Protesting the Globalized Metropolis: The Local as Counterspace in Recent Berlin Literature

This essay analyzes the social tensions between global and local spaces emerging in the post-1989 transformation of Germany's capital, Berlin. As urban studies scholars such as Neil Smith and Saskia Sassen have argued, inflows of global capital leads to the gentrification – and thereby not only to architectural, but also to social and cultural transformations – of urban space. The essay examines the tensions between two levels of discourse about the city's postwall trajectory: on the one hand, the globalized Berlin envisioned by urban planners, investors, and politicians; and, on the other, its subsequent counterrepresentations in two recent novels, Norman Ohler's Mitte [Middle, 2001] and Raul Zelik's Berliner Verhältnisse [Berlin Conditions, 2005]. I argue that these two novels emphasize, and politicize, the local to create a literary counterspace against the corporate nature of the new streetscape. Both novels reflect a counterdiscourse to the new urban fabric by constructing private and local space as perpetually threatened by the city's radical transformation.

“Suhsi-Bars als Speerspitze hinterlistiger Gentrifizierungsstrategien” [“Sushi bars as spearheads of perfidious strategies of gentrification”] and “pervertierte Heimat” [“perverted Heimat”] are among the pointed remarks offered by two recent novels about the spaces of Berlin. These novels capture the restructuring of postwall Berlin, a restructuring that provides the critical background for their narratives about Berliners' struggles to adjust to the new circumstances of Germany's capital. The former quote is from Raul Zelik's Berliner Verhältnisse [Berlin Conditions, 2005], a humorous portrait of a society and city in flux, and the latter from Norman Ohler's Mitte [Middle, 2001], a novel about residents of a soon-to-be renovated apartment building in Berlin's central and formerly East-Berlin district Mitte.1 Berlin is easily identifiable in both novels through the deployment of actual names of streets, neighborhoods, and parks. Both Berlin texts demonstrate a distinctly critical view of the redevelopment projects that are transforming the once-divided city into what is now called the “New Berlin”. This essay examines the literary representation of social tensions between the global and local spaces of Berlin after Germany's unification. I argue that the novels of Zelik and Ohler reflect anxieties about both globalization and the subsequent gentrification of neighborhoods. In particular, Berliner Verhältnisse and Mitte deliberately track and trace gentrifying processes as they reconfigure Berlin's Kieze [boroughs] Kreuzberg and Mitte.

Before analyzing Berlin in its spatial dimensions and interpreting the city as a globalized urban space, I would like to offer some clarification of terms, not least what “Berlin” has come to signify locally, nationally, and around the world. While Berlin has gained a new strategic role in Europe and in the globalized world of the postwall era, Saskia Sassen has nonetheless argued that Berlin is not really part of the network of global cities, but instead located on the periphery. According to Sassen, global cities have a “capability for producing global control”, and they typically constitute “transnational centers for financial and service activity”, as is the case with New York, London, and Tokyo, the three foci of her landmark study on how major cities become command centers of the global economy in times of accelerated globalization. Sassen observes that globalization and economic shifts have afforded new strategic roles to cities in the past few decades: “The fundamental dynamic posited here is that the more globalized the economy becomes, the higher the agglomeration of central functions in a relatively few sites, that is, the global cities”. Even though Berlin, for Sassen, might not qualify as a “global city”, globalization is not, as Richard Grant and John Rennie Short emphasize, limited to New York City, London, and Tokyo. Similarly, Roland Robertson argues that the economic aspects in the debates on globalization are often overemphasized, but that other dimensions such as politics and culture are equally important. The revived capital of Germany has clearly been pretending to a new status as world metropolis, as Janet Ward and Albert Scharenberg point out. City marketing plays an important role in the transformational process of Berlin. As Lehrer states in her discussion on Bildproduktion in

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4 Ibid. P. 5.