

Global Cityscapes of Modernity and Post Modernity: Vienna and Berlin 1900-2000

In Honor of Hinrich C. Seeba, University of California, Berkeley¹

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The focus of this volume is broad, both historically and topically. Berlin and Vienna, modernity and postmodernity, the twentieth century and two incisive *Wenden* of a tumultuous millennium offer an opportunity to examine central issues in the relationship among European culture, history, and politics. Cities provide a rich location to examine expressions of creativity, growth, and change over the course of one hundred years. As a transit point of entry and exit, the city becomes a site for exchange and cross-fertilization of peoples, ideas, and commodities. Cities are nodes in a network whose spokes extend beyond their metropolitan borders and bring intellectual and physical nourishment to surrounding areas. This European century will be known for its great cities and the production of cultural objects that spread around the globe. Less dramatically, nevertheless significant for the transfer of knowledge, academic figures will also be remembered for the dissemination of these intellectual traditions to generations of students who were fortunate to cross their paths. Hinrich C. Seeba, professor of German at the University of California, Berkeley, from 1967 to the present, is one such person.

In this chronological period, Vienna and Berlin are unparalleled as the two German-speaking cities of cultural and political power that have produced the plethora of authors, cultural critics, and their insightful and incisive works. No wonder that Hinrich Seeba, engaged

with both the aesthetics and the politics of literary production and reception, was drawn to these urban environments for his life and his work. Hinrich Seeba's career has intellectually and geographically spanned the major cosmopolitan areas of both the Habsburg Empire and Germany's many incarnations, as Prussia, as empire, as Bonn and Berlin Republics. As a literary and cultural critic, he has drawn our attention to the language, images, and feelings of characters caught in confusing worlds they do not understand, authors who struggle to articulate a coherent vision where there is none, and audiences who are moved to critical self-reflection by the productive ambiguity of artistic production.

Like this volume produced in his honor, his intellectual reach has been extensive, academically and professionally. He is interdisciplinary in his scope, international in his perspective, and trans-Atlantic in his contribution to intercultural relations between Germany, his country of birth and education, and the United States, his adopted home. Above all, as demonstrated in this collection, he has profoundly shaped the careers of his students and colleagues, both of whom are represented here. Under this title, the essays on the novel, drama, essay, film, media, architecture, and memorials testify to the wide range of interests that have benefited from his influence and that he has followed in his prolific writings. There is, in fact, little in the German and Austrian traditions within these hundred years that he has not addressed eloquently and incisively. He is one of the most important scholars in the field of German literary and cultural studies in the United States and Germany. In fact, for American German Studies he has been a major bridge between these two different intellectual and academic traditions. He was central in the American turn to interdisciplinary German studies in the 1980s, even as he continued to display his acumen in interpreting literary texts in the German literary tradition. Vienna drew him to the literary texts of Franz Grillparzer, Johann Nestroy, and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and the rich Austrian tradition of *Sprachproblematik* and its German incarnation in Kleist as well. Berlin attracted him, especially after 1989, to questions of political and cultural identity in the wake of the city's new national, European, and global status. However, whether addressing text or context, Hinrich Seeba has always been concerned with the hermeneutic project of critical reflection and inter-

pretation, be it in his scholarship or his teaching. No wonder then that his work on *Wissenschaftsgeschichte* (history of scholarship) is a major contribution to our professional thinking about our discipline in the United States and abroad.

Today, after more than 30 years at Berkeley, he has grown with his devoted students and with innovative theoretical currents. Without succumbing to fashionable trends for their own sake, however, he sustains his intellectual integrity that is grounded in the German educational tradition as he has welcomed the openness and flexibility of the American academy and its adaptability to new ideas. In short, he represents the best of these two worlds. He has been a mentor and model for many generations of students who now populate major American universities. One important dimension of this personal and professional dimension—the relationship of the German and the Jewish—is presented in my own contribution as postscript. This more personal intervention framed in a *Wissenschaftsgeschichte* of American German Studies illustrates Hinrich Seeba's influence as part of a unique generation. There is no question that Hinrich Seeba's expansive presence and dedicated engagement have transformed the study of Germany through his literary and cultural perspective.

