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# Invisible Culture

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## Picturing Berlin Piecing Together a Public Sphere

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The long and often fraught process of re-establishing Berlin as both the capital of a reunified Germany and the seat of its government took place over a period of a decade, beginning in 1991. Incredibly, this would mean Berlin would be host to a fifth distinctive political regime within just one century. Following the unification of Germany in 1871 and the establishment of an imperial power that continued until the disarray at the end of the First World War, the city of Berlin was to witness the inauguration of the Weimar Republic, the fascist totalitarian state of Nazi Germany and communist rule of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), before embodying the democratic federalism of today's "United Germany." With such fits of political domination and new beginnings, the changing face of Berlin's "public sphere" has undoubtedly carried with it changing fortunes, and given rise to a panoply of myths, symbols, and images. I intend here to turn, specifically, to aspects of Berlin's rich visual culture in an attempt to understand the role played by "images" in thinking through political responsibility and the marking out of our public sphere(s).



I do not seek to offer any express claims for Berlin itself, nor for the efficacy of its public sphere. Instead, I want only to draw inspiration from the city's unique history and ever changing urban landscape in order to say something about the nature and problems that any flexible and open-ended conception of public political engagement must inevitably face. Crucially, what I take to be at stake is not simply a linguistic or discursive space, but, as well, a social sphere created through an exchange of images. Historically and architecturally, Berlin is a city full of openings and gaps that maintain, at least, the spectre of a public sphere that is not simply a diverse and multifarious public domain, but one, due to its ruinous and evolving state, perpetually in the process of *becoming*. In some respects, my interest in the city might best be thought of as a wish to establish a *fictional* Berlin, one that, like Roland Barthes' fictional account of Japan, affords a certain "situation of writing." Thus, in this way, where Barthes sought, "the *possibility* of a difference, of a mutation, of a revolution in the propriety of symbolic systems,"<sup>1</sup> I hope to open up the possibility for

thinking publicly in pictures, as much as in words.

Before I proceed, it is perhaps helpful to offer a note on what I mean by "image"—it is a word that certainly attracts many different uses and meanings. As W.J.T. Mitchell remarks, when we speak of images, we might well, "speak of pictures, statues, optical illusions, maps, diagrams, hallucinations, spectacles, projections, poems, patterns, memories, and even ideas." He suggests we think of images as, "a far-flung family," encompassing the mental, optical, graphic, sculptural, architectural, verbal, and perceptual.<sup>2</sup> There is often a tendency to privilege the visual, material *picture*—that is, to advocate "the image 'proper' [as . . .] the graphic or optical representations we see displayed in an objective publicly sharable space." By contrast, the literary, dream, or metaphoric image might seem somehow doubtful, unstable. Mitchell adds that, "mental images don't seem to be exclusively visual the way real pictures are; they involve all the senses." Yet, of course, this can all be turned upon its head, for even "proper" images are "not stable, static, or permanent in any metaphysical sense."<sup>3</sup> Mitchell's proposed genealogy or family tree of images is useful, especially in that it helps account and make allowances for the diversity (and clash) of image types, while also acknowledging a common mode between images distinct from a linguistic mode.

I will refer throughout to a broad range of visual images, from Berlin's urban landscape, tourist, and architectural sites, to more iconic pictures associated with the city. However, the *underlying* meaning or concept of the "image" I wish to employ relates to a notion of the image as "likeness," or "resemblance"—the image-type that Mitchell places at the very root of his family tree.<sup>4</sup> The idea of the image as "likeness" might well suggest some crude form of mimesis, of reflecting or mimicking an external reality. However, this is not what I intend. As I will develop further on, "likeness," here, is to be understood in terms of a *process* of imaging—or, for want of a better word, "writing"—that is a perpetual motion of *thinking in images*. Akin to Walter Benjamin's notion of the mimetic faculty,<sup>5</sup> or Barthes' "pleasure of the text,"<sup>6</sup> the point is that an engagement with images constitutes an act of production, offering a unique way of combining, distorting and replicating various elements. So just as Barthes suggests, in his essay "From Work to Text," that the text is a social space, "where languages circulate (keeping the circular sense of the term),"<sup>7</sup> the image is to be considered here as an over-arching term for a social "writing/imaging" of that which is seen or imagined. Purposely then, the title of this essay is "Picturing Berlin", rather than simply "Pictures of Berlin," for it considers how the public sphere might necessarily need be pieced together again and again through complex modes of thinking and engagement, including the use of many different image-types.

### Picturing the Public Sphere

Only in the light of the public sphere did that which existed become revealed, did everything become visible to all.  
— Jürgen Habermas<sup>8</sup>

The origins of the public sphere are most commonly ascribed to Ancient Greece with its overtly strict division between public and private affairs. The distinction is different from that between simply

inside and outside the public sphere is a domain in which both subjective and worldly (or communal) experience are brought together. It is a visually oriented arena, offering the ability to see and be seen. The Ancient Greek, according to Richard Sennett, “could use his or her eyes to see the complexities of life. The temples, markets, playing fields, meeting places, walls, public statuary, and paintings of the ancient city represented the culture’s values in religion, politics, and family life.”<sup>9</sup> Sennett suggests that this ability (or perhaps more appropriately, privilege) to see the “complexity of life” is one that allowed emotional, ethical, and spiritual concerns to be given voice in and from the immediate surroundings. Moreover, he refers to a sense of “openness,” whereby public spaces function as site where people can come together publicly, and where citizens are able, as it were, to open their eyes, “to *think* about political, religious and erotic experiences.”<sup>10</sup> By comparison, with its proliferation of many more *privately* experienced public spaces (such as the shopping centre, automobiles, and leisure complexes), Sennett suggests that our own contemporary culture has closed down such openness, thwarting our ability to see “the complexities of life.” Perhaps, indeed, we have lost, or at least neglected, something of this ability to see. However, in this discussion of a public sphere found in the “ruins” and shifting sands of Berlin, I suggest that these complexities are still apparent, available to be seen, heard, and touched.

