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Abstract

Review of Iain Boyd White and David Frisby, eds. *Metropolis Berlin: 1880-1940*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

Keywords

Berlin, Metropolis, turn-of-the-century, Kaiserreich, Weimar, Nazi, Wilhelmine, urban, Grossstadt

Iain Boyd White and David Frisby, eds. *Metropolis Berlin: 1880-1940*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012. xvi + 638 pp.

In *Metropolis Berlin: 1880-1940*, Iain Boyd Whyte and David Frisby have designed for readers a 600 plus page tour through the most important texts produced in and about Berlin, one of the most celebrated and quintessentially modern cities in the Western world. Skipping over its medieval origins and focusing instead on Berlin as a twentieth-century metropolis, they begin with its industrial re-birth (1880s) and move through its blossoming (1900-1930) to the beginnings of its Nazi transfiguration into something altogether different, namely *Germania*, the city Hitler imagined as the capital of his would-be thousand-year empire (ca. 1940). Their interest, as indicated in both the brief introduction and the eighteen succinct section prefaces, is to suggest continuities among the urban dreams and musings of Wilhelmine, Weimar, and Nazi Berlin, indeed, between modernism and totalitarianism, more generally.

These important connections lend the volume a certain historiographical *raison d'être*. But the real value of the volume lies in the texts that Whyte and Frisby have grouped thematically and translated, rendering them not only meaningful but also legible and accessible for English-speaking audiences. Indeed, the sheer variety of texts we are presented with in this volume is remarkable. There is no doubt plenty of standard Berlin fare here, including Käthe Kollwitz, Kurt Tucholsky, Christopher Isherwood, and Alfred Döblin. But for all these classics, we get an eclectic accompanying chorus of lesser-known voices from astute urban observers like the sociologist Hans Ostwald and the variety of colleagues who contributed to his outstanding *Großstadt-Dokumente* ('Big City Documents'), keen-eyed writers like Alfred Kerr and Robert Walser, and selections from Berlin's colorful daily newspapers, which offer a delightfully revealing (and largely forgotten) lens onto turn-of-the-twentieth-century Berlin life. To give just a few examples of newspaper reportage presented here: from *Vorwärts* ('Forward'), a panoramic description of 1902 Berlin from the vantage point of the roof of the town hall; a leisurely portrait of "A Sunday in Berlin" in 1903 in the *Berliner Tageblatt* ('Berlin Daily Journal'); also from the *Berliner Tageblatt* in 1918, an hour-by-hour account of the course of the German Revolution—described here as mere demonstrations—on November 9; Siegfried Kracauer on the "Cult of the Automobile" in the *Abendblatt* ('Evening Journal') in 1931; and Kurt Tucholsky's sky-gazing "Traffic Passing Over the House" in a July 1931 edition of the *Vossische Zeitung* ('Voß's Newspaper'). Each document evokes the feel of its era; together, these texts recreate something of the ubiquitous textual browsing that was so central to early-twentieth-century urban life.

Metropolis Berlin's thematic groupings are equally exciting. To take just a selection from the grouping on consumer culture ('Production, Commerce, and

Consumption'), we get, in the span of roughly 30 pages, Georg Simmel's sociological dissection of Berlin's 1896 trade exposition, sketches of popular turn-of-the-century department stores and cafes (Wertheim and Aschinger's, respectively) by Albert Hoffmann and Robert Walser, Karl Scheffler with an architectural study of retail buildings, Leo Cotze's contribution to the *Großstadt-Dokumente* on the way grand department stores were changing the surrounding neighborhoods, a great excerpt from Erich Köhler's under-appreciated 1909 novel *Berlin Department Store*, Karl Scheffler again with a brief biography of Peter Behrens (the architect of the massive AEG factory), Karl Ernst Osthaus on the fascinating world of display windows, and Paul Westheim's schematic of Berlin's growing administrative/bureaucratic machinery as embodied in the new *Nordstern* ('North Star') administration building. Groupings like this one both enliven these texts—endlessly compelling in their own right—and render them newly meaningful by revealing the stylistic and thematic continuities that contemporaries knew intuitively but are now mostly opaque. Indeed, each section beckons with an immersive and idea-generating journey into the Berlins of the past.

I would like to linger briefly on the point of this edition's pedagogical usefulness, for the value of this contribution is not easily overstated. To be sure, the sources that fill the pages of *Metropolis Berlin* exist to a certain extent elsewhere and could, in theory, be pulled together into a makeshift undergraduate course reader by an enterprising instructor. But there is immense value (which comes here at a relatively reasonable list price) in being able to assign a text that is at once manageable and inviting of individual exploration. I can imagine this text becoming something of a dog-eared companion for the student of Berlin, of Germany, or of urban environments more generally, with its texts serving as exciting launching points for all manner of scholarly and artistic discovery. As for the translations (which are Whyte and Frisby's own except in a handful of cases where translations already existed), it is worth pointing out that what we find here are not just (excellently) translated versions of important texts; they are, perhaps equally importantly, *transcribed* versions of the originals, which often appeared in now dusty and blurry newspapers, journals, and small monographs. While this volume admittedly can only do so much to enliven, say, Kracauer (of which there are many selections) for the unaccustomed undergraduate palate, one thinks that the clean, easy-to-read, and attractive presentation here will be much more successful than anything else available in helping students dive into the fascinating world of the Berlin metropolis.

As with any collection of primary sources, different readers will point to different texts they would have liked to see included. While there is perhaps too little of the aforementioned newspaper reportage, calling this an editorial deficiency would be unfair. *Metropolis Berlin* is a superb collection of important texts. The selections are at once representative and delightfully off-beat; the editorial

signposts are helpful but do not discourage rogue exploration or thematic innovation by the reader; and the presentation (from translation quality to layout design) is excellent. An absolute no-brainer, a must-have for every library, Germanist, and lover of Berlin.

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