Berlin by Metaphor

Jonathan Kalb

FRIENDS AND I used to joke that flying to West Berlin by way of Tegel Airport was cheating. You had to drive or take the train, preferably the night train, if you wanted a first impression that didn't deceive. The slow, clanking diesel engine that sometimes ground to a stop with long, unbearable squeals, sitting still for twenty minutes, or thirty, for no apparent reason; the blue- and green-uniformed men who periodically snapped on the compartment lights and gleefully barked "*Fahrkarten, bitte!*" and "*Pässe, bitte!*," like SS-officers turned housewives, spacing out their visits as if to insure that you didn't get more than an hour's uninterrupted sleep; the GDR soldiers with machine-guns, German Shepherds, and *really* bad attitudes sniffing around outside the windows for a half-hour before the train entered the city at sunrise: that was the true paradigmatic journey from West to East to West—overlong, exhausting, infuriating, anachronistic. Anything else was either a lie or a euphemism.

Since the *Wende*, or turning point, it's hard to talk about such difficulties without seeming to be gloating or condescending. Lest we forget, though, there was one western city that had to deal with them on a daily basis for over four decades, and ultimately accepted them as commonplace. Some Berliners have even gone through a sort of withdrawal from them over the past year, complaining that they miss the Wall, that makeshift yet endless palimpsest, that public yet private message-board equally amenable to the most radical political schrei and the most insular love proclamation. The sentiment may sound strange—it certainly evokes little enough sympathy among "*Wessies*" from other places, or "*Ossies*" from anywhere—but having lived in this city for two years, I confess that I share it. As its residents never tire of explaining, West Berlin was not just another western metropolis before and is not about to become one now with the incorporation of its "lost" half. Despite the profusion of new corporate offices in the West and dayglo Camel-cigarette café-umbrellas in the East—which appeared overnight, as instantaneously as the Wall once did—that rarified, alienated condition known as "Berliner" (formerly "West Berliner") will continue to exist and will likely remain deeply resonant to outsiders for a good, long while.

NOW AND THEN during the time I lived here, I considered earning a little money by writing a travel essay on Berlin in the spirit of *Baedeker* and *Blue Guide*, but I eventually gave up the idea after realizing that such a "guide" would be even more pointless than it is in other places—not only because of the city itself but also because of the preconceptions people bring to it. Guides are for stable things, timeless objects that have already been eulogized, laid to rest in a way that enables tourists to relax, the job of thinking already done for them. Anyone who comes here on a pilgrimage to the front of the Cold War, or for any other reason, soon sees that that job isn't finished and, as a compensation, quickly acquires an arsenal of metaphors, loaded and ready to fire. There's no avoiding the impulse to understand Berlin this way. It's why visitors always found the Wall so irresistible. Didn't it symbolize the bankruptcy of so-called Communism, political hypocrisy in general, the wages of German nationalism, man's inability to conquer his aggressiveness? More, didn't its symbolism
also encompass our private pathos, all those difficulties that self-help books try to ameliorate: the barriers between parent and child, men and women, you and your mother, your father, your girlfriend, the pigeons you fed in the park on Sundays?

It was the perfect epitome of a city that could be all things to all people, and its effective disappearance one day last November didn't change the obliging nature of the place. Berlin still repays the tourist's expense and trouble with a confirmation for every prejudice. In fact, the Wall's disappearance turns out to be as metaphorically provocative as the Wall itself. Think about it: Orwellian sanitation of history, denial of the fascist past, the triumph of the will to freedom, to capitalism. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, with one important caveat. In this city, *la même chose*, the thing that never changes, is an abstract idea, a permanent condition of ephemerality, and anyone really interested in understanding the changes now occurring here must first understand that preexisting fact. There is no such thing as a durable iconic image in Berlin.

Native Berliners have always held particular scorn for those who come and gawk and leave, or, worse, those who come and work and attempt to stay; and such feelings have been especially prevalent since throngs of *Ossies* arrived for orgies of free-market consuming. To see that scorn as something more than contempt for the vulgar tourist or the poor cousin, however—a variation on the superficial local pride encountered in any large city—takes a certain induced toughness of mind. It takes a resistance to metaphor, or rather, since resistance is ultimately futile, a self-consciousness about why the mind keeps rushing to comparison. Before you succumb, consider where you are: a place where the nature of truth isn't just relative, as everywhere, but exceptionally temporary. Metaphors, like guides, are for stable objects; comparison can actually encumber thought about the unstable. A perfectly upstanding, hard-working metaphor can suddenly appear lazy in Berlin, a poor substitute for the ebb and flow of events, for endless talk in smoke-choked *Kneipen*—bars—where nothing hangs on the walls and the patrons all show up in black clothing.