Of course, the public sphere of the Greek *polis* was premised upon the significant exclusion of women, children, labourers, non-residents, and slaves; and thus, hardly acceptable grounds for modern democracy. However, the Greek conception has remained useful for defining or imagining a place outside the realm of power and special interests, a space in which one can become public.<sup>11</sup> Jürgen Habermas retained this aspect in his consideration of the public sphere as, “an essential part of the life world in which people interact and *make sense of their lives*.”<sup>12</sup> Yet his is a public sphere of private individuals. Its ideal is rooted in the bourgeois public sphere of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the concomitant rise in new sociability that marked the separation of society from its ruler (the State). Habermas’ is an ideal typified by the culture of salons and coffee houses, and the dramatic growth of the literary sphere with its impact on the availability of “public” information.

However, Habermas goes on to point out that by the twentieth century this Enlightenment model of a literate, freethinking public was in decline, due largely to the emergence of mass culture and “commercial industrial publicity.” The public sphere, now an arena for advertising rather than critical debate, becomes a sphere in which the state, corporate actors, and special-interest organisations make use of what Habermas terms “publicity work,” the aim of which is to strengthen “the prestige of one’s own position without making the matter on which a compromise is to be achieved itself a topic of the public discussion.”<sup>13</sup> In more recent debates, some commentators have not framed this notion of “publicity” in such negative terms. Kevin Deluca and Jennifer Peeples, for example, have suggested we might think in terms of a “public screen,”<sup>14</sup>—Deluca’s own slogan being “critique through spectacle, not critique versus spectacle.”<sup>15</sup> Deluca would seem to accept the terms of “publicity” as an operator in a (highly mediated) public sphere. In his studies of environmental campaigning organisations, he demonstrates how the staging of media events can, in actual fact, play a key role in helping shape (or even reorient) the public agenda.<sup>16</sup> For my purposes here, I will allow this ambiguity between public sphere, and so-called “public screen” to remain, since I do not want to over-problematise how public debate comes to fruition. Of course, it is evident, whether you accept the work of publicity or not, that the public sphere is not only a site in which contests are played out, but it is also *itself* up for contest. The important questions that persist concern whom the public sphere is actually for, who it includes, and how it is possible to take up a “voice” in such a domain.

Berlin’s tempestuous history has meant dramatic political and cultural changes, but even the more recent, and generally subtler changes of the latter half of the twentieth century pose interesting problems and possibilities for theorists of the public sphere. Key issues have been: the huge expansion in the role and presence of the media, the development of feminist and multicultural discourses, the specific concerns for Germany’s *Sonderweg* (or special path) regarding its national identity,<sup>17</sup> and the transformations following the collapse of communist regimes. In light of these cultural shifts and transformations, Habermas’ original conception of the public sphere has come under a great deal of criticism, and some argue that it is overly monolithic, and unworkable. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge issued a direct challenge in their examination of the student movements of the late sixties. In this study, they put forward an important alternative notion of the public sphere, which they describe as “an accumulation of different and divergent spaces, some of them connected, even overlapping, other separate, sometimes even functioning in different dimensions.”<sup>18</sup> Habermas’ response to his critics has been no less important,<sup>19</sup> and indeed he has come to accept the need for a revised theoretical grounding.<sup>20</sup> Of greatest significance is the fact that with the rise of an increasingly complex and functionally differentiated society, Habermas, too, rejects the idea of large associations as the focal point around which individuals can unite. Instead, he suggests, “the normative foundations of the critical theory of society be laid at a deeper level. The theory of communicative action intends to bring into the open the rational potential intrinsic in *everyday* communicative practices.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, as Peter Uwe Hohendahl notes, just as the “political issues of the last decade, in particular the turmoil caused by unification, have validated Negt and Kluge’s concept of a fragmented, multiple public sphere,” so Habermas can be seen to have dropped the more “questionable notion of a pure and unified bourgeois public sphere.”<sup>22</sup>

A particular problem that persists with Habermas’ conception of the public sphere, however, is its strong emphasis upon a linguistic mode of rational discourse—a mode of apparently unrivalled analytic enquiry obviating any other mode of communication, including the visual. All too frequently in modern society, images of all types are regarded as the impoverishment of politics, that is, as contributing to the distortion of communication. It should be pointed out that for Habermas, mass communications are not taken to be *in themselves* the distortion of communication, and, in fact, there is a sense in which the media and its public are understood to assume a communicative community.<sup>23</sup> But as Jon Simons notes, a significant problem arises with Habermas’ appeal to “the fundamental norms of rational speech,” which would seem only to subject images and news media to critique, “turning them back into ideologies that distort communication.”<sup>24</sup> In this respect, the form of verbal (or “worded”) argumentation that underpins Habermas’ proposed “deliberative democracy” tends to lead “commentators to overemphasise the differences between systematic verbal presentation of ideas (ideologies) and the visual and narrative representations.”<sup>25</sup> As a result, deliberation is read simply as an antidote to the images and “scenes” of political life, or to put it another way, images are not taken to actually play any part in the *act* of deliberating itself, but instead are something over which we might deliberate. So, for example, while the events leading to German reunification from 1989 to 1990 can be said to have been, “the right stuff for television,” there is an overriding sense that the significant debates over the meaning and implications for the future of Germany and Europe were actually carried out by the print media. Significantly, as Hohendahl argues, the “public demand” for more in-depth information and analysis occurred “precisely because the events that resulted in the unification occurred so fast that those who participated in them [ . . . ] found it difficult to get a *complete picture* of the structural transformation.”<sup>26</sup> But what would this complete picture look like, and is it not yet another example of a monolithic and potentially unworkable aspiration?

