

## History as Trash: Reading Berlin 2000<sup>1</sup>

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The expectation that Berlin, at the cusp of the twenty-first century, should produce “big-city” novels that, like Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in its own time, would catch the encounters, juxtapositions, and historical layerings of the newly reunified capital is perhaps unfair, and certainly a high bar, but it reflects widespread interest in literary representations of this brazenly, even insolently transformed city. In September 1999, Germany’s most prestigious news weekly, *Der Spiegel*, introduced with front-cover fanfare a new generation of writers living in Berlin, if not necessarily writing about Berlin, and since then there has been a star quality to young thirty-something novelists such as Tanja Dücker, Karen Duve, and Judith Hermann, so-called “wonder girls” (*Fräuleinwunder*) who have already landed on the syllabi of university literature courses, and Thomas Brussig, formerly of East Berlin, and now something of a spokesman for the new Berlin (Voigt).<sup>2</sup> That it was Sven Regener, songwriter for the acclaimed German rock band, *Element of Crime*, who in 2001 wrote one of the funniest Berlin novels, added marvelously to the spectacle. Throughout the 1990s, Berlin’s literary subculture blossomed, with readings taking place across the city, especially in new locations in the old East, the *Volksbühne* on Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, the *Kulturfabrik* in Prenzlauer Berg or the *Literaturwerkstatt* in Pankow. They attracted lots of curious listeners who would never have tuned in to the *Literarisches Quartett*, until 2001 Germany’s premier television book show hosted by the octogenarian Marcel

Reich-Ranicki, but who in these hip settings were eager to catch a glimpse of the new scene-makers and to hear about how they wrote about familiar streets and underground clubs and simulated so well metropolitan desires for experiment and novelty (Sitzler). There is an affinity between writing and clubbing. Not only did Tanja Dückers, for example, step right out of Berlin's fabled nights, but the rave happenings and techno bars she describes have also been the setting for "poetry slams," which first brought Dückers to attention; *Der Spiegel*, in fact, paid Dückers 6,000 Marks in 1999 for an underground travelogue through the city's "Szene" (Kuhlbrodt). Publishers now introduce young authors in Berlin storefronts decked out as an "illegal club from the mid-1990s" (Kuhlbrodt). From there they make the rounds of readings and talkshows in the German provinces, to Halberstadt and Wiesbaden and Bremen, promoting themselves but also marketing the "Mitte-Fieber" of raves, love parade, and Scheunenviertel that has rapidly become Berlin's favored "Integrationszement" (Arned). With two very impressive books in 2001, Norman Ohler's highly original *Mitte*, which translates as "Midtown," and Norbert Zähringer's extraordinary *So*, which is just "so," along with Regener's debut of the same year with *Herr Lehmann* and another pertinent 2001 addition, Uwe Timm's *Rot* ("Red"), as well as Dückers' 1999 provocative *Spielzone* ("Playzone"), there is a shelf of recent books that directly take the measure of the new Berlin and its sights and sounds and especially its trash, a good start even if Frank Schirrmacher, the literary editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* famously misses the representative *Hauptstadroman*, the novel of the new capital city.

The novel has been regarded as a capacious form well suited to representing the variety and mobility of the metropolis. According to Volker Klotz in his acclaimed study *The Narrated City*, the novel achieved in the nineteenth century a suppleness that drama, the favored eighteenth-century literary form, lacked. It retold city matters more ably because scenes and characters could depict spatial breadth and social diversity more freely. The various walks of city life, which crossed and recrossed the boundary between public and private, exploded "the playtime of a drama or

