

**Berlin Street Life:**

**Scenes and Scenarios**

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## **Berlin Becomes a Metropolis!\***

The motto ‘Berlin becomes a metropolis’ describes what we might call an acceleration in the city’s history at the end of the nineteenth century. The German Empire had found its military and national unity in the Franco-Prussian War of 1871 and its capital in Prussian Berlin, and in the four or five decades that followed the city underwent a rapid and radical transformation. Berlin became a ‘sort of world centre’ as the Danish writer Martin Andersen Nexö noted. And it became a metropolis, at least in regard to the international presence of its culture and media, and at least until the Nazis destroyed this new cosmopolitanism.

This metropolis did not, however, emerge simply ‘from within’, in its own right and under its own steam. Rather, its new expansiveness and character increasingly came from ‘outside’, from incorporation and immigration. Between the years 1860 and 1900 alone, the city’s population tripled to 1.9 million persons, 798,612 of whom were officially registered as ‘outsiders’ or ‘strangers’ (*Fremde*). They included thousands of princes, bankers, politicians and journalists who had moved to the capital to engage in politics and business, but who did not possess local citizenship rights. Naturally, they primarily included the hundreds of thousands of labour migrants who came to Berlin from other German states as well as abroad. Statistically speaking, soon only one in two inhabitants of the city was a native Berliner, and the other half belonged to the constant and endless stream of immigrants.

This omnipresence of ‘strangers’ and ‘otherness’ became a sort of Berlin trademark, albeit one apparently taken quite lightly, because in Berlin, this constant coming and becoming now seemed almost normal. Here is Andersen Nexö again, who recalls, ‘One day, after several months in Berlin, I saw two men doffing their hats to each other. It was indeed

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an experience to find two people who had known each other before meeting in this Babel!’<sup>i</sup> He may have told this story with tongue in cheek, but change defined the rhythm of the city, and could be felt in the streets, squares, railway stations and newsstands, in the department stores and pubs, everywhere people, groups and languages gathered and attempted to communicate. In many cases, the milieus and differences mixed in such a way that in some districts, it was precisely this social blend that became the new common ground: a demonstrative unity of difference.

This Berlin mixture in fact emerged ‘in public’, and the city’s streets were its main arenas. And the city consists above all of its streets. They were the daily, concrete and ubiquitous scenes of everything that traffic and tempo, architecture and technology sought to embody as ‘modernity’, with all of its theoretical and practical meanings. The automobile and the tram, cinema advertising and electricity, the masses and events: For contemporaries, these were above all urban ‘outdoor experiences’, components of a public world of the streets. And that is why everybody wanted to be part of it. Berlin’s new burst of urbanisation and modernisation was also expressed in these years in a new thirst for knowledge and sensation among a public that had not yet withdrawn with the media into the private sphere, because television did not yet bring images of the new things and events into their homes. Instead, people consciously used the occasion of press or radio reports to visit the scenes of events personally, to ‘be there’ as curious, horrified, moved or titillated spectators, whether at artistic spectacles, fairs, Zeppelin flights or crime scenes. A new public street culture also emerged in this metropolitan landscape.

We need to speak of the ‘public’ as plural and diverse, however, for there were many and quite different publics, with highly varied forms of street life. From the organ grinders and children in the back courtyards to workers and clerks outside the bars, and from demonstrations of the unemployed to the elegant patrons of cafés on Kurfürstendamm, street life proved to be a complex system of urban publics: socially diverse and yet similar in its

scenes, divergent and yet connected, lively, even hectic and yet in a sense also contemplative in its insistent dynamism. In this sense, Walter Benjamin once spoke of the Parisians' particular technique 'of *inhabiting* their streets', that is, appropriating the space in an almost intimate way that unites the private and the public.<sup>ii</sup> Berliners seem to have mastered this technique as well.

These scenes of everyday life had long since been joined, however, by scenarios, deliberately arranged motifs of public street life. These were orchestrated forms and arrangements of social life on the stages of urban space, in which groups and trades, subcultures and lifestyles, consumption and commerce imagined and displayed themselves. Such strategies of representation and forms of (self-) stylising gave an urban public room for self-dramatisation, staking claims, occupying space, and demanding attention. This also expressed a certain desire to be seen, a new need for public attention and recognition, which adroitly used the city and its spaces as a stage.