Of course, the black is just a style, isn't it? Just a uniform for the spoiled middle-class teenagers from West Germany who once flocked to Berlin in order to avoid military service or to find comrades for their various murky rebellions. Their motto: "No future!" Yes, on one level, that's what it is: the black pirate-flag in a make-believe sea battle, the ideal badge for a dilettantish flirtation with anarchy. On another level, though, it's as thoroughly Prussian as the great Friedrich himself, obligatory, manipulative, disposed to coerce mood, delimit conversation (Shall we talk about death today?), and inspire the same imperious pride as did the blue in Friedrich's coat. Or the shiny point on Bismarck's helmet. Or the polished barrels of Ulrike Meinhof's guns....

You see, that's just how it happens. The metaphors slip in without your noticing. You can't really help it. And it doesn't only occur with foreigners. Recently, a well-known German choreographer named Johann Kresnik won the coveted director's prize at the Theatertreffen, Berlin's annual invitational theater festival, for a dance-theater piece that used Meinhof's biography as a metaphor for the *Wende* and postwar German history in general. The piece treated Meinhof as *only* a victim—she commits no terrorist acts herself and is raped again and again by various symbolic and non-symbolic characters—which is as skewed a view of history as that which sees her *only* as a terrorist. In Berlin, though, where having a strong opinion is far more important than being right, the oversimplification was seen as profound, the elisions a small price to pay for the forcefulness of the sledgehammer imagery.

Of course, there's nothing inherently wrong with comparison per se but rather with the way it tends to mitigate the truth, distract from the facts. After all, Berlin isn't like Prussia; it *is* Prussia, neither a forgotten place nor an obsolete concept. (Look up the number of the *Staatsbibliothek* some time in the Berlin phone book; you won't find it under "S," or even "B," but rather "P" for *Preussischer Kulturbesitz*—Prussian Cultural Property.) Berlin is the thing itself, still the actual or symbolic nexus of countless strands of imperialist influence and domination, its history a conglomeration of facts about power politics so cold and hard that the propaganda of appearances—made as adroitly here as anywhere—can hardly cover them up. Berlin is the original, the rarity. Its isolated and divided condition was a literal expression of, and not a metaphor for, the condition of modern imperialism: at once doggedly persistent and fearfully precarious. And the same is true of its reunified condition: a reflection of the new imperialism, monodirectional, self-satisfied, oblivious. Berlin isn't like other places, they are like aspects of it, and when I am asked to explain why I've spent so much time here, I always return to this point about centrality.

Beyond cheap thrills, what is the attraction of a place in which the weight of history is so immediate and oppressive it makes the most disciplined mind feel itself to be scrambling in a frenzy for explanations? The answer lies in the double challenge that Berlin poses to the onlooker: not only to get behind its reality of shifting appearances but also to perceive the significance of that shifting. The former challenge applies almost anywhere, but the latter is unique to Berlin, where superficiality is a sort of religion and doesn't always indicate insignificance. To gain insight into that religion is to feel that you are at least scrambling to a purpose.

This is a city of surfaces, a city of padded shoulders, chartered libertinism, a city unashamed to value texture above color, shape above function, style for style's sake, means at the expense of meaning. What other city would support the theater-auteur Robert Wilson to the extent that this one does? What other city would find ways actually to build structures from so many "postmodern" architectural designs? What other place could become home to a movement called *Neue Wilde* whose painters really believe that a surfeit of red goo can still represent a rent body or a bludgeoned spirit? Where else would some people risk arrest in order to decorate and desecrate a heavily guarded international border fortification, only to contend with neighbors who insist that it be respected and kept clean? In May 1990, when demolition of the Wall was already in full swing, I actually saw two East German workmen whitewash over new graffiti that had appeared on their side of the Wall for the first time The experience was surreal, as if I'd seen someone washing and waxing an abandoned car, but I've learned not to judge absurdity too fast here.

