Berlin’s Symphony Continues: Architectural, Social and Artistic Change

The fall of the Berlin Wall is one of the defining images of the late twentieth century. The subsequent unification of Germany and the decision to return Berlin to its status as capital has made the constant changes within the city a matter of even greater public interest. It also has afforded Berlin the opportunity to create a new image for itself, one that can serve as a counterbalance to the city’s politically charged recent history as the capital of Nazi Germany and former East Berlin as the capital of the German Democratic Republic. Poised between capitalist Western Europe and the former communist powers in Eastern Europe, Berlin occupies a fascinating geopolitical space. As Karl Scheffler wrote as early as 1910, Berlin is a city destined “immerfort zu werden und niemals zu sein” (267).¹

Even now at the outset of the 21st century, Berlin is in a state of relentless transformation, still portrayed in the media not as a city that is, but as city that is always “becoming.” Many changes, above all architectural ones, are obvious; others are occurring much more subtly, as the population shifts to occupy areas of the city that long lay fallow. In incorporating these changes, the city thus seeks to redefine itself, and in so doing, also attempts to shake off some of the historical burdens that befall it during the 20th century. For observers of these changes, the city evokes the feel of an unfinished site; new political directions and city planners continue the tasks that previous ones have left unfinished. As our book’s title suggests, our reference points derive from the images of Walter Ruttmann’s 1927 film, Berlin. Die Sinfonie einer Großstadt (Berlin. Symphony of a Great City). The release of that film earned Ruttmann immediate fame, thrusting him into the limelight and making him one of the most important avant-garde filmmakers of the 1920s. The film itself is symbolic for Berlin as it is remembered from the Weimar period, a robust and dynamic city, full of speed. When viewed today, the film also calls to mind the historical period before the turmoil and strife that characterized Berlin for most of the 20th century. Seventy-five years after the debut of

¹ “forever to become and never to be.” Unless otherwise noted, the authors have done all translations.
Ruttmann's film, the metaphor of the symphony remains contemporary: on 10 April 2002 the documentary filmmaker Thomas Schadt's homage to Ruttmann, *Berlin: Sinfonie einer Großstadt* (*Berlin: Symphony of a City*) premiered at the Berliner Staatsoper, with live symphonic accompaniment.\(^2\) Our anthology builds on the idea of a city symphony that these two filmmakers espouse, and thus seeks to analyze the myriad changes in the city as part of an unfinished composition. As the capital of newly united Germany, Berlin has been granted the unique opportunity to re-create itself: it yearns to become a multi-national metropolis, a *Welkstadt* ("world city"), with an image and stature equivalent to that of other European capitals such as Paris and London. Still the scars of the past lie just under the city's new glossy surface and continue to color its realization of a new identity.

This volume is the first in any language to examine and analyze the myriad changes in the city of Berlin since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. The media, particularly news magazines such as *Der Spiegel*, eagerly have documented the changes in Berlin and followed every controversy. Recently, documentary films have tackled changing Berlin. The city also has garnered considerable attention from historians and writers in the last five years. It is our hope that this collection of essays will be read alongside such texts as Brian Ladd's *The Ghosts of Berlin* (1997), Giles McDonogh's *Berlin* (1997), Alexandra Ritchie's *Faust's Metropolis* (1998), Michael Wise's *Capital Dilemma* (1998), David Clay Large's *Berlin* (2000), and Elizabeth A. Strom's *Building the New Berlin* (2001). Bringing together scholars from the United States, Brazil, Germany and Australia, who represent German studies in general with their individual disciplinary interests in literary and film studies, urban planning, art history, architecture, music, history and anthropology, this anthology seeks to present readers interested in recent German history and culture a unique glimpse into the various constituencies that make up Berlin and that impact the city's challenges and promises. Physical space, its representation and the way we experience it form the backbone of all the essays in this volume.