All of these scenes and scenarios, however, embody presentations of the complex experience of modernity—an experiential figure in which the city, its diversity and disparities notwithstanding, appears as a collective agent, a coherent subject perfectly capable of action. And contemporaries already saw it this way: 'The Berlin of 1905 is made up of its physical and spiritual elements, as it presents itself as a single entity to a cultured contemporary, comprehended by a temperament, judged according to the opinions of the age, and depicted in the language of today'.<sup>iii</sup> And Berlin indeed appeared to be a new city. For, 'The old Berlin died around 1900, and was replaced by the sort of faceless world city one can find anywhere'.<sup>iv</sup>

Thus the new and the modern were also deplored and feared. For that reason, Berliners also tried to preserve the old or at least to locate old certainties in the new – in streets and buildings as well as ideas and people. Work on the city therefore now also frequently became 'social work', work on an urban 'people' who had apparently lost their ethics and morals in a

big city environment allegedly bereft of traditions and taboos.<sup>v</sup> Countless social reforms and reformers appeared particularly in Berlin, many of them with muddled or fanciful ideas of how to educate and ennoble ‘the people’. It seems clear at any rate that labour migrants, as the ‘drifting sand’ of industrialisation, created new problems because many of them arrived in the strange city without connections and with scant opportunity to put down roots. ‘The city offers splendid deep soil to the intelligent offspring of the old middle classes and the fresh sons of the countryside, allowing them to develop their powers to an extent never seen before. But those already born in the city into broken families can only weakly flap the wings of their souls; accustomed from an early age to a rapidly changing sequence of impressions, they have never learnt to observe things thoroughly; mentally passive, incapable of imagination or of helping themselves...these creatures of the big city are deficient human beings, and of little use’.<sup>vi</sup> Thus the ‘rootless people of the big city’ became a metaphor of bourgeois social critique, which retained its penchant for a romantic peasantry and its scepticism towards the ‘Moloch of the metropolis’.

### **Flanerie: ‘Reading the Street’**

This image sketches in a few lines a panorama that opens vistas on the metropolitan cityscape. And it is also this panoramic world in which Willy Römer gained his impressions and sought his motifs as a photographer—by no means wholly free and unbiased, but full of outside urgings and demands—just as the city itself no longer found an innocent reflection in its images, but was instead subject to a constant discourse of interpretations and meanings. Preservation and extinction, memory and forgetting, documentation and orchestration: These were not simply alternatives and decisions facing politicians, architects or social reformers. They also faced the observer who thought professionally in visual images, and himself created ‘reality’ in these photographic images: through his choices of motif and detail, light and shadow, stasis and dynamism, empathy and distance. And so this city also became his city.

In 1929, the journalist and author Franz Hessel published his book *Spazieren in Berlin* (Walking in Berlin), in which he writes programmatically: ‘Tauentzienstraße and Kurfürstendamm have the high cultural mission of teaching Berliners the art of flânerie, unless this urban pursuit should disappear altogether. But perhaps it is not yet too late. Flânerie is a sort of reading of the street, in which human faces, displays, shop windows, café terraces, tracks, cars, and trees become so many equal letters of the alphabet that, taken together, make up the words, sentences and pages of ever-changing books. In order to engage properly in flânerie, one must have no fixed objective. And since the route from Wittenbergplatz to Halensee offers so many possibilities to shop, eat, drink, or attend the theatre, cinema or cabaret, one may risk the promenade with no clear destination and set off in search of unsuspected adventures of the eye’.<sup>vii</sup>

As a specific way of experiencing urbanity, flânerie appears as a recurring cipher of modernity. It was above all Walter Benjamin who introduced the term when he referred to the cultural historical origins of the discourse on urbanity and thereby to its starting point: mid-nineteenth-century Paris. ‘Paris created the type of the flâneur. What is remarkable is that it wasn’t Rome. And the reason? Does not dreaming itself take the high road in Rome? And isn’t that city too full of temples, enclosed squares, national shrines, to be able to enter *tout entière*—with every cobblestone, every shop sign, every step, and every gateway—into the passerby’s dream? The national character of the Italians may also have much to do with this. For it is not the foreigners but they themselves, the Parisians, who have made Paris the promised land of the flâneur—the “landscape built of sheer life,” as Hofmannsthal once put it. Landscape—that, in fact, is what Paris becomes for the flâneur. Or, more precisely: the city splits for him into its dialectical poles. It opens up to him as a landscape, even as it closes around him as a room’.<sup>viii</sup> Willy Römer was doubtless also such a flâneur in the nascent metropolis of Berlin, and simultaneously its pictorial chronicler as well. He discovered the city for himself, quite subjectively and constantly anew. At the same time, he also discovered

it in the perspectives and manner of speaking of his contemporaries, who were also continually talking about and ‘reinventing’ the city. After all, he was naturally not just an amateur in the sense of an individual devotee of the city, who merely followed his own inclinations. Rather, he was also and above all a press photographer, whose pictures had to take up the motifs of the contemporary literary and media discourse. To that extent, Römer was never simply Römer: His photos crystallise the perceptions, mentalities and feelings of a society between the Wilhelmine Empire and the world wars, which was just beginning to work out its ‘worldview’. And Berlin undoubtedly offered one of the most fascinating and exciting vantage points from which to do so.

