

Gothic, Global Berlin:
An Analysis of Chloe Aridjis's *Book of Clouds*

In contemporary advertising and marketing discourses about modern-day Germany, Berlin is often represented as a centre for reconstruction, growth and renewal. 'Berlin is unlike every other city because it is new', states a spokesperson for *Partners for Berlin*. 'There is so much construction and change going on now, and it won't be the case ten years from now.'¹ Likewise, another advertisement describes Berlin as the 'perfect place to live': 'Germany's largest city is open and cosmopolitan, allowing for every kind of life style. The inexhaustible urban diversity of Berlin makes for a quality of life that is particularly appealing.'² In both of these texts, a focus on the city's current construction projects serves as a way of setting Berlin apart from its past, separating it from its former prejudices and divisions, and highlighting its forward-looking vision – of progress and democracy, as a centre for global technology and cosmopolitan mixture. As Karen Till explains, 'postunification Berlin draws from the long-standing stable democracy of the FRG – which now includes a history of trying to work through two authoritarian regimes. Contemporary marketers reject the Cold War city to imagine the future and celebrate the new.'³

In relation to a city so clearly saturated by its past, including the Weimar, Nazi, and Stasi governments, the romantic character of this discourse is easily visible. Thus, Till continues:

While Berlin may be unusual in Europe because of the sheer scale of construction and renovation that has occurred since 1990, it remains distinctive because of the array of places that have been (re)established that convey both the desires and fears of returning to traumatic national pasts.⁴

¹ Karen Till, *The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 5.

² Partners for Berlin, 'Perfect Place to Live' postcard, n.d. See <http://www.berlin.de/partner-fuer-berlin/english/newberlin/leben.html>.

³ Till, *The New Berlin*, p. 55.

⁴ Till, *The New Berlin*, p. 6.

In effect, Berlin offers a palimpsest of urban histories, each layered upon the others in diverse ways.

Of course, earlier theorists like Walter Benjamin, Michel de Certeau, and Pierre Nora have confronted this issue previously in obvious ways, reflecting on how, in de Certeau's words, 'there is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can "invoke" or not'.⁵ Likewise, various Berlin artists, architects, and grass-roots organisations have also responded to the city's hauntedness by creating new types of 'active' memorial, which rather than simply destroying signs of the past, or commemorating them, instead invoke new, 'active' forms of reflection, urging viewers to interact with their presence and to relate their meaning personally. Nevertheless, as Till notes, there is still a considerable amount of modern criticism which ignores spatial history, seeing Berlin more as a backdrop for historical dramas played out on its surface than as an actual historical identity in itself, engaged within historical processes. This problem is visible in one recent article by Tanya Gold, which while rightly condemning consumer culture's romanticisation of Germany's past, nevertheless simplifies the problem by prioritising the concern for present-day 'evils' over Holocaust reflections: 'I thought the point of the second world war was to eradicate Nazism from the face of the earth', Gold writes:

[W]e seem to have a new kind of Nazi domination – a cultural domination – and it's silly. There is no point to it [...] it turns our eyes from the evils that we should be noticing today. It is a big dressing-up box, full of distraction.⁶

Gold is right in saying that Hitler stories can sometimes be banal and unnecessary – certainly her examples of 'Cats Who Look Like Hitler' and 'Nazi uber-Cows' living in Devon make this point. Nevertheless, in so far as 'the evils that we should be noticing

⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 108.

⁶ Tanya Gold, 'Nazi cows, Nazi cats, actors playing depressed Nazis. It's all just Hitler porn and it disgusts me', *Guardian*, 23/04/09 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/apr/23/nazi-culture-film-hitler>>

today' include continued neo-Nazi and fascist racism and violence, this diagnosis problematically ignores the necessity of memorial reflection as a means of social education. In this sense, only by recognising the Holocaust's continued importance, and by engaging with this reflectively, can historical maturity be achieved.

