Sammelrez: Sammelrezension Modern Berlin

von Ankum, Katharina (Hrsg.): *Women in the Metropolis. Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1997. ISBN: 0-520-20465-4; X + 238 S.

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Both publications trace in admirable and innovative ways the representational, discursive and cultural articulations of modern Berlin in its making by covering the crucial time span from 1900 up to the rise of National Socialism. Both are able to reveal and analyze the unique setting of its urban development as compared to different patterns of urbanization in other, historically much older European metropolises such as Vienna, Paris and London. Both, however differing in their analytical perspectives, make understandable why the Wilhelmine and Weimar era provided such a fertile ground for rapid city development, flourishing cultural production, and exemplary manifestations of the „modern" such as fragmentation, instability, anomie, transience and the accelerated blurring of individual and collective identities.

The particular strength of 'Reading Berlin 1900' and Peter Fritzsche's methodological and empirical approach is to thoroughly excavate the structural interplay between mass circulation papers, the creation of city imaginaries and the new perception of urban spaces. He does profoundly well in researching the interlinks between the narration of the city, the new readers, and new readings. His account that the „representational acts, in turn, constructed a second-hand metropolis which gave a narrative to the concrete one and choreographed its encounters" (p.1) is well taken and solidly elaborated.

The chapters on „Readers and Metropolitans", „Physiognomy of the City" and the „City as Spectacle" present sufficient empirical evidence to support Fritzsche's thesis that the interaction between readers and texts, and the multiplicity of reading and browsing, discovering and consuming the city gave the „metropolitan diversity a common, inclusive note" (p. 49). He also nicely deciphers the ironic dialectic of early mass media by one the side (ed note: on the one hand) focusing attention on urban life, ist sensations, pleasures and horrors, and on the other side (ed note: on the other hand) distracting and even destroying the observer's and reader's capability to get a homogenous understanding of the city as a lived environment of antagonistic social and political layers and forces. He is able to prove convincingly how the widespread textualization of urban life through media and advertisement, emerging sensational reportage and new literary genres influenced the transformation of observers from city dwellers into flaneurs, browsers, and spectators.

However what is missing in Fritzsche's monograph, is a careful comparison of the textual surface of Berlin 1900-1914 with its social history. His study could have significantly benefited from such a cross-reading of social „texts" and social „facts" and might have brought better evidence for his hypothesis that the shared metropolitan culture „did not snuff out other countervailing identities based on class, ethnicity, or gender, and it certainly did not homogenize" (p. 49).

Reading the city as a social text should not only take into account the formation of urban imaginaries through the textures of newspapers, feuilletons, advertisements, notices on 'Litfassaeulen', handbills, tourist guides and other texts for browsing the city, but should also thematize modernization as a doubled, symbolic and material encoding of social and cultural spaces. The modern city in its making is not just a further developed and more complex storehouse of monuments, spatial arrangements and inscriptions but the transformation and re-configuration of traditions within emerging rationally organized industrial landscapes, being shaped under the rule of science, technology and new forms of social control. The latter heavily imply elaborated representations of the „other", the „low", and the „marginal" through medical, hygienic, statistic, urban planning and legal discourses. These discourses had not been egalitarian at all but established political as well cultural regimes of power and oppression above those who could not equally participate in civic cul-

ture, electoral vote and collective discourse.

On the contrary (ed note: in the alternative) the bourgeois regime of power inherent in the process of modernization split the „other" into rationalized agents of production (industrial labor force) and „irrational" objects of surveillance and policing (prostitutes, 'Lumpenproletariat', criminal filth etc.). The Berlin bourgeois subject, like the Viennese or Parisian one, continuously defined and redefined itself through the exclusion of what it marked out as 'low,' as dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating and yet that very act of exclusion was constitutive of its cultural and political identity. Hence the dominant bourgeois and elitist modes of representation distorted the subcultures of marginal social and ethnic strata into the grotesque „other" of the metropolis, mirroring both the grave difference of the urban body, and the hegemony of metropolitan elites. Therefore one should differentiate Fritzsche's assumption that readers and readings, texts and contexts of Berlin 1900 constituted something like a coherent metropolitan mode of perception shared by the majority of Berliners.

One should ask, in which ways the social topography of urban spaces did unfold and how the socio-economic segregation corresponded with the creation of the textual surface of the metropolis. To use social history as complementary tool for decoding urban textures would entail paying close attention to the plurality of languages caused by the immigration of ethnic groups, the social distribution of literacy and illiteracy, and the varying use of sites of consumption and entertainment by different social strata. And it would also entail to focus on social and cultural patterns of intra-urban mobility and the mutual construction of bourgeois, middle class and proletarian subjects and subjectivities through perceptual mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion.