ESPECIALLY in the city's western half, you can make friends fairly easily if you let people express their surfaces, so to speak. Ask someone where she likes to drink, dance, bowl, but don't ask her not to smoke in your bedroom, and don't open the door to the *Kneipe* to let any oxygen in. Ask a person where he buys his black clothes, what his opinion on the census boycott is, but wait a while to ask more than superficially about his work, his love troubles, or he'll lose interest in you. You won't have much luck trying to see through a Berliner, as American friends play guru and try to see through to the core even at a first meeting, largely because the German language doesn't provide the proper tools for those urbane games of pop-psychologizing—all that jargony, circumlocutionary stuff that allows English-speakers to keep up the appearance of going deeper while in fact giving their neuroses free play. For forty-five years, the city's best kept secret has been that it isn't cosmopolitan in that sense; it's a blown-up *Dorf*, a village that enjoyed flattering itself with the image of a metropolis cut in half.

The fact is, Berlin, like many other cities, really was originally an amalgamation of *Dörfer* that, over centuries, gathered into a single municipality with the palatial structures along the Spree and the wide avenue Unter den Linden at its center. That center lay entirely in the East, however, and after the erection of the Wall, West Berlin had to pretend to be a coherent *Grossstadt* when in fact it regressed to its earlier identity as a collection of contiguous villages. Officially, the villages became city districts, like the boroughs of New York, but they retained their small-town mentalities to a surprising degree, each acting independently to suppress "difference" and enforce mindless adherence to a peculiar provincial ideal of order. West Berlin always displayed an extremely puzzling resistance to blending these various attitudes; it preferred to preserve the state of parallel narrow-mindedness, despite the fact that, for practical purposes such as mass transit, it did function as a large city.

This narrowness appeared to apply everywhere, as much to Kreuzberg, the supposedly enlightened haven for the avant-garde, as to stuffy suburban districts like Zehlendorf and Mariendorf. To have met a thirteen-year-old who was so isolated and over-protected that he never even heard of the city magazines *Tip* and *Zitty*—he believed that "everything you could want is right here in Zehlendorf"—wasn't so surprising; it was like an eighth-grader in Staten Island never having heard of the *Village Voice*. But to see *Autonomen* (literally, "the autonomous ones") in Kreuzberg smashing windows and torching cars right in their own neighborhood was shocking to the point of bewilderment. The *Bezirk*, or district, constituted the limits of even the revolutionary imagination: too drunk or high or unorganized to go down to Kurfürstendamm ("Ku'damm" to the locals) to register a louder voice, they rationalized the soiling of their own nest as a sort of generic protest. There was no parallel with the suicidal violence that convulses American ghettoes, a truly urban phenomenon born of real deprivation, where home base represents a socio-economic prison imposed from without. The parallel was with the "bad boys" from the high schools of New Rochelle, New York or Milpitas, California or a thousand other suburbs, who get suspended for fighting and then run away to make trouble in the nearby city pool hall until they're bored enough to buckle down and join Daddy's business. Kreuzberg was West Germany's pool hall.

Now that Berlin is whole again, though, it is being wrenched back into its cosmopolitanism with a vengeance. Soon it will once again enjoy the dirt, the violent crime, the confusion, all those aspects of modern urbanism from which its long, provincial beauty sleep, to an amazing extent, spared it; and no one is asking whether the people also can change so suddenly and convulsively. Imagine, if you can, a western metropolitan subway system in which overcrowding and graffiti became problems for the first time only in 1989. Imagine the instantaneous appearance of futuristically dense crowds in the city center, a babel of languages in the banks and shops, fierce competition for apartments, for used cars, for university places. The full scope of the new reality will take as many years to sink in here as it will in the East. Most of what the stunned West Berliners feel is a vague first-time realization of how good they had it before.

It's a shame that no one who travels here from now on will be able to see the peculiar detached attitude the locals used to take toward the Ku'damm area. Ku'damm, the ersatz downtown of the West, was supposed to be exceptional, a bastion of true urbanity; in fact, the neon was as indigenous to the city as tacos. The whole avenue was imported, a collection of pre-fab objects and images whose main purpose was to serve tourists. Ku'damm was an alien phenomenon, an outgrowth of military occupation, as foreign to the Berliner's mindset as the concept of fashion, its dozens of designer shops notwithstanding. Yes, that's right, there was no such thing as indigenous fashion here. How could there be? Fashion is a combination of innovativeness and perceptiveness about beauty and self, beauty in relation to self. The typical Berlin villagers possessed the former in superfluity but were so estranged from the latter that they hadn't even the slightest notion what it was. The city's anti-health ethic was the telling backdrop in this regard: the ubiquitous smoking, the drinking, the sedentariness. It's as if entrapment inside a concrete cage had caused some sort of chronic alienation from the body, as if the full experience of physical presence was, over a lifetime in Berlin, more than anyone could bear.