the playroom of a stage." Dramatists had difficulty adequately representing the collective nature of the metropolis given the center-stage focus on a few individual characters and carefully conceived dialogues (Klotz 15-16). Novelists, by contrast, worked with a far greater stock of characters, whose movements and impressions built a veritable word city. More than that: the novelist could quickly change scenes, lead readers into asides, and introduce a range of social mechanisms such as letters, conversations, rumors, and newspapers to convey or exchange information, all of which erected an increasingly complex labyrinth in the mind's eye. The particular attention to detail as the author introduced opinion and dialect, or interposed different media such as advertisements, newspapers, and crime reports, and described social conditions gave the nineteenth-century realist novel from Dickens to Dreiser a spectacular quality that it intimately shared with the city. Again and again, novelists compared city to text. Already the Romantics recognized city streets as sites of uncountable treasure and unexpected possibility and sought to translate that metropolitan geography into the dream worlds of their stories in which streets ended in crooked alleys or wide plazas and doors opened onto hidden chambers, staircases, and courtyards. A century later, in the 1920s, Franz Hessel described "strolling" as "a way of reading the street, whereby faces, displays, show windows, cafes, tracks, automobiles, and trees all become lots of equal letters which compose the sentences and pages in an always-changing book" (Hessel 145). And it was no longer simply well-to-do flaneurs who were "at home" out and about in urban places. At the end of the nineteenth century, industrialization not only moved people away from work to make them commuters but reconnected them to centers of labor and leisure via buses, trains, and trams so that Berlin, Paris, London and Petersburg had truly become settlements where strangers were likely to meet, which is Richard Sennett's very fine definition of a city (Sennett 39, 47).

The circulation of so many people, the strangers they encountered, the sighs, groans, and exclamations they uttered, and the piles of goods they carried about them gave the city a restless and mutable quality that resisted any authoritative or definitive

representation. It was precisely this metropolitan disharmony that worked its way into more experimental texts. Already in Charles Dickens' last novel, *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), the city emerged as "an agglomeration of crazed parts . . . whose relationship to each other has been jumbled" rather than simply hidden from view (Pike 58-59). "The feverish babble of constant digressions," which was so consonant with the experience of walking down the big-city boulevard, had become louder still in Andrei Biely's celebrated surrealist novel, *Petersburg* (1913-1916) (Berman 267). Set in the revolutionary year 1905, *Petersburg* ostensibly tracks the attempt of comrades to throw a bomb and accomplish a political end. But, in fact, "not only do all intentions fall flat"—the assassins fail, the plot is derailed, the bomb does not go off—but, what is more, Biely's protagonists are constantly being diverted, scattered, turned around, and kept waiting. By cutting from one scene to the next, changing perspectives, constantly revising previous statements, and censoriously inserting himself in the dialogue, Biely attempts to reproduce the discontinuities of the city in an almost tactile way to the reader. *Petersburg* prevails not as a place but as a force that arbitrarily gathers up and disperses its inhabitants.

The most ambitious effort to exploit the possibilities of the novel in order to comprehend the relentlessly unstable experience of the metropolis was undertaken by Alfred Döblin in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929). Döblin's originality lay in bending the novel to the city by eschewing a narrative line and fashioning techniques of montage, layering, and serialization instead. The irritation that Döblin produced in his readers who were accustomed to a plot, however slowly revealed, reproduced the irritation and incoherence of the city (Stühler). Döblin's readers, like Berliners themselves, were flooded by streams of words and impressions, which tumbled over one another in rapid sequence and resisted arrangement into hierarchically ordered beginnings and endings. Any storyline, Döblin felt, would extinguish the transient and contradictory nature of city life. In constructing *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Döblin rejected "the red thread of narration" that would otherwise have torn apart "the many folds that

make up the cloth of life” and cut apart “the interconnections between events” (Jähner 116).

The city that Döblin described does not exist anymore. In the first place, Berlin, like other European cities, is no longer a place of explosive population growth. Moreover, the changing nature of work and leisure has emptied the streets of their raucous movements in which thirty-four streetcar lines converged on Alexanderplatz, hundreds of thousands of commuters and shoppers crossed Potsdamer Platz every day; and about one in every two Berlin families changed their residences ever year. Streets today are surprisingly vacant, and perhaps this is why Döblin’s representation of plenty remains the treasured city novel. At least according to the ratings for German novels about Berlin on amazon.de, readers are far more interested in buying Döblin and even the pre-World War I novelist Erdmann Graeser or the rediscovered Weimar-era writers Martin Kessel and Gabriele Tergit than they are in purchasing Norbert Zähringer or Tanja Dückers. Indeed, I could not even find Dückers or Karen Duve or Bianca Döring on the shelves of the city’s bookshops, although, since I was at the “D”’s, I noticed that Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was missing too. For any of these authors, readers are much better served on the internet, which is an anecdotal way of coming to the second point about the *Grossstadtroman* today: the aural and visual space of everyday life at the turn of the twenty-first century no longer corresponds to the city as it did at least up to Döblin’s vantage point in the mid-1920s. The intertextuality between the city and the novel is something of an anachronism, given the development of national and international film publics, the extraordinary influence of popular music, and the internet.

