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Digital Geographies: Berlin in the Ages of New Media

In the 1920s, Weimar era intellectuals such as Walter Benjamin, Alfred Döblin, and Franz Hessel spent a significant amount of time reflecting on the relationship between new media technologies, especially film, and the embodied experiences of the urban flâneur in the modern metropolis. City films such as those by Walter Ruttmann and Dziga Vertov allowed for a new aesthetic experience of the simultaneity of the city space and generated a new discourse of cultural criticism. With the advent of digital technologies, we are on the edge of another watershed moment in the perception, experience, and representation of space. This essay explores the complex ways in which city spaces, particularly Berlin, have been “remediated” in the contemporary world of geospatial media technologies such as Google Earth and ask what these technologies may offer for extending and reworking some of the key concepts of cultural criticism and urban theory that emerged in the Weimar period. I will use some of the results of my own work on a project called HyperCities to address these questions.

I.

In March 2007, Germany’s foremost newsmagazine, Der Spiegel, exclaimed that “Berlin gibt es jetzt doppelt” [“there is now a double of Berlin”]. The city had not been divided again but rather turned into two, as all the physical buildings and streets in the city center had been painstakingly recreated as three-dimensional digital models over the past few years and dropped into Google Earth. Der Spiegel declared that “Die Hauptstadt steht als erster virtueller Stadtplan der Welt nahezu vollständig in Google Earth” [“The capital is the first virtual city in the world to be almost completely in Google Earth”].¹ The hype was not hyperbolic: in fact, approximately 44,000 buildings had been modeled and could be viewed using a geo-browser application such as Google Earth. As part of a project to develop a geographic information infrastructure for the city of Berlin, the models had been commissioned over a period of several years by the Senate Department for Economics, Technology, and Women’s Affairs in association with the Senate Department of Urban Development and Berlin Partner GmbH.² They were to be precisely scaled representations of their physical counterparts and utilized exacting standards for integrating a wide-range of geo-data that would be useful for land surveying and urban planning. While all the models were textured with varying

¹ <http://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/tech/0,1518,470441,00.html>.
² For information about the project and to download the models into Google Earth, see: <http://www.3d-stadtmfeld-berlin.de/3d/en/seite0.jsp>.
degrees of detail, around 550 had photo-realistic facades, and five particularly prominent buildings – the Reichstag, the Sony Center at Potsdamer Platz, the DZ-Bank on Pariser Platz, the Lehrter Hauptbahnhof, and the Olympic Stadium – could also be “flown into”, allowing a user to enter the buildings from the outside and look around inside.3

Not only do the models represent a digital archive of the city as it existed in 2007, one that is certainly useful for urban planners, architects, and tourists, but they also represent a will to protect the city as a whole, a kind of historicist gesture of digital salvation. That is to say, the models represent, in their hyper-realistic accuracy, an attempt to mimic and freeze the city as it really is. In this sense, the doubling of Berlin as a virtual city is not so much an exercise in resurrecting the past but an exercise in preservation made from the standpoint of the present for the sake of the future.4 To be sure, it is fairly easy to understand one of the implicit impulses motivating this project, as the space of Berlin bears witness to nothing more consistently than its physical destruction, the wrenching apart of its topography, the reduction of its urban environment to rubble, and the fragmentation and burial of its memories. Berlin was devastated by the Thirty Years War, occupied by Napoleon in 1806, rebuilt numerous times throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, turned to rubble in the aerial bombardment campaigns of World War II, divided by the Berlin Wall for twenty-eight years, and hastily put back together again in 1990. The city is a synecdoche for the trauma and destruction of urban space. It fits within a lineage of ruination – both natural and man-made – that includes the flooding of New Orleans, the obliteration of the Aceh region of Indonesia by the tsunami, the great earthquake in Lisbon, the burial of Pompeii, and the deliberate destruction of cities such as Baghdad, Hiroshima, Dresden, Tokyo, and London, not to mention the pillaging of the great cities of antiquity such as Carthage and Babylon.


4 Unlike the 3D models analyzed by Puff that “functioned within the frame of early modern rulership”, the 3D models of Berlin in Google Earth seem to be less about waging military campaigns or forging the territoriality of the nation-state and more about exactitude, realism, and preservation. Puff: The City as Model. P. 144. Of course, the digital models can be used for anything, and they do not really look that different from the digital renditions of cities in videogames such as Combat Flight Simulator.