Visual representations of working-class Berlin, 1924–1930


Abstract

This thesis examines the urban topography of Berlin’s working-class districts, as seen in the art, architecture and other images produced in the city between 1924 and 1930. During the 1920s, Berlin flourished as centre of modern culture. Yet this flourishing did not exist exclusively amongst the intellectual elites that occupied the city centre and affluent western suburbs. It also extended into the proletarian districts to the north and east of the city. Within these areas existed a complex urban landscape that was rich with cultural tradition and artistic expression. This thesis seeks to redress the bias towards the centre of Berlin and its recognised cultural currents, by exploring the art and architecture found in the city’s working-class districts. The thesis adopts Henri Lefebvre’s premise that each society creates its own space in which it lives, works, and sustains its cultural identity. On this basis, working-class culture and the spaces in which it was practiced, are treated with equal weight.

The thesis begins by examining how the laissez-faire economics of the German Empire (1871–1914), combined with a massive influx of rural migrants into Berlin, created a complex industrial landscape, whose working-class inhabitants retained many pastoral traditions. The thesis moves on to study the works of a number of artists active in Berlin between 1924 and 1930, using examples of their work to examine the unique nature of the working-class districts, and the culture and traditions that took place there. The second half of the thesis explores the working-class districts from an explicitly political perspective. The extensive house building programme that took place across Berlin throughout the twenties is explored in all its varied and conflicting political perspectives. What emerges is a picture of a growing schism between Berlin’s Social Democratic government, and Communist supporters in the working-class districts. 1929 emerges as a critical year in which political contestations of space between the two parties and their supporters reached new levels of hostility, as working-class culture clashed against Social Democratic urban policy.

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The content of visual representations is not entirely conventional in the above sense; relations between the visible form of visual symbols and their referents are also involved in determining the content of pictures. There is a fundamental difference between textual and visual symbol systems. Visual systems are based on a spatial format: Visual representations are symbols in which some spatial relations are interpreted to mean something about the referent.