Chloe Ardijs's recent novel *Book of Clouds* (2009) offers an important contribution to this discussion. It tells the story of a Jewish woman in her early twenties, Tatiana, who having visited Berlin briefly as a child, returns to live there as an adult. She is a solitary figure, prone to long walks, U-Bahn rides, and isolation. She doesn't speak much, but she observes and remembers considerably, and so her narrative begins with the memory of her first trip to Germany. Admittedly, on my first reading of this opening, I was confused. Or rather, because the events themselves are straight-forward – a girl, on a Berlin train, who thinks she sees Hitler in the features of an elderly fellow passenger – I did not understand what to make of them: how was supposed to feel about this bizarre personal declaration? Was I really supposed to believe that she saw Hitler? Nevertheless, as the book continues, its invocation of Berlin's historical ghosts begins to make sense.

In effect, what is odd about this opening passage is the seriousness with which it is related: 'To my great surprise', Tatiana laments,

not a single person seemed to notice the old woman in the head scarf. [...] But how could no one else notice the forehead and the eyes and the shaded patch between nose and mouth, when the combination of these features seemed so glaringly, so obscenely, real and factual and present?⁷

The tortured level of insistence here (combined with such an unlikely event) suggests a clear issue of unreliability: Tatiana seems delusional, or overly imaginative; she seems to have a tendency for childish exaggeration. Such is also the case also in novels like Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, both of which

⁷ Chloe Ardijs, *Book of Clouds* (London: Grove Press, 2009), p. 7. All future references to the novel will be to this edition and will be made parenthetically in the text.

famously explore the deceptiveness (and danger) of a young girl's declared impressions. With this in mind, Aridjis seems at first to be attempting something similar – perhaps a comment on the possible romanticism of Hitler stories, or on the emotional risk in subjecting of young minds to their telling.

Nevertheless, unlike these earlier novels, there is little irony with which the older Tatiana relates this experience. She is extremely serious, and when her employer does raise the possibility that she has 'projected' the impression, perhaps due to something called 'Hitler syndrome' – the sick sense that 'Hitler is everywhere' – Tatiana is adamantly contrary: 'But it was him that day. I'm sure it was. He was still alive, and in Berlin. It wasn't a delusion.' (98). It is in this explanation, with all its Gothic insistence, that the real meaning of the scene becomes clear, replacing moral explanations with psychoanalytic. In effect, it shows that while Tatiana is clearly neurotic in many ways – not least in her obsession with ghostly presences – the purpose of this neurosis is not so much to convey suspicion or to cast doubt on Tatiana's perception as it is to invoke the uncanny experience of modern Berlin living. The attempt to negotiate this haunted and unpredictable space, and to give meaning to its apparently impossible (but all the same *real*) experiences, is what drives Tatiana's seriousness. A stranger to the modern Gothic, coming from the ancient mythical landscape of Mexico City, she sees Berlin's urban secrets as a cause for unusual gravity.

In fact, this understanding is hinted at from the start, where the novel's opening chapters are filled with *unheimlich* instances, both at the level of content and of style. There are the witch-like downstairs spinsters, for example, who watch Tatiana through the crack in their curtains; and there is the stormy weather, which shakes Tatiana's apartment and exposes layers of hidden dust from the cracks in the floor-boards; there

is also the insomniac electric lighting of the city, whose never-ending brightness converts night into a zombified day. In all these ways, Berlin appears as a modern, updated Gotham, whose over-used technological capacity, as much as its unsleeping inhabitants, make it familiarly unfamiliar.

Even so, the more unsettling Gothic element here comes not from the current city, as it is now, but rather from its lingering, hidden history, whose unspoken presence creates an atmosphere of ghostliness. This concern is highlighted most directly through Dr Weiss, whose spatial Berlin histories use a Benjaminian ‘digging’ method in order to explore the way in which particular buildings (for example, those employed for Nazi persecutions) continue to exert their past meanings in recognisable ways. This message is conveyed clearly (if subtly) in Tatiana’s summation of one of Weiss’ texts:

Spaces cling to their pasts, he said, and sometimes the present finds a way of accommodating this past and sometimes it doesn’t. At best, a peaceful coexistence is struck up between temporal planes but most of the time it is a constant struggle for dominion.(33)

