Destination Berlin: Orderings of City-Identity in Contemporary Tourist Guidebooks

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A radical process of standardization of tourist destinations around the globe, particularly in urban contexts, has been described by numerous scholars during the last decades. Indeed, the reinvention of many cities as tourist destinations has made evident ‘an odd paradox: whereas the appeal of tourism is the opportunity to see something different, cities that are remade to attract tourists seem more and more alike’. In such a context, both scholars and practitioners point to abstract elements such as images, identities, flairs, and experiences, as the main elements defining destinations’ profiles. The American historian Catherine Cocks argued that the attribution of a ‘personality’ to the city was a key aspect in the transformation of American cities into tourist destinations. Urban personalities made the city easily available, readable and intelligible, transformed it into a salable commodity, and offered a compelling reason to visit it and to come back. Similarly, contemporary European cities can be seen as bearers of specific local urban identities that remain relatively fixed even when information, stereotypes and attributes may prove to be inaccurate or simply false. Wolfgang Kaschuba has in this sense described the production of urban identities as a cultural technique that is predominantly performed in certain societal spaces such as literature, tourism, mass media, pop culture, and history marketing. This article focuses on one of such spaces, tourism, and explores how tourist communication transforms Berlin into a distinct and unique destination. It asks how the city is enacted by tourism as a singular and bounded entity, to which multiple orderings of identity are attributed.

Such a research question triggers two moves away from ‘standard’ studies of destination, as these are commonly carried out in the main disciplines informing the field of tourism studies, namely, human geography, social psychology, and marketing.\(^6\) The first move is to replace the ubiquitous concept of ‘city-image’ with that of ‘orderings of destination identity’. The concept of ordering was proposed by John Law for the description of the ‘fairly regular patterns that may be usefully imputed for certain purposes to the recursive networks of the social’.\(^7\) Orderings are thus tools for making sense and for literally ordering heterogeneous materials. Orderings, as this author explains in a later piece, can be understood in a similar way to Foucauldian disciplines: ‘Discipline is \([…]\) about bodies. It is about architecture. It is about time. It is about texts. It is about sight. It is about furniture. And, finally, it is about the soul.’\(^8\) Orderings are sets of relations that go across language and materiality, discourses and technologies, semantics and practices. As sets of coherent notions, they are not just inscribed in materials, but also inculcate sets of practices. Adrian Franklin has made the case for understanding tourism as an ordering; i.e. as a way of ‘remaking the world anew as a tourist world; a world to be seen, felt, interpellated and traveled’.\(^9\) Consequently, I propose to understand destinations as one of those ‘new objects that cannot be known, that we cannot have access to, other than through the ordering that creates them’.\(^10\) The ‘identity’ of destinations is given then by the coherency principles of these orderings, and does not refer to any sort of substantial, unitary or pervasive asset or property intrinsic to the city. Either it is something cultural upon which individuals or groups of individuals agree. As in Foucault’s archeology of archives,\(^11\) individuals are not understood here as subjects or actors producing such orderings, but as positions made possible in various ways by the particular orderings of destination identity.

The second move is to rely on media of tourist communication as main empirical sources. For at least three reasons I am particularly interested in guidebooks. First, guidebooks insinuate comprehensiveness. They present themselves as containing all the information necessary for the travel to a destination, not only what ought to be seen, but also the domestic issues that ought to be known. Second, tourist guidebooks focus on issues of identity, offering ‘something more’ than just packaged and commodified attractions.

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\(^6\) These two moves are also necessary to formulate research questions more strongly informed by sociological and historical perspectives.


\(^10\) Franklin, Tourism (fn. 9), p. 279.

Third, and most importantly, guidebooks constitute devices that serve to stabilize the complex relations between expectations and practices, identity and space, semantics and materialities. On the one hand, tourist guidebooks constitute autonomous devices, producing meaning by their own and not needing to be ‘in-place’ to make sense. On the other hand, such guidebooks are designed to be used in place, to inform practices of travelling, touring and sightseeing, by indicating how to see, where to go, and what to do.

