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POOR, BUT SEXY

REFLECTIONS ON
BERLIN SCENES



Poor, But Sexy: Reflections on Berlin Scenes

Introduction

The scene opens up the conversation on the dreamwork of the city, how it arouses dreaming, the desire to be seduced by the present—the dream of the eternal present—in a way that can make it enduring. It is through the idea of the scene what we can begin to recover the notion of the great city as exciting because such an approach leads us to rethink the interior dream of *Gesellschaft*, the dream that we might be strong enough... to cancel the opposition (between *Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft*) and to preserve the difference, that is, to dream the dream of *Gesellschaft* (that a society can be memorable, that this present can live in time). (Alan Blum, *The Imaginative Structure of the City*, 2003 176)

In the twenty-plus years since the fall of the Wall, Berlin has undergone an immense transformation on a scale not seen in any other European city. This dramatic urban makeover has been as much cultural and social as it has material and symbolic. Alongside the renovation of the city's built environment, as well as its reputation, a large part of this urban reconstruction has been the foregrounding of the city's many cultural activities. This has been a process that has reaffirmed and reinvigorated Berlin's near century-long status as a cultural hub for artists, entrepreneurs and a host of other creatively inclined individuals. This profound overhaul also generated a frenzied entrepreneurial energy, an effervescence made manifest in the many gallery, music, theatre, film, design, new media scenes borne out of the offices, bars, cafés, squats and club cultures of neighbourhoods such as Mitte, Prenzlauer Berg, Kreuzberg, Neuköln, and Friedrichshain. The proliferation and diversity, as well as the success and failure, of these kinds of cultural spaces reaffirms Berlin as a city able to provide a unique urban stage among European cities, its foundations resting on the legacy of a well-established bohemian pedigree that has made possible and, as Rolf Lindner (2006) suggests with regard to cities more generally, makes plausible

its current role as creative city and *de facto* (sub)cultural capital of Europe. While drawing on its cultural heritage, its attractiveness as a demi-monde is tied also to a sense of creative promise, a complicated appeal that is bound up in a reputation spread through word of mouth, artistic and social networks, urban “boosterism” campaigns, the proliferation of cultural policies, numerous creative funding bodies and academic institutions, urban planning directives, and attractive investment opportunities. The many rhetorical and discursive framings of Berlin as a multi-faceted space of reinvention and possibility situate it as a rich semiotic resource, at one and the same time an iconic city signalling an openness and tolerance to artists, ex-pats and entrepreneurs, as well as an eminently marketable repository of images of a contemporary, up-to-date, and innovative city, neatly tailored to the imperatives of current city-brand managers.

This tension, pitched between those who seek to value Berlin’s cultural spaces as ends in themselves and those that see them as means to other, perhaps more nefarious, purposes (i.e. pecuniary), is a plight shared by many cities. In Berlin, however, the reliance on a fraught promise of good things to come has a particular valence and has taken both an imaginative and material form that has given the city’s contemporary cultural spaces a distinctive character. Janet Ward (2004), for example, has referred to the reimagining of the city over the last fifteen years as helping to constitute what she refers to as the ‘virtual Berlin,’ where the ‘becoming Berlin’ remains only that: a city always imagined, promised, yet forever unrealised. The efforts undertaken to market the city’s thousands of square-metres of office space to investors, on the assurance of good returns and vibrant markets, have for the most part unfolded in vain (minus perhaps the countless hotels and hostels which have sprung up in Prenzlauer Berg and Mitte to cater to an expanding tourist industry). A percentage of these buildings still remain either empty, partially, or only temporarily occupied. While new media start-ups, artists, and a host of entrepreneurs fill many of these spaces, overall the uptake has been slow and not nearly reaching the occupancy rate that their rapid renovating aspired to generate. As Ward suggests, in framing Berlin as a ‘virtual city,’ the symbolic wins out over the material, as the attractiveness of a city’s many cultural spaces remains caught up not in financially lucrative investment appeal, but rather in

what Lindner (2006) has referred to as the dense mesh of textures found in cities. In drawing upon its troubled mythologies, its complex layers of history, and its unstable economic state, it demonstrates the city's creative resilience as well as highlights the many dilemmas and paradoxes that shape the dream, in Blum's above sense, of the pursuit of a creative life in Berlin.