What will interest us here are Römer’s pictures and his viewpoints in this particular sense – a photographer who sees the city ‘from the inside’ because he lives there, knows it, and understands himself as a part of it, and by no means as a cool and objective observer. In this he resembles the figure of the flâneur described by Walter Benjamin. In this he also resembles the figure of the anthropologist, for whom empathy and sympathy are familiar stances because they connect him with his field. This, however, also means that the ‘anthropological gaze’ is always at once knowledgeable and questioning, not truly ‘native’ and not truly ‘foreign’, but rather ambivalent in its perspective. And this also seems to be the point of view in Willy Römer’s photos: knowledgeable and sympathetic in their attitude, but questioning in their interpretation and message.

The photographer Römer probably often felt like the writer Hessel, who noted during his walks through the city, ‘Sometimes I would like to enter the courtyards. In the older parts of Berlin, life in the back of the tenements becomes denser and more intimate and makes the courtyards rich, the poor courtyards with a bit of green in the corner, the frames for beating carpets, the rubbish bins and the wells that survive from the time before water pipes. In the mornings, I succeed only when the singers and fiddlers perform or the barrel organ man, who also played the natural whistle with two free fingers, or the amazing fellow who plays snare in

front and a bass drum in back... But I would also like to participate in the courtyard evenings, and see the last games of the children, who are always being called to come upstairs, and the young girls returning home and wanting to go out again; however, I find neither courage nor excuse to intrude, for it is all too obvious that I have no business there. In this country you need to have a reason, or you aren't allowed. One doesn't simply go somewhere here; one has to have a destination. It is not easy for the likes of us.... I always get suspicious looks when I try to stroll among the busy people. I think they take me for a pickpocket'.<sup>ix</sup>

The author probably has it easier because he merely looks while he is out and about and produces his texts at home. The photographer, in contrast, looks and produces 'on site', and is thus doubly intrusive and far less footloose. One must naturally keep in mind the particular historical and cultural as well as technological circumstances of photography at the time when Römer was working. The medium was not yet common enough for the photographer to go unnoticed in the city, and he even became a sensation in some tenement courtyards for showing an interest in such marginal motifs. Despite the work of Heinrich Zille, photographing everyday life was still considered something that required explanation, because photography more generally, and press photography in particular, had heretofore been dedicated mainly to major events and state actions: weddings, not washdays, and Bismarck, not the man in the street. From a purely technical perspective, cameras were still heavy, awkwardly large and complicated and time-consuming to operate. Even the new box cameras that came on the market around the turn of the century were still the size of a brick and could hold a maximum of six photo plates, and their set-up, adjustment and exposure time did not make them conducive to spontaneous snap shots. The handy Leica, which became available in 1926, offered a good deal more comfort, but not to press photographers, since printers still required pictures on plates. Thus the technological medium existed in a certain conflict with the cultural object. What motivated and fascinated the photographer Römer above all was the rapid transformation of the Berlin cityscape after 1900. He seems to have



been impressed by the contemporary discourses and juxtapositions in which an old Berlin of the pre-modern era was contrasted with the growing metropolis. The losses and gains of history and the present, of aura and modernity were very familiar categories, especially in regard to his choice of motifs and pictures. And he clearly saw it as his duty to secure pictures of both Berlins: the motifs and horizons of the fading city as well those of the up-and-coming Berlin. The fading city often stood still, and declined only slowly, thus also allowing for the leisurely set-up of camera and image. The up-and-coming city, in contrast, was often too fast and dynamic for camera technology to easily capture, so quickly did it rush past. Here, photographic technology apparently caught up only gradually with the technology of everyday life.