Bringing these dimensions into the analytical focus of the study would probably have offered a rather different reading of the city as a (social) text. Ignoring the social history of Berlin in 1900 causes severe problems in understanding why its seemingly „civic unity" at the turn of the century (which itself could be deciphered as an ideological construct) doomed into the socially polarized, politically radicalized and „unreadable" Berlin of the 1920s.

'Women in the Metropolis. Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture' , edited by Katharina von Ankum, provides a different reading of the urban spaces as textures of the „social," than does Peter Fritzsche's monograph. Five of the ten essays on female experiences with and responses to the process of modernization in the 1920s and 1930s successfully elaborate a double-fold perspective, on the one side excavating gender perceptions and experiences with urbanization and interwar ambivalence of modernity versus regression, and on the other side analyzing the cultural discourses that articulated and regulated emerging forms and images of femininity.

Most valuable is the attempt not only to look into the cultural modeling of women but also to situate gender roles and the polarization of male and female within a broader concept of representational modes intersected by its social constituency. Hence not only the mutual construction of male and female identities as (distorted) projections and responses is brought to the fore but equally a careful and differentiated analysis of the multifaceted cultural fabric of Berlin is presented. Furthermore this collection of essays provides convincing evidence for the strong potential of New Historicism not just to offer cultural history, confined to literary products of high and elite culture but to valorize a broad spectrum of historical sources - from film to photography, from paintings to collages, and from multiple texts to material objects.

From the reviewer's perspective the most lucid and intellectually exciting contributions are Lynne Frame's „Gretchen, Girl, Garconne? Weimar Science and Popular Culture in Search of the Ideal New Woman", Anke Gleber's „Female Flanerie and the Symphony of the City", Maria Makela's „The Misogynist Machine: Images of Technology in the Work of Hannah Hooch", Janet Lungstrum's „Metropolis and the Technosexual Woman of German Modernity", and Nancy Neno's „Femininity, the Primitive, and Modern Urban Space: Josephine Baker in Berlin". All five essays reveal the significant embedding of women into the process of modernization,

into mass and popular culture, technology and patterns of urbanization. And all, though each differently, demonstrate the complex interplay of female subjectivity, its autonomous trajectories and external assignments, and the close parallelism of emancipatory and oppressive components within the transitory period from the 1920s to Nazi dictatorship, continually melting together greatest (subjective) expectations with harshest political disillusion and cultural despair.

What could be criticized is that none of the essays really pays close and deep attention to the varying relationship of female working lives, public order and privacy, the political economy of gender and reproductive behavior, and the gender differences and antinomies in political groupings and parties during the Weimar period. But this lack can be less attributed to the individual authors of 'Women in the Metropolis' than far more to an observable tendency in cultural studies to cut of(f) cultural matters and articulations from their (hidden) socio-economic agenda. By this I do not at all intend to recall simplistic and outdated stories about capitalism, its base and superstructure. Rather I would to like to draw upon a recent work of Lawrence Grossberg (1) who argued that though gender, class, sexuality and other cultural markers can not be linearly reduced to economic relations as their ultimate bottom line, it is nevertheless crucial to analyze the socio-economic trajectories which both set options for social identities/differences and simultaneously confine their political and cultural agency.

Thus analyzing socio-economic trajectories of cultural articulations does not only imply to thematize the interplay of production, consumption, and distribution but - in the case of metropolises - also to relate urban textures to the city's built environment. Therefore, a criticism which could be targeted at both 'Reading Berlin 1900' and 'Women in the Metropolis' is the nearly complete omission of architecture and municipal networks of mobility and communication in their capacity to segregate urban spaces and to rupture the city's narrated unity and homogeneity . In fact, both buildings and streets, monuments and networks of communication (such as telephone and railroad networks) can be viewed as empowered sites carrying social fragmentations as well as economic trajectories. Leaving their superposition and interference out of scholarly focus does imply the suspension of two vectors crucially shaping the metropolitan physiognomy of class, ethnic, and gender hegemony and its discontents.

Note:

(1) Lawrence Grossberg, „Cultural Studies vs. Political Economy: Is Anybody Else Bored with this Debate?", Colloquy (March 1995): 72-80 ; Lawrence Grossberg, „Cultural Studies, Globalization and the Logic of Negativity", paper presented at the IFK conference „The Contemporary Study of Culture", Vienna (Austria), 4-6 December 1997.

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