For Americans this could be extremely hard to understand. We didn't want to understand it because we didn't want to be disappointed. We preferred to interpret the lights of Ku'damm as real *Donner* and *Blitzen*, a foreign brand of authentic excitement, rather than as a replica of what we just came from, perfunctorily pasted onto another culture like a "SOLD" sign. The longings that underlie our own urbanity, the yearnings for security disguised as stimulation, are what we hope to escape in Europe, and Berlin did allow a kind of escape: it wore its garish coat so awkwardly that the effect was sometimes one of self-mockery. Ultimately, though, you couldn't help recognizing that the Berliners were deeply indifferent to the whole affair. They were thankful for the money the businesses brought them, but the place remained irrelevant to their self-image. I remember being initially fooled, for instance, by the crowds of what looked like American kids wearing football jerseys (from supposedly American teams—the Cleveland Bears?) and drinking Coca-Cola on the steps of the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church: only when I stopped to listen did I learn that their chatter in heavy Berlinese was a distended harangue on American vulgarity, arrogance, and imperialism, pieced together from clichés half-heard during weekend nights in Kreuzberg.

The point is, this unimpressibility wasn't a weakness; it actually demonstrated a strength of character of which we and the West Germans could only dream. Like most foreigners, we were blinded by the configuration of our basic needs and fears, especially our assumption that everyone faced with precariousness must cling to something solid. Berlin, able to survive economically only because of huge subsidies from the West German government, a land-locked island inside a totalitarian state, possibly the most dangerous place in the world to be in the event of an East/West conflict—how could the people in such a place resist clinging to the name brands, the ad-speak and cheap media images that offered us at least the illusion of security? That was precisely the peculiarity of the Berliner's self-image, though. In a culture with a long history of embracing arrant abstractions, it was actually possible to cling to precariousness itself.

NOW, HOWEVER, the precariousness is gone, and the Berliners have no choice but to start believing in that mantle of glitziness so dearly bought for them over four decades. Fashion will now return, on the way to spread its terrorism through the East, and Ku'damm will again become an indigenous phenomenon, though perhaps not the one everyone expects. In these first transitional months there are wonderfully telling scenes, as mobs of shoppers suffocate the downtown area in a violent, starved embrace, seeing there the source of all things good. Good is a point of view, though, and these mobs aren't buying Bendel originals or Gucci shoes, but rather Japanese electronics and Lipton iced-tea mix by the case. In other words, they're worshipping the wrong gods according to Western standards, patronizing all the peripheral shops whose parasitic growth on Augsburgerstrasse and the other side-streets always poignantly reflected the Berliners' lack of respect for Ku'damm as a city center. Through all its practical difficulties over the years, West Berlin was prepared for many eventualities, including, under certain circumstances, to be plundered like a jewelry shop in a poor neighborhood. It was never prepared, however, for what actually happened, for the East to call the West's bluff, transforming the place overnight into something it never was or wanted to be, a team player, an obedient soldier. Now all it can do is sit there, in its chronic bad mood, passively observing its own draft induction.

The shock to East Berlin is even more acute, and more upsetting. A people to be pitied: unlike the majority of their countrymen, they voted for the Social Democrats as if to protect themselves from their own naiveté, and their instincts were right. No one there even *sees* the corporate advance men as they claim vast physical and mental territories with advertising before a single individual has a chance to exercise his or her new right to conduct private enterprise. Unfortunately, I'm all too familiar with this sort of benevolent strongarming; it's my culture's preferred method of filling power vacuums. Sometimes, against the ubiquitous grey, the swatches of high-tech color in the cigarette umbrellas and billboards resemble party-pins on giant suit-lapels, *western* party-pins. Other times they leave an impression of spores, which is of course figuratively what they are, seeds for a system that's meant to grow like a weed. The advertising isn't only meant to sell things to the *Ossies* but also to reassure us *Wessies*, make us feel safe in the knowledge that somewhere in this former "desert" someone is not giving a sucker an even break.

