development. This segment is followed by several other protagonists discussing the future construction of condos around the park.

At this point in the film, we have another brief visual and musical interlude in the narrative (Figures 13 and 14). But rather than signifying the beginning of another act or a thematic switch in the narrative, it is a deliberate slowing down and pausing in the narrative to allow the audience to digest what the protagonists are agonizing about, and to experience the park as it is, before it too will be transformed by gentrification. Robert Lee Fardoe's melancholy song 'Moan' plays over images of the 'other side' of the park where the future condos shall be built. Karsten shows us the un-groomed parts of the park: the road that separates the two sides, empty lots and spaces, former train tracks with trees and grass growing over them – similar to the ones Peter Schneider draws attention to in *In Berlin* – a fence, bikes left in the grass, an old bathtub and abandoned lawn chair. Karsten also shows us close-ups of nature that has reclaimed this urban space – a butterfly on a flower, bees, etc. Structurally, this interlude breaks the narrative three-act structure of the film; it pauses the narrative in the middle of the third act to allow for an emotional and contemplative pause. While the tone of the film remains objective and observational, this visual and musical interlude can be described as nostalgic, melancholy and contemplative. The camera sweeps over the park spaces that are soon to be transformed, after several of the interviewed protagonists express their worry that the property adjacent to Mauerpark has been sold to developers and voice their fear that the park's 'free culture' is in danger of disappearance, as it has been in the rest of the now-gentrified Prenzlauer Berg. The British musician, Robert Lee Fardoe, who often performs in the park, provided the opening music at the start of the film, as well as the song that plays as the camera sweeps over that un-developed section of the park, allowing the audience a moment of

contemplation about the park's, and Berlin's, future. The music is fitting, and deliberately evokes an emotional response, a certain longing, a consciousness of time or a longing for the ability to make time stand still and prevent immanent changes. Through this non-diegetic music, the viewer is invited to engage with this space on an emotional level.

The film narrative resumes with Joyce revealing more about the new life in Prenzlauer Berg: 'I find there are not enough spaces in Prenzlauer Berg for colourful people like me. I often feel swamped by children', echoing Neft's mocking description of the new inhabitants of Kollwitzplatz. DJ Tanith adds:

It was clear that things would change in the East. But that it would hit Prenzlauer Berg of all places, in this Disneyfied way, it didn't have to be like this. But the SO36 club in Kreuzberg is also on the verge of being shut down.

Equating Prenzlauer Berg's gentrification with Disneyfication echoes Sharon Zukin's conceptualization of the landscape of power and its encroachment on the central neighbourhoods' liminal spaces (1991). Nada continues to express her dissatisfaction with the transformations in the New Berlin, claiming that 'the people who used to be squatters and created the subculture, the ones who made the whole thing so interesting in the first place and brought so much life, they have all moved out'. From her comments it becomes apparent that while the Berlin Senate has been busy attracting investors, re-branding the city and inviting the creative classes to 'be Berlin', the Babylonian creativity that sparked Berlin's cultural revival has been gradually de-placed from Mitte and Prenzlauer Berg. In one of the concluding scenes of the film, the protagonist Sylvio provides a counter-argument, saying that

now I like Berlin again, there were a few years where I wasn't sure, but in the last 5–6 years, since Berlin became an open, worldly city with a metropolitan character, I find it more pleasant again. Multilingual, multi-layered, a nice meeting point. Berlin is inexpensive, fun, has free spaces, and the park is one such place within the city.

While Sylvio's comment celebrates the transformations that took place in Berlin, he also reminds us of the value of openness and free spaces which Mauerpark represents. Karsten chose to end his park narrative on a positive and hopeful note. The closing sequence of the film shows people in the park,



Figures 15 and 16: Film stills: Mauerpark, closing scenes of music and concerts, 2011. © Dennis Karsten.

making music, lounging, standing, dancing, walking, hugging, singing. The evening falls, the night comes. Music and concerts continue to play late into the night throughout the park, perhaps being the strongest social glue of its current cultural scene (Figures 15 and 16).