The ghostly metaphors employed here, of spaces ‘clinging’ to their pasts and ‘struggling’ for domination, give shape to a contemporary Gothic which not only modernises but also (to some extent) inverts the argument made in Benjamin’s *Berlin Childhood around 1900*. For Weiss, as for Benjamin, the importance of history lies precisely in its embodied presence – as something which persists through time, and which (rather than simply progressing) carries traces of past meanings which work to register present historical change. Benjamin writes:

Origin, although a thoroughly historical category, has nevertheless nothing in common with genesis. Origin does not at all mean the formation or becoming of what has arisen [Entsprungene], but rather what is arising [Entspringendes] out of becoming and passing away.⁸

For Benjamin, writing in the 1930s, about his own protected and wealthy childhood in early century Berlin, this message results in a notably tragic sense of the historical

⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, trans. by Peter Szondi (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006), p. 30.

present, involving ruined innocence and lost freedom. He remembers the ‘serpentine paths’, ‘tender retreats’, and ‘lonely old men’ of his now destroyed city, and he sadly questions where these joys have gone.⁹ Of course, Benjamin is well aware of the darker aspects to early-century Germany, and his philosophy of historical scepticism is vigilant to elements of elitism and fascism which contributed to the Nazi’s rise to power: he talks of police intruders in his household, and of a night-time discovery of his family hiding in his room in the night. Nevertheless, in his comparisons between his (mostly) enchanted upbringing and the oppressive 1930s – where even his most revered authority figures are socially disrespected – there is also a strong sense of memorial lament: he clearly misses his former freedom, and this is indicative of the sadness of the age more generally.

For Weiss, by contrast, a historical perspective informed by the interred Nazi and Stasi governments, whose traces the modern city now incorporates, brings about a notably different register – one characterised not so much by lament, nor terror, but rather by discomfort and uncertainty: the tone of the Gothic. Thus, rather than uncovering the joy that once was, and comparing this to present crisis, as Benjamin does, Tatiana instead explores a consciously hidden past, whose horrors are entombed not only by time but also by present nationalist rhetorics (the NPD’s slogan ‘We’ll Let The Grass Grow Over’, for example, which Ardijs plants on a sign on Tatiana’s walk). Thus, in place of the former tragedian, the historian now becomes the Gothic artist, who draws attention to the past’s eerie remnants, using the uncanny to make discomfort prominent.

Ardijs accomplishes this task here in several ways. Firstly, and most obviously, she juxtaposes Weiss’s historical observations with Tatiana’s travels around the city, thus calling to attention specific sites of Gothic resonance. These include

⁹ Ibid., p. 65.

(amongst various neighbourhood squares) the Reichstag, the Brandenburg Gate, the Berlin Wall, the new Holocaust Memorial, the Wasserturm, the Topography of Terror, and the underground ‘ghost stations’ (the East Berlin stations which during the Cold War were left unused due to the unevenness of the city divide). For each of these structures, Aridjis reflects on a double meaning – a simultaneous past and present, or memorial and anti-memorial significance – which contributes to an underlying ghostliness.

Thus, the Reichstag is described as both a tourist destination and ‘little more than a burnt skeletal silhouette of its former self’, at once attracting and repelling aesthetic attention. Likewise, the Brandenburg gate both ‘grants’ passage and ‘obstructs’ it, offering a gateway to the ancient city as well as a reminder of Cold War division (1). The Berlin Wall also works in opposition to traditional directional norms, invoking the uncanny impression that ‘no matter where you went – east, west, north, south – before long you [would] hit against [it]’ in an experience of persecution (2). Similarly, the ‘ghost stations’ and underground passages retain an eerie sense of subterranean presences: ‘[t]heirs was a world of dead silence and dead stillness, blitzed, every now and then, by trains from the West hurtling through their muffled realm’ (78). In all these scenes, Berlin appears as multi-layered and haunted.