Alas, instead of being reassured, I'm alternately furious and ashamed. How do you explain to people who've never been allowed to travel to New York that the idiotic carousel constantly spinning sights and sounds round your head there, without your blessing or permission, may not be wholly benevolent? How do you explain the conspiracy to steal attention, to interpret every minute of your waking life as an opportunity to sell you something, to people enraptured by the conspiracy's most perfect instruments, television and the disorienting environments of the Europa Center and other shopping malls? The answer is, you don't. Like Americans, they'll only insist on learning for themselves, and when that carousel starts gathering momentum, they won't have the slightest idea what hit 'em.

I don't stay furious or ashamed for long, though, because as soon as I start to relax all those metaphors start jumping out at me again from behind every sewer grate and tree stump. Comparison is an easy form of reflection, and inasmuch as the shifting of realities becomes a commonplace here, you become a believer in the value of approximate and temporary similarity, convinced of the pointlessness of demanding permanence of any truth. Berlin, everything in it, and everything that happens in it, strike you as epitomes, and as the images and associations start to swarm, you make the only decision left you and allow the swarm to run its course.

Look at the Teufelsberg, highest point in the city, literally a pile of rubble from bombed-out buildings, carried in buckets to the northern edge of the Grunewald after the war, almost entirely by women. The logical thing would be to pile it still higher with pieces from the demolished Wall after Berlin is triumphantly declared *Mauerrein*—that is, the pieces not stored away in museums alongside the torahs, talises, and other Jewish treasures that survived another November 9 not long ago. Objectivity in this place means a view from rubble overgrown with pretty grass.

Look at the Berliner Ensemble, the theater founded by Bertolt Brecht—which couldn't fill its seats if not for American tourists—once the standard-bearer for ideals of immediacy in performance and egalitarianism backstage, now administrator of a waxworks repertory and a star-system as ruthless as that of New York or Los Angeles. Its work before the *Wende* bore approximately the same relation to Brecht as the GDR's political system did to Communism, and today it gropes along that same moribund path, hoping the new political reality will magically endow it with fresh significance. On countless fronts, keeping up appearances will now replace all deep reflection and self-scrutiny.

Recall the woman saved from drowning in the Landwehrkanal in 1920, claiming to be the Grand Duchess Anastasia, pampered and humored for years by opportunistic Germans and Americans with eyes on her family's fortune. How long, I used to ask myself, could the Federal Republic be expected to tolerate, feed, and nurse West Berlin, its problem child, in the desperate hope it would prove an authentic relic from a lost world? Now, suddenly, the lost world has been regained through an opportunism so intense it devalues even further our notions of authenticity. Anastasia is no longer relevant; this week's new icon is the *Ossie* with his newly acquired free enterprise, who chisels at a slab of concrete that he's just spray-painted because he knows he can charge more money for colored "relics of the true Wall."

Ponder the Reichstag, the world's most useless building, atrociously restored as a dull museum. How touching it was, all these years, that its engraved proclamation of democracy (DEM DEUTSCHEN VOLKE) faced not eastward like a reproof but westward like a warning light on a control panel. (*"Achtung! You are leaving the American Sector!!"*) Its function was to wait endlessly, a petrified Didi or Gogo, its noblest purpose, to be wrapped as a Christo sculpture. Poor giant edifice, all it can do is loom again now, a dumb sponge for hopefully obsolete fears about the future, its waiting no more resonant than an affianced debutante's.

The mind goes on and on until exhausted. Nothing is exempt, not the tree branch outside your window that resembles an expressionist wood-cut more than a living plant, not the relentlessly dark and brutal winter that lasts from October until June and leaves you permanently scarred, or should I say branded, with frostbite acquired on ordinary

trips to the corner store. History makes you edgy when it's written too plainly on your environment, especially if you're an American.

IN THE END, you have to admit the truth to yourself, though: that you haven't in fact been overwhelmed but have been struggling all along to make sense of the swarm, to project sense onto it if need be. After all, you're not a Berliner but an outsider with a privileged vantage point. Searching for themes and motifs, you find them almost too easily by indulging in the old intellectual sport of analyzing the Teutonic personality. Is that wrong, unfair? Perhaps, but it's also common and inevitable, a sort of involuntary act of mental hygiene when you live here for any length of time. I never lost interest, during my stay, in the question of why I was fascinated by Berlin, but as time went on I did become more and more inclined to differentiate it, understand it in light of the other undeniable fact that the idea of spending a year or two in any other German city repulsed me.

