

## **CITYSCAPES OF DESTRUCTION AND REBUILDING:**

CINEMATOGRAPHIC IMAGES OF BERLIN IN THE NINETIES (HUBERTUS SIEGERT'S FILM BERLIN BABYLON) AND ART PRACTICES IN THE TRANSITIONAL CITY OF CHRISTCHURCH AFTER THE EARTHQUAKES 2010/11

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### **INTRODUCTION**

What happens when a modern Western city is struck by unforeseen political upheavals or a natural disaster which change the cityscape once and for all? My two cases are the cities of Berlin after the fall of the Wall and Christchurch in the South Island of New Zealand which experienced devastating earthquakes in 2010 and 2011. My paper will outline the differences between the two causes of city spectacles of disappearances, demolitions and rebuild. These are given by the circumstances and causes of major city transformations: a natural disaster on the one side and the political 'earthquake' of the fall of the Wall and unification. By focussing on the significance of the arts for the experience of the transitional cityscape of Otherness, further major differences appear. Berlin in the heyday of her transitional stage in the nineties - the period of the media slogan of the "biggest construction site in Europe" - called for a comprehensive representation of the physical changes and the ambitions of the rebuild project. It is no coincidence that it was a cinematic work of art which took up the challenge. I am talking of Hubertus Siegart's film on Berlin's rebuild in the nineties, shot over four years between 1996 and 2000: *Berlin Babylon* (2001) which will be the example of analysis of the Berlin part of my paper.

For obvious reasons there is no cinematic masterpiece which reflects on Christchurch as a transitional city with its images of destruction and rebuild. What we have in Christchurch instead are a wide range of creative responses to the transitional city after the earthquakes including a large number of grassroots initiatives such as the projects of the organisation Gap Filler as well as a vibrant art scene of temporary uses of space. The Free Theatre's latest production, *Canterbury Tales*, performed at the second Festival of Transitional Architecture on 25-28 October 2013, will be my main example of the exploration of the current artistic interpretations of the cityscape of the inner city of Christchurch.

My claim is that both cities, Berlin and Christchurch, are symptomatic of two different phases of postmodern urban image creation in the way they relate to postmodern consumerist and event culture - in terms of the "society of spectacle" (Guy Debord) or a festivalisation of urban culture. The gigantic architectural and planning ambitions in Berlin were not only directed at a successful city branding but they were also accompanied by top-to-bottom festivals and staging of the city. Siegart's film is a true mirror of the postmodernity of city planning and city staging for which the Berlin building project had become a milestone in the nineties.

In Christchurch it is striking that artistic responses to the devastation can be labelled optimistic and that they are concerned with the emotional involvement of the people in the city rebuild. This is what can be called the up-to-date stage of postmodern urban image production where the arts in particular play an essential role. In any case, at the current stage the city image creation in Christchurch goes far

## THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture\_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University  
London: 01—03 April, 2014

beyond a disaster response. It may even be a model case for the re-invention of urban identity through creative-artistic means.

### ***Berlin Babylon: a poetic documentary about architecture and city transformations in Berlin the nineties***

Let me turn now to the film *Berlin Babylon*. It is a film about buildings and architecture. There is no plot and no biographical experience of the city in transition; the hero of the film is the monumental enterprise of city planning and the perceptions of it during the building period. It is inspired by a criticism of the dogmatism of the planners, and it is spellbound by the tantalizing views of the construction sites, which the film tries to preserve in beautifully photographed impressions. The editing of this film was concluded in 2000, and the film premièred in 2001 at the *International Panorama Festival* in Berlin. Prominent architects (e.g. I.M. Pei, Helmut Jahn, Rem Koolhaas and Renzo Piano, Günter Behnisch, etc.), developers, politicians, urban planners, builders, and manual workers are seen at work. In its final editing, one has to say, the movie is something beyond a documentary - it is a poetic documentary or an essay film, where the film auteur comments on what he shows, referring to the mythical or philosophical theme of cities' memories as being rebuilt and destroyed, including one outstanding sequence of digital images of the "storm of history" and a voice over quoting a passage from Walter Benjamin's "Angelus Novus"<sup>1</sup>.