In some ways, these Gothic descriptions might themselves appear as tricky textual ways of ‘cashing in on the past’, using the Nazi’s and Stasi’s dark histories to abjectify (in banal ways) an otherwise dynamic urban setting. Such is the impression of Megan Doll, who complains of how Tatiana ‘begins to see World War II everywhere, even where it doesn’t belong’.¹⁰

Nevertheless, against this reading, I would argue that what is central to

¹⁰ Meghan Doll, Review of Book of Clouds, *Time Out*
<<http://newyork.timeout.com/articles/books/72235/book-of-clouds>> [accessed on 4 June, 2009]

Aridjis's novel is precisely its historical attentiveness, which rather than merely *exploiting* Gothic structures to create suspense or fear, actually highlights and challenges Gothic responses in order to *redefine* modern historical anxieties. This becomes apparent in the novel in particular through its preservationist discussions, which use Tatiana's uncanny and abject experiences to raise important questions about what should and should not be preserved, and how. Thus, for example, while Tatiana's own experience of the Stasi underground (where she becomes accidentally trapped and separated from her tour group) leaves her intent on destruction – she wants to erase the bowling scores she finds left on the wall, to deny them 'posterity' – her later discussion with Weiss alerts her to the possible precipitousness of this response, which emerges more from emotion than from historical reflection. She explains:

I thought about those scores I'd erased from the wall [...] wondering what had been left [...] after I'd rubbed them with my fist, and wondering whether this dark imprint was somehow mocking me, reminding me of the inevitable, which was, of course, that nothing can truly be rubbed away or blotted out, and how the more you try to rub something away the darker it becomes. (128)

In this way, Tatiana's Gothic encounter teaches her the ambiguousness of reconstructionist efforts, which while erasing the past often succeed only in repositioning it.

One other scene in which the Gothic gives way to memorial education is in Tatiana's visit, with Jonas, to the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. Here, because this structure is dedicatory, rather than preservationist – offering a conscious tribute to Holocaust victims – the form of its message is different. Rather than offering a space of historical revulsion which then provokes reflection, it instead plays upon a defamiliarising tactic: it immerses the viewer in uncanniness, and in so doing, creates a constructed experience of historical consciousness. In this case, this works through Tatiana's unexpected experience of emotional disorientation, whereby her

intellectual approach to the memorial leaves her unprepared for the site's affective complexity, thus instigating readerly re-interpretation. Thus, while Tatiana enters the site with a confident analytic mentality, hoping to encounter the structure's historical and aesthetic merits, her easy psychological disorientation quickly signals a need to reconsider the meaning of memorial.

Indeed, the value of this structure as it appears here seems here not to be to secure understanding but rather, to the contrary, to refute this, using its inbuilt uncanniness to immerse the viewer in structural discomfort. Tatiana explains: 'despite the hundreds of possible exits and entrances it was hard not to feel an immediate wave of claustrophobia and disorientation. [...] It was the topography of the place that threw me off balance, not the tequila, and before long everything was undulating and vertiginous' (144). In this way, the structure's complexity ensures an active, self-conscious participation: by involving Tatiana in its experience, it insists that history's meaning can never be taken for granted, and that its present pertinence remains intact. At the close of the novel, the importance of this message to contemporary Berlin is clearly registered. In a twist of the plot, Tatiana and her teacher are beaten-up and nearly raped by a pair of neo-Nazi skinheads. The damage is minimal – Weiss is hospitalised, but he seems to recover. Nevertheless, the message is clear: history hasn't ended, elements of anti-Semitic racism still occur, and as long as they do, the business of memorial-making must continue. Within this context, Aridjis's novel offers an apt reminder of Berlin's historical ghostliness, reasserting the need for reflection as a way of battling looming spectres.

Bibliography

- Aridjis, Chloe, *Book of Clouds* (London: Grove Press, 2009).
- Benjamin, Walter, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, trans. by Peter Szondi (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006).
- De Certeau, Michel, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
- Doll, Megan, Review of Book of Clouds, *Time Out*
<<http://newyork.timeout.com/articles/books/72235/book-of-clouds>> [accessed on 4 June, 2009].
- Gold, Tanya, 'Nazi cows, Nazi cats, actors playing depressed Nazis. It's all just Hitler porn and it disgusts me', *Guardian*, 23/04/09.
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/apr/23/nazi-culture-film-hitler>> [accessed on 4 June 2009].
- Till, Karen, *The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).