This emphasis on verbal reasoning is certainly not restricted to Habermas’ notion of the public sphere. Rather, it underpins much of the liberal tradition that emphasises the need for “reasoned dialogue” to negotiate power relations.<sup>27</sup> In fact, even in the more idiosyncratic writings of Hannah Arendt—who many would consider to be much more receptive to matters of creativity, spontaneity, and imagination—there is an equally explicit penchant for verbal reasoning. In an interview with Günter Gaus in the 1960s, Arendt was asked what, if anything, she could retain despite having fled her home country during Nazi occupation. She replied that only the “language remains,” and noted how strictly she sought to maintain her “mother tongue,” the only language she felt she could rely upon

to satisfy a certain “productivity” or dexterity of thought.<sup>28</sup> Later in the interview, she equates this adroitness of language directly with acting in the public sphere, noting: “[o]ne exposes oneself to the light of the public, as a person [ . . . ] Speaking is also a form of action.”<sup>29</sup> However, Arendt’s concern with the tension between philosophy and politics, “between man as a thinking being and man as an acting being,”<sup>30</sup> is equally sustained (albeit unintentionally) through non-linguistic engagement. In the same interview, Arendt was asked whether a specific event could be said to account for her “turn to the political.” She replied emphatically with the date of February 27, 1933, and a stark image: “the burning of the Reichstag, and the illegal arrests that followed during the same night [ . . . ] What happened then was monstrous [ . . . ] This was an immediate shock for me, and from that moment on I felt responsible.”<sup>31</sup>

On one level, this shocking image can be said to feed into Arendt’s familiar methodology of conceiving of political thought through a process of storytelling. This is not necessarily to be understood as a straightforward narrative mode, but rather one that digs, as Seyla Benhabib describes, “under the rubble of history to recover those pearls of past experience [ . . . ] so as to cull from them a story that can orient the mind in the future.”<sup>32</sup> Such a procedure is reminiscent of the work of Benjamin (with whom Arendt was certainly familiar). Benjamin’s aversion towards narrative history is well documented in his preparatory writings for the legendary *Arcades Project*.<sup>33</sup> History, he claimed, is only ever to be read (or made tangible) from the constellations of the past *in* the present: “For while the relation of the present to the past is purely a temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is *not progression but image*, suddenly emergent.”<sup>34</sup> Benjamin’s theory of the dialectical image, or “dialectics at a standstill” seeks a critical engagement, or “awakening,”<sup>35</sup> understood to occur only by engaging in the nature of the image. His experiments with a form of literary montage were designed to reinitiate the shocks of emerging images.

Benjamin’s phrase “dialectics at a standstill” is perhaps a little misleading. Although the dialectical image is most certainly set against the conventional linearity of historical narratives, it is not meant to suggest the fixing (or “standing still”) of a specific, and more ideologically acceptable, image or interpretation. Instead, it refers to the *act* and/or instance of making meaning itself, and to the situation, or situating of that act. Benjamin explains this by way of a “third” term that goes beyond the form/content relation. He describes this in an episode in “Berlin Childhood Around 1900,” in which a small child takes delight in pulling apart a pair of stockings that are rolled together forming a “bag.” With his hand inside the bundled stockings the child draws the stockings out until he is suddenly left with two separate stockings in his hand. “I had taken “what had been brought to me” [the stockings] out, but “the bag” in which it had lain was no longer there. I could not put this process to the test often enough. It taught me that form and content, the wrapping and what is wrapped in it are the same thing.”<sup>36</sup> Although this may seem a rather frivolous story, it raises an important point about the sense of surprise and confluence that the exercise with the stockings describes. It is this immanent, revelatory quality that Benjamin sought to bring into a theory (and practice) of the dialectical image—an image that might bring to light (and life) a critical realisation.

The idea of “thinking in images” (*Bild Denken*) is not a concern with specific images as such, but rather a productive, creative procedure of both dialectically forming an image, and being aware of the process and your place in that moment. For Benjamin, the power of images is not so much their supposed seductive qualities, but their ability to make meaning *materialise*, to become available to the spectator/participant.<sup>37</sup> In this way, Benjamin suggests, knowledge comes by way of thinking in images—it “comes only in lighting flashes. The text is the long roll of thunder that follows.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, it might be more appropriate to suggest it is the *image* of the burning Reichstag that induces Arendt’s sense of responsibility, and which crucially enables her to carry forward a sense of shock and importance. Furthermore, reasoned deliberation might not necessarily be thought sustainable as a linguistic action alone, but must also be understood in terms of other non-linguistic modes. Indeed, we might find we think (and act) politically as well, if not better, through images as we do through ideas.<sup>39</sup>

Habermas’ original conception of the public sphere, itself, alerts us to this importance of images, or, at least, the visual. As he notes, “only in the *light* of the public sphere did that which existed become revealed, did everything become *visible* to all.”<sup>40</sup> Stressing the emphasis upon both visual representation and uncoerced discussion, Mitchell describes Habermas’ “ideological template” for the public sphere “as a theatrical/architectural imagetext, an openly visible place or stage in which everything may be revealed, everyone may see and be seen, and in which everyone may speak and be heard.”<sup>41</sup> There is, no doubt, something utopian about such a “place or stage,” but it is nevertheless an important guiding conception. As I have already noted, historically speaking—and this is akin to the paradox of *defining* democracy—the fortunes of the public sphere have largely depended upon the exclusion of those who are not of the “right” age, gender, class, or creed. Thus, for the public sphere to be more all encompassing, it must surely be able to imagine and re-imagine its space or stage. It is in this respect, then, that the incompleteness and ruins of Berlin offer a space sufficiently in flux, perpetually open to new configurations of the public sphere.