And yet Berlin is obviously a new and transformed place, and, for Europe at least, it is the closest thing there is to a new city, one that corresponds in part to the furious development and dramatic rearrangement of urban life in the nineteenth century. It is a city that in the 1990s witnessed nothing less than a reoccupation of the spaces left empty by the war, the division of Germany, and finally the complete enclosure of West Berlin by the Berlin Wall. Potsdamer Platz, the Bundeskanzlei, Pariser Platz, the

Spreebogen, and the Lehrter Bahnhof, all near the site of the former Wall, represent major construction projects that have turned much of the city into a vast *Baustelle*. The city also has been abruptly recentered to the east and the north, undoing the movement to the west and south that began at the beginning of the twentieth century with the development of the districts around the Kurfürstendamm. And while Berlin has not actually grown, and in fact is losing bits and pieces of its three and a half million inhabitants to the surrounding suburbs of Brandenburg, it has attracted new social constituencies, from the technocrats, administrators, and corporate officers who have moved in since Berlin's designation as the new capital of Germany, to thousands of tourists, and to as many as three-hundred thousand undocumented migrant workers, mostly from eastern Europe. In addition to new spaces and new people, Berlin is the site of cultural, social, and political encounters with the former East Germany and its past, and the city is now an anomaly in Europe for its large, conspicuously socialist party, the *Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus*, which is the legacy of the old Communist *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*. Insofar as there is a geography to German memory, Berlin is very much at its center. The seemingly omnipresent TV tower on Alexanderplatz, the crumbling 1970s ruin, the *Palast der Republik*, and the horrible, delectable "wedding cake" apartment blocks of the "Stalinallee," which seem left over from the set of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, all evoke the East German past, and Libeskind's new Jewish museum, the improbable survival of Göring's Aviation Ministry on Leipziger Strasse, and the monument to the victims of the Holocaust that will presumably be built near the Brandenburger Tor are unmistakable reminders of the Nazi past. Yet the past does not speak all that loudly, and while this is a cause of consternation to some observers, the absence of presence as well as the presence of absence, forgetting as much as remembering, is very much part of the metropolitan story. Cities typically forget the horrors that have taken place in their precincts (Fritzsche). In many ways, the success of recent Berlin novels is that they have deliberately avoided staged encounters between East and West or with the German

pasts, which, I think, has been the expectation held out for the much anticipated *Hauptstadtroman* of German reunification, and that they have just as deliberately churned the drama of East and West and of Communism and Nazism into the debris of everyday life, a re-collection which is in fact what big-city novels do best and results in a more telling reading of history.

What gives contemporary Berlin novels their power is that they recognize the ways in which the city is a place of appearance and disappearance in which people, things, and memories collide and also fall by the wayside. The choreography of "History" with a big "H" is not their primary concern. This may seem surprising since Berlin seems so conspicuously a place of layers of history, of recovered and hidden memories, and of encounters with other pasts and other traditions. Isn't this engagement what we should expect particularly from the "new" Berlin writers of the last ten years? As Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder has dutifully noted, Berlin is where "even the stones cry" (Vinocur). But the past does not speak for itself; the scars of Berlin are only readable if observers know about and care about national history, and in any case city people do not encounter one another primarily as "Ossies" and "Wessies" or "Germans" and "Jews."

There is something altogether heavy-handed about two recent novels which choreograph quite explicitly the breaks of recent German history in Berlin. Peter Schneider's *Eduards Heimkehr* stumbles around the potholes and cranes of the *Baustelle*; the details of the early 1990s are all there. But ultimately the novel moves according to the paradoxes of archived history (the ownership of a former Jewish property; the precise political backgrounds of characters) and to self-interested political alliances, both of which illuminate the crosswinds of political history from Nazism, and the Cold War, to the *Wende* of 1989 but not so much the movements of Berlin itself. If the city is a congenial setting for Schneider's inquiry into layers of history and partisanship, the city as such is not a force or a character or an irritant. Berlin is even more straightforward and didactic in Uwe Timm's *Rot*, which recalls leftist militants of the 1960s and 1970s through the perspective both of Thomas Linde, a former partisan who is