"Berlin isn't Germany as New York isn't America," goes the saying, and there is truth in it. With its multitude of bullet- and shrapnel-pocked facades and cheap, grey-stucco, non-designed buildings, Berlin is the only western German city that doesn't look as if the war never happened—a sort of visual frankness that warms the foreigner's heart. There is no self-consciousness in the cleaned-up landscape of, say, Frankfurt, where you almost believe that the engraving on the Alte Oper, *DEM WAHREN SCHOENEN GUTEN* ("To Truth, Beauty, and Goodness") extends to its neighboring network of happy corporate logos—ALLIANZBASFDEUTSCHE-BANKDRESDNERBANKHOECHST-BMW—as well as to all other potent symbols of the "economic miracle." Also, despite its lack of real tolerance for alternative behavior and ideas, Berlin, like New York, has a flourishing cultural scene and a huge "visiting" population that give it an appearance of tolerance that no other German city can rival.

It's easy to miss the point, though. Berlin would have none of its metaphorical resonance if not specifically for its Germanness. It still retains its age-old identity as showcase for exceptions that prove rules about the culture. How appropriate, for instance, that a city eighty percent flattened in war and then shorn of its identity as a capital—the capital of a people who themselves search perpetually for identity—should first scrape the ornamentation from the facades of its surviving buildings in an effort to wipe out all vestiges of German folk tradition, and then become foster parent to an architectural movement—"postmodernism"—that it didn't help create and that isn't really even a movement.

In the apartments by Hans Hollein, Rob Krier, and others in the Tiergartenviertel, built from winning designs in the *Internationale Bau-Ausstellung*, hybridity becomes a metaphor for identity-crisis, identity as a pastiche of other identities. Some of these buildings are quite beautiful, all are whimsical and risky, and there are a thousand interesting points to be made about them, but in Berlin what impresses first is the deep-rooted diffidence of the "postmodern" in general, the ridiculous arrogance of calling it a style at all. The humor of the various pastiches draws distrust like an inadvertent smile—especially now that the Wall is gone and the eye can take in the frivolously new and the appallingly dilapidated old in a single glance. It's both the ideal stage set for the *Wende* and the ideal architecture for a city that banks on the world's uncertainty about its imperialistic future.

The monstrous, futuristic *Internationales Congress Centrum*, one of the city's most famous buildings, may be the most comprehensive example. In it, excess becomes a metaphor for an age-old form of German self-deception: the quixotic attempt at reification. The gaudy overdecoration in Bavarian and Austrian churches, where every piece of gilt molding, every cherub and angel, had to be depicted in brightly colored plaster relief, reflected an effort to encourage belief by making heaven more "real," and the ICC's icy metal tubes and phony "modularity" constitute a similar effort to enhance belief in the heaven of machines and technology. The Bavarians, blinded by their *horror vacui*, could never see that the Italian *trompe-l'oeil* frescoes painted on plain pillars and unadorned walls, which their

Roots (The Pedregal), 1943

churches tried to imitate and "top," were ultimately more tasteful and more convincing, and the Berliners, blinded by their drive to be *au courant*, again don't quite "get it": that you can't just plunk down a huge, steel behemoth in the middle of nowhere next to an Autobahn interchange and expect it to make the same kind of contextual sense as the Pompidou Centre does in the middle of Beaubourg.

This is the famous spectacle of the Germans trying too hard, and over the past year it has come to represent all that is most feared about this people and its culture. Even those of us who usually maintain a pretense of harmlessly observing *Kultur* have lately found it impossible to resist direct commentary on the society, as witnessed by this essay. My own usual field of view is the theater, which, as is well known, both German governments support to an astounding degree. (The Federal Republic, for instance, now spends 2 billion Marks, or 1.2 billion dollars, annually on theater, seven times more than the United States spends on all the arts combined.) And Berlin has remained the theater capital of the German-speaking world—some twenty houses receive substantial public support and hundreds of "Off" theaters survive on their own—even through twenty-eight years when it couldn't draw audiences from a wide commuter belt.

