



Post-Wall Berlin Documentary Films

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The Berlin documentary film corpus produced after the Fall of the Wall in 1989 deserves closer attention and examination. The body of films that take post-Wall Berlin as their primary focus has grown exponentially since 1999, and then again after 2009. This can be explained by the changes in the city's urban-economic development, when the very act of documenting became a way of making sense of the rapid changes and disappearances witnessed during that time. Documenting can be seen as a way of engaging, preserving, questioning, affirming and even mourning the transformations evident in the New Berlin. I examine post-Wall Berlin documentary films because they have an immediacy of representation and engagement with the city and its various neighbourhoods, as well as its rapid transformations, which very few feature films and literary works provide. Moreover, many of the documentaries produced after 2009 display elements of an emerging nostalgia for the pre-gentrified Berlin of the 1990s – what I call 'nostalgia for Babylon'. Thus, by looking at documentary films and their ways of representation and documentation, we can analyse Berlin's cultural history or urban-economic development and detect certain patterns, such as nostalgic sentiments, unfulfilled desires and longings, unprocessed feelings of loss, as well as elements of future-determination and power struggles that help us understand the underlying forces that make up the New Berlin.

History and Theory of Documentaries

But before we turn to examining these Berlin documentaries, let us briefly look back at the history and theory of the documentary film genre. Carl R. Plantinga traced the origins of the documentary genre to 1914 in his study, *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film* (1997), explaining that '[t]he term *documentaire* was widely used in France in the 1920s', while

Edward S. Curtis used the terms 'documentary material' and 'documentary works' in relation to moving picture nonfictions as early as 1914. Nevertheless, John Grierson is widely thought to have been the first to use the term 'documentary' in English in relation to Robert Flaherty's *Moana* (1926) in 1926. (Plantinga 1997: 26)

According to the British film producer John Grierson's definition, 'a documentary was meant to describe things from actual life objectively and realistically – as opposed to the subjectivity of films that represent a fictitious reality' (van den Heuvel 2005:

108). Grierson described documentary film as 'the creative treatment of actuality', and summarized his theory in the so-called 'first principles', claiming that the documentary must be 'dramatic, not merely instructional, in order to promote a common pattern of thought and feeling among audience members', and insisting that the documentary 'must have a social purpose, educating the masses and enabling them to better understand their place in society and the public institutions that organize their lives' (Plantinga 1997: 27). As Lewis Jacobs summarized in his work, *The Documentary Tradition* (1979),

What has come to be called 'documentary' developed slowly over a period of almost thirty years, from 1894 to 1922, emerging finally as an original model distinct from all other types of motion pictures. The documentary film came to be identifiable as a special kind of picture with a clear social purpose, dealing with real people and real events, as opposed to staged scenes of imaginary characters and fictional stories of the studio-made pictures. (Jacobs 1979: 2)

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Almost immediately after its beginnings, city films began to emerge in the 1920s, with films such as *Man with a Movie Camera* (1927), *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (*Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*, 1927) and *À Propos de Nice* (1930), whose 'expressivity' and 'artfulness as a function of its purely photographic properties was now allied with the possibilities of editing to create explosive effects – cerebral as well as visceral' (Renov 1993: 33). After Walter Ruttmann commissioned an original music score for his *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* from the composer Edmund Meisel, the concept of the 'city symphonies' emerged, which combined the 'industrial enterprise of the modern city with the classical musical form that demonstrates the capacity to organize and coordinate many individual expressions into a whole' (Aufderheide 2007: 13–14). Ruttmann's film is divided into five acts, chronicling the life of the city in the course of 24 hours. It starts with an image of water, followed by a train speeding through the countryside, approaching Berlin (we see a sign marking 15km to the city) and arriving at Anhalter Bahnhof (we see another sign announcing the destination: Berlin). The film shows different locations, as well as people in various stages of work, leisure and mobility. The final scenes of *Berlin's* nightlife segment conclude with fireworks, and the final image of the film is the Funkturm radio tower with a searchlight illuminating the sky over the city. To this day, film-makers documenting Berlin often use elements that Ruttmann introduced, such as the 24-hour format (appropriated by the makers of *24h Berlin* in 2009) or the city symphony genre (*Berlin: Sinfonie einer Großstadt*, 2002), observing 'real people and real events' (Jacobs 1979: 2), to understand the rhythm, the diversity and the lifestyle patterns of the city.

By the 1960s, a new style of film-making emerged called *cinéma-vérité*, also known as 'observational cinema' or 'direct cinema', which deviated from the practices set in motion by the documentary founders, and broke dramatically with 'then-standard documentary practices of advance planning, scripting, staging, lighting, re-enactment, and interviewing', as well as the use of the large, heavy 35mm equipment, in favour of the lighter 16mm technology, made more popular and accessible after its military deployment during the war (Aufderheide 2007: 44). Patricia Aufderheide summarizes the advantages of the new film style, highlighting that

Cinema verité filmmakers took lighter, 16mm equipment into places that had not been seen before – the interiors of ordinary people's homes, on the dance floor with teenagers, back rooms in political campaigns, backstage

with celebrities, on line with strikers, inside mental hospitals – and filmed what they saw. They took huge quantities of filmed footage into editing rooms, and through editing they found a story to tell. They used the innovation of sync (for 'synchronized') sound – for the first time they could record image and sound simultaneously in 16mm – to overhear ordinary conversation, and they mostly did away with narration. (Aufderheide 2007: 445)

Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz noted in their book, *Observational Cinema* (2009), that

the observational turn was part of a more general shift in postwar cinema. Beginning with Italian neorealism and continuing in subsequent decades as a central tenet of documentary practice, the commitment to observation was counter-posed to what had gone before. (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009: x)

They explain that the term 'observational cinema' appeared during the 1970s, emerging from a dialogue between anthropologists and documentary film-makers (2009: ix); namely, in 1972, when the anthropologist Roger Sandall introduced the term 'observational' as a description of a certain kind of documentary. But it was with the publication of an article by Colin Young three years later that 'observational cinema' was coined to designate 'films that represented a significant break with earlier anthropological approaches toward the recording of social and cultural practice' (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009: 3). Sandall wrote that to 'observe' involved 'attending to the world – actively, passionately, concretely – while, at the same time, relinquishing the desire to control, circumscribe or appropriate it' (quoted in Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009: 5). In her study on the *New Documentary* (2006), Stella Bruzzi claims that, with the introduction of reality TV shows, such as *Big Brother*, which use observational techniques differently than traditional documentaries because of their 'emphasis on entertainment, fast editing and the intercutting between alternate stories or personalities, and a prominent voice-over', observational documentary 'has not been rendered obsolete by the advent of more interactive and reflexive modes of non-fiction television and film' (Bruzzi 2006: 120).