For this research I analyzed a considerable number of tourist guidebooks. A first sample included four very popular contemporary Berlin guidebooks in German and English, namely, ADAC (2005), Baedeker (2005), Marco Polo pocket-edition (2005), and Lonely Planet (2002). In order to incorporate a temporal perspective, two further samples were made, including three guidebooks published between 1989 and 1991, and three guidebooks published in the late 1990s. Less systematically, many other guidebooks were also included in the analysis. Despite such diachronic considerations, this research has a synchronic focus. It does not account for the historical continuities and changes of identity attributed to the destination Berlin throughout the twentieth century. Neither it is considered how these tourist orderings were coupled, adapted and influenced by the different German political cultures and systems. A further disclaimer is that differences between German and English guidebooks are not taken into consideration in this article, which focuses rather on the underlying orderings within which further specifications, also along the lines of national origins, class and gender, can be distinguished.

The analysis led to the identification of at least four orderings of Berlin’s identity, which function as knots of tourist narratives, images and slogans, tourist attractions and sites, tourist practices and identities. I have labelled these orderings with single-minded concepts, aiming to give a glimpse of the main features that each of these orderings attributes to Berlin. These labels are the ‘always-becoming city’, the ‘haunted city’, the ‘Berliner Luft’, the ‘green city on the water’. In the following sections I will briefly present main results con-


cerning the first two orderings. As a summary, I will stress some synergies and tensions between them.

1. The always-becoming city

A very familiar and recurrent motif reproduced in tourist guidebooks to depict the identity of Berlin portrays the city as immersed in a continuous transformation. A central trope is the ‘always-becoming city’, which (re)appeared vigorously during the 1990s and since then has joined and perhaps also contributed to the rise of Berlin as one of the most visited destinations of Europe. In fact, stressing processes of transformation as the main attraction of Berlin was an almost natural direct consequence of the abrupt transformation that the year 1989 brought for the city, Germany, Europe and the world. The fall of the Berlin Wall produced a form of ‘event-tourism’, attracting people in a very intensive way but for a relatively short period of time. A central focus was posed on the transformations affecting East Berlin and East Germany, rendering the experience of touring Berlin into an adventure through and in the exotic East.

But during the 1990s, the uniqueness of Berlin, its character and attractiveness were fundamentally reframed. The key word remained being ‘transformations’, but the meaning associated to it moved drastically in at least three ways. First, Berlin was less seen as the place where transformations in the post-communist society could be skin-deep observed and experienced than as a city on its way to become the new German capital. Second, and correspondingly, the temporal axis of the transformations moved from the present to the future. Third, the focus moved from the ‘event’ Wende to the ‘process’ of reunification. Guidebooks described Berlin as a place where both, the chances and the difficulties of the process of Zusammenwachsen, became evident. Towards the end of the 1990s another subtle, but significant re-ordering of the identity attributed to the destination Berlin took place, which suggested that Berlin’s transformations resembled a movement or a flow (Stadt im Umbruch) rather than a new start or a birth (Aufbruch einer Metropole): ‘With the reunification, Berlin, like no other metropolis in history, has been given the chance – and the challenge – to remake itself following in its own modern perception of what it should be. By comparison, other global hubs like Paris, London and Tokyo, are finished products, whereas Berlin is a work in progress.’ (Lonely Planet 2000, p. 9)

In fact, the ‘always-becoming city’ has a long history as a trope for the city. Its well-known and finest formulation was conveyed by Karl Scheffler, who in