All in all, the subsidy is wonderful, a splendidly bizarre accident of history. Since the *Wende*, however, you also can't help noticing that it serves the same sort of authoritarian power structure that has proved ruinous to countless other German institutions, including the state of East Germany. The authority of the director has become absolute, he (almost never she) tolerates few serious challenges from playwrights and other "minions," and one of the commonest results is blind perpetuation of the paternalistic "bashing aesthetic," the attitude that sees the theater's Enlightenment function as a process of chastising audiences—choose your own examples, from Sturm und Drang, through Expressionism, right up to Heiner Müller. The other common results are elitism and aestheticism, which reach their logical culmination in the Theatertreffen, an event attended almost exclusively by "insiders" and consisting of productions such as Achim Freyer's *Woyzeck* or Frank Castorf's *Miss Sara Sampson*, chosen on the basis of "purely aesthetic criteria" and disdainful of the very idea that theater should remain accessible to first-time viewers.

If only one could point to a few intrepid souls who actively fight against this system. At a recent colloquium in Berlin entitled "Opportunities and Hazards for the Theater in the GDR," however, a large, diverse panel of artists and critics spent two and a half hours discussing the coming budget crunch in East Germany without anyone even mentioning the idea of interpreting adversity as opportunity and returning to fundamentals, making theater with less money, or none. Of course, poverty and unemployment aren't to be wished on anyone, but has *all* interest in grass-roots work and avant-gardism here, even among artists, been completely overpowered by the craving to become a cog in a well-oiled machine? Is it really true that the goal of *every* young German director today is to become an assistant in a Staatstheater and then climb up the ladder of that corporate-style institution?

Of course, these issues are more complicated than I'm making them seem. Perhaps all I'm really saying is that 1990 was a bad year for theatergoing, a bad time for representation in general. The theater couldn't compete with the drama outside on the streets—a point that was driven home pungently for me one night after seeing Maxim Gorky's *The Last Ones* at the Theatertreffen. Actually, I saw very little of *The Last Ones* because of the infuriating narrowness of the stage set, but I did *hear* the gist of the story. It was about a corrupt and cruel police chief who destroys his family through lies and self-deception, four hours of hypertrophied psycho-pummeling that paled by comparison with events outside the theater that night. Audience members strolling toward Ku'damm after the show encountered a real riot by a rowdy crowd that had just come from forming a 300-square-yard "living swastika" in the middle of Alexanderplatz.

IT'S ONE of the great post-war challenges: to recognize that the really difficult task is to characterize the Germans as human, to see and admit to yourself what is all too human in them, without glossing the facts. Berlin is one of the few places where this is possible, for it's still, even without the Wall, the only German city capable of both enraging and allowing distance from your rage. The distance comes from the ironies, which don't exist elsewhere. It's not ironic when an average German pedestrian waits for a traffic light on a deserted corner at 2:00 a.m., but it is when a punker does, replete with safety-pin earrings and purple-sprayed hair. Cigarette advertising isn't in itself ironic, but when seen against a landscape drained of all other color, it is. Right-wing radicalism isn't in itself ironic either, but it appears so in a city run by a coalition of Socialist and Green parties. Berlin offers a footing, a vantage-point, a time-space in which to contemplate the obvious: that the whole Teutonic melodrama, and in particular the badly redundant sub-plot about authority, has something deeply to do with you.

Project whatever meanings you like onto the swarm of metaphors; the city itself will insure that your reflections reach beyond German-bashing. Think about who's to blame for the success of the Republikaner party, or for the now victorious Federal Republic never having been properly denazified, and try to keep your thoughts from wandering toward the United States, Klaus Barbie's postwar protector and employer. Try looking at bullet-ridden facades and not-yet-demolished war bunkers day in and day out without recalling that America's bombs were too precious to drop on even one rail connection to Auschwitz. Laugh all you want at the soon-to-be-shipped-out GIs without high-school diplomas racing their mag-wheeled Camaros down Clayallee, yelling and tossing beer cans at pedestrians; your mirth might just succeed at blocking out the thought that Germany isn't the only place where certain people have found the failures of the Enlightenment terribly convenient.

There are no innocents in Berlin. To come here is to be forced, until recently at gunpoint, to see some larger context. And to live here is to be constantly reminded that all the really pressing questions can be posed as German questions, and that very few German questions have only to do with Germany. □