As a leitmotif, the film aims at a metaphorisation of the spectacle as an eerie return of the mythical tale of the building of the Tower of Babylon, a tale which is predominantly biblical in origin, and has come to us through the myth of the hubris of the builders of a tower reaching the sky told in the Genesis (Genesis, 11, 1-9). Hubris, or the feeling of melancholy resulting from the enormity of the task and the incredible haste of the city's rebuilding programme, is suggested by the tracking shots of the actual building process and by the statements coming from the protagonists involved. At the discursive level the film is highly instructive: we are told about the major aims of the "critical reconstruction" in Berlin's city centre: the healing of the wounds of a retarded city centre, the city of voids and fragments which was the heritage of the GDR and post-war city planning of the West. The central event in the film is the building of the Potsdamer Platz which is presented in shots over a period of 4 years.

More so, Siegert's film is a symbolically charged urban drama. The impressions of a chaotic cityscape of transformations and rebuild are inscribed in the film in Berlin as a metropolis which has an outstanding role as a historical capital and has served many times to understand the fate of modernity and the discontinuities of German history. There are the mythical references to building towers out of the "rubble" of history as to be seen in the reference to Benjamin. Siegert also integrates archive material in the footage covering a period of 60 years. But predominantly, Berlin in the period of Siegert's film was the city of cranes, the wrapped city, the city of scaffoldings, a city ripped open by huge holes dug into the ground. Despite the apparent criticism of the dogmatism of the planners or rather because of it Siegert has an interesting aesthetic formula for the psychological impact of the construction sites. For him, the aesthetic openness of the construction site was a phase of "utopia" before the concept the planners had for Berlin's centre became a new reality. Siegert says:

"All what was barren, ugly – what may well make claims of grandeur and the sublime – is demolished, built over, erased, until the city has lost its quality as a reservoir of memory. In this situation, the construction site

## THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture\_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University  
London: 01—03 April, 2014

becomes a last moment of utopia. The buildings sites themselves were fascinating and remarkable in their dimensions and in their density for German standards. They were beautiful because they were threatening.” (“Blickwinkel”)

The consequence of Siegert's fascination with the aesthetics of the cityscape of demolition and rebuild combined with a "documentary" investigation of the planning and building process are the dialectic features of the film: Verbal statements versus choreographed images, for example poetic effects of shots of huge prefabs sliding effortless through the air, the poetic sequences of the underwater works and the night shots with their fantastic illuminations, etc. Some shots suggest a return of nature in the cityscape which is dominated by pure technology. The most striking contrast is between the bird's eye view and the locations below, suggesting an alternation between the flat historical city and the emerging towers at Potsdamer Platz.

I would now like to turn to a concluding evaluation of the film by introducing cultural concepts which deal with the everyday life mythology of phenomena which are crucial for this paper.<sup>2</sup> In Berlin, the cityscape of voids and construction sites are charged with social cultural debates. There are the famous " Voids of Berlin" (Andreas Huyssen) products of the city's more recent discontinuous history (see Barthes). The construction sites in the *Schaustelle Berlin* in the nineties were a huge media event, understood in its symbolic significance for the Berlin Republic as a metaphor for an intensive societal and cultural change. Slogans such as the “thrill of discontinuity“ contributed to the metaphorical status of the construction site as a place of adventure, danger, excitement.<sup>3</sup> But Siegert metaphorised the spectacle by alluding to universal symbols and associations. These transcend the biblical tale of film and are to be found in the suggestive and emotionalised tracking shots of eerie effects of Berlin's demolitions and building sites. I am suggesting here that cultural concepts can be applied to the film which belong to a wider spectrum of the aesthetics of the urban and to the "uncanny city" (James Donald) in particular.<sup>4</sup>

An urban uncanny would emerge in places and moments when the city dweller still makes disturbing, disquieting experiences in today's urban environment. In Freudian terms, this means the state of mind of “familiarity“ which is suddenly overwhelmed by the unfamiliar, the uncanny, the secret and enigmatic which are rooted in the familiar -- the regressive dimension of the “Unheimliche”. A cityscape of ruins, voids and building sites is such a place which triggers the ambiguous emotions of "mythologies of everyday life" (Roland Barthes) in contemporary consumerist society. *Berlin Babylon* explores a heterogeneous spectrum of perceptions and attitudes toward a cityscape of Otherness. This Otherness could be used by city marketing; it contributed to the party mood at festivals, but *Berlin Babylon* brings out the emotional ambiguities of the uncanny as an “uneasy space between the physical city and the imaginary”.<sup>5</sup> The construction sites appear as gloomy ghosts in the postmodern society of spectacle.

