

CULTURAL TRANSFERS WORKSHOP

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WEIMAR MODERNITIES: REPRESENTATIONS OF TRAVEL AND ECONOMY

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Spaces of Modernity: Dr. Mabuse at the Berliner Börse

Stock exchanges stand in the centre of every modern metropolis, as sites of flux and impermanence, typically dressed in the trappings of neo-classical respectability. Yet exchanges, and the potentially radically disruptive activity that they house, are largely under discussed in debates surrounding the experience of urban modernity. The concept of the modern has been in a large part defined through its spaces and spatial practices - a loosely defined collection that includes the arcade, the railway station, the street and later, the cinema. Our understanding of these spaces revolves in large part around Paris - the “capital of modernity” of the 19th century. This paper seeks to examine existing discussions of the stock exchange as such a space within the Parisian context, as well as to introduce the importance of this space within the context of Berlin during the years of the Weimar Republic.

The exchange is understood here not only through its physical presence within the city, but more critically, through the cultural representations that refer to it and reproduce it as an image, within the context of Weimar Berlin. Financial speculation was a popular and under-regulated activity during the 1920s in Germany, and everyday participation and engagement with this space was heavily reliant on the information published within a wide variety of media. Financial reporting, speculation strategies and foreign exchange rates were part of the common parlance of German society as it experienced the economic turmoil that followed WWI. Fictional accounts of market activity are equally important to understanding this activity as a whole, as well as what general concepts, ideas and common anxieties were at stake.

While the importance of the stock exchange is represented in a wide variety of sources from the period, this paper will focus on an analysis of a central text: Fritz Lang’s 1922 film *Dr. Mabuse der Spieler*, which was released during a period in which the Berlin stock exchange was only open one day per week because of frantic demand for speculative profits. *Mabuse* is read here as a document of its time. The film provides valuable insight into the popular conception of financial activity, the figure of the trader, and the uneasy relationship between the exchange’s role as a threshold to the global space of financial flow, and concepts of nation and territory. In so doing, general concepts of the “unbinding of space and place” in modernity will be returned to within the specific context of the German cultural landscape of this time.

James Casteel

Revolutionary Encounters: German Travelers to the Soviet Union between the Wars

Historian Michael David-Fox has argued that the cultural exchange between Western intellectuals and the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s was important because it occurred at a moment “in which the underlying assumptions of Western superiority were ostensibly reversed or cast in doubt.”¹ For German (as well as Austrian) travelers to the Soviet Union between the wars, such anxiety was perhaps more acute than for other Europeans because Germany’s defeat during the First World War had resulted in the loss of its overseas colonial empire as well as territorial gains made in eastern Europe during World War I and parts of the prewar German Empire to neighboring states. Recent scholarship influenced by postcolonial studies has suggested that this experience of colonial loss -- both on the continent and overseas -- had a substantial impact on German culture and national identity in the Weimar Republic.²

Building on some of these interventions, my paper will analyze German accounts of travel to the Soviet Union. In particular, I will situate German travelers’ perceptions of the Bolsheviks’ attempt to build a socialist state in the broader context of the changing world order and extra-European challenges to European hegemony in the world. Although there was a long tradition in Germany of viewing Russia as what Larry Wolff termed “an intermediary cultural space” separating Europe from Asia, a borderland between “civilization” and “barbarism,”³ interwar German travelers to the Soviet Union no longer viewed Russia as part of Europe, but rather as the centre of a “New World” emerging in the East. Thus while German travelers, regardless of their political orientation, were often fascinated with the Bolshevik efforts to transform Russia into the next “America,” they also saw much that was “backward” and “Asiatic.” By focusing on these ambivalences in interwar German travel accounts, I will show how travelers attempted to make sense of the changing world around them and, in the process, redefined what it meant to be German (and European).

¹ Michael David-Fox, “The Fellow Travelers Revisited: The ‘Cultured West’ through Soviet Eyes,” *Journal of Modern History* 75 (June 2003), 300-301.

² Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994), 7.

³ See Marcia Klotz, “The Weimar Republic: A Postcolonial State in a Still-Colonial World,” in Eric Ames, et al., *Germany's Colonial Pasts* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 135-147; Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *War Lands on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000); Robert L. Nelson, ed. *Germans, Poland, and Colonial Expansion to the East: 1850 Through the Present* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).