Modes of Documentaries

Before discussing Berlin documentary films in greater detail, it is also useful to examine the established modes of documentaries. Bill Nichols



identified six principal modes of documentary film-making. Firstly, he lists the 'poetic mode', which stresses visual and acoustic rhythms, patterns and the overall form of the film, emphasizing visual associations, tonal or rhythmic qualities, descriptive passages and formal organization. In this mode, style counts as much as content; form helps to reveal what the world feels like from a particular perspective. This mode bears close proximity to experimental, personal and avant-garde film-making (Nichols 2010: 31). Dominik Graf and Martin Gressmann's film *Der Weg, den wir nicht zusammen gehen* (2009), as well as Cynthia Beatt's two films, *Cycling the Frame* (1988) and *The Invisible Frame* (2009), fit this mode with their cyclical, repetitive and rhythmic structure, slower pace and contemplative voice-over narrations. Secondly, the 'expository mode' speaks directly to the viewer with a voice-over, emphasizing verbal commentary and an argumentative logic. According to Nichols, this is the mode that most people used to associate with documentaries in general, and it is commonly found in educational films. None of the films selected for this study employ this mode exclusively. Thirdly, the 'observational mode' looks on as social actors go about their lives as if the camera were not present, emphasizing a direct engagement with the everyday life of the subjects. Fourthly, the 'participatory mode' allows the film-maker to interact with his or her social actors and to participate in shaping what happens before the camera, using interviews as a primary mode of narrative, and often coupled with archival footage to examine historical

issues. For example, Marco Wilm's film *Comrade Couture* (*Comrade Couture: Ein Traum in Erdbeerfolie*, 2009) fits this mode of documentary, as the film-maker actively participates in the making, narrating and documenting practices of his film. The fifth 'reflexive mode' calls attention to the conventions of documentary film-making, increasing our awareness of the constructedness of the film's representation of reality. Graf and Gressmann's *Der Weg* employs reflexive elements to question the materiality of the film medium as well as the materiality of urban architecture. Finally, the sixth 'performative mode' emphasizes the film-maker's own involvement with a subject, rejecting notions of objectivity in favour of evocation and affect (Nichols 2010: 31; 149–53). *Comrade Couture* has elements of this mode, as the film-maker is also one of the main protagonists of the film, interacting both with the audience (through voice-over narration) and the other protagonists of the film. Within these six documentary modes, there can also be different styles and categories of films, and one of the most commonly used styles in many of the Berlin films is the 'personal portrait documentary', which, as Nichols points out, privileges the 'voice of social actors (people) who speak for themselves rather than as representatives of a cause or issue', while presenting individuals as 'unique, distinctive, mythic, and charismatic', and relying 'heavily on style to engage or involve the viewer' (Nichols 2010: 250).

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Post-Wall Berlin

The growing corpus of documentary films that take Berlin and Berliners as their focus can be explained by the city's now widely recognized status as *Schaustelle* (display/spectacle site), which has gradually replaced its 1990s status as *Baustelle* (construction site).¹ Berlin is the place where urban and cultural identities continue to be renegotiated. In terms of scholarship on recent Berlin documentaries, many studies position the films hierarchically, as competing against each other in terms of quality or accuracy, rather than examine them as cultural products within a larger analysis of culture. For example, in his 2011 study of post-reunification film, Nick Hodgkin briefly summarized his criticism of what he calls 'successful documentaries', such as *Berlin: Sinfonie einer Großstadt* and *Berlin Babylon* (2001), as having

been accused of lacking the critical impetus of the period's earlier documentaries – Jürgen Böttcher's *Die Mauer* (*The Wall*, 1991), Heide Reidemeister's *Lichter aus dem Hintergrund* (*Lights from Afar*, 1998) and Hito Steyerl's *Die leere Mitte* (*The Empty Centre*, 1998) – and [as] failing to represent a sustained, historically specific reflection of developments within the city's urban space. (Hodgkin 2011: 132)

While Hodgkin's study mentioned these few documentary films set in Berlin, he did not provide a detailed analysis of them, but rather focused on fiction films and the representations of the East after reunifica-

tion. Barbara Mennel (2004) and Christina Gerhard (2007) examined Hito Steyerl's film *The Empty Centre* (*Die leere Mitte*, 1998) and the ways in which it 'take[s] marginality to the center of the Berlin Republic' (Mennel 2004: 48). Janet Ward highlighted Samira Gloor-Fadel's documentary film, *Berlin-Cinema* (1998), as 'an overt homage' to Wim Wenders's vision of Berlin, in which 'we are shown immediate *Wende* footage of children playing along the spaces of the voided *Mauerstreifen*, the ruined landscape where the Wall used to be', which Ward links to 'nostalgia for the unformed spaces left behind by the dismantled Wall' (2011: 134). The film documents reunited Berlin streets, voids, trains, construction, people biking in the voids and Wim Wenders on location, shooting scenes from his *Wings of Desire* (1987) sequel, *Far Away, So Close* (1993) (filming a scene with Otto Sander and Nastassia Kinski inside U-Alexanderplatz). One of the featured shots in the film is a biker riding towards the Brandenburg Gate, from East to West, which at the time was still open to traffic passing through the Gate before the reconstruction of Pariser Platz began. The significance of this movement through the formerly inaccessible Gate is also documented in *The Invisible Frame*, in which the protagonist Tilda Swinton enters Pariser Platz through the Brandenburg Gate at the end of her journey, a space that was inaccessible to her 21 years earlier in *Cycling the Frame*.