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15 A detailed analysis of these four orderings is delivered in one chapter of my dissertation ‘Touring Berlin: Virtual Destination, Tourist Communication, and the Multiple City’ submitted in February 2008 at the Humboldt University of Berlin.
his famous piece *Berlin, ein Stadtschicksal* (1910) wrote ‘Berlin ist eine Stadt, verdammt dazu, ewig zu werden, niemals zu sein’. Even though this was aimed to critically reflect on the social and urban transformation of Berlin into the capital of *Kaiserreich* Germany, Scheffler’s dictum has been used to imply multiple things. In contemporary tourism, the claim of a state of continuous transformation, even though it does also point to the transformation of Berlin’s urban cultures or changing life conditions, is mainly reproduced with references to the material transformations of the city. New architectural and urban projects, the restoration of the urban fabric, and the waste lands, voids and building sites that complete the city landscape are the main kind of urban sites highlighted within this ordering. Thus, by re-defining what tourist attractions are, the ‘always-becoming city’ makes the difference between narration and materiality collapse, changing the horizons of tourist practices. Moreover, it has significant consequences for how identities of tourists and dwellers are constructed. I would like to concentrate on this latter point.

As Catherine Cocks argued for American cities by the turn of the twentieth century, the focus on the physical city and on its materiality permitted to create a critical distance between the city and the visitors. By the turn of the twenty-first century, at least for Berlin, the case seems to be more radical, for the idea of an ‘always-becoming’ city with its focus on a changing materiality leads to a separation of the city dweller from the city. The idea that Berlin is waiting to be discovered not only by the tourists but also by the Berliners equates city dwellers and tourists as spectators of the transformations of the city. This per-spective suggests that the knowledge and familiarity that tourists can have in relation to the city does not profoundly differ from the knowledge and familiarity of city dwellers. They are not strangers anymore, or at least not stranger than the dwellers: ‘Und so wie vielen Berlinern, die tagtäglich ihre Stadt erleben, wird es auch Ihnen gehen: Auf Ihrer Entdeckungstour [...] werden Sie erstaunt sein, was Sie alles vorher noch nicht kannten. Berlin – das ist wie eine Wundertüte: Viel Spaß beim Auspacken.’ (Marco Polo 2005, p. 11)

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16 City-boosters’ contemporary invocations of Scheffler’s dictum, for example, are usually aimed to celebrate the process of becoming capital and to plead for a clear definition of a new city centre, contradicting thus its original sense. See Claudia Schwartz, *Architekturkritik im Kontext – Berlin nach der Wende*, in: *Wolkenkuckucksheim* 7 (2003), URL: <http://www-1.tu-cottbus.de/BTU/Fak2/TheoArch/Wolke/deu/Themen/022/Schwartz/schwartz.htm>.

17 Cocks, *Doing the Town* (fn. 4).
Moreover, tourists have the benefit of leisure time that allows them to make their own discoveries, fostering the integration of the tourists in the city. To a certain extent, this makes the tourist into a better user of the city than the proper city dweller, who does not have much time to see and palpate Berlin’s transformations. On the other hand, the ‘always-becoming’ city demands tourists to come again and again. Regardless how many times a visitor can come, the city is always waiting with novelties and surprises: ‘So darf der Berlinbesucher darauf gefasst sein, Neues zu sehen und zu erleben, unabhängig davon, ob er zum ersten oder zum zehnten Mal kommt.’ (Baedeker 2005, p. 12) Thus, the ‘always-becoming’ ordering of Berlin’s identity offers not just a compelling reason to visit Berlin; it offers above all a compelling reason to
come back to Berlin, making the visitor into a new kind of dweller, a sort of sporadic dweller. This argument, of course, is not only and perhaps not primarily a cultural one; it is strongly connected with economic aims of tourism and city marketing.

2. The haunted city

In tourism Berlin’s identity, history and geography is also performed, ordered and molded with a focus on death, war, tragedy, destruction, division, and renewal. Contemporary Berlin is rendered thus into a landscape in which the burdens of the modern German history are inscribed in the form of voids, memorials, signs, fragments, ruins etc. The image of a ‘haunted city’, proposed by Brian Ladd in his book *The Ghosts of Berlin*, is very appropriate to reflect this, since it critically unveils the pervasive presence of problematic memories in Berlin’s landscape. Berlin is a haunted city, according to Ladd, in which ‘calls for remembrance – and the calls for silence and forgetting – make all silence and all forgetting impossible, and they also make remembrance difficult’.18 The sense of a ‘haunted city’ plays a central role in the definition of Berlin’s identity and atmosphere, weaving together urban spaces and historical narratives, and articulating tourist practices and identities.