The first section, physical space, presents five essays that focus not only on the outward changes occurring in Berlin, but also on the history, mentality, and philosophy behind them. In his photo-essay, "*Gedächtnis and Zukunft: Remembrance and the Future,*" Gary Catchen demonstrates how Berlin's future is dependant on remembering its past. Catchen views Berlin's current architectural renewal as symbolic of the continuous connection between Berlin's history, its present, and its future. The photographs provide a pictorial tour of important Berlin sites: traditional tourist destinations (*Reichstagsgebäude, Gedächtniskirche*); contrasts between the Topography of Terror exhibit and the Jewish Museum; the Cultural Forum in West Berlin.

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\(^2\) In choosing to title his film "Symphony of a City," Schadt implies a more general approach, making Berlin symbolic of major metropolises rather than being the symbol par excellence.
(Neue Nationalgalerie) and the traditional, historic city center (Lustgarten), sites of intense debate (Neue Wache, Schloßplatz) and industry (AEG buildings).

Barbara Mennel’s essay, “Shifting Margins and Contested Centers: Changing Cinematic Visions of (West) Berlin,” examines a topographic shift in cinematic portrayals of Berlin. She addresses a geographic axis of center (Potsdamer Platz) and margin (Kreuzberg) to highlight spatial relationships. Pre-1989 films such as Helke Sanders’ Redupers (1977) and Wim Wenders’ Himmel über Berlin (Wings of Desire, 1987) are representative of films, Mennel argues, that employed (West) Berlin topography to underscore the decenteredness or marginality of West German identity in the post war era. Post-1989 cinema shifts its focus to the construction on Potsdamer Platz, where a paradigm shift occurs: the earlier margin now serves as center in two films by minority directors, Hito Steyerl’s Die leere Mitte (The Empty Center, 1998) and Hussi Kutucan’s Ich Chef, Du Turnschuh (Me Boss, You Sneakers, 1998). Die leere Mitte focuses on the question of public space and who may access it. Mennel shows that this film beseeches the audience to understand and to question the continuities and discontinuities of violence and power as they relate to the marginalization of groups. Ich Chef, du Turnschuh is an immigration comedy that focuses on the situation of migrant workers and asylum seekers. Both films thus seek to insert a minority perspective (typically a voice from the margin) into the transnational center that Potsdamer Platz has become.

In “Building on a Metaphor: Democracy, Transparency and the Berlin Reichstag,” Eric Jarosinski scrutinizes the concept of Transparenz (“transparency”). The current architectural trend toward glass façades draws on a tradition begun in government buildings in Bonn. The transparency of the glass is intended to symbolize an openness that the democracy of the Berlin Republic promises. Drawing on the theoretical writings of Walter Benjamin (Einstahnsstraße) and Theodor Adorno (Minima Moralia), Jarosinski applies their cultural criticisms to the metaphorical transparency occurring in Berlin. He warns, that despite the lofty ambitions of political policymakers, transferring an aesthetic concept like that of transparency onto Germany’s political agenda may serve to work against the democratic ideals it seeks to evoke.

In contrast to Jarosinski’s focus on the Reichstag cupola as a metaphor for openness and democracy, Simon Ward turns to the site of Berlin’s new central railroad station for his analysis of how rail travel impacts physical space. In “Neues, altes Tor zur Welt: The New Central Station in the New Berlin,” he

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3 The entire complex of the Cultural Forum includes three museums: Neue Nationalgalerie, Gemäldegalerie, and the Kunstgewerbemuseum. Also part of the Cultural Forum are the philharmonic, the Staatsbibliothek, and the Staatliche Institut für Musikforschung which also contains the Musikinstrumentenmuseum. In the photograph in the chapter in question, however, only the Neue Nationalgalerie is pictured.
Introduction

outlines the fundamental importance of the railroad station for late 19th and early 20th century Germany, and thus sees a continuity between this earlier era and the plans for rail travel in unified Germany. The new central station, which occupies the site of the former Lehrter Bahnhof has been designed by Meinhard von Gerkan as a space for lived experience. The railroad station is intended to reflect cultural change and following Jarosinski’s line of analysis, the emphasis on transparency in the 21st century shifts to consumption, rather than openness.