The contributions mark various points and intersections on this intellectual map and as such are exemplary rather than comprehensive coverage of a century. Still, the essays point to central nodes in a network of relations that emanates from two German-speaking capitals: first, the Austrian, and now, the new center of the Berlin Republic. In the lead essay, Frank Trommler introduces the tension between the two cities quite explicitly and provides an excellent introduction to the entire volume. He states, " [My discussion] acknowledges the distinctive Austrian cultural and intellectual traditions yet is based on the realization that the unique achievements and traditions as well as the public standing of these two cities can only be fully understood within the larger confines of German culture in which they constituted a polarity, effectively confirming its diverse and regional character." In its glory, the former was the gem in the crown of the Habsburg Empire and later would face its demise as an early global capital that would have to be satisfied with more modest circumstances. The Vienna of the twentieth century is overshadowed by its larger German neighbor who instigated a world

war that made Austria's willing incorporation into the Third Reich a sore point in the postwar period. Today, Vienna can be proud of its 2004 Nobel Prize winner Elfriede Jelinek and its other star dramatist, Thomas Bernhard, who both address as, Gail Finney's article points out, these authors' "perennial roles as keen observers and harsh critics of Austrian society." However, as we cast our gaze to other "German" areas, we must not forget the "other Germany" of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Roger Cook reminds us, as has become all too clear now 15 years after unification, that ambivalences remain on both sides of the former wall in the guise of what has commonly been called *Ostalgie* and the lesser-known *Westalgie*, "two forms of nostalgia [that] might have more in common than one would expect." The sudden unification of East and West Germany that created for some a new possibility of a *Mittleuropa* cannot help but remind us of the role of another city and philosopher: Prague and its most famous German writer, Franz Kafka. In their essay appropriately titled, "Kafka's Urban Reader," Paul Reitter and Brett Wheeler see the newspaper in selected Kafka texts as the vehicle for their reflection "on the *topos* of reading in a modern—and often *urban* setting." Specifically, they address the problem of "a reader who reflects a fundamental loss of both external structures of authority and internal faculties of imagination: a subject of modern, urban life, who is cognitively truncated by mass culture and anonymous powers of bureaucracy that rob modern subjects of agency altogether."

For German modernity's love affair with the city, in particular Berlin, no better style and medium was the Expressionist film. Closely reading a one-minute sequence in Karl Grune's film *Die Strasse* (1923), Anton Kaes goes on to develop a brief but bristling theory of the "nexus between urban modernity and the disciplining power of vision." Protagonists as flâneurs encounter a city that offers them excitement and risk, as well as danger and defeat. What he calls "urban animism," "the gendered gaze," and finally "vision and power" round out a sophisticated framework for interpreting the status of seeing in the Expressionist film and beyond. The metropolis that functions as the site for the characters, actions, and images particular to Expressionism is not surprisingly identified and mentioned in many of these essays with Walter Benjamin's *Pasagen Projekt*. Just as new forms of film language were developed

by expressionists, so too does Benjamin present, according to Willi Bolle, a “theoretische Konzept einer ‘internationalen Wandelschrift’, begleitet von praktischen Experimenten wie den ‘Denkbildern’ und, als eine noch radikalere Form, im Zwischenbereich von Schrift und Bild, ein von ihm in den späten 30er Jahren erfundenes System von Farbsiglen.” Linking Benjamin’s “*netzhaften Essayistik*” to Bertolt Brecht’s notion of the “*Netzestadt*” and to contemporary theories of hypertext, Bolle brings current information theory to bear on classical texts of urban modernity.