Within this context, the Reichstag is again a useful example. Its image has attained iconic status as a recurring symbol regardless of ideology, captured, for example, in those well known pictures of devastation from the pogrom of *Kristallnacht* (as noted by Arendt), or the Soviet flag raised on its roof by Russian soldiers following the conquest of Berlin at the close of World War II. Today, following



extensive renovation under the direction of Sir Norman Foster & Partners, the building houses the new seat of Federal government for (re)united Germany, and so offers a renewed political image. In addition, with its eco-friendly innovations and the suturing of old and new, it has become a marker of Berlin’s “new architecture.”<sup>42</sup> Each of these images (and more besides) collected throughout history were symbolically “screened” by a single, dramatic art event that took place over two weeks in the summer of 1995. Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s “wrapping” of the Reichstag, which cloaked the building in a million square feet of fabric, initiated an extremely popular public event—a reported five million visitors came to the site.

For many, Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s grand veiling of the building actually meant the “screening out” of dark pictures from the past. It was an “ideal rite of passage marking the Reichstag’s initiation into a new era”<sup>43</sup>—any more formal or orchestrated a ceremony would most likely have stirred up controversy and unrest. The wrapping of the Reichstag was undoubtedly “a huge public-relations coup for Berlin,”<sup>44</sup> not only because it brought together many different people, but also because in it, Berliners finally found a successful way to celebrate the past. Perhaps one of the reasons for the success of this event was, as Brian Ladd suggests, the absence of a single or determined message. The artists refrained from offering one, and “neither their supporters nor their opponents had been able to agree on what it all meant.”<sup>45</sup> The result was that this single event “could be a celebration for some and a commemoration for others, one person’s work of art and another’s spectacle, a political event and a giant party.”<sup>46</sup> The event not only offered a new start, a blank canvass so to speak, but it also helped to underwrite the re-issuing of various aspects of the city’s past, projecting them as images for the future, as well as maintaining a

degree of reflexivity during the process. Of course, the Reichstag is not the only site in Berlin which offers such public opportunity—and I will consider below a number of other interesting examples—but in all cases the underlying problematic with a public “image” sphere lies in managing, or perhaps finding acceptance of, this inevitable instability in meaning.

### Snapshots of Berlin, a Public Sphere in Process

[ . . . ] the tragedy of a fate that [ . . . ] condemns Berlin forever to become and never to be  
– Karl Scheffler<sup>47</sup>

Berlin is a city steeped in “ideological archaeologies.”<sup>48</sup> Each era has left its markings and monuments: some are clearly displayed, others are only ruins or scars, invisible to the untrained eye. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, great swathes of land that were previously out of bounds or dormant due to their “peripheral” location suddenly came back (quite literally) to centre stage, and with them came the prospect of a new and united Berlin. Out of all this change, all manner of memories and associations (re)entered the public domain for open debate. Thus, at the turn of the second millennium, the chance arose to build a new centre of Europe (making Berlin the informal new capital of *Mitteleuropa*) and to implement new images and topographies of democracy.

I want to provide an account of some of these events and changes, here, by offering a brief “Berlin Imaginary” that, I hope, will further elaborate on the function of images in the creation and maintenance of a rich public sphere. The key remains of the past in Berlin today are the pictures, images, and memories scattered throughout the city like a collection of snapshots strewn upon its floor, some prominently displayed, some a little obscured, others well buried. All can be picked up and re-circulated to differing ends. Indeed, somewhat akin to the “cut and paste” of contemporary digital culture that enables various elements to be easily combined, manipulated, and, of course, disposed, I would suggest, Berlin is not simply a city full of images, symbols, and remnants, but it is also, itself, an *image-maker*; in this case, Berlin offers a process which brings forth all manner of concerns whether of past or future, East or West, local or global.



One example of this process of combining and recirculating imagery is the Brandenburg Gate: a monument that stands at the centre of the newly unified Berlin as a gateway to both the East and the West, and a well known symbol worldwide. Over two hundred years old and a symbol of Prussia and its capital, the gate escapes many of the negative associations that tarnish much of the last century. During the height of the Cold War, the gate remained some feet behind the Wall. But ever since President Kennedy’s visit to the Wall in 1963, the Brandenburg Gate has been a prominent landmark for any number of visiting dignitaries; including Ronald Regan who gave a speech (in 1986) just yards in front of it on a specially constructed platform. Since the fall of the Wall, the gate has come firmly into focus again as a key symbol for Berlin and for Germany. And while it may well be more apt to say that it was “the foreign media from the West that made the gate the pre-eminent symbol of the less telegenic Berlin Wall,”<sup>49</sup> the Brandenburg Gate today has reclaimed its traditional status

as a symbol of the city and its unity. With renewed capital status, the gate has become the adopted logo for “New Berlin,” used, for example, on all materials issued by *Partner für Berlin* (a corporation with a remit to unite the city’s commerce and culture). Thus, the “much-restored but never removed Brandenburg Gate [ . . . ] is as authentic a symbol as Berlin can offer,”<sup>50</sup> and continues to produce images, whether of Berlin or of more abstract notions such as unity. While visiting Berlin in 2001, I came across a large-scale representation of the gate painted on the canvass covering the real gate as it underwent restoration. The image, sponsored by Deutsche Telecom, offered a view either to the West or the East of Europe (the latter, for example, showing the sights of Paris) with the slogan: “The World comes closer.” A year later, with the gate still under cover, the images had been changed to depict an even more “global” message of unity with advertising for football news (and by extension a celebration of the World Cup taking place that year).