One of the most central references for this haunted city is the history of Berlin as capital of the Third Reich. The reconstruction of this history is articulated around three main thematic focuses, which in their interrelation produce a rich and complex narrative and geography of Berlin as the place from where the most evil forces of the twentieth century emanated. First, and most important, tourist guidebooks capitalize on the role of Berlin as political, bureaucratic and command center of the crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Nazi dictatorship, not just within Germany, but all over Europe. In tourism the connection between Berlin and the Holocaust is mainly performed by means of off-site locations, i.e. memorials, documentary centers and museums. In fact, many important sites of Nazi rule have been destroyed, remaining only ruins (as in the former SS and Gestapo headquarters, where today the exhibition *Topography of Terror* is located), voids (as the Reichskanzlei, where today a Chinese restaurant is located and a plate indicates its absence) and imaginary places (as Hitler’s bunker, which is not signalized, leading to all kind of speculations). Second, the rise of the Nazi movement within the city constitutes another central topic directly connected with concrete locations where persecution, forced evictions, pogroms, crimes and other atrocities took place.

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as in the very popular cases of the Old Synagogue or the Bebelplatz. Third, the architectonic and urban interventions for transforming Berlin into ‘Germania’, and particularly the megalomaniac plans for the North-South Axis, play a central role in the tourist enactment of Nazi Berlin.19

Berlin is also presented as an accursed city condemned to be destroyed again and again: by the Nazis, by the Allies’ bombs of 1945, by communist and modernist urbanism. What in these narratives is destroyed, is a sort of ‘authentic Berlin’ formed during 700 years and that by the first decades of the twentieth century was mainly structured as a mix of old medieval Berlin and old imperial Berlin. The vanished buildings, the restored buildings, and the fact that almost no old building or monument is still in its original position, are continuously highlighted to show the radical destruction of that imagined ‘authentic Berlin’. Even buildings that have survived without major damages are pointed to as clear symbols of the destruction of all what surrounds them. With this emphasis on destruction, Berlin is reconstructed as a city stripped of its historical character, as a city that has lost its original urban identity.

Finally, the Berlin Wall, the no man’s land, the physical division of the city, and its social partition conform a third subset of memories haunting Berlin’s landscape. The velocity with which the Wall vanished from the face of the city can be read about in a guidebook published a few months after the fall of the Berlin Wall that stated ‘Reste der Mauer sind noch heute zu sehen’ (Berlin für junge Leute 1990, p. 155, my emphasis). However, despite of its relative invisibility, the ‘divided city’ continues to articulate tourist narratives, practices, routes, images etc. Indeed, a distinction between East and West Berlin is constantly traced still today, almost two decades after the fall of the Wall, and has become a basic structure of the tourist space. Many contemporary maps, for example, show no major differences from maps dating from the beginning of the 1980s.

The course of the Wall serves not just to glean the city landscape in certain ways, but is even used as a means of geographical orientation in the city. This requires however a certain priority of the imagination over vision. Since it cannot be seen, the divided city has to be read or rather gleaned, in terms of its indirect consequences over the urban landscape. Reading the division in Berlin’s landscape requires thus to focus on small details that unveil the division, but which may not be obvious. Traces of the division are, for example, to be found in the tram lines of the East or even in the number of trees in the West: ‘Und

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Evil city, destroyed city, divided city: Even though these memories refer to significant events and processes in the history of the city that cannot be equated or reduced in their specificity, they exhibit certain continuity, if not homogeneity, within the tourist orderings. In fact, these memories share at least two central characteristics. First, they all dramatically show the extent to which memory is an operation that occurs in the present. Touring Berlin along the lines of the ‘haunted-city’ is mostly about the present pasts, the complicated ways past intermingles with the present, and about the knots of contemporary controversies associated to unresolved pasts rather than about the past itself. Secondly, these three dimensions of the ‘haunted city’ refer to memories that can hardly be seen and gazed upon; memories that require an intensive work of imagination and visualization. This has an important consequence for the way tourists’ identities are constructed, since tourists do not have any epistemological or experiential disadvantages against locals regarding their possibil-
ities of seeing and experiencing a city of absences and voids. The evil city, the destroyed city and the divided city are then for locals as invisible and unreachable as for tourists, and they can only be enacted by means of performances and narratives, such as the ones predominant in tourism. Thus tourists acquire again epistemic priority against the locals, since they actively engage in the enactment of the ‘haunted city’.