Benjamin fixated on the metropolis and its inhabitants, not so unlike the Expressionists before him. The latter paid particular attention to spatial and design elements and developed a signature German style. In this vein policy about architecture and the aesthetics of design were debated at the Deutscher Werkbund Congress of 1914. Initiated by Berlin architect Hermann Muthesius, architectural historian John Maciuka tells us that for Muthesius “standardized ‘types’ in architecture, industry, and applied arts would enable German manufacturers to boost radically their production of consumer products and exports. This would not only improve the nation’s domestic economic welfare and enhance Germany’s international standing, but would simultaneously introduce a cohesive, self-conscious and qualitatively superior “German style’ into global commerce.” As his title suggests, imperial Germany had political and economic interests in “good design.”

A gaze at an urban topography of a literary sort, what Wilhelm Vosskamp calls a “*Berliner Phantasmagorie*” is the subject of Peter Weiss’s fragmented collection of images of postwar Berlin, titled, *Die Besiegten*. For Vosskamp, this “*Architektur’ von Texten*,” to be exact, represents the discontinuity of the destroyed city and the inability to provide a coherent narrative for disconnected “*Traumbilder*” that provoke self-reflection for the narrator or subject. Here, “Literatur erweist sich als kongeniales künstlerisches Selbst-reflexionsmedium historischer Erfahrung.” Of course, in the aftermath of war, destruction, and remembrance, no better object of study exists than the memorial. And Berlin, as both Nazi capital and head of the new Berlin Republic, has become the site of monuments and the often heated disputes surrounding their design and representational function. Kirsten Harjes enters this sensitive territory with her essay on Gunter Semnig’s

“Stumbling Blocks” and of course, the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe, as they “have become a means to shape a new national identity via the history shared by both Germans.”

As if to mark two newer directions in German studies, the volume closes with one essay on Turkish writers, “From Istanbul to Berlin: Stations on the Road to a Transcultural /Transnational Literature,” and another on “German Culture Studies and the New Media.” In the first, Azade Seyhan reminds us of the new intercultural relations and extensions of German writing from Berlin to Istanbul. As she tells us, “For the many displaced and transplanted contemporary writers living in diasporas of the Western world, a metropolis like Berlin often becomes a desired object of affiliation, for it represents a territory that no essentialist national interest can lay claim to.” Diaspora writing and hybrid identities have created an entirely new genre of German literature that, in addition to the dominant Turkish, includes Jews, Italians, Spaniards, and Japanese, among others. A newly constructed network of relations is also the narrative leitmotif in Todd Presner’s essay on “Hypermedia Berlin: German Cultural Studies and New Media.” As if to summarize the entire project of this special volume, Presner presents a fascinating interdisciplinary study of the theoretical and interpretive potential of an actual media project on Berlin. With nods to E.T.A. Hoffman, Edgar Allan Poe, as well as Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Ruttmann, and of course, Walter Benjamin, Presner creates a stunning project. He proves that “changes in media technologies—by which I mean the materiality of representational practices (including but not limited to, writing), the modes of transcription, as well as means of producing, recognizing engaging with, and disseminating knowledge—necessitates changes in the constitution of academic disciplines.” This broad stroke incorporates a scholarly and pedagogical agenda that alludes to his mentor Hinrich Seeba’s own career and influence, particularly in a seminar on Berlin that inspired many students such as Presner. Finally, my contribution as postscript on “The Transfer of Knowledge from Germans to Jews in American German Studies” is meant to mark Seeba’s place in a unique generation of people who profoundly changed our profession. My essay is meant to remind us, as Hinrich Seeba always did, that an intercultural and interdisciplinary history of scholarship and knowledge production is necessary for

developing a critical hermeneutic of literary and cultural study in which individuals matter as much as institutions.

In addition to the scholars in this special volume, I know that there are many others who would like to have contributed to this collection published in his honor. On behalf of all of them, the contributors, and others whom he has touched in his academic career, we thank him.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Brett Wheeler and Paul Reitter for their work during the early phases of this project, especially for the title and description of the volume.