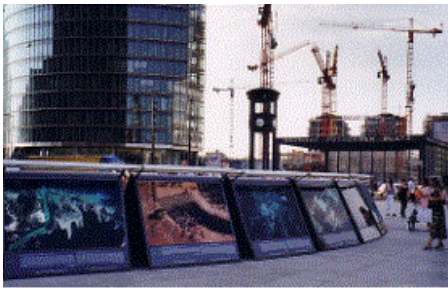
Potsdamer Platz has been perhaps the most obvious beacon of Berlin’s redevelopment. Historically, it is an important site. The busiest intersection of the industrial world during the Weimar Years, Potsdamer Platz, incredibly, lay idle, as no-man’s land, throughout the Cold War period. Its rejuvenation has certainly been important to the overall reunification of Berlin. It is perhaps ironic that



following the cessation of a highly competitive building program by vying East/West governments (of a divided Berlin), the recovery of this site has again initiated a dramatic visualisation of a “New Berlin.” Argued by some to be simply the prevailing capitalist vision, Potsdamer Platz has been reinvented as a leisure complex and a series of monumental corporate buildings.<sup>51</sup> From a divided city that once competed on ideological grounds for the most prominent modernist visual experiences, Potsdamer Platz now seems to epitomise the European, postmodern, urban playground—a sphere more dedicated perhaps to fashion and consumption than public debate. Yet even here there are numerous ongoing contests, debates, and persistent histories, many of which concern the Weimar and Nazi periods.<sup>52</sup> By day, the site is a rather dull, faceless environment, the sun shining through vacant, glass-clad office blocks (although even these open spaces speak of an anxiety over Berlin’s already flagging vision as European business centre). By night, under the luminance of big corporate headquarters, it is a pleasure-seekers domain open to the many interpretations and encounters of flâneurs and mixed social cohorts. So while the films showing at the multiplex, and the coffees and ice cream available in the arcades may be of a fairly homogenous kind, it need not follow that corporatism dictates what is and can be said in this kind of public space.

As an important tourist destination, Berlin trades heavily upon its history. Typically, however, images and memories of former Nazi and communist rule in Berlin have been downplayed when





promoting the city, reserved as images for museums and other exhibition spaces. Instead, in preparation for the move of Government from Bonn, the underlying trend toward major redevelopment in Berlin has been one of “critical reconstruction.” The idea behind this is to understand and restore a more deep-rooted, historical identity for the city. Its chief proponent is the architectural historian Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm, who has generally located the “essence” of Berlin in the eighteenth-century block structure of Friedrichstadt.<sup>53</sup> Understandably, critical reconstruction and its general appeal to the architecture of an imperial past as a direct attack upon the modernist post-war developments has been seen by many as a conservative approach to the rebuilding of the city and the visualisation of its contemporary identity. It has prompted many heated debates. Perhaps the most dramatic of these unfolded on the site of the former Royal Palace, which, from the 1700s through to the Second World War, dominated the view for anyone entering the city through the Brandenburg Gate. Heavily bombed during the war, the East German government soon made the decision to demolish the palace. The site then remained dormant, used only as a parking lot, until the 1970s when a new, quite different palace was erected: the Palace of the Republic. This modernist yet mysterious glass-panelled building was the seat of the East German parliament, but it also served many other purposes, with facilities including a concert hall, a bowling alley, and various cafes and meeting places. It was intended as a palace for the “people,” and it was in this very building on August 23, 1990 that the former GDR voted to join the Federal Republic. For many, however, it is simply an architectural monstrosity, and worse still, with the discovery of extensive use of asbestos, a health hazard.

The decision by the GDR authorities to pull down the war-damaged Royal Palace provoked huge protests, but it was not really until after the fall of the communist regime that a public debate about the site really kicked off. A final decision to tear down the people’s palace has never quite been reached. It has come close on many occasions, but each time, former GDR citizens have protested strongly, arguing that the palace is an important cultural remnant of their former lives. The counter-opposition is equally strong with some wishing the land to be used for a fresh start, and others lobbying extensively for the former Royal Palace to be rebuilt. The many twists and turns of these debates are too numerous to recount here,<sup>54</sup> but, essentially, the wish to restore the Royal Palace has been an appeal, “to restore not the monarchy [ . . . ] but rather a cityscape and with it a civic wholeness that [has] been lacking since 1950, or 1933, or 1918.”<sup>55</sup> In a rather elaborate ruse, during 1993, yet another use of canvass played its part in revisualising the city. A complete mock-up of the Royal Palace was erected using scaffolding extending over the empty land next to the Palace of the Republic. It marked the high point in the campaign to have the Royal Palace rebuilt and the current palace demolished. To this day, however, the former GDR building remains, largely due to budgetary cutbacks and the government’s indecision over the removal of the asbestos. Strangely, then, the Palace of the Republic, a legacy of GDR design, remains an important focal point in the old city centre. The only other obviously prominent East German structure, by comparison, is the Television Tower, but even this is continually reflected in the modernist glass panelling of the Palace. Overall, the site remains open to interpretation. There is no certainty or coherence, no single picture or history on display, just a ghost of the former Palace of the Republic sealed in its own box of tarnished metal and glass, and the half-excavated foundations to the Royal Palace providing the surrounding, ragged terrain.