Rail travel also is the focus of Karein Goertz and Mick Kennedy’s contribution. Whereas Ward analyzes the new train station and its potential as a site not only for connecting Berlin to other cities but also as a site for consumerism, Goertz and Kennedy trace history and traditions via the Berlin S-Bahn. According to their essay, “Tracking Berlin: Along S-Bahn Linie 5,” this particular city rail line provides a unique perspective from which to view the city due to its encircling route. The circularity overrides the traditional geopolitical distinctions of East and West that have become so ubiquitous in discussions of Berlin. Though the S-Bahn is a public entity, travel along the rail line affords, as Goertz and Kennedy argue, a glimpse into private spaces and unofficial (non-tourist, non-promotional) views. They propose that chronotopography, the layering of literal and spatial descriptions of the physical urban space, makes it possible to experience S-Bahn travel. They offer a new type of methodology for mapping the city that draws not only on physical markers, but also on sensory and cognitive inputs.

In the second group of essays, all of the authors examine the way the city can be experienced, in film and literature, in controversies surrounding music, in the constant naming and re-naming, and in the perceptions of former East and former West Berliners. Evelyn Preuss analyzes two films that she characterizes as city symphonies. In her “The Collapse of Time: German History and Identity in Hubertus Siegert’s Berlin Babylon (2001) and Thomas Schadt’s Berlin: Sinfonie einer Großstadt (2002),” Preuss proposes that the pre-occupation with 1920s Berlin projected in these films grows out of a desire to return to an era free of historical guilt. Though both films focus on 21st century Berlin, Preuss’s analysis demonstrates that the preoccupation of both directors with Weimar images prohibits their engagement with Germany’s difficult history in the ensuing years. The conflation of past and present ignores historical accuracy, resulting, in Preuss’ view, in time collapsing.

It is the 40-year division and resultant creation of divergent intellectual communities that is the focus of Elizabeth Janik’s essay, “The Symphony of a Capital City: Controversies of Reunification in the Berlin Music Community.” She traces the history of various cultural controversies in Berlin since unification, focusing in particular on the debate surrounding the merger of the two Akademien der Künste (Academies of Arts) and the continued support for Berlin’s three public opera houses. Considerable protest accompanied the efforts to merge the two Akademien der Künste, for members of the East
German academy had to pass a selection process and receive state and party approval. Ultimately, the discussions focused on the relationship between art and the State. Public support for cultural institutions forms the backbone of the debate surrounding the potential merger of Berlin's opera houses or the eventual closing of at least one. In this instance, cultural finances take a backseat to the attempt to define German music and its appropriate representation. Despite all overt attempts to unify the cultural and intellectual communities in Berlin, the centuries-old debates about appropriateness still remain.

Through a series of interviews with East and West Berliners, Jens Schneider seeks to analyze how they perceive themselves and each other. His essay, "Mutual Othering: East and West Berliners Happily Divided?" addresses the questions of identity and perception: how do East and West Berliners perceive themselves and each other. Schneider's conclusion is disturbing. Contrary to Willy Brandt's claim that the fall of the Wall would allow what belongs together actually to be together, it seems that Peter Schneider's narrator in Der Mauerspringer (The Wall Jumper, 1982) was correct: there is still a divide between East and West, if only in the heads of Berliners.

Following on the question of identity, Margit Sinka provides a fascinating look at the innate human predisposition to labeling. She traces sociologist Heinz Bude's branding of the "Generation Berlin" as the defining construct for the Berlin Republic. Drawing on business models rather than artistic or political ones, Bude classifies the Generation Berlin as "entrepreneurial individuals." Ultimately, these individuals will want to enter the political arena, evoking decided change. Bude's original optimism from 1998, however, has already waned, for somehow Berlin is unable to sustain the newness and promise that Bude envisioned. Nonetheless, Sinka concludes, Bude successfully has inserted himself and his Generation Berlin into discourses about Berlin.