called on to deliver the eulogy at an old comrade's funeral, and of the dead man himself, Aschenberger, who it turns out died leaving explosives and a detailed plan to blow up the *Siegessäule*, the victory column built in part of melted-down French cannons captured in 1870, which stands in the middle of the *Tiergarten*. Berlin is portrayed as the well-documented place of the ruins of German history, a conventional tourist's itinerary—the *Siegessäule*, “the victory arch, the Reichstag, Hitler's Chancellory, the Avenue of June 17”—one that Aschenberger himself followed step-by-step since he earned his money in later years as an alternative guide to the city. “Right here,” Linde reflects about the victory column, “this is the intersection of many strands of history” (Timm 306-07). True, but a cliché. (Incidentally, the same didacticism applies to Grass.) Although one of the ruins in Timm's novel is the deftly told marginalization of Aschenberger in the years since 1968, the didactic quality of his rendition of German history and also the fate of the quixotic but not entirely irrelevant passions of the 1960s, the city itself is uncomplicated, a poster-board of transparent historical signs that push the reader left and right but don't engage his or her empathy as to the incompleteness of political passion.

By contrast, the novels by Zähringer, Ohler, and Dücker are not about German history, although they do talk about German history, just as Döblin's novel is not about the November Revolution or the Treaty of Versailles, even though it makes references to those events. These much younger Berliners stay very much on the street, the place where the city can best be dramatized. Zähringer's *So* takes place in a district—perhaps near Ostbahnhof—somewhere near the old Wall in Mitte and explores the classic urban theme of the underground city: the unemployed Willy Bein attempts to tunnel underneath a metal container that is the temporary home of a bank hoping to drum up new business among former East Berliners and prospective new consumers and entrusting this task of market enhancement to the unmotivated Herr Gummer (see also Reid and Williams). A tenement building “in the middle of the city, which is coming closer on all sides,” “chained in by high-voltage wires,” is the scene of Ohler's

*Mitte*. And Dückers' *Spielzone* takes place on "Thomasstrasse" in Neukölln and "Sonnenburger Strasse" in Prenzlauer Berg. Although Dückers names her streets up front, and Ohler's house is indirectly identified as Grosse Präsidentenstrasse 10 in the Scheunenviertel, the precise locations are not important because the novels do not in point of fact rely on historical or geographic specificity; they are not about East and West or the Berlin Wall. Readers will not need the street maps that at least one professor teaching a course on Berlin's new literature emphatically recommends.<sup>3</sup> This conspicuous remove from the actual events and specific geography of 1989, or of 1945, 1961, and 1968, allows the novelists to treat history as just one more item on the urban landscape. It also means that they operate inside a temporality that is more complicated and more dense than Döblin's.

In contrast to Ohler and Zähringer, who lay out a three-dimensional cartography to the city, Tanja Dückers stays on the surface, but her descriptions of the streets are marvelous. She follows Rainer, a vagrant, from Hermannstrasse to Silbersteinstrasse (Dückers 48):

He runs across the curb, and spots a crumpled-up piece of paper in the gutter. A truck rumbles past, and a gust of wind sweeps it a few meters down the street before it comes to rest under a dream-blue Ford. He looks at the license plate and reads B-KF 6213 and notes it right away on the register receipt from "Conny's Containers." He probably won't even be able to read it since the last of the egg-liquor ice cream is dripping onto the letters and numbers, but who cares. He finally picks up the crumpled-up paper. A torn-off news page, a half-legible article about football.

Referred to by Verena Auffermann in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* as a "Berlin street ethnologist," Dückers is an energetic collector of cast-off things. And she catches the dime-store materiality of everyday life: the girls munch on "*Haribo-Gummi-Bears*" and "*Granni-Bonbons*" and compare their eyes to "the colors of the Pacific Ocean on the globes in the show windows at Karstadt" (Dückers 11). Even her language picks up odd words, advertisements, Americanisms—"so cosy finde ich es hier auch nicht" (Dückers 186); "bist du ready" (Dückers 182); and "das ist echt