Many further examples could be cited of the reconstructions that have gone on in the city over the last ten years or so: the need to handle the decommissioning and restoration of the Wall itself, countless GDR developments (including for example the former “Stalinallee,” a wide avenue of Soviet styled ornate monumental apartment blocks built for and to impress the “people”),<sup>56</sup> and the numerous reminders of the Nazi period. All of these concerns have kept public debate and forums alive, but nothing has been more discussed, contested, and wrangled over than the role and building of monuments in the city. The “Neue Wache” is perhaps the most obvious example of this. This little building, designed by Karl Friedrich Schinkel in 1818, has only recently become (after fulfilling many different functions) the central state memorial for Germany. However, its inauguration in 1993 as the “Memorial to the Victims of War and Tyranny,” at the behest of Chancellor Kohl, came only after a protracted period of deliberation and protest over who exactly should be remembered and how to do so. Many different factions felt misrepresented, while others complained of the conflation of Nazis crimes with those of the former GDR. Another stalling point was the proposed centrepiece for the memorial, an enlarged version of a sculpture by Käthe Kollwitz. Although the artist was formerly honoured by both East and West Germany, many felt the reproduction of the statue to be a falsification of her work, and others angrily considered its form, that of a *pietà*, not only too overtly Christian, but also a denial of the many women who died during the Second World War.<sup>57</sup>



In stark contrast to the memorial of the Neue Wache, the on-going memorial conundrums faced by Germany—a country charged as it is with remembering its failures—has resulted in the rise of the “counter-monument.” James Young describes such monuments as “brazen, painfully self-conscious memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very premises of their being.”<sup>58</sup> A good example of which is “The Topography of Terror” exhibit on the site of the former Gestapo headquarters, which remains a “gaping wound as politicians, artists, and various committees forever debate the most appropriate memorial for the site.”<sup>59</sup> Other, more organised attempts have included installations. One of these, in Neukölln, used projected text on the surrounding area, triggered unwittingly by passers-by. Another, devised by Renate Stih and Frieder Schnock, which remains in place today, seamlessly integrates alternative street signs into the area around Bayerischer Platz. These signs poignantly detail simple everyday denials made to the Jews during the Nazi regime; on each is shown a picture of a domestic or civic object, and on the reverse is printed the text of a related law which

decreed refusal of Jewish rights.

The counter-monument is perhaps the most obvious example of “dialectics at a standstill”—it illustrates the complex relationship between past and present, and foregrounds the *act of writing*, or the making of meaning. The counter-monument enacts a degree of interplay between remembering and forgetting. For Nietzsche, this would be a form of “critical” history, a selective forgetting as a means to overcome a dominant sense of history or destiny.<sup>60</sup> Yet each of the “snapshots” of Berlin I have discussed here pose the same sort of deliberation over questions of history and identity. The result, each time, is a far-from-assured view, with no firm resolution of Nietzsche’s question whether to remember, or to (remember to) forget. However, it is perhaps more appropriate that this question is kept open. In so many ways, Berlin has continued to live up to Karl Scheffler’s prophetic words from 1910, when he regretfully described Berlin as the city that was condemned ever to be *becoming*, rather than to be.<sup>61</sup> It is surely this nature of “becoming” that has been Berlin’s great strength in the troubled times, and offers one way of understanding the nature and possibilities of an image politics relevant to the workings of a public sphere. It might seem counterintuitive to want to let images continually shift the meaning of things, and to make new images out of the old without necessarily arriving at any obvert political or cultural stasis. But perhaps it is this nature of images to be in flux, to be ever becoming, that best suits the ideals of a public sphere that needs to remain an open, *living* space.



### Ecologies of Images, Topologies of Critique

Berlin is clearly rich with images old and new, many of which continue to offer novel and re-constituted images all the time. I have tried to show that these images are an important part of the way we think and maintain our vast reservoir of sharable and contested meanings and memories. Mitchell suggests images might best be thought of as “go-betweens” in social life, offering an important “repertoire of screen images or templates that structure our encounters with other human beings.”<sup>62</sup> And he argues, it is important not to over-analyse images or seek to “understand” and interpret them as such, but rather to consider why and for whom they surround us and what they actually *do* for us. Susan Sontag makes a similar point. In our “image-world”,<sup>63</sup> she suggests, there is a need for a conservation of images due to the fact that we can never get enough nor be finished with images.<sup>64</sup> These images, she points out, are essential to the workings of an advanced industrial society, and, as such, we have moved into an era where “social change is replaced by a change of images.” She signals a need to consider the role of the image in the cultural and political sphere more pertinently. Images, she notes:

[ . . . ] are more real than anyone could have supposed. And just because they are an unlimited resource, one that cannot be exhausted by consumerist waste, there is all the more reason to apply the conservationist remedy. If there can be a better way for the real world to include the one of images, it will require an ecology not only of real things but of images as well.<sup>65</sup>

There is something iconoclastic about this “ecology of images” with its need to temper the *wasteful* outpourings of consumer society, yet it does help break down the preconception that images are somehow different from the *things* around us. In conjuring up this idea (or image) of an eco-system, or “image-system,” with subtle links, pressures, hierarchies, and rejuvenations, there is a marked need for closer consideration, indeed, a learning of the circulation of images. And in suggesting a system of care, a need to treat the flow of images with discernment and concern for the impact of one image on another, attention is directed away from the idea that images need be discarded or critiqued, and instead there is a sense in which we might actually wish to *use* images. Sontag’s “ecology of images” evokes an idea of there being no end to the images that surround us; thus, it could be argued, images, like energy, can neither be created nor destroyed, only transmitted or

transformed. We live in an eco-system, as well as play a part in shaping that system; and so it is with images, they situate us, just as we make situations from them. Our task is to remain doubly aware of this circumstance.