Baedeker 2005, p. 19. This figure even stresses old frontiers between districts nowadays melted together.

3. Conclusions

This short description may leave the impression that there are multiple tourist Berlins, undermining the contention that tourist communication transforms cities into destinations by producing orderings of their identity. I would like to argue that these multiple strata interact with each other, producing a complex, multilayered, but still unique sense of place. Regarding the two orderings sketched here, I would like to show how the senses of an ‘always-becoming
city’ and of a ‘haunted city’ contribute to the production of a unique destination. I have found helpful to order these last comments along the analytical lines introduced by Luhmann to think about sense (Sinn). Luhmann’s argument is that the sense of any distinction – and tourist destinations are certainly to be understood as distinctions – can be analytically decomposed by taking into account three major dimensions of sense: objectual, temporal and social.20

Regarding the first dimension, it has been shown that both orderings are constituted by reference to particular objects, buildings, sites and monuments placed at specific positions in the urban space rather than to a ubiquitous urban flair, culture, or nature. These orderings exhibit thus a clear objectual or spatial fix, favoring sightseeing as the most appropriate tourist practice for grasping the destination’s identity. However, the objects and tourist attractions within these orderings exhibit fluid and fragmentary materialities, and even sometimes a complete lack of materiality. Often they are building sites, voids, relocated restored buildings, imaginary places, not-yet or never built urban projects, turning sightseeing into a non self-evident activity. Thus, the tourist objects of Berlin share a sense of virtuality that can only be recovered by an extensive use of imagination and other techniques of visualization.

Thinking about time, it becomes evident that the temporal horizons of the always-becoming and the haunted city complement each other’s figuration of the city identity. Indeed, while the ‘always-becoming’ city is constituted by reference to an unreachable and utopian future, the ‘haunted’ city is oriented to an inescapable and dystopian past. It is probably such intertwine ment of past and future in the present that induce many tourist guides and authors to describe Berlin as a city of the first modernity; a dialectic city molded by a Faustian movement of creative destruction. Thus, Berlin is not portrayed as a historical city, but rather as a city where history is intertwined with the present. The tourist attraction of Berlin lies precisely in the way how past and future become functions of the present. Touring Berlin is mainly not about its past, as in the case of Rome or Prague, or about its present, as in the case of Bilbao or Wolfsburg, but about its present futures and present pasts.

A last point refers to the tourists’ and dwellers’ positions. Both orderings figure the city as moulded by self-dynamics which are to a certain extent independent from the horizons of practice and knowledge of its human users. Both orderings operate in this way an equivalent separation of both dwellers and tourists from the city, equating thus their epistemic and experiential positions. Regarding their knowledge or familiarity with the haunting memories of the past and the ungraspable instantiations of the future, dwellers become thus stripped of any authority and as strangers as the tourists. Having the benefit of leisure time, tourists even appear as better city-users than the very dwellers.

This last remark should make clear that social actors, institutional agencies and historical subjects are understood here as enabled and constituted by the internal sets and knots of relations that define each of these orderings. While such evidence might link our analysis with both Foucault’s archaeology of discourse and Luhmann’s theory of social systems, the attempt of identifying present-day hybrid orderings of destination identity is also informed in a central way by an ethnographic eye. It is indeed ethnography’s particular sensibility towards present processes and phenomena, its audacity for facing the task of describing these fluid forms that are formed, transformed and deformed before one’s eyes, what has encouraged the descriptions of the precarious and certainly malleable orderings of destination identity enacted by tourist communication.

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Bilderbrief von Wolfgang Weber aus Roanoke-Island

...test und raucht...