Those textures have been brought to life in other ways as well. Ward's thoughts on post-*Wende* Berlin also offer a salient counterpoint to the city's more recent slogan, "Be Berlin," an attempt to resemantise Berlin that signals a notable shift in the orientation of the city's branding strategies. As Ward notes, it has long been argued that Berlin has never fully realised its potential to be a *Weltstadt*, a "world city." In the 1910s, to take an early example, Karl Scheffler suggested that Berlin was a city always becoming, never being; or some years later, as Joseph Roth would note in 1930, 'Berlin is a young and unhappy city-in-waiting' (1996 125). The various ideologies wrought upon Germany in the ensuing decades brought with it the massive destruction and razing of the city both during and after World War II. This, along with the departure of its manufacturing sector, its primary revenue base, ensured its maturation into a world-class metropolis remained stunted. As Ward, among a number of scholars, notes, the fall of the Wall and reunification of the city did little to improve Berlin's long-held desire to be a *Weltstadt*, with chronically high rates of unemployment, the loss of an industrial-based economy, and turbulent in- and out-migration. While the fortunes of some might be changing, particularly those working in the new media and tourism sectors, an invocation and invitation to *be Berlin* remains haunted by potential rather than realisation, still encumbered by becoming and not yet being.

There is of course more to this phrase 'Be Berlin.' Launched by the Berlin Senate with much fanfare in 2008, its exhortation is an attempt to eschew this near-century long agony of status-anxiety, to have the city and its citizens resolutely, and finally, "be." The nature of its address, however, stresses the need for individuals, rather than the city itself, to "be," and by "be" could mean any number of things. With its clear emphasis on innovation, however, it affixes "being Berlin" to entrepreneurialism, which comes with its own ideological baggage. In a

precarious urban context where responsibility is downloaded onto individuals, and as the German welfare state has withered under austerity measures and economic rationalisation over the last decade, one hears in this insistence the reverberations of neoliberalism, ‘a project of institutional reorganisation, sociospatial transformation and ideological hegemony,’ that has underwritten the erosion of federal and municipal support and diminished once robust cultural subsidies in Berlin (and elsewhere) (Brenner, Peck and Theodore, 2012 13). In this context, if, as Roland Barthes (1986) reminds us, the city is a discourse, this new slogan ‘Be Berlin,’ typically represented as set within a distinctive red speech balloon, works to speak for and through its intended addressees, and thus interpellate and produce an unsettled and restless urban subjectivity as well as an ambiguous civic identity, or, in linguistic terms, a more troubling individualised, atomised *parole* to the city’s collective *langue*.

Barthes (1972) has also reminded us that ‘myth is a type of speech’ and in “Be Berlin” there is an ideological and ontological sleight of hand at work. There is an expectation to inhabit Berlin such that the addressee take on the habitus of the city, commit to being a Berliner, whatever that may mean, but to also serve at the same time as an ambassador for the city. As the campaign patter suggests (disavowing the city’s previous incarnation as *Schaustelle*, or Showcase, *Berlin* which made a spectacle of its massive renovation. See Ward, 2004; 2011, for more on this), Berlin is not about large-scale events, but about things happening at the level of the innovating individual. The suggestion then is that people will find a way to make their life in Berlin “eventful,” the city again a site of possibility, a locus for reconstructing one’s self and actualising creative potential. More importantly, the labour of selling Berlin, of being branded a Berliner and bearing the brand of Berlin, of taking on the onus of promoting and celebrating its civic assets, is now expected to be both the burden as well as hallmark of a good citizen.

This entreaty to ‘Be Berlin’ also fits into agendas tied to the city being cast now as a model “creative city,” with its many scenes being continually celebrated as part of the urban package. The creative city, a term also emptied out of meaning at the exact moment of its ubiquity as cultural policy buzzword, has been made synonymous with Berlin. An assortment of the issues related to the creative city play themselves