What emerged in this Berlin, a mixture of old and new, native and immigrant, particularly attracted Römer, as it did many journalists and authors of his time. The Viennese author Felix Braun, for example, writes ‘Berlin was the open-streeted, noisy-vehicled Potsdamer Platz, to cross which verged on an adventure; Friedrichstraße at night full of people of all classes taking a stroll, the proletariat outside Aschinger’s beer halls, passengers streaming out of the underground, shouting newsboys, prostitutes; Kurfürstendamm with its department stores, shops, tall omnibuses, all kinds of vehicles whose drivers wore strangely shiny hats, intellectual faces, strikingly dressed women... It often seemed to me that I was in an Asiatic city, in Nineveh or Babylon, and for me Berlin always retained this Oriental and destructible quality...’<sup>x</sup> And Franz Hessel adds, ‘These streets are still a world of their own and a sort of home to the eternal foreigners until they, carried here not long ago in a push from the East, have become sufficiently acclimatised to Berlin that they are tempted to penetrate further into the West and shake off the all-too-obvious signs of their peculiarity. It is often a shame, since they actually look far finer walking around the Scheunenviertel than they do later in the garment trade or the stock exchange’.<sup>xi</sup>

Braun, Römer and the others thus all really ‘read’ their images into the city, images that

arose in literary and intellectual discourse and were now being constantly reworked, just as the city was always also reworking itself. Römer also discovered the contrasts he found in the streets of Berlin because they were already present in his mind. In the light of current debates on late modernism, we could thus refer to his pictures as very much ‘constructivist’ and highly ‘reflexive’. For in his choice of motifs and details, he not only considered the contents of the pictures, but also already took into account their effect and interpretation against the background of contemporary discourses on Berlin. It was a ‘construction’ of experience and reality, as is always the case with texts and images. But here, in this medium and for this individual, it already appears to have been a conscious and deliberate ‘construction’.

### **Urban Scenes and Sites**

The big city as a ‘human workshop’, a ‘site of modernity’, a ‘laboratory’ of society’s future: these metaphors illustrate the particular interest that the art, scholarship and intellectual debate of Willy Römer’s time took in urban culture. Its development appeared to prefigure, and indeed anticipate, the future of industrial modernity—in regard not merely to architecture, infrastructure, transport and communication, but also to the ‘urban individual’ in his new and therefore mysterious world. Thus the question of a new mentality and even a new human being arose with increasing frequency. Especially with psychology as the new leading science on the relationship between the individual and society, the metropolis was discovered as another new experience-defining space – also, to be sure, as the home of the neurosis, as scoffers put it at the time. In any case, it stands for a place and environment whose massiveness, technology and tempo subjected the individual to particular social tensions and mental stress, and thus could also produce particular psychic, mental and intellectual consequences.

This interest in the ‘spirit’ of the city, and especially of Berlin, was naturally not a wholly new phenomenon, as was frequently pointed out in the press and in literature: ‘The

peculiarity of this Berlinism already ... disquieted Master Goethe, when it approached him in the splendid form of the freemason and musician Zelter; since then, it has preoccupied quite a few folk psychologists, bidden or unbidden'.<sup>xii</sup> Initially, however, this preliminary work consisted mainly of citing regional clichés, and was thus not very lucid. Thus a new chapter in the scholarly debate began when the cultural psychologist Willy Hellpach noted the evolution of a new type of human being, who developed new mental, almost genetic qualities in the conditions of the urban environment: '...There is an incredible mass dynamism, people streaming and flooding, swirling and whirling, in which everything is incessantly being displaced, and thus ever-changing: new phenomena are constantly appearing to replace those that went before... And this uninterrupted succession also belongs to the city's very essence; without it the traffic and the dynamism of the masses would come to a standstill, and the confinement could never cope with the crowd. Onward, ever onward! This battle cry of breathlessness belongs to the very existence of metropolitan street life'.<sup>xiii</sup>

Thus Hellpach's place was also the street. He, too, saw something emerging here in the anonymity of fleeting glances and wordless rushing, in the mixture of haste, alertness and foreignness that was worth watching closely. He believed that a state in which cognitive vigilance coexisted with 'emotional indifference' was typical of big city dwellers. What he meant was high mental alertness paired with deliberate indifference – a combination that seemed quite simply necessary in the sensory overload of a large city like Berlin if one wished to do so much as cross Potsdamer Platz or Unter den Linden successfully– i.e., without being killed.

