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Andrew Webber. *Berlin in the Twentieth Century: A Cultural Topography.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. viii + 322 pp. $90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-89572-9.

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An Allegorical Reading of Berlin

Near the end of the sixth and final case study in his exploration of twentieth-century Berlin, Andrew Webber takes on the production company behind *Lola rennt*, which claimed that 1995 hit as "the absolute 'Berlin-Film."' If that is indeed the case, he suggests, then "it is a Berlin which is largely freed of its history" (p. 286). For good or ill, the same could be said of the Berlin in Webber's book.

Webber makes no bones about his intentions: this book does not strive to be a history. Early in his introduction Webber explains that while historical narrative will inform his book, he sees his "cultural topography" as an "extension of cultural analysis through space and place that is practiced by such commentators as Benjamin or Kracauer" (p. 15).

Although its self-referentiality is at times confusing–Walter Benjamin serves both to model Webber's analytical methodology and as the foundation for his analytical subject matter–the book offers readers the opportunity to sink their teeth into hearty if not always easily digestible forays into literary and cinematic artists who engage Berlin, among which are Benjamin, Franz Kafka, Bertolt Brecht, Walther Ruttmann, Alfred Döblin, Rainer-Werner Fassbinder, Ingeborg Bachmann, Christa Wolf, Uwe Johnson, and Wim Wenders. Webber's case studies function as loosely interconnected critical essays that each take on a handful of artists/works and seek to explain Berlin's place as the "capital of the twentieth century" (p. 13).

For Webber, this iconic status derives from the city's representative experience of "displacement, ruin, and loss" (p. 53). The first of these terms, displacement, anchors his analysis, which he offers as the foundation for an allegorical reading of Berlin.

The book takes a while to get going. A prologue is followed by a fifty-page introduction, which segues into a first chapter (on Benjamin) that "prefigures much of what will be encountered in the chapters that follow" (p. 103). While the chapters are all rich with detail, their conceptual and organizational density make it difficult to mark a decisive trajectory through the book.

The six chapters each explore one site of analysis, which Weber frames within contradictory perspectives declared in the chapter subtitles: thresholds and boundaries, inhabitations and accommodations, movements and stills, alterations and reconstructions, divisions and falls, openings and closures. The chapters proceed in a roughly chronological order through the century, but the first four, in particular, emphasize the centrality of the Weimar era for making sense of the whole.

In his first chapter Webber follows Benjamin from Paris, moving from the *Passagen* of the French capital to Berlin's courtyards. If Parisian passageways represent the marketplace of the nineteenth century, Berlin's iconic *Höfe* serve as point of entry into a dislocated twentieth century. Beginning with a discussion of allegory as a way of "speaking otherwise," this chapter deploys the *Hof* as a simultaneously interior and exterior venue, and thus a setting from which to argue for Berlin's allegorical significance for the twentieth century. It functions as a "network of other places" (p. 79).

The subsequent chapters work to develop further these allegorical ways of reading Berlin. Brecht in conjunction with his post-1989 heir at the Berliner Ensemble, Heiner Müller, serves to articulate the tension of being in Berlin, a city full of trauma and endings but one that nonetheless invites playful performances in and out of its midst: *Trauer* and *Spiel* as equal components of the historical tragedies (*Trauerspiele*) that compose Berlin.

Ruttmann's and Döblin's versions of Berlin (in chapters 3 and 4, respectively) ground Webber's investigations into changes in the ways in which we perceive

and narrate the city. He takes us from a discussion of "filmic seeing" to shifting mechanisms of "photographic reconstruction" to transformations of the novel into "public speech." In each instance, Webber puts into question the definitive explanatory potential of any one take on Berlin: thus Thomas Schadt's 2002 reworking of Ruttmann's film and Fassbinder's 1980 television version of Alexanderplatz pair with their Weimar counterparts to blur the city's topographic and chronographic coherence.

The last two chapters are more firmly ensconced in the city's post-World War II cultural and political landscape and seek to explore representations of Berlin in the aftermath of its 1945 fall and its post-1989 "fall into unity and normality" (p. 261). While they offer strong readings of works by artists like Bachmann, Johnson, Wenders, and Tom Tykwer, the relationships they seek to articulate between past, present, and future remain out of time. As much as Webber acknowledges the extent to which the city is "freighted with historical meaning" (p. 262), this freighting remains ahistorical. It seems to occur almost by itself.

In its organization and style, the book keeps promising illuminations to come: thus on page 287 (sixteen pages from the end) the chapter's interpretive payoff remains "as we shall see." This sense of conclusions at a distance is heightened by lists of titles that function as evidence that speaks for itself: on the penultimate page, for example, Webber mentions for the first time four titles with only the briefest hint of how they illustrate his point. Here, as elsewhere, Webber seems to presume a depth and breadth of familiarity with the literary and cinematic works he cites that makes this book most accessible for those scholars for whom Irina Liebmann, Tanja Dückers, Wolfgang Hilbig, and Lukas Hammerstein (to cite the four authors mentioned one page from the end) are already known quantities.

Even though the book never quite seems to coalesce as more than the sum of its parts, these parts overflow with smart details. Every time I prepared to throw up my hands in frustration at its meandering complexity, the next page offered a particularly provocative insight or a new angle from which to approach a familiar conundrum. When I returned to the book or revisited small sections of the text a second or third time, I always found something new. In other words, this volume demands that readers make a significant investment of mental energy. But that investment does prove rewarding.

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