bad" (Dückers 171). But Dücker also keeps things in motion, scattering wrappers, trinkets, newspaper clippings, and personal letters into the side streets and backyards of the consumer city. Things do not last long in the *Spielzone*: objects and passions are torn, or falling away, faded or sticky and not quite readable, conditions which correspond to the aimless journeys Dücker's characters undertake in a city that stretches the long way from the discount clothing store H&M to the nighttime club "Subground." Jason, for example, has been doing odd jobs since the age of sixteen: "ice cream scooper, DJ, dog walker, tester for sleeping pills, magician in a children's theater" (Dücker 69). Felix does not know what to wear; "finally he pulls on green-orange jogging pants, a Bert-and-Ernie tee-shirt, a red jacket, and sneakers" (Dücker 129). Everything is tried on, from the Bert-and-Ernie tee-shirt, to drugs, to sexualities: "You know, I sleep with women once in a while, I just don't make such a big deal about the fact that they are women," exclaims Ada (Dücker 121).

Nothing seems very important in this life patched together at H&M, but, as Dücker explains, it "wears well."<sup>4</sup> This nonchalance irritates readers, who complain that it reduces meaning to the clothes one wears and presents young Germans as "politically, historically completely indifferent."<sup>5</sup> The objection seems unfair, however, blaming the messenger for the message. Dücker's complacency can also be appreciated as an assertion of the ordinary and accidental in the face of pretension, and as a display of the wonder of small things that do not add up to much. It skewers the fantasy of an all-embracing mass culture with the lost and found debris of consumption.

The wind that blows scraps of newspaper down Hermannstrasse is much stronger in Zähringer's precincts, and Zähringer's *So* is a much more complex exploration of both the things of daily life and the transience of those things in historical time. From the very beginning of the novel, when a certain Schulz goes downstairs to buy a pack of cigarettes, people disappear, or they get lost, or they are moved out, as is the case when Gummer is forced to leave his subsidized apartment because, promoted to the branch director of the bank, he is no longer an employee but

management. It is a bit of bad luck since the new branch is simply a temporary metal container dropped by helicopter on an empty lot in Mitte one day. Gummer ends up living in the container, quite undisturbed as it turns out, since his two employees, Frau Hugendobel and the trainee, the Azubi (an acronym from the German "*Auszubildenden*"), left without a trace in the first week; that is, until Hugendobel returns and possibly alerts the bank's upper management about the long list of depositors that Gummer has fabricated in order to keep his directorship. Making way for these new arrivals are the people who have disappeared. So many Berliners have vanished that one of the most popular shows on television, which Gummer watches on his "little red portable TV," is the "Come-Back Show" ("Komm-zurück-Show"): "Somebody figured out that in the city there were more lost people than lost dogs," Zähringer explains (Zähringer 183). Even the spectacle of transience is not constant, for the "Komm-zurück-Show" is eventually canceled because of low ratings. In this city there are no reliable registers of loss. The "Come-Back Show" is cancelled, and the "scars of war" that once speckled the old building stock especially of East Berlin, the shrapnel marks of the Battle of Berlin that could still be seen in the early 1990s, have disappeared underneath "lemon-yellow facades, new and smooth" (Zähringer 390). The past is not always wiped away, however; sometimes it is simply recycled. One day even the container, the outpost of the brave new world of German consumerism, has disappeared, this time replaced with a "Shopping and Service Center, "in the traditional style of a historic factory site" (Zähringer 389).

In this fugitive space, it is no wonder that every morning Gummer feels completely stranded in the present, and he reflects on the powerful forces of corporate Germany that have run him aground. One strength of Zähringer's novel is to pencil in the rational order that has caused so much turbulence on the periphery. Like Döblin's Alexanderplatz, Zähringer's Berlin is choreographed both by the commotion of dispersion and the machinery of order. Berlin's public transportation system, the BVG, moves through these novels with an almost omnipotent sovereignty. Both Zähringer and Sven Regener compose priceless scenes in which

rule-bearing drivers consistently impede the attempt of hapless riders to get from one place to another. Moreover, Gummer feels constantly under the surveillance of the bank's division of internal affairs and its terrifying chief, Fuchs. At the same time, the predictable order of the offices, which are decorated with prints of van Gogh and Gauguin, is itself a reproduction. The vigilance of the bank has been repeatedly breached by the assassinations of 1960s militants, yet one of the militants, "Guevara," ends up being forgotten in the underground, and an earlier action had resulted in the death of the driver, not the capitalist, for the two had just switched places in the limousine in a transgressive exchange of power. It is never clear who is fooling whom. Zähringer repeatedly undermines the sources of power, and thus the sightlines of calculation. He folds and refolds his story, blocking the development of any authoritative line of narration. So is about it not being so.

