Annette Seidel Arpaci

Excavations at Potsdamer Platz: Die leere Mitte and the Dilemma of (Re)Narrating ‘Other’ Pasts and Presences

Through a discussion of the filmic essay Die leere Mitte/The Empty Centre (1998) by Hito Steyerl, I aim to engage with the possibilities and limitations of her disruption of constructions of national as well as of diasporic and migrant memory. Acknowledging Steyerl’s deconstruction of (self-) images of ‘the other’ in the film, I focus on the difficulties of interweaving ‘other’ pasts and presences in post-Holocaust Germany. I wish to explore whether Steyerl’s approach and aesthetic can open up a space that would further aid the communication, but also the theorisation, of past and present experience of the ‘minoritised’ and/or ‘migrantised’ in Germany.

Die leere Mitte can perhaps be described as filmic archaeology, excavating past and presences at Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, and taking as its point of departure the events unfolding in the wake of the fall of the Wall in 1989. The film’s project is framed by two phrases by Siegfried Kracauer. The first ‘[…] establishing tradition of lost causes; giving names to the hitherto unnamed’ is set out at the beginning. While at the end of the film we hear: ‘There are always holes in the wall for us to evade and the improbable to slip in’.[1] Steyerl’s film consists of seven sections, apart from the introduction and end credits, which also include some film-sequences such as closing remarks by protagonists. We first see a black screen imprinted in white with Kracauer’s words in German translation: ‘[…] eine Tradition verlorener Prozesse begründen; dem bislang Namenlosen Namen geben’. The phrase ‘[…] eine Tradition verlorener Prozesse begründen’ (‘establishing tradition of lost causes’) appears first, and a short time later, the second part of Kracauer’s sentence comes onto the screen. For a brief moment, they can be read together, before the first part fades back into the black screen, leaving us to begin watching the film still seeing the programmatic ‘giving names to the hitherto unnamed’. The fading out of the first part of the quote also visually emphasises a loss and prepares us for the agenda of ‘giving names’. Siegfried Kracauer remains a source of reference throughout the film, as does the music of Felix Mendelssohn. Additionally the voice-over of the filmmaker herself and of another narrator, Hatice Ayten, guide
us through the film, together with architect Huan Zhu and Dong Yang, a young man who describes his experience of a racist assault and his treatment at the hands of the police thereafter. In the same way that we are presented with recurring images of the Berlin Wall in its various states of being dismantled, we also return over and over again to the architectural models exhibited within the so-called ‘Info Box’, a large red cube which stood on Potsdamer Platz during the first years of its rebuilding in the 1990s, and there we watch visitors circling and inspecting the models. At the beginning of the film, we hear the voice-over saying:

There are many ways to break through a border. There are many ways to erect new borders. In 1989 the Berlin wall comes down. The area between the walls, an empty mine field between East and West, is now open. Before, this was the centre of the city, the centre of its power. Then it became the empty and deadly margins. The border. Now, the centre returns.

At this point, the title of the film is introduced visually. While we first see an image of the ‘empty’ space shortly after the Wall came down, dated 1990, this is soon superimposed with shots of the building sites and its fences in this place, dated ‘1997’. The years 1990 to 1997 mark the time period during which Steyerl repeatedly returned to Potsdamer Platz for conversations with squatters, tourist guides and builders amongst others, and to record and interpret the changes in this place. We travel with the filmmaker and her camera through different times in the same place: the holes in the Wall soon make way for layered images of the place after the Wall’s dismantling, and after that we can see builders with their equipment moving around the place, and again thereafter the filmmaker interviews squatters who occupied part of Potsdamer Platz in 1990 in protest against the site being sold to Daimler Benz. Throughout, Steyerl interweaves her own film sequences, some of which include interviews, with footage from old black and white films, with old photographs, drawings, maps and construction plans. After the title Die leere Mitte is introduced, the voice-over tells us:

Old borders are torn down, dismantled or displaced. At the same time new boundaries and fences appear. In this empty centre of Berlin, borders and boundaries shift constantly. At Potsdamer Platz ages and images overlap. The new centre of Berlin is being built on the Aryan ruins of the Third