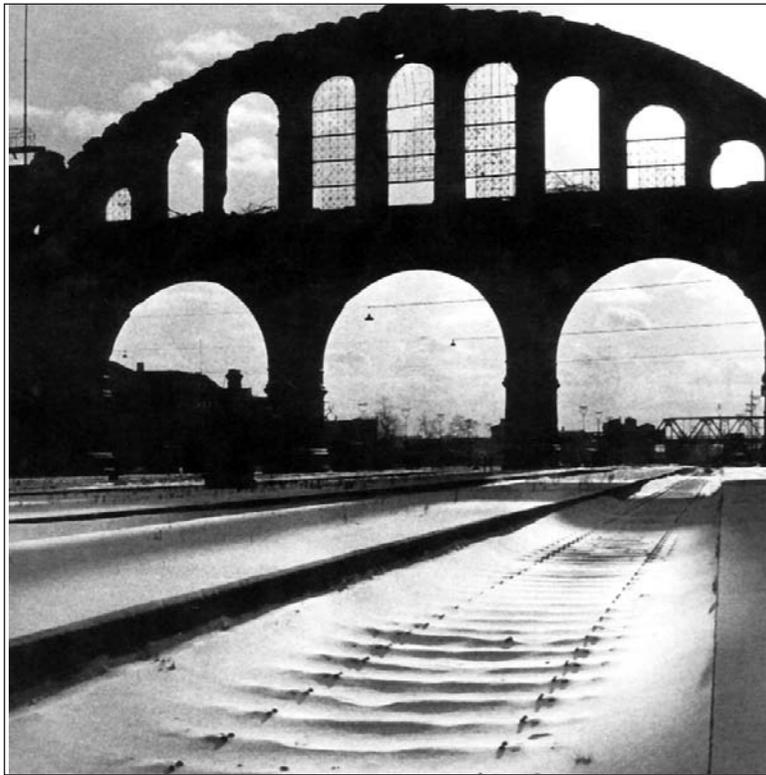


# STATIONS OF DESIRE

A BERLIN FILM-MAKER REVISITS THE VANISHED CITY OF HIS DREAMS.

By Daniel Höpfner



“I cannot find the Potsdamer Platz! I think, here... no, that can't be! Because on the Potsdamer Platz there was... but I won't give up until I've found the Potsdamer Platz!”

**W**hen I was considering the theme of this issue, I couldn't help thinking of the above scene from Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*. The old Homer walks along the Wall on the Potsdamer Platz (as it was then), accompanied by his angel. His memories of the place don't match with what he finds before him. He seems lost, without an umbilical cord – uprooted. There's not the slightest clue, only the unkempt grass.

I grew up in the west Berlin of the '70s and '80s. Often my parents took me for a walk 'of a different kind'. While the majority of people enjoyed themselves in parks or other recreational areas, we went, like those with a special knowledge, to a 'real' piece of nature: the Gleisdreieck (lit. the Rail Triangle). The Gleisdreieck is a huge rail zone in the centre of Berlin, between Schöneberg, Kreuzberg and Mitte. It was the forecourt of the former stations – Postdamer Bahnhof and the famous Anhalter Bahnhof – the latter, according to Walter Benjamin, being 'mother cave of the trains':

“...but mostly in the early hours the destination was nearer, namely the 'Anhalter'... mother-cave of trains, where the locomotives had to come home and the trains had to halt... No distance was more remote than

the place where the rails converged in the mist...’

The wretched remains of the taxi rank were all that was left of this imposing Berlin landmark. During the war, the Anhalter was badly damaged but trains were still able to run until 1952. Then the mania for demolition during the reconstruction of the city saw the station finally torn down (as well as four large terminus stations). And still now, the area is bare, like a blind spot in the middle of the city, with a football pitch the only helpless attempt at resuscitation.

As a child I was very impressed by the Gleisdreieck. It was a kind of jungle in which one could discover remnants of the industrial era, with plants overgrowing railway buildings, tracks, turnplates, lamp-posts and decaying wagons. I still remember a group of young people (likely members of the early '80s squatter movement), who were trying to capture their anarchist visions on celluloid... dumped rubbish and a sofa are burning, one guy is smashing an old car with a hammer while the others, in futuristic costumes, are screaming and running around in the ruins. Naturally, I found it exciting.

At that time, I discovered the city as a city *with history*. Many places were still untouched at that time. In the '70s, Kreuzberg and Wedding looked as though the war had only finished a few months previously. Soot-blackened and bullet-riddled facades, faded painted wall advertisements... In those districts there were buildings that had never been renovated since their construction. Everything looked like it would have done at the turn of the last century: the interior decoration, the light switches, bellpushes etc... Also unforgettable for me were the journeys on the almost always empty S-Bahn through the divided city (from the '60s until the '80s this train line was boycotted, because it was owned by the DDR).

Then, on 60 year old trains with their simple wooden benches, you passed through a very special urban landscape (today there are horrendously-priced, tours on these trains for railway enthusiasts). In a way one saw the city from the back, passing by numerous brick firewalls, faded hoardings from the '20s and '30s,

yards, railway zones turned wild and the so-called 'ghost stations' (Potsdamer Platz, Unter den Linden and Oranienburger Str.), where the S-Bahn didn't stop but rolled slowly through. These stations rumbled past the window like hallucinations, sites in a secret city, always accompanied by the distinctive and untiring sound of the train itself and the smell of wooden thresholds and tar.

Many of those derelict locations reminded me of the atmosphere of 'the Zone' in Tarkovsky's *Stalker*. (West) Berlin was at that time surrounded by 'a zone'. It was this aspect of the former capital, 'on the sidings', forgotten and full of memories of a more glamorous time, which struck me the most. Everywhere one discovered empty and abandoned lots, ruins, deserts and wilderness, places of meditation and imagination, timeless. This post-war aesthetic, with its improvised character, was conserved by the Wall but now it is noticeably disappearing.

Since the fall of the Wall, Berlin has of course changed rapidly and greatly. Many of those, for me, familiar and loved places, have disappeared or have been reordered to death. This is the old illness of Berlin city development politics throughout its history. Again and again, houses, stations and neighbourhoods, as well as whole districts, are demolished, in order to give Berlin a 'new face' (in the '70s, a third of the Wedding district, with its typical, and war-spared, late 19th century buildings, was completely erased).

A contemporary example of this kind of behaviour is the way that the palace of the Republic has been dealt with. Situated on the site of the old Berlin city palace (in 1950 Walter Ulbricht ordered that building's demolition), it has been completely cleaned of its asbestos, at huge cost, and yet is now to be flattened. This ignorant relationship to history might have prompted the well-known phrase, 'Berlin is constantly becoming but never being'.

This incessant renewal of the city stirs in me the need to protect my memories of it. I try to give the city within myself, with its small treasure and valuables, a space in my films. These are my memories, my inspirations, as well as the remembrances of the city itself. They are for me a point of contact with this process, the traces of which are more and more threatened with extinction. So today, sometimes, I stand on the Postdamer Platz and think of it (as I always have) with its unkempt grass, which has now completely gone. ▾

Daniel Höpfner has lived in Berlin since 1972, studying animation in Potsdam-Babelsberg since 1997. His last film, *Cherchez la Femme*, was inspired by photographs of the mentally ill taken from the mid 1850s, and documented in *Doctor Diamond's Portraits of the Insane*, by Adrienne Burrows and Iwan Schumacher (1979). He is working on a puppet animation about memories of Berlin.

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