In this totally mobilized landscape, almost all of Zähringer's characters are on the make, as Erhard Schütz has pointed out: "Screwballs and pickpockets, losers and idlers, bar owners and bartenders and barflies, fake countesses, divorce lawyers, retired military, ex-terrorists—bankers fit right in" (Schütz). To be sure, they are all on the (proverbial) "wrong side of the tracks," but make their way, outfitted with the "small, red portable TV" and those other items that Dücker, at least, genuinely prizes, "travel provisions," "Reiseproviant," the last noun of *Spielzone* (Dücker 207). And what better way to make your way as a laid-off machinist than to dig a tunnel under the bank container and steal some money, as does Willy Beil? And so: "the tunnel stretched into the city like a forgotten serpent, resolved to get back for itself a piece of life" (Zähringer 143).

The tunnel adds a daring vertical axis to Zähringer's novel. As the tunnel grows longer, Willy Beil stumbles onto more and more debris from the past. Recovered material objects such as a World War I dagger or a 1928 newspaper article prompt stories that glom onto the prehistories of Zähringer's disappearing Berliners and fabricated depositors. The vignettes themselves do not add up to a whole, and readers encounter them as they do the

transients who walk around above ground; they are remnants that sometimes echo the present (a 1928 newspaper headlining “Unrest in Afghanistan—Nobel Prize Awarded—Freienwalde Murderer Nabbed”), sound a scary alterity (the cries of prisoners in the makeshift SA prison in the Columbiahaus on Potsdamer Platz), or reappear in unexpected ways (the former Berliner who bombs the familiar precincts of his old city as an American airman). That it is Willy Beil who uncovers these pieces of history is significant because the newly fashioned collector had himself forgotten to take even a single photograph when he left his wife; Zähringer makes it clear that all historical recollections are wrenched from their contexts and scattered about for recycling. History here appears as another version of the “Come-Back Show,” which fades from the screen by the end of the book. The disposable new economy on the surface thus corresponds to the disposed old history underground. The very terms of instability are the source for multiple stories, reversals of fortune, and narratives not contained by any authoritative telling. The only history that is available in the city is a “*Thesaurus*” of broken pieces (Zähringer 251).

Order and disorder are mismatched in Norman Ohler’s Berlin-Mitte as well. This is a place that is increasingly laced up by technology. “People are part of a system that they don’t even want,” Ohler observes, “they build their little niches and are completely oblivious, like the lobsters at the fishmongers, with tied-up claws, they climb on top of each other in a big heap, a prolonged, miserable scene” (Kuhlbrodt). Ohler repeatedly describes contemporary movement in terms of extreme functionality, but he tells the story from the perspective of bystanders who for a moment have been pushed to the side, find temporary shelter, and can observe the centripetal forces before being caught themselves. The protagonist is Klinger, who has lost his job after the collapse of an internet startup in London and returns to Berlin to “self hack,” “the only thing that is left on this blue planet of melancholy” (Ohler 23). The housing he finds corresponds to his in-between station: an old apartment building at Grosse Präsidentenstrasse 10, the last untouched, unrenovated house in the area, but now,

finally, due to be “cored,” that is gutted with only the facade remaining as the new high-tech economy of the Berlin Republic completes the make-over of the city. “High-tech construction sites, all over, encirclement [*Einkesselung*]. Expansion of the track network, renovations like military operations” (Ohler 222): “in its old dilapidation,” the building is caught in a web of tram tracks, electricity lines, and sleek facades (Ohler 11). It too is stranded in the present.