### **Artistic practices and performances in the post-quake inner city of Christchurch with an emphasis on the performance *Canterbury Tales* by the Free Theatre**

The devastations of Christchurch's inner city and the damage done to its suburban areas are spectacles on their own which certainly have movielike qualities. What I would like to outline here are the alliances between the arts and everyday experience of the cityscape. What are the chances for a representation of the mythologies of this urban Otherness in a work of art? Christchurch at the current

## THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture\_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University  
London: 01—03 April, 2014

stage offers the perturbing sight of ruins and vacant lots, of demolition works and some construction sites going up in the inner city. Different from Berlin, voids and city transformations have no socio-political meaning resulting from history. It is my claim that the arts make a difference in stepping into the collective experience of the return of an archaic city Otherness. It is up to the arts - in a broad sense of creative processes - to interpret the experience and to deliver a message. This is what is occurring in the various artistic and performative projects in Christchurch which, in some way or another, aim at engaging the population in their attitudes and emotions toward the transitional city. One aspect of the up-to-date postmodernity in Christchurch's rebuild is that the plans for the inner city and the current temporary uses of space profit very much from the ideas of a city revival in terms of an artsy city as a desirable urban lifestyle quality. Indeed, national and international visual and performing artists are attracted to the city and given the opportunity to exhibit and creatively transform spaces through installations, murals, sculptures, graffiti etc.

Among the grassroots initiatives and artistic activities in Christchurch are connectional attempts which aim at the "subversive" dimension of practices and affective appropriations of space in the meaning of the influential theory of Michel de Certeau in his essay "Walking in the City".<sup>6</sup> The Gap Filler initiative understands its creative temporary projects as an interrogation of the private use of urban space and also as a criticism of the blueprint for the inner city.<sup>7</sup> And so does the Free Theatre's performance of *The Canterbury Tales* which was the centrepiece of the FESTA event in October 2013.<sup>8</sup> Not only is the theatrical form chosen for this performance one of "walking" through a section of the former red zone of the inner city: a Carnavalesque procession of giant puppets, masked performers and musicians - there are theoretical contexts of the performance which stem from the director of the Free Theatre, Peter Falkenberg, George Parker, the organiser of FESTA, and many other co-operators. They bring to the point what has been discussed in critical and intellectual and artistic reflections on the rebuild: what matters is not so much the "Concept City" (de Certeau) as conceived in the rebuild plans, its large infrastructure projects and ambitious designs. Rather they aim at the population's imaginative responses to the present, the past and the future. They wish to appeal to the audience's memories, dreams and desires for healing the wounds in their environment. A "subversive" element of the nightly Carnavalesque event has to be seen first as a reflection of the Free Theatre on the heterotopias of the cultural encounters in Christchurch: the Pasifika and English cultural heritages. The performance addresses the issues of place making and of city identity.

The centrepiece of the play is, of course, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Christchurch in New Zealand has been billed the most English city outside England ever since the colonial period. This is due to some neo-Gothic architecture which was destroyed or damaged in most places in the February 2011 earthquake, including the landmark Cathedral. As often in Falkenberg's productions, the actual inspiration of the historical text is a selective one, here consisting in clues to some of Chaucer's tales and a selection of characters which were presented either in the puppets or in groups of performers. Chaucer's text plays a minimal part but the medieval atmosphere is rendered through the singing of medieval songs and the playing of drums. Main puppet characters in the play are for example the Knight, the Scholar, the Merchant, the Wife of Bath and a number of Friars (one of which bore the traits of the controversial Earthquake Minister Gerry Brownlee). The other side of city identity is represented in the performances of local groups such as Pacific Underground as a representative of the Christchurch Maori community. The procession culminates in a karanga (welcome) and a fanfare performed by local Nhai Tahu artists and the Christchurch Symphonic orchestra in front of the broken shell of the Christchurch cathedral doomed for demolition. The gloomy cityscape and its broken

## THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture\_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University  
London: 01—03 April, 2014

monuments are part of the play. Interestingly, Falkenberg's production provides (reflected) parallels with a more recent popular event in Berlin on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Wall: the performance by the French Theatre group Royal de Luxe *Giants in Berlin* (October 2009).