Other articles on Berlin documentaries and the significance of Berlin's spaces can be found in Jaimy Fisher and Barbara Mennel's co-edited volume, *Spatial Turns: Space, Place, and Mobility in German Literary and Visual Culture* (2010). Similarly, in her chap-

ter from *A Companion to German Cinema* (2012), Julia Knight reminds us that

[i]n 1991 the Goethe-Institute toured a package of [five documentary] films made during the year or so following the opening of the Berlin Wall. *November Days* (Marcel Ophus, 1990), *In the Splendour of Happiness* (Johann Feindt and Helga Reidenmeister, 1990), *Locked Up in Time* (Sybille Schönemann, 1990s), *Last Year in Germany* (Lars Barthel et al., 1990), and *Last Year – Titanic* (Andreas Voigt, 1991). All five films undertook an exploration of East Germany in light of the recent opening of its borders with West Germany. They are informed either by the realization that what was happening during 1989–1990 was history in the making, as it were, and should therefore be documented as it happened, and/or by the desire to examine what had happened in order to establish causes and responsibility. (Knight 2012: 82)

This growing interest in documentary films that portray the transformations in Berlin reveals not only a curiosity, but also a deeper need to understand the changes that had taken place in Berlin since the Fall of the Wall. In the last 25 years, documentary films have become the primary medium to capture and export the visual and narrative representations of these transformations.

In what follows, I divide post-Wall Berlin documentaries into thematic subgroups to provide more insight into the kinds of films produced in Berlin after reunification. Because no comprehensive study of post-Wall Berlin documentary films exists yet, I devised the following categories based on thematic and stylistic patterns evident in the films themselves, guided by the abovementioned modes of documentary conventions.

The post-Wall Berlin documentary film corpus can be organized into four main subgroups, which I label thematically as ‘topographical documentaries’, which deal with the transformations in the city’s urban and architectural landscape; ‘narrative-portrait documentaries’, which represent the new inhabitants of the New Berlin; ‘documentaries of artistic communities’, which document the creative professionals living and working in Berlin; and ‘Kiez-documentaries’, which represent Berlin’s different neighbourhoods (Kiez) and communities, as well as their diverse inhabitants.

Topographical documentaries

The first category that comprises a rich collection of ‘topographical documentaries’ engages with the many social, cultural and spatial transformations in post-Wall Berlin. Starting with the 1990s, films such as Jürgen Böttcher’s *The Wall* (*Die Mauer*, 1991) and Hito Steyerl’s *The Empty Centre*,² and early 2000s films, such as Eric Black and Frauke Sandig’s *After*





the Fall (*Nach dem Fall*, 2000), presented Berlin voids, construction sites and the elaborate wastelands in the city centre left by the dismantling of the Berlin Wall. In his study, *Shadows, Specters, Shards: Making History in Avant-Garde Film* (2005), Jeffrey Skoller examined Daniel Eisenberg's film *Persistence: Film in 24 Absences/Presences/Prospects* (1997), noting that

[p]art of the reconfiguring of Berlin as a unified city includes the erasure of much of the evidence of the forced division. Immediately after reunification, statues, monuments, and military installations were dismantled. The empty areas surrounding the Berlin Wall were rebuilt. The film carefully documents such sites in anticipation of the receding and eventual erasure of the period of the city's division. The film attempts to stand as a counter-memory to the construction of whatever master narrative may emerge in the current German effort to reconstitute its national identity as a single unified nation. (Skoller 2005: 89)

Eisenberg's film echoes Sophie Calle's 1996 photographs that captured the missing symbols and removed monuments from Berlin's public spaces. This anticipation of the erasure of traces of division is documented in the films of the 1990s and can also be found in narratives of construction of the New Berlin (such as *Berlin Babylon*), as well as in Cynthia Beatt's narrative of retracement of the Wall in *The Invisible Frame*. Much like *Berlin Babylon*, *After the Fall* documents the voids and construction sites of Ber-

lin at the end of the 1990s and in the early 2000s. In the film, construction cranes are paired with swarms of birds flying through the empty construction sites and voids of the former death strips, as Brian Ladd narrates,

50,000 new buildings have gone up in Berlin in the last decade. The city has exploded. This is an attempt to catch up after decades in which Berlin was a city in moth balls. After the war and division and the Wall. Before the war, Berlin was the third most popular city in the world. Now it has fewer inhabitants than it did then and it is no-where near the largest city in the world. So what we're seeing is a desire to retrieve what was lost in those decades. [...] The biggest construction site is a former death strip. I remember climbing up the platforms on the western side of the Wall, and gazing out over the open space that marked the end of things in my Berlin. As open spaces are vanishing now, the Wall has vanished, and sometimes it's hard to imagine that such a thing could have been here.³

The motif of climbing up the viewing platform to gaze over the Wall is revisited by Cynthia Beatt's protagonist Tilda Swinton in both *Cycling the Frame* and *The Invisible Frame*, while the vanishing open spaces are examined in Dennis Karsten's *Mauerpark* (2011). As Ladd and the film-makers of *After the Fall* remind us, in the years following reunification, there was a strong desire to forget, and by eliminating the traces

of the Wall itself, to repress not only the difficulties of division, but those of reunification as well:

I can't imagine Berlin trying to wipe away entirely that episode of its past, the existence of the Wall, by getting rid of every trace of the Wall. That to me is very much about forgetting, but there is a very powerful desire to forget going on here. On the other hand, how do you preserve the Wall in a way that is meaningful to anybody? You can keep a piece of the concrete there, but that in no way enables visitors to come and sense what it was like to have the Wall through the city, what it was like to have to cross this border, what it was like to have border guards and search lights, and escape attempts, and death in the middle of Berlin. I don't think there is any way to reproduce that except perhaps on a Hollywood film set, and that's something entirely different.

The post-Wall desire to forget the past as portrayed in *After the Fall* in many ways explains Beatt and Swinton's contemplation on the disappearance of the Wall and all its accompanying structures in *The Invisible Frame*.