In her essay, "Living Berlin: Autobiography and the City," Rachel J. Halverson directs attention to several generations of male East German novelists, who following the Wende, turned to autobiographical writings in their efforts to come to terms with the tumultuous political, social and economic upheaval taking place. By examining three writers from three different generations, Günter de Bruyn, Christoph Hein and Stephan Krawczyk, Halverson articulates the position that the city of Berlin plays in each life story. Furthermore, as her analysis progresses, multiple subtextual meanings of the city emerge, each of which conflicts with the officially sanctioned portrayals of East and West Berlin that GDR authorities allowed. This analysis demonstrates that the autobiographical works of East German authors offer the plethora of perspectives necessary to understand that complexities of what Berlin was and is becoming.
Moving from the experiences of the city, to its representation, the final section of the anthology presents five essays that treat literary and filmic portrayals of Berlin. In his essay on Peter Schneider, "Divided and Reunited Berlin in Peter Schneider's Fiction," Stephen Brockmann examines three of Schneider's narratives that take the city of Berlin and the German Question, that is the co-existence of two divergent political and social existence in immediate proximity to each other, as their focal point. While Der Mauerspringer (1982) pre-dates the Wende and unification of Germany, an understanding of this text plays a pivotal role in Brockmann’s judgment of Schneider’s later works. Brockmann sees the Berlin of Der Mauerspringer as the “most German of German cities” because it is in this divided Berlin that the question of German unity most glaringly is obvious. Brockmann views Schneider’s approach here as an open one, and concludes that this openness is missing from Schneider’s subsequent Berlin novels. Paarungen (Couplings, 1992) in particular focuses exclusively on the love interests of the three male protagonists, ignoring fully the larger political questions that divided Berlin symbolizes. When in Eduards Heimkehr (Eduard’s Homecoming, 1999), the narrator returns to a united Berlin, political questions once again take a backseat to personal concerns. Though sexual prowess remains an issue for Eduard, his ability to satisfy both his Jewish wife and his East German lover, places him in the role of an “unconflicted” [West] German, whose sins of the past have been forgiven. Though the German Question has been resolved, at least politically, Brockmann concludes that Schneider’s inattention to it in these two post-unification novels represents a literary sellout.

In the last decade, Berlin has changed so rapidly and radically, that it is difficult to absorb the changes except in a schematic framework. Through an analysis of short fictional representations of the city, Carol Anne Costabile-Heming’s essay charts the impact that the physical, social, and cultural changes have had on writers who are both native Berliner and relative newcomers. In “Berlin Snapshots: Images of the City in Short Fiction,” she begins with an analysis of Katje Lange-Müller’s anthology Bahnhof Berlin (1997), a collection that explores the principle of transit, the city as a vehicle as well as the city in transition. Die Stadt nach der Mauer (1998) assembles prose pieces of less-established writers, who look to the city’s potential for the future by moving beyond the images of Berlin as a divided city. Romanian-born Carmen-Francesca Banciu’s presents a collection of vignettes in Berlin ist mein Paris (2002). The compilation illustrates how an immigrant can come to feel at home in the vast and foreign Berlin. The texts discussed move beyond black and white comparisons and the juxtaposition of East and West to show that Berlin is a vibrant, multifaceted city. Costabile-Heming concludes that only such short fiction can provide readers with the true variety of impressions that are indicative of Berlin.

Mila Ganeva turns to cinematic representations of Germany’s capital in her essay “No History, Just Stories: Revisiting Tradition in Berlin Films of the
1990s.” She argues that post-Wall Berlin films no longer contain the political pathos and historical depictions characteristic of the genre prior to 1989. Ganeva first addresses the commodification of unified Berlin, whose urban spaces have been cleaned up in an effort to promote tourism. In these efforts at beautification, significant historical reference points (the most obvious example being the Berlin Wall) have all but disappeared. The history that is permitted to remain does so in an easily digestible form. One of the most significant trends in Berlin film from the 1990s is the shift in perspective from West to East or at least to the old city center. Despite this topographical shift, Ganeva contends that Berlin films of the 1990s do not concern themselves with questions of unification, but present instead, the stories of individuals in the present. Wolfgang Becker’s 1997 film Das Leben ist eine Baustelle (Life is all you get) and Andreas Kleinert’s Wege in die Nacht (Paths in the Night, 1999) for example, avoid direct confrontation with historical issues. As Ganeva argues, these films evoke the traditions of earlier Berlin films through their emphasis on aesthetic forms and themes.