The performance of the Free Theatre is based on collaborative ideas and the participation of the audience. The procession passes a number of installations erected by students from Architectural and Design departments all over New Zealand and Australia and includes a "Night Market". The Free Theatre performance itself falls into several projects of groups of performers. One of them is entitled "Angel of History", which is a reference to Benjamin, realised through images of catastrophe and sounds of lament. This a surprising parallel to the sequence in Siegert's film, an intertextual reference certainly not recognizable for the audience but part of the conceptual work of the Free Theater team. The whole play is no less critical than Siegert's portrait of the "builders": the Merchant can be understood as a collective figure for the entrepreneurs' attempts to profit from the rebuild of the city. Chaucers's troupe is unendearing, despite the fun the puppets provide for the spectators. It reflects the timeless circumstances of conservatism, hypocrisy, selfishness and drama that occur in society. Falkenberg's productions tend towards a Brechtian didacticism together with a Bakhtinian sense for the hybrid and the Carnavalesque. The staging of Carnavalesque hybridity serves to interpret the images of the current stage of devastation and rebuild in Christchurch. It is also an aesthetic device for capturing the "uncanny" of this cityscape and to captivate the emotions of the spectators in their visit of the destroyed city centre.

## CONCLUSION

It seems interesting to me that there are parallels between the play *Canterbury Tales* and the film *Berlin Babylon* with regard to the mythologies of the uncanny. I would also like to apply the cultural theories of Michel de Certeau to both of my examples. Not only can the most recent Christchurch production *Canterbury Tales* with its procession through the city be seen in this light, but also the film *Berlin Babylon*, which vacillates between the rationality of the "Concept-City" in the portrait of city planners and city builders on the one hand, and the "anthropological, poetic and mythic experience of space"(de Certeau<sup>9</sup>) on the other. Here the tracking camera takes the role of people's affective everyday practices under extraordinary circumstances. The constructions sites can become allies for the subjective appropriations of space by the city dwellers.

One can ask why these parallels appear in two cultural productions which are separated by a considerable time gap and originate from very different types of cities. For one, the two cities are connected through the experience of destructions, demolitions and rebuild, albeit to a different extent. I would like to point out the fact that the cases of these spectacles in Western cities - large or small - are rather limited. Perhaps a comparative project dealing with artistic responses to abrupt city transformations or natural disasters could be promising, a project that could include the city imaginations after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, for example. I chose the Berlin example because of the powerful metaphors in Hubertus Siegert's film. The case of Berlin in current global city debates is certainly "old" but the urban experiment of the

## THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture\_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University  
London: 01—03 April, 2014

90es is still historically outstanding, and, as Siegert's film shows, has been highly inspiring for filmic experimentation which comes with a high level of cultural reflection on cities.

The Christchurch example stands for an update of postmodern city image production which I would like to see in the European tradition of reflecting on identity and place. The performance of *Canterbury Tales* belongs to the processes of intensive discussions of the "transitional" in Christchurch which started soon after the earthquakes. This led to variety of artistic responses to the devastation and also an interesting international academic interest in urbanistic-artistic experimentation in post-quake Christchurch. Among these activities, *Canterbury Tales* is certainly the most comprehensive attempt at a multilayered, "mythological" imagination of the city.

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### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin. "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," in *W. Benjamin. Gesammelte Schriften I.2.* ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1974, passage quoted in the film 697 f.
- <sup>2</sup> I would not like to see Siegert's film as a mere footnote in German film after unification revolving around the "ever the same" principle as it is claimed by Evelyn Preuss in her chapter "The Collapse of Time. German History and Identity in Hubertus Siegert's *Berlin Babylon* (2001) and Thomas Schadt's *Sinfonie einer Großstadt* (2002)". In *Berlin: the symphony continues: orchestrating architectural, social and artistic change in Germany's new capital.* Ed. by Costabile-Heming et al.(eds). Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004, 119-142, here 134.
- <sup>3</sup> Franz Profener. 'Flirting with Disaster. Zur Symbolgegenwart der Baustelle', in *Zeitzeichen Baustelle. Realität, Inszenierung und Metaphorik eines abseitigen Ortes.* Ed. by F. Profener. New York: Campus, 1998, 13.
- <sup>4</sup> James Donald. *Imagining the Modern City. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1999, 71.*
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the city", in M. d. C.. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, 91-110.
- <sup>7</sup> See my paper "Art and other creative projects in transient spaces in Berlin after the fall of the Wall and in Christchurch after the earthquakes 2010/2011." In *Urban life and contemporary Arts.* Conference proceedings from the contemp Art 13 conference, Dakam, Istanbul, 10-12 April 2013, 102-115.
- <sup>8</sup> The experimental Free Theatre emerged as an independent entity in 1979 at the University of Canterbury. In October 2011 it made already an intriguing contribution to the post-quake city culture with the theatrical event 'The Earthquake in Chile' performed in one of the remaining heritage churches and based on commul practices.
- <sup>9</sup> "Walking in the City", 93.

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## THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture\_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University  
London: 01—03 April, 2014

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