The images of the *Baustelle*, or construction site, are striking and portray a city under technological siege: the house is “shackled by high-voltage lines” (Ohler 11); renovation is described as “encirclement” (Ohler 222). At the same time, there is something archaic about this future which reminds me of the rusted, almost primitive modern in the movie *Brazil*: “The floor: raw. Worn, patchy parquet, construction dirt in the cracks, broken mouldings reveal flaking plaster. Ink stains on the old whitewashed, smoke-tinted walls. Dusty smells of neglect. And noise like the clatter of heavy trains on loose rails” (Ohler 25). The future does not quite work so seamlessly and often enough comes in the form of the tram—the slow-moving relics of a nineteenth-century transportation system, maintained by East Berliners, and now quite adorable. To my mind, Ohler cannot have it both ways. “Encirclement,” “all over” at that, is not “neglect,” and with all their rickety noises, trams are simply not offensive vehicles. Perhaps the incongruity is calculated to reveal the cracks and chinks in the armor of functionality, but that does not correspond to the attention Ohlers pays to the lonesome building on Grosse Präsidentenstrasse, which is a survivor, or to the martial flavor he imparts to the wrecking crew, “in shiny black jackets with CORING stenciled on the back,” who come to blow it up (Ohler 188).

Ohler’s aim in any case is to tell the story of the left-over spaces and the left-over people: “Make me a hero. Tell my story. But for that I have to survive” (Ohler 11). Whereas “coring” is the process of destroying historical ballast and tarding up sandstone facades to create sheer, functional lines, Ohler’s delapidated apartment house is full of anomalies and secrets. The quiet interior courtyard; the wooden, worn steps; the cellar; the attic; the annex

are mysterious, unused, or neglected spaces which have not been scrubbed clean or tidied up. And when the house is very still, its past whispers. Klinger can hear only snippets, but they are sounds of domestic life long-ago: "screams," the exhalations of collective life in the crowded tenements where three, four people inhabited a single room even as late as the 1920s and 1930s; "the organ-grinder's melody," from the inner courtyard when the organ-grinder came around to play; "murmurings in Polish," and the strains of a waltz, which is then abruptly silenced by the noise of a passing tram (Ohler 26).

Eventually Klinger makes contact with a ghost, and it is striking that Ohler presents himself with a number of choices as to who this ghost should be. Bonz, the owner of what must be one of the "illegal club[s] from the mid-1990s," tells about his antecedents: "here behind us, in the ground, there was once a kind of establishment, one of the legendary cellar bars of the 1920s." Supposedly its patrons survived the Third Reich in the shadows of the law until they were buried and killed by a Soviet missile in the last days of the war. But Ohler leaves them be, perhaps for the same reason that Bonz gives for the tomb's neglect: "Imagine, you do all this excavation, and then suddenly you hit something totally unappetizing. Resistance fighters, you know. Then there's a big ol' debate—no investor wants that." And he adds: "That's why you core the building—you just leave the foundation alone" (Ohler 36). In other words, "Entkernung" is at once the destruction of the past (the house) and the entombment, or secret preservation of the past (the foundation). Ohler also fiddles with another possible ghost, an old DDR comrade who has not yet realized that the regime has fallen and that advertisement campaigns are not the spruced up Leninist slogans he takes them for; but the author ends up keeping him alive in one of the rooms. In the end, the ghost is Igor, a DJ for Bolz's club who had lived in Klinger's apartment before accidentally setting himself on fire during a Ketamin-induced drug experiment in which his spirit had left his body only to be unable return to what had become a corpse. So Igor lurks about as a ghost, haunting the house and urging Klinger to continue resistance to renovation and coring. Igor thus be-

comes emblematic of the “*Zwischenzeit*” between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the entry of the Bonn bureaucrats, a lost time when, according to at least one reviewer, Detlef Kuhlbrodt of *die tageszeitung*, “Berlin was the most interesting city in the world” (Kuhlbrodt).

Ohler himself does not romanticize Mitte either as a time or a place; rather, what the pedestrian choice of Igor over the improbable “*Widerstandskämpfer*” of 1945 or the demented Communist indicates is the constancy of the production of ruins, not just the big ones of Nazism or Communism. Memories of the lost time of Mitte, or of 1968, for that matter, which are the subject of Timm’s novel *Rot* and also of Bodo Morshäuser’s bitter resumé, *In seinen Armen das Kind*, displace earlier memories and the history of Nazi and postwar Germany, and along with the ruins of love, and middle age, and the consumer society that Zähringer illuminates suggest the ordinariness of the past and the disposability and reproducibility of history. All that remains are the soft, disconnected whispers through the walls, which Klinger chooses to listen to, or the decontextualized fragments that Willy Beil stumbles upon, or the fragments embedded in familiar speech, Ohler’s descriptive “*Einkesselung*,” for example, which conjures up German soldiers surrounded during the Battle of Stalingrad. Indeed the strength of the novels under discussion here is the way they reduce history to the profane terms of everyday life and the way they reveal how it infiltrates everyday life. Like the noises behind the walls in Grosse Präsidentenstrasse, the television is always on. In an apartment on Tanja Dücker’s Thomasstrasse, it broadcasts a show about Plötzensee, the prison where the July 20, 1944, plotters against Hitler were executed. Laura’s parents want her to see it: “‘No thanks!’ I say loudly:” “I myself personally have already been to Plötzensee twice, once with school and once, if they even remember it, with my parents. Each time I had nightmares, I cared, even if Wolf blamed me for not caring, just because I ate a bag of chips inside, which for some reason he found ‘totally inappropriate’ ” (Dücker 20-21). This trivial recollection in which horror, shame, and apathy, memory and its afterlife in culture, are all tied together is a very artful