Kristie Foell also looks away from political-historical perspectives to analyze four post-unification love stories in “Growing Together, Growing Apart: Berlin Love Stories as Allegories of German Unification.” In her analysis, Foell employs the metaphor of love story to symbolize the unification process still taking place in Germany. As the locus of unification, Berlin provides the appropriate backdrop to judge the success of these love stories. Foell analyzes two commercial pulp novels and two more challenging ones in her attempt to read the unification process as love story. The sado-masochistic characters in Else Buschheuer’s Ruf! Mich! An! (Call! Me! Up! 2000) is, according to Foell, a critical commentary on the sex, glitz and consumerism of the West that now too finds a home on the Potsdamer Platz. Barbara Sichtermann’s Vicky Victory (1995) is a similar example of the personal degradation that occurs through Westernization, the main characteristic of the unification process. Foell juxtaposes these two works with two novels from 1996, Monika Maron’s Animal Triste and Ingo Schramm’s Fichters Blau (Fichter’s Blue). Unlike other critics who have focused on the erotic side of Maron’s novel, Foell concludes the novel actually bemoans the unfulfilled promises of unification. Schramm, on the other hand, turns to Germanic traditions, citing both Grimm’s fairy tales and Wagnerian operas to suggest the ambiguousness of post-unification unions through the siblings, Janni and Karl. Foell concludes that all of the characters in these novels suffer from an inability to achieve a sense of unity; symbolic of the way that Berlin’s unity still is, at least emotionally, incomplete.

In the volume’s final essay, Sunka Simon returns to the bond that exists between Weimar Berlin and the newly emerging Berlin of the 21st century. In “Weimar Project(ions) in Post-Unification Cinema” she focuses on the ways that Weimar-era iconography has infiltrated post-1989 Berlin films. It is noteworthy that the popularity of Weimar images grows out of that era’s
association as the "better" Germany; that is, one free of the historical guilt of post-Nazi Germany (arriving at a reference point similar to that of Evelyn Preuss). Simon bases her analysis on two very different films: Comedian Harmonists (1997) and Nachtgestalten (Night Shapes, 1999). The blockbuster Comedian Harmonists idolizes both the musical group that is its subject as well as the Berlin of the Weimar era. Simon argues that the filmmaker Josef Vilsmaier tends to gloss over the complicated issues of racial politics so clearly a part of the Harmonists' career trajectory, leaving the audience with a "feel good" sensation. By contrast, Andreas Dresen's documentary-like Nachtgestalten, while focusing primarily on the darker side of Berlin existence, draws on the montage techniques of Walter Ruttmann's Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt, thus bringing the volume full circle.

Constant changes make it difficult to analyze the city of Berlin adequately, and the adage "Berlin wird" ("Berlin becomes") is as apt today as it was during Scheffler's time. It perhaps is more productive to view Berlin from a distance, for as Bodo Morshäuser writes, "Um [...] doch lieben zu können, muß ich stets Berlin verlassen [...]" (37). It is our hope as the editors of this volume, that we and our contributors can bring exactly that perspective to Berlin, for, though all of us have spent extensive time in the city, we all also write about the city from afar. It is with this distanced eye and differentiated perspective, drawing from our own Berlin experiences and cultural relevancies that we present this anthology in the hopes that all who read it will gain a sense of Berlin since 1989, enough to want to visit and investigate personally this unfinished, perhaps never to be finished symphony.

Works Cited


4 "In order to love Berlin, I constantly have to leave it."