Janet Ward's description of the park in many ways compliments Karsten's film:

today the Mauerpark's reputation as a *Subkultur*-outlet for Berlin youth is enhanced by its very own graffiti wall (remnant of the former Hinterlandmauer, or inner Wall). At night it hosts unofficial parties, bonfires, grills, beer-drinking and drug trades, activities that the police have had trouble controlling. Its very imperfections and ugliness, according to the tidy standards of what constitutes appropriate urban public space for the boosterist New Berlin, contribute to its alternative value [...]. Precisely because the Wall Park is a landscape 'extension of the no-man's-land character of the death strip' it has installed a sense of the uncomfortable past in the present that has so often been lacking in the city's other new projects. The mutable border, then, can make instability and ugliness into something positive.

(2011: 128–29)

Ward's understanding of the park is heavily rooted in its anarchist, alternative, drug-dealing, garbage-filled and unsafe past, as seen from its gentrified, post-Babylonian present. In Karsten's portrait of Mauerpark, it stands as a microcosm for post-Wall Berlin and its diverse, eccentric, creative and increasingly international inhabitants. The viewer is left to contemplate the ephemerality of Berlin's open spaces and their looming uncertainty in the future. As Alan Blum noted,

the aura of impermanence suggests that the city is always on the verge of losing itself and, so, can always be approached as if poised for an ethical collision over the question of who and what it is, that is, by the question of its identity.

(2003: 235)

Questions of Berlin's new identity are at the core of much of its cultural production precisely because of its rapid transformation and redevelopment. This process has been accompanied by a sense of longing and nostalgia, or what Ward referred to as 'inverted topophilia':

the naked, ruined tracks of land that the dismantled Wall first revealed to the New Berlin amounted to a visually powerful rendering of the psycho-spatial cost of the nation's unity. These voids certainly served to inspire the reunified city's obsession with building and becoming, but their first effect was that of creating an inverted topophilia. Reunified Berlin's obsession with the un-built and the possibilities but not the results of the re-built became a selling-point. It is the spatial version of the *arm aber sexy* (poor but sexy) tagline for the city uttered by [former] Mayor Klaus Wowereit. These disused spaces were not valued as sites of mourning or loss; they gained in significance as sites of play, transformation, danger, and discovery.

(2011: 118)

Through the various protagonists of *Mauerpark*, we get different histories and different practices of space, as well as different longing associated with urban space. This is what Ward means by 'topophilia' and the possibilities of un-built spaces.

Karsten documented Mauerpark as a vernacular place, threatened by the eradication of nonconformity in the new landscape of power, but as yet at a high-point of its un-regulated scene culture. As Blum and Straw have shown, urban scenes are characterized by their theatricality, transgression, spectacle, performance, ephemerality and impermanence (Blum 2003: 233). Through the protagonists' narratives we also get to understand the emotional composition of urban spaces, the disappearance and transformation of which provoke longing, contestations and nostalgia. If we interpret nostalgia as a way of coping with unprecedentedly fast-paced change, as well as a reflection on the present, then it becomes apparent that *Mauerpark* has documented the various ways in which this process has played out in post-Wall Berlin. The film combines the themes of Berlin's transformation, gentrification and the ephemerality of its spaces, and calls for a more mindful treatment of public space. It focuses on the park's past (the history of the park) and future (the gentrification and condo-development around the park), which in turn enhances our understanding of its present, and leaves us conscious of its complex real and imaginary terrain.

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### **SUGGESTED CITATION**

- Sark, K. (2017), 'Mauerpark: Berlin's gentrifying scene park', *Journal of European Popular Culture*, 8:1, pp. 39–56, doi: [10.1386/jepc.8.1.39\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jepc.8.1.39_1)

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