It is pertinent perhaps to return to one last image: the open-air exhibition known as “The Topography of Terror” which lies in the heart of Berlin, on Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse. It is the site of the former headquarters of the Nazi secret police agency, the Gestapo. For many years after the war this area remained a wasteland and dumping ground due to its proximity to sector perimeters. However, in 1986, following on-going pressure from the public for a confrontation with the Nazi past, the city government sponsored an archaeological excavation of the site. As a result, the foundation walls of the former headquarters and the ruins of the Gestapo cells were uncovered. Since this discovery, (managed by a small organisation) the site has remained an “open wound,” “an intentional irritant and lasting reminder of [Berlin’s] troubled past.”<sup>66</sup> Numerous attempts to galvanise the site into a more traditional memorial have failed, and instead the temporary cabin that serves as the “Museum” office and the exhibition panels which detail the Nazi past have become, simply by default, a permanent fixture amidst the earth and weeds of this overgrown plot. The site survived many changes after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a stretch of which remains only meters above the exhibition. Many have considered the presence of the defunct Berlin Wall confusing to those who visit, and it is almost certain some do go away thinking that the Nazi exhibit details the GDR regime that once lay behind it. But while the organisers have their own views on the correct interpretations, they have remained committed to the need for visitors to find the “answers” for themselves—the site remains one of documentation, not interpretation. In this way the exhibit exposes the seam of Berlin’s recent and painful past, and continues to draw many visitors throughout the year. “The Topographies of Terror” stimulates thought, but does not direct it; in the ruins remain an appetite and openness for critical and public engagement. Here lies an “ecology of images,” a topology of critique, which allows a “complete” picture to be perpetually pieced together, and then taken apart again. The viewer is able to become aware of the past, but also of their own present context in which they bring the various elements together. Perhaps, then, if Berlin’s public sphere really is in pieces—with images strewn across its landscape—it need not necessarily be taken as a sign of decay, but rather of a healthy, and edifying circulation.

### Illustrations (in order of appearance)

All photographs are the authors own, except where noted.

1. American TV crews on the east side of the Brandenburg Gate broadcasting live coverage of the fall of the Berlin Wall (November 10, 1989). Photo courtesy of Jürgen Müller-Schneck.
2. Crowds gather to see Christo and Jeanne-Claude's "wrapping" of the Reichstag, Summer 1995. Photo courtesy of Wolfgang Volz. ([www.wolfgangvolz.com](http://www.wolfgangvolz.com))
3. A statue (during restoration) of the Soviet War Memorial, Berlin-Treptow, 2002.
4. “Die Welt rückt näher,” the Brandenburg Gate covered for restoration, 2001.
5. “Bundesliga-News aufs Handy,” the Brandenburg Gate covered for restoration, 2002.
6. “Und wo ist Ihr Büro?” detail of office buildings in Potsdamer Platz, 2002.
7. An outside exhibition at Potsdamer Platz, 2002.
8. Television Tower reflected in panelling of the Palace of the Republic.
9. “Loaf of bread” street sign, Bayerischer Platz, Schöneberg, 2002.
10. Street sign detailing an anti-Semitic decree of the Nazi period, in this case restricting times in which Jews were allowed to purchase bread (“Lebensmittel dürfen Juden in Berlin nur nachmittags von 4-5 Uhr einkaufen”), Bayerischer Platz, Schöneberg, 2002.
11. Exhibition panels for “The Topographies of Terror,” and above, a section of the Berlin Wall, Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse, 2002.



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1. Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, Richard Howard, trans. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982) 3-4. ↑
2. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 9-10. ↑
3. Mitchell, 13-14. ↑
4. Mitchell, 31-35. ↑
5. Walter Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faulty” in *One Way Street*, Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, trans. (London: Verso, 1979) 160-163. ↑
6. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Richard Miller, trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975). ↑
7. Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text” in *Image – Music - Text*, Stephen Heath, trans. (London: Fontana, 1982) 164. ↑
8. Jürgen Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence, trans. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989) 4. ↑

9. Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990) xi. ↑
10. Sennett, xii (emphasis added). ↑
11. Here the German term *Öffentlichkeit* bears similarity as it means the “idea of being public – without any specific reference to social or economic structures,” and thus is, as Hohendahl notes, more abstract than the English translation “public sphere” (Peter Uwe Hohendahl, “Recasting the Public Sphere” in *October*, No. 73, Summer (1995): 31). ↑
12. Peter Uwe Hohendahl, “Introduction,” in *A Berlin Republic: Writings on Germany*, Jürgen Habermas (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998) viii (emphasis added). ↑
13. Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 200. ↑
14. Kevin Deluca and Jennifer Peeples, “From Public Sphere to Public Screen: Democracy, Activism, and the “Violence” of Seattle,” in *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 19, No. 2, June (2002): 125-151. ↑
15. Kevin Deluca, *Image Politics* (New York: Guildford Press, 1999) 22. ↑
16. Deluca, *Image Politics*. ↑
17. The extensive debates and the anxieties raised over Germany nationalism and troubled past--namely concerns over German national identity, German unity (including a consideration of reunification as a “natural” course of action), the place and role of Germany in international and more specifically European affairs, as well as the seemingly ceaseless angst over German power--are collectively referred to as the “German Question.” For an excellent, detailed account of these concerns see Dirk Verheyen’s *The German Question: A Cultural Historical, and Geopolitical Exploration*, 2nd edition (Colorado: Westview Press, 1999). ↑
18. Cited by Peter Uwe Hohendahl, “Recasting the Public Sphere” in *October*, No. 73, Summer (1995): 36. ↑
19. It is perhaps worth pointing out that Habermas is considered not only a theorist of the public sphere, but also a critic committed to being in the public sphere. In other words, alongside an academic pursuit for a normative theory of political participation, he has also sought to be a politically-engaged intellectual, responding to the public debates of his time, and maintaining dialogue with those around him, including his critics. For a detailed examination of Habermas as a critic committed to being in the public sphere see Robert C. Holub’s *Jürgen Habermas: Critic in the Public Sphere* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991). Also of interest is Max Pensky’s “Universalism and the situated critic” in *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas*, Stephen K. White, ed.(Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 67-94. ↑
20. Jürgen Habermas, “Further reflections on the Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Craig Calhoun, ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999) 421-461. ↑
21. Habermas, “Further reflections on the Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere,” 442 (emphasis added). ↑
22. Hohendahl, “Recasting the Public Sphere,” 54. ↑
23. Habermas makes a distinction between media practices that resemble discursive communicative process, and those that actively seek to sway opinion and influence behaviour. For a useful summary and note on historical context, see Habermas, “Further Reflections on the Public Sphere,” 436-439. ↑
24. Jon Simons, “Ideology, imagology, and critical thought: the impoverishment of politics,” in *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol 5 no. 1 (2000): 93. ↑
25. Simons, 81. ↑
26. Hohendahl, “Recasting the Public Sphere”, 27. ↑
27. For a useful overview of the liberal tradition and the importance of “dialogue,” see Seyla Benhabib’s “Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Craig Calhoun, ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999) 73-98. ↑
28. Hannah Arendt, “What Remains? The Language Remains: A Conversation with Günter Gaus,” in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, Peter Baehr, ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2000) 12-13. ↑
29. Arendt, 21. ↑
30. Arendt, 4. ↑
31. Arendt, 6. ↑
32. Benhabib, 76. ↑
33. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, trans. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997). ↑
34. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 462 (N2a,3) (emphasis added). ↑
35. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 462 (N2a,3). ↑
36. Walter Benjamin, *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987) 58. ↑
37. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 456-488. ↑
38. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 457 (N1,1). ↑



39. Simons, 94.↑
40. Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 4 (emphasis added).↑
41. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994) 364.↑
42. For a short comment on the “new” Reichstag, see Förderverein Deutsches Architektur Zentrum, ed., *New Architecture, Berlin 1990 – 2000* (Berlin: Jovis, 1998) 40.↑
43. Brian Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) 92.↑
44. David Clay Large, *Berlin: A Modern History*, (London: Penguin Books, 2001) 612.↑
45. Ladd, 95.↑
46. Ladd, 95.↑
47. Karl Scheffler, *Berlin – ein Stadtschicksal* (reprint, Berli: Fannei und Walz, 1989) 219, as quoted in Ladd, 124.↑
48. I am indebted to Prof. Dirk Verheyen (Berlin Freie Universität) for this phrase, which I picked up from his commentary while standing upon the Soviet Memorial in Treptower during one of a number of his excellent “fieldtrips” in 2002.↑
49. The stretch of Berlin Wall that stood in front of the gate was the only section suitable for climbing upon, and so clearly made for a more interesting and revealing image – the media image that many would be most familiar with of people chanting and dancing upon the wall. See Ladd, 78-79.↑
50. Ladd, 81.↑
51. See Elizabeth A. Strom, *Building the New Berlin: The Politics of Urban Development in Germany’s Capital City* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2001) and Daniela Sandler, “Incarnate Politics: The Rhetorics of German Reunification in the Architecture of Berlin” in *Invisible Culture*, issue 5, 2003 <[http://www.rochester.edu/in\\_visible\\_culture/Issue5/daniela/daniela3.html](http://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/Issue5/daniela/daniela3.html)>.↑
52. For an excellent architectural and cultural study of this particular site, see Alan Balfour, *Berlin: The Politics of Order, 1737-1989* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1990).↑
53. For more on “critical reconstruction,” see Ladd, 231 and Alexandra Richie, *Faust’s Metropolis: A History of Berlin* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), 860n.↑
54. See Ladd, 47-70 and Large, 603-605.↑
55. Ladd, 59.↑
56. See Ladd, 178-192.↑
57. See Ladd, and Dirk Verheyen, “National Identity and the Commemoration of War: Germany’s Road to the Neue Wache,” [Occasional Paper] (Berkeley: University of California, Center for German and European Studies, March 1999).↑
58. James E. Young, “The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today” in *Art and the Public Sphere*, W.J.T. Mitchell, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 53.↑
59. Young, 53.↑
60. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, Adrian Collins, trans. (New York: Macmillan, 1985).↑
61. Cited in Ladd, 124.↑
62. W.J.T. Mitchell, “Showing Seeing: a critique of visual culture” in *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol 1 (2) (2003): 12.↑
63. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (London: Penguin, 1979), 153-180.↑
64. Sontag, 178.↑
65. Sontag, 180.↑
66. Ladd, 165.↑