rendition of the uses to which history is in fact put. Judith Hermann composes a similar scene in her acclaimed collection, *Sommerhaus, später*:

I said: "Christian has fallen in love," and you said, "Nothing new there," and then we were silent. I could hear the quiet voices from the television set, war noise, air-raid alarm; I knew that it was cold in your room, frost flowers on the window. You hung up. (Hermann 98)

The television is also on when Herr Lehmann wakes up one evening in Sven Regener's novel: "The afternoon news was on—some sort of demonstrations. Next to him, Katrin lay on her back and snored quietly." Lehmann is ultimately caught by surprise: "Ach, du Scheisse" 'Holy shit,' he remarks upon hearing that the Berlin Wall has fallen (Regener 153, 294). History is just another intruder, like Lehmann's parents who announce an unwelcome visit to the city in October. There is no epochal break or a sense of new historical time, and this gives these novels a deliberate "Nachwende" or post-unification feel. They inhabit a city that is not indifferent to history, but encounters it in bits and pieces that are scattered about and occasionally recollected like all the other profane matters of the city.

What these novels do effectively is represent history that has in many respects taken the form of the "Come Back" TV show, which sometimes holds the interest of the audience, is sometimes heard in snippets from the next room, and which must keep up its own ratings. Not only is urban space full of historical references, but the references appear and reappear in various degrees of decay. And one set of historical memories can displace another, as is the case with the melancholy that surrounds 1968 and ends up displacing (although not eliminating) an engagement with Nazism and Communism. The fallability of history is part of the story. On the one hand, this attention to temporal layers is something that justifies the claim that *So* and *Mitte* are in fact the noteworthy Berlin novels that Schirrmacher misses. Indeed they push Döblin's method into the midden of history in startling ways, introducing readers to ghosts, tunnels, and buried treasure. The

intertextuality they rely on to bring this debris to our attention has invigorated the genre of the contemporary novel. On the other hand, the fragmentary nature of history and the distracted interest in all its components suggest that the successful novel of post-unification Berlin will have to make that fragmentation and distraction part of the story and thereby render the past in the profane terms of consumption, recollection, and misplacement.

### Notes

1 I would like to thank Stephen Brockmann and Erhard Schütz for their comments and encouragement.

2 On the syllabi, see Hanns-Josef Ortheil, "Was gibt's Neues? Literatur und Kultur am Anfang des 21. Jahrhunderts," Universität Hildesheim, Winter 2000/01, at <<http://www.kulturserver.de/home/rina/seminarenext.html>>; and Bettina Clausen, "Literatur der 90er Jahre (Teil II)," Universität Hamburg, Winter 2001, at <[http://www.signlang.uni-hamburg.de/fb07/LitS/Archiv\\_KVV/KVV\\_IfG2\\_WS01f/Seminare\\_II-2.html](http://www.signlang.uni-hamburg.de/fb07/LitS/Archiv_KVV/KVV_IfG2_WS01f/Seminare_II-2.html)>.

3 Gerhard Spaney, "Berlin-Texte vor und nach dem Fall der Mauer," Universität Freiburg, Spring 2002, at <<http://www.ph-freiburg.de/deutsch/kvv/Semlw.htm>>.

4 Interview with Dückers at [www.leonce.de/lifestyle/spielplatz.html](http://www.leonce.de/lifestyle/spielplatz.html) [1999].

5 One reader's comment and two-star rating on amazon.de, dated 22 September 1999.

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