Cultural sociologists like Georg Simmel, for their part, discovered the extraordinary variety of symbolic forms in which urban culture treated human mental states such as anonymity and individuality, mass existence and community, loneliness and the craving for pleasure. Simmel chiefly addressed the new 'nomadism', people's increasing mobility, which led 'the spatial conditions of their existence' to 'become fluid' and produced wholly new forms of cultural

‘socialization’ especially in the metropolis.<sup>xiv</sup> And urban sociology then gradually followed people into their neighbourhoods and milieus, to test whether the purportedly vast and bewildering landscape of urban manufacturers and ‘economic organisations’ (Max Weber) nevertheless allowed for the emergence of ‘small worlds’: social neighbourhoods and ethnic group cultures, which create their own loyalties and ties. Even a nascent ethnology of the city had begun to ask how people in the urban life-worlds were compensating for the cultural loss they had apparently suffered during their migration from the small towns and villages, how they were trying to cultivate regional traditions of culinary culture or festivals in order to salvage their social ties and old values in the new environment.

During this period, Berlin became a hotbed of such scholarly efforts, as is also evident in the images of the city that arose at the time. After all, scholarship never simply adopts what already exists, but also adds its own ingredients: motifs, images and interpretations. And as a site of modern mass culture, Berlin with its tenements, traffic and cinemas virtually promoted such scholarly creations and inventions: theses, emblems and visions of both a theoretical and an aesthetic nature. It was also from this intellectual material that the specific image of Berlin as a social ‘laboratory’ and a city ‘in the making’ emerged. Literature and the media, in turn, took up these scholarly motifs and disseminated them to tourists through city guides and newspaper articles. Visitors in turn ‘communicated’ these images back into the everyday life of the city through their encounters with waiters and publicans, newspaper sellers and cab drivers, policemen and journalists. An intensive dialogue of images arose, which was not without effect on the city itself and its inhabitants. Ultimately it was probably this discourse about Berlin as the new cultural metropolis of the twentieth century that actually ‘made’ the city just that.

Willy Römer’s pictures pick up all facets of these images of and discourses about Berlin, storing them, regrouping them and creating a collage, their very own Berlin panorama. Thus they naturally also expose and illuminate politics and its media orchestration: Kaiser

Wilhelm II at a military parade and Karl Liebknecht giving a speech on Unter den Linden or his photojournalist colleagues snapping the members of parliament entering the Reichstag in an early flurry of flashing folding cameras. The intellectuals and bohemians also have their day in the spotlight, as do the theatres and cinemas, the old palaces and ministries in Wilhelmstraße and the new villa suburbs on the River Havel. This made Römer a good and professional photographer, but everybody who worked with pictures at the time did the same.

What most others did not do, however, was Römer's special bailiwick: the observation of everyday life in Berlin. This everyday life had two faces: the metropolis as a monumental world of urban canyons and traffic, and the more circumscribed environment of 'ordinary' folk in the side streets and back courtyards they called home. With all the decisiveness, but also all of the naiveté, of his time Römer engaged in a sort of 'metropolitan ethnology' of the technological and urban world as well as the neighbourhoods and quarters. In this he resembled Heinrich Zille, who also roamed Berlin's courtyards armed with his camera in search of photographic motifs for his drawings and paintings.

Römer, too, pursued particular motifs and traces. For instance, he produced an entire series of pictures of Potsdamer Platz and on the theme of urban traffic: the jumbled profusion of people and vehicles of all kinds, the coexistence of Maybach limousines and horse-drawn brewery drays, the merging of individual and crowd and the cooperation of old and new, fast and slow, chic and shabby. And some manner of order nevertheless shone through all of this apparent chaos, for Römer's pictures make us feel that we can follow the portrayed movement, understand the transport technology of the day and practically hear the accompanying street noise. His long shots organise space and movement almost ornamentally, for example when he shows Potsdamer Platz during the 1919 transport strike: anthill-like in its directional streams and yet individual in the hotchpotch of trams, automobiles, carriages, carts, bicycles and pedestrians. And this ornamental quality returns in his observations of the great railway stations with their masses of arrivals and departures or of

political demonstrations and parades.

While there the movement of people in transit creates its own order, as it were, other urban spaces appear to be prestructured. Architecturally designed squares and buildings, for example, or Berlin's countless monuments articulate the space and its perception, especially in the city centre. An English journalist commented with astonishment in 1906 that 'You can hardly turn your head without seeing a statue. They are here, there and everywhere – in beautiful, leafy, exact-looking parks and squares, on the corners of streets, in the middle of streets, at the ends and beginnings of streets – everywhere. Statues, statues, everywhere'.<sup>xv</sup> And this omnipresence and density of citations from history and art guides not only the gaze but also the footsteps, which attain a different rhythm and a rapidly changing clarity of focus. This also applies when the scene changes to Kurfürstendamm, which doubtless offers a somewhat different ambiance and programme: the elegant promenade and the shopping boulevard. Here, one encountered not monuments but department stores like