The Wall, on the other hand, depicts the Berlin Wall around the Brandenburg Gate and Potsdamer Platz in the months following 9 November 1989. We are shown iconic images of tourists and Berliners chipping away from the western, graffiti-covered side of the Wall, contrasted with images of industrial machines and construction cranes dismantling and demolishing the cement structure. Key historical moments, such as the official and ceremonial lifting of the first piece of the Wall near the Brandenburg Gate, and the former Pink Floyd member Roger Waters's concert production 'The Wall, Live in Berlin',⁴ which was the first international event staged in the no-man's-land of Potsdamer Platz on 21 July 1990, are shot from the sidelines. The dismantling of the Wall is shot from the eastern side, where no official media cameras were set up, and where no crowds were assembled to witness the historic event. 'The Wall' concert was shot from the rooftop of a nearby residential building, where the chimney cleaners were busy at work, overlooking the massive crowd assembled in the former death strip.

The film's aesthetics combine the techniques of direct cinema (*cinéma-vérité*), observing, rather than

reproducing action, but at the same time engaging with passers-by when they address the camera directly, which lends the film a participatory mode. The use of archival footage is integrated into the film because at the time of filming it was being projected onto the Wall before its demolition. Thus we have a superimposition of black-and-white archival footage of the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, footage of the many escape attempts, and even archival footage of Nazi Berlin, shown projected onto the soon-to-disappear Wall of 1990. This representation of the Wall as a historical screen, positions it both as an urban palimpsest and a cinematic one. The film becomes a historical record documenting a time and space that no longer exist in the New Berlin. The film also captures the mass euphoria and awe of people in Berlin witnessing history first-hand. It simultaneously transmits and mediates it to those who were not there in person and to the generations to come. Its contemplative and observational style allows the audience to engage with the images, and thus with history, in a significant way, which simultaneously politicizes the aesthetics, and at the same time allows us an alternative view of history – the one not presented on CNN, not narrated by reporters or politicians, not presented for global, instant consumption, but rather, it is a marginal view from behind the official cameras. The film documents places that are in the process of disappearing. It ends with a slow panning shot of the disjointed, graffiti-covered pieces of the Wall waiting to be shipped off to various parts of the world, sold to amusement parks and museums around the globe. The camera is literally slowly taking leave from the Wall, ultimately allowing it to disappear, while retaining images of it as a historical and cinematic record.

Another key example in this category of topographical documentaries is Thomas Schadt's *Berlin: Sinfonie einer Großstadt*. Schadt's homage to Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* was shot in black and white, on 35mm film. Reversing Ruttmann's first and last image sequence, Schadt's film opens with images of fireworks at the Gendarmenmarkt, and closes with fireworks and an image of water. Schadt also commissioned music composers Iris ter Schiphorst and Helmut Oehring to create a new score. The city symphony tradition continues as several scholars of post-Wall Berlin have noted (see Constabile-Heming, Halverson and Foell 2004), but the subtle replacement of the definite article 'der' (of *the*) in Ruttmann's title, with the indefinite article

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'einer' (of a) in Schadt's film, invites us to contemplate the very changes that created the New Berlin. Post-Wall Berlin of 2002 is a very different city from that of the roaring 1920s of the Weimar Republic; it is a wounded and broken city; a city in the process of rebuilding itself. It is also one ('eine') city again, after the 28 years of enforced division. Schadt gives us snapshots of the city's transformations and the people who inhabit the emerging New Berlin. In many ways, Schadt's film can be seen as a precursor to *In Berlin* (2009), in that both films show glimpses of the cultural and political life of the city. For example, Schadt includes images of the Love Parade, a fashion show at Bebelplatz, as well as Chancellor Schröder welcoming Arab delegates to the newly constructed Kanzleramt. But unlike the self-narrated portraits of Berliners that we get in *In Berlin*, Schadt's film only gives us visual images of the city's inhabitants, as well as a few images of voids and construction sites (the Holocaust Memorial is still an empty lot) symbolic of post-reunification Berlin. Schadt's privileging of the musical score – the modern symphony – over narratives of the protagonists is significant not only because it adheres to the original city symphony films that were created before the advent and mainstreaming of sound films, but also because it documents the early years of the New Berlin, just after the arrival of the federal government, but before the city was transformed by gentrification and international branding campaigns.

But perhaps the most evocative example in this category of films is Hubertus Siegert's *Berlin Babylon*, which embodies the quintessential metaphor

of a mythological, Babylonian city. Filmed throughout the 1990s, Siegert's film is almost the opposite of Schadt's symphony, focusing primarily on the images of voids and construction sites, rather than the vitality and rhythms of the city and its inhabitants, as Schadt's film does. *Berlin Babylon* presents the city as mostly empty, abandoned and even ghostly, while Schadt's film shows people, transportation, social and cultural events, liveliness and mobility. This comparative view of the two films allows us to recognize Siegert's film as stylized and aestheticized in a particular way that constructs a metaphor for Berlin under construction, a place quite different from that presented in other documentaries. However, in her chapter in the anthology *Berlin: The Symphony Continues* (2004), Evelyn Preuss outlines a hierarchical comparison between what she understands as 'critical' documentaries of the 1990s,⁵ and Siegert's and Schadt's films of the early 2000s, which she believes 'assume an arresting political acquiescence', and 'abandon the entrenched critique that German film put forward throughout the 1990s' (Preuss 2004: 123). She claims that both films can be understood as city symphonies, and that both suggest 'a harmonization between the depicted historical, social and political contradictions' (123). Moreover, she believes that 'while German films of the 1990s focused on individuals' perspectives and behaviors, *Berlin Babylon* and *Sinfonie* combine abstraction and fragmentation with myth and metaphor in order to reinvent grand narratives' (135). Preuss's understanding of Siegert's metaphor is rather limited as she links it to 'Ruttman's film through the Babylon topos that domi-



nated Weimar culture and film, and associates [it with] the legendary “Babylon” movie theatre, which opened the same year Ruttmann’s symphony was released’ (136). *Berlin Babylon* is not a city symphony, and its Babylonian metaphor is much more complex than Preuss’s interpretation would allow.

Cynthia Beatt’s two films, *Cycling the Frame* and *The Invisible Frame*, can also be categorized as topographical documentaries, following the protagonist Tilda Swinton as she cycles along the traces of the Berlin Wall in 1988 and then again along its remnants in 2009. The first film draws attention to the materiality of the Wall, including the watchtowers, guards and graffiti, while the second film highlights the disappearance of all these structures from the New Berlin’s topography. In the same vein as Brian Ladd, author of the much-quoted *Ghosts of Berlin* (1998), in the documentary *After the Fall*, Swinton moves through Berlin on bicycle, seeking out the physical and emotional remains of the Wall. In Beatt’s first film from 1988, the year before the Wall fell, Swinton attempts to understand the ‘normalcy’ of everyday life in West

Berlin in close proximity to the Wall. She climbs up on several viewing platforms along the stretch of the Wall to look over into the East, contemplating watchtowers and border guards, and trying to reconcile the paradox of living next to this artificial, but deadly border. By the time Beatt and Swinton teamed up again 21 years later, the Wall had completely vanished and its conceptual retracing and reimagining became the premise for the second film. Both films mix a direct cinema approach with minimal interference from the film-maker with a more poetic and essay-film mode, enhanced by Swinton’s voice-over narration of her thoughts, observations, recitals of poems⁶ and brief interactions with local inhabitants. As Dirk Verheyen explained, in 1996 the Berlin Senate launched a formal ‘idea and design’ contest to commemorate the Berlin Wall, entitled *Geschichtsmeile Mauerstreifen* (Historical Mile of the Wall Zone), partly inspired by the Freedom Trail in Boston (Verheyen 2008: 253). Simultaneously, a hiking and biking trail was designed along the entire 160km trajectory of the border system, incorporating memorials for





the Wall's victims, which was completed in 2005.⁷ As Verheyen noted, the project of memorialization of the Wall began even before its disappearance:

Even before its collapse, the Wall had acquired undisputed status as a monument, at least in the West, making its almost complete disappearance perhaps all the more surprising. Yet as an object of souvenir hunters, as a reminder of recent trauma, and as a clear obstacle to the city's infrastructural reunification, its demolition was, in hindsight, all but guaranteed. Today's discussion in Berlin about the Wall as a monument has taken place on at least two levels. On the one hand, there has been controversy over the preservation, if possible, of several segments that are still standing, in the context of the creation of largely formal memorial sites. On the other hand, the years after German reunification have witnessed a lively debate about appropriate methods of memorialization in general, focused on the commemoration of victims, the removal of East German Wall-related memorials, the possibility of marking the former course of the Wall in the city's pavement (*Mauer-Markierung*), the future of the Museum at Checkpoint Charlie, and so forth. (Verheyen 2008: 206)

The repeated act of cycling along the traces of the Berlin Wall calls to mind both Andreas Huyssen's much-quoted metaphor for Berlin as a palimpsest, as well as the three repeated sequences of Tom Tykwer's *Lola* running through reunited Berlin, each time learning something new that helps her advance the narrative. In Beatt's films, Swinton stops at the Oberbaunbrücke, the border between Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain, which was closed for 28 years of division, and which Tykwer's *Lola* symbolically crossed on screens worldwide in 1998. Towards the end of her journey in the first film, Swinton comes across a note on the Wall near the Gropius Bau that reads, 'Berlin wird Mauerfrei' ('Berlin will be wall-less'), which it indeed becomes a year later in 1989.

In *The Invisible Frame*, which premiered at the Arsenal Kino at Potsdamer Platz on 8 November 2009, during the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Wall, Swinton contemplates the disappearance of the Wall, along with its watchtowers, border guards and the death strip:

All these odds and ends, these bits of walls, watchtowers, binoculars, uniforms and photographs, they are like the archeological remains of some long, long, long dead civilization. Sort of pre-1300. Sort of Byzantine. So far, pre-historic, that there is no way of understanding how it all worked. But it was



twenty years ago! Where is it all? Where are the people, the men in these watchtowers? Why must we guess everything? It's all underground, it's like a trap door that was just shut, and a carpet has been rolled over it. Vanished underneath it, acres and acres of shame, unwritten history. Such a bad idea. Everything will come out in the wash. [...] This Wall, this ex-Wall, this manifestation of the ghost Wall. It was here. It felt so much more invisible than it is now. It has my attention in a way that it never did before. One can really taste the brutality of it all, in the way it was built up, because one sees that what divided was just space, just land, just streets, and just people, families, and communities, and a nation.

Beatt and Swinton put the very invisibility of the Wall itself into question. When Swinton climbs up a viewing platform in a field with nothing to view over, we notice that much like the abandoned train tracks she encounters along the way in the first film, the original function of the viewing platform has disappeared. Later in the film, standing at a crossroads, she holds a map, not knowing which way to go next. 'Where am I now?' she asks. 'Am I in the East or in the West? Does it matter? Why does it matter? Because it means a history, a point of view, and it means a perspective.' Swinton's questioning of the space and its representation on the map echoes Doreen Massey's notion that space

is the 'co-constitutive product with relations/interactions [we] are also helping to produce', which we are 'altering a little, moving it on, producing' (Massey 2000: 225, 226). Swinton's own subjective and at times disoriented experience of this transformed space demonstrates Massey's notion of relationality of space.

Significantly, Swinton ends her trip by biking through the Brandenburg Gate, and walking her bike to Pariser Platz, which was cut off by the Wall in the first film. In *Cycling the Frame*, Swinton stands facing the Wall in front of the Gate, while tourists are seen on top of the viewing platform next to the Gate, looking over the Wall. In the second film, she bikes through the Gate onto Pariser Platz, and turns to look at the gate from the East side. Beatt and Swinton demonstrate through both films that the Wall's disappearance does not in fact make it invisible. The theme of disappearing structures is also taken up by Dominik Graf and Martin Gressmann in *Der Weg, den wir nicht zusammen gehen*, another topographical film that catalogues the disappearance of old, ruined and unwanted buildings in Berlin and the rest of the country.

Narrative-portrait documentaries

In contrast with topographical documentaries, and similar to what Bill Nichols called 'personal portrait documentary', there is a growing rubric of films that can be categorized as 'narrative-portrait documen-



tarities', which depict the reconstructed New Berlin through the accounts of both old and new Berliners, and that range from average-length films, such as Michael Ballhaus and Ciro Cappellari's *In Berlin*, to an elaborate 24-hour-long collection of portraits of the city's inhabitants in Volker Heise's *24h Berlin*. The motif of capturing the city in the span of 24 hours goes back to Ruttman's symphony, but in Heise's real-time format of 1440 minutes of edited segments and portraits over the course of one day, there is the advantage of multiple cameras and editing teams, including over 400 people who worked on this production on the day of shooting.⁸ By following the different protagonists through the course of their day, the film draws on influences from contemporary reality-TV shows, and may be referred to as what Linda Williams and Stella Bruzzi call the 'new documentary'. This massive collection of observational documentary footage produced by 80 camera teams (including the *Berlin Babylon* director Hubertus Siegert, who shot the Tegel prison segment) was all shot in one day, on 5 September 2008, and then aired on German television (RBB), and subsequently released on eight DVDs in 2009. Twenty years after the Fall of the Wall, Berlin was presented as a multicultural, vibrant and technologically-savvy city, whose very diverse inhabitants go about their mundane and creative daily routines, and range from Mayor Klaus Wowereit, *BILD* editor-in-chief Kai Diekmann, West German real-estate developer Harm Müller-Spreer, choreographer Sasha Waltz, DJ Paul van Dyk, gallery-owner Gerd Harry Lybke, top chef Michael Hoffmann, hat designer Fiona Bennett, prisoner Kurt Lummert, homeless heroin-addict Mario Krüger, a sex worker named Sidney, as

well as many other doctors, patients, social workers, police officers, shop-owners, musicians, businessmen, retired and unemployed people. The goal, according to the film-makers, was to capture an

average day in the life of the city, its people, their daily routine, their hopes and dreams, their defeats and victories, from the outskirts to Mitte, East and West, business people and artists, immigrants and locals. The TV show holds up a mirror to life, as a wide testimony of contemporary reality.⁹

The film's editing strategies connect otherwise completely unrelated characters into a web of urban protagonists; even the music of one scene carries over non-diegetically into another, thus making a subconscious link between the different narratives. This technique is what Linda Williams described as 'new documentary', borrowing from feature film aesthetics to enhance the documentary form and narrative structure (Fisher 2010: 426). Thus, an impression is created that the many famous and average protagonists are not only connected, but are essential parts of a kaleidoscopic whole. Because the cameras remain so close to the protagonists – following them from their homes, through the streets, into their cars, into elevators, to their work, hovering over their shoulders at their desks – we get personal and intimate portraits of their lives. Scenes showing the mayor on his public appearance appointments at City Hall, at Tegel Airport and at a party in Tempelhof, are linked to those of the DJs in Berlin's famous nightclubs Tresor and Berghain, and even to the

... Berlin has been diagnosed with growing and gentrifying too quickly by film-makers, architects and cultural theorists.

scenes inside the Tegel prison, a brothel and a gay sex club. Through the smooth editing technique and cross-cutting, the city's various worlds are woven into one interconnected narrative portrait and presented to the viewer as a homogenous, authentic, up-close representation of Berliners. Like the angels in Will Wenders' *Wings of Desire*, who can hear people's thoughts and follow them about their day, the many different camera teams of *24h Berlin* bring us as close to their protagonists as we can get. This type of constructed proximity, especially when prolonged over 24 hours, creates an illusion of intimacy and coherence, and allows the viewer to develop a relational identification with and emotional attachment to the protagonists. Thus we have a different type of symphony that constructs a narrative and observational representation of many individual expressions into one, reunified whole.

Documentaries of artistic communities

Related to the category of narrative portraits are what can be subcategorized as observational 'documentaries of artistic communities' or of creative individuals living and working in the New Berlin. One example from this category is Peter Zach's *Sehnsucht Berlin: The City Named Desire* (2009), which follows several artists, writers, musicians and other recipients of DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst) stipends set up by the Academy of Arts, through their creative environments.¹⁰ Witnessing

their experiences and narratives, we get their perspective on the city and its cultural landscape. These protagonists are both connected and detached from Berlin and its changing topography. Their exceptional status as artists in residence allows them to engage and disengage with the city as much as they need to. Similarly, Uli M. Schueppel's *Berlin Song* (2010) is a portrait of musicians from all over the world working in Berlin today, who reflect on their relationship with the city and its transformations. Both films provide the artistic outsiders' point of view on the New Berlin, and their understanding of and (sometimes limited) critical engagement with its identity. Especially in *Berlin Song*, the protagonists are the consumers of the New Berlin brand that has been produced to attract creative talent and cultural capital. Most of the musicians portrayed in the film have come to Berlin around 2005, after the city's urban reconstruction was mostly completed, and it began to market itself to the rest of the world as an open, affordable and creative 'place to be'.¹¹ Their perception of the city is based solely on this newly constructed image of Berlin as a cultural hub; a city of innovation, opportunity and freedom for creative expression.

Another example in this subcategory is *Comrade Couture*, which documents a reunion of several members of the former East Berlin (Prenzlauer Berg) underground fashion scene in their attempt to recreate one of their edgy fashion shows. In this film, we are invited to observe the protagonists' quest to find or recreate the no-longer produced materials used in the original fashion show: strawberry foil (*Erdbeerfolie*), used by



GDR farmers to cover up strawberry crops, and old-fashioned GDR plastic shower curtains. One of the protagonists, the designer Angelika Kroker, described their fashion style as 'an aesthetic of morbidity', and their costume creations as 'opportunities to be free'. Their stories reveal elements of nostalgia for their make-shift creativity and resilience in times of fabric shortages and Stasi surveillance in East Germany during the 1980s. In the film, director and protagonist Marco Wilms explains that 'their dismal performances' celebrated the gradual GDR downfall, and that amid the GDR decay the members of the underground group were young and full of life, just as he was. We also get a glimpse into the lives of the main protagonists after reunification. One of them, the hair-stylist Frank Schäfer, contemplates why their former edginess and rebellion has faded after reunification: 'Ein Tiger, der im Käfig wohnt, ist viel gefährlicher als ein Tiger im Freien!' ('A tiger that lives in a cage is much more dangerous than a free tiger'). Their collective effort to tell their stories of life in the walled-in city, and to recreate one of their artsy happenings, is marked with distinct sentiments of *Ostalgie* – nostalgia for the no-longer existent city, underground culture and material culture of strawberry foil of East Berlin that existed and thrived under a repressive regime. Wilms's concluding remarks reconcile his sentimental longing for a 'feeling of the past' with the new creativity of the New Berlin. He says, 'Das alte Lebensgefühl kehrte nicht zurück. Dafür fand ich etwas neues, was mich irgendwie ans alte erinnerte. Die nächste Generation hat übernommen. Genauso jung wie wir damals. Und am Ende hatten wir einfach eine geile Party' ('The old life feeling did not return. But instead I found something new, something that reminded me of the old. The next generation had taken over. Just as young as we were then. And in the end we had a great

party'). The new generation has indeed arrived and is gradually replacing the older, nostalgic one in the creative scenes of the New Berlin.

Other films in this category include Tilmann Künzel's *Sub Berlin: The Story of Tresor* (2009) and Maren Sextro and Holger Wick's *We Call It Techno* (2008), both of which are composed of interviews with various techno DJs, entrepreneurs and other members of the techno scene.¹² Both films narrate the story of Berlin's reunification and its Babylonian years of the early 1990s from the perspective of the newly emerging music and subculture. The protagonists of these films have witnessed the Fall of the Wall and the early years of post-Wall Berlin, and therefore often express sentiments of longing for the open spaces that spurred such creativity, and even nostalgia for the utopian spirit associated with these spaces.

Kiez-documentaries

Finally, there is a growing number of what can be described as observational 'Kiez-documentaries', that is, documentaries set in a particular Berlin Neighbourhood or (Kiez) community, accompanying several local inhabitants on their daily routines. In his analysis of Bettina Blümner's *Princess Pool* (*Prinzessinnenbad*, 2007), a documentary film set in Kreuzberg following and observing three teenage female protagonists, Fisher employs Doreen Massey's analysis of space and place, focusing, as Massey suggests, on 'social practices and relations' of space, as well as the 'content, not the spatial form, of the relations through which space is constructed' (quoted in Fisher 2010: 431, original emphasis). Simultaneously, Fisher ties in Linda Williams's analysis of 'new documentaries', which, she claims, depart from 'the conventional



cinéma-vérité style of documentary films', to include 'various stylistic techniques of feature films and the ways in which they make, and often openly manipulate, meaning' (Williams, quoted in Fisher 2010: 426). The combined analysis of space (the pool) and the representational medium and style (the new documentary) allow Fisher to map out this public space in Lefebvrian terms of how it is produced and represented. Thus, the local Kreuzberg outdoor pool can be seen as a space of social relations (Massey), constructed by the protagonists who frequent it. Because they constantly return to this space throughout the film, Fisher notes, they enact how spaces are produced 'not only by the simple physical space (Lefebvre's 'spatial practice') or by planners' imagination of space (Lefebvre's 'representations of space'), but also as lived 'representational spaces' (Lefebvre), or relationally defined place (Massey)' (Fisher 2010: 435). Linking theories of urban space with documentary theory also allows Fisher to examine the way in which both the protagonists and the audience relate to and engage with urban space, as well as the way in which meaning is constructed through repetitive occupation and representation of this space. This engagement with space also becomes significant in Dennis Karsten's *Mauerpark* (2011), in which the various protagonists filmed in the park over the course of one summer present it as a space of social relations and shape our understanding of this space as socially constructed through their narratives.

Another example is Agostino Imondi and Dietmar Ratsch's *Neukölln Unlimited* (2010), which follows three German-born teenage siblings of Lebanese descent as they search for work to support their family in order to escape deportation. Likewise, Nana Rehan's *Hasenheide* (2010) presents various local inhabitants who frequent Neukölln's public park, and together, through their interwoven narratives, form a kind of alternative community. These documentaries focus on portraits of diverse communities and/or public places (schools, pools or parks) where the protagonists provide a glimpse into the New Berlin's multicultural mosaic. Most of the films in this category do not feature any nostalgic elements because their protagonists largely focus on their present situations and environments, on securing a stable and comfortable existence, or on establishing their role in their community. However, *Mauerpark*, which can also be classified as a Kiez-documentary, does feature elements of nostalgia for the Berlin of the 1990s. The post-Wall Berlin documentary film canon captures the reconstruction and reconceptualization of the New Berlin and allows us to recognize certain patterns and trends better than other media.

Conclusion

The year 2009 is important in recent German history because it marked the twentieth anniversary of the Fall of the Wall. Throughout that year, Berlin facilitated the staging of many different cultural events, exhibitions, memorial projects, screenings and public discussions on the experiences of the Wall. This collective self-reflexivity spurred a wave of cultural production, and specifically documentary films that tackle the various implications of transformation in Berlin since 1989. A great number of Berlin documentaries came out during the gentrification phase of Berlin's contemporary urban redevelopment, after the 2006 FIFA World Cup hosted by Germany; after the launch of the 'be Berlin' marketing campaign in 2008; and after the sweeping waves of gentrification and real estate development in Mitte and Prenzlauer Berg were set into motion. All these films engage in various ways with Berlin's transformations, its spaces, its history and its contested identity. These films document the changes that Berlin continues to undergo in its process of becoming a capital, a creative centre and a globalizing city. In its rapid transformation from the marginality of a *Grenzgebiet* (border zone) to the centrality of a political and cultural capital of reunified Germany, Berlin has been diagnosed with growing and gentrifying too quickly by film-makers, architects and cultural theorists (see Ward 2011: 303). Jonathan Kahana defines the documentary genre as a 'transitional medium', which 'carries fragments of social reality from one place or one group or one time to another, and in transporting them, translates them from a local dialect to a lingua franca' (Kahana 2008: 2).¹³ Fittingly, Mark Shiel also identifies modern urban space as transitional, and as 'more and more defined and experienced in terms of flow' (2001: 11). It is precisely in this transitional nature of both city spaces and the documentary medium of representation that new and emerging cultural transformations can be identified and analysed.

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Endnotes

1. For a detailed discussion of the concepts of *Schaustelle* and *Baustelle*, see Ward 2011: 306.

2. *Die leere Mitte* is available on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffg4EafY7aI>. Accessed 8 April 2016.

3. For more current statistics on Berlin's reconstruction, see <http://www.statistik-berlin-brandenburg.de/>. Accessed 8 April 2016.

4. Based on the music by Pink Floyd from their studio album *The Wall* (1980), the concert, or rock opera, as it was referred to, was conceptualized by Roger Waters, and included musicians such as the Scorpions, Joni Mitchell, Sinéad O'Connor, Bryan Adams, Ute Lemper, Van Morrison, Cyndi Lauper and performances by Jerry Hall, Tim Curry, Albert Finney, Rupert Everett, Rundfunkorchester and Chor Berlin. The stage design featured a 25 metre (82 foot)-high wall that stretched 80 metres (591 feet) across the stage. Most of the wall was built before the show and the rest was built progressively during the first part of the show. The wall was then knocked down at the end of the show. In front ran a long two-lane-wide forestage, wide and strong enough to accommodate limousines, motorbikes, military trucks and the Marching Band of the Combined Soviet Forces. As the set designer, Jonathan Park explained in the 'Behind the Scenes' footage of the concert DVD, that the no-man's-land of Potsdamer Platz had not been utilized since 1945, and had to be mine-searched before the concert. Grenades and Hitler's bunker were excavated, while a remaining piece of the Berlin Wall backstage was used as a security fence. Two construction cranes behind the stage assisted with the manoeuvring of the giant puppets of

the 'teacher' and the 'pig' and two smaller cranes (cherry pickers) were onstage with cameras, foreshadowing the landscape of cranes in Berlin's skyline and at Potsdamer Platz. With the performance of the song 'Another Brick in the Wall' the stage crew began to reconstruct a wall out of over-sized Styrofoam bricks, which makes us question, what does it mean to symbolically rebuild a wall at Potsdamer Platz in 1990 right after the Wall was torn down? Symbolic reconstructions of the Wall are a recurrent theme in Berlin, repeated with the domino Wall pieces during the Festival of Freedom in 2009. For more about the concert, see http://www.rogerwaters.org/about_berlin.html. Accessed 1 February 2014.

5. 'The documentaries that portray Berlin's urban landscape articulate an even more pronounced critique, as they directly address the post-unification debates. In his 1991 *The Wall (Die Mauer)* Jürgen Böttcher literally projects history – in for of film – onto the Berlin Wall, while he records in real time its dismantling by citizens, tourists and demolition crews. Following a young East German photographer through the wastelands and over the construction sites of Berlin, Helga Reidemeister's 1998 *Lights from Afar (Lichter aus dem Hintergrund)* asks disturbing questions regarding the state of democracy and the perspective of the individual in unified Germany. Similarly, the 1999 *After the Fall (Nach dem Fall)* by Frauke Sandig and Eric Black investigates the significance of the Wall and its vanishing through the perceptions of Berliners and others involved with its history' (Preuss 2004: 123).

6. The end credits of *The Invisible Frame* list the following poets and works: 'Gedichte und Gedanken': Tilda Swinton; Cynthia Beatt; Robert Louis Stevenson, *An Apology for Idlers*; William Butler Yeats, *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*; Anna Akhmatova, *Untitled*.'

7. Among the key champions of this project has been Michael Cramer, a long-time representative of the Green Party in Berlin's assembly and himself both a bicycle enthusiast and the author of a book about biking along the former Wall trajectory. The decision in favor of this project, co-financed by funds provided by the city, the federal government, and the European Union, and most recently estimated to cost some 4.7 million Euros and slated for completion by late 2005, was made by Berlin's Abgeordnetenhaus in 2001' (Verheyen 2008: 253).

8. See <http://www.zeroone.de/zero/index.php?id=464>. Accessed 8 April 2016.

9. Original text: 'Mit dem Ziel, einen ganz normalen Tag im Leben einer Stadt zu erzählen: die Menschen und ihr Alltag, ihre Hoffnungen und Träume, ihre Niederlagen und Siege. Von den Rändern der Stadt bis in die glamouröse Mitte. Ost und West, Karrieristen und Lebenskünstler, Migranten und Einheimische. Das Fernsehprogramm als Spiegel unseres Lebens, als breit angelegtes Zeugnis unserer Gegenwart.'

10. One of the protagonists, Peter Nestler (first director of the Berlin Artist's Program at the Academy of Arts, which was founded in 1960) remarks: 'After the Wall was built, of course, a unique situation arose here. The population became lachrymose, whilst the public indulged in incredible megalomania. Then an old Berliner, Shepard Stone, the international program director of the Ford Foundation, came up with the idea of offering between four and six million of Ford Foundation's funds for something new. It was intended to compensate for Berlin's loss of political significance by increasing its cultural significance. But above all it was meant to promote a bridge effect, between East and West Europe. [...] It was good that very famous people from the music scene were here: Elliott Carter, Stravinsky, Penderecki, and Ligeti all came. And they all had a strong effect, they made the program renowned.'

11. 'Berlin – the place to be' [marketing film], 15 April 2010, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Czv087KVYRE>. Accessed 14 April 2016.

12. *We Call It Techno* is freely available at <http://documentarystorm.com/we-call-it-techno/>. Accessed 14 April 2016.

13. 'The political force of documentary, whether in the service of reform, repression, or revolution, depends upon its ability to make an experience available for interpretation by an array of institutions and organizations, from government agencies and corporations to political moments and community groups. To put this another way, documentary is an essentially transitional medium: it carries fragments of social reality from one place or one group or one time to another, and in transporting them, translates them from a local dialect to a lingua franca. It collects the evidence of experience in the most far-flung precincts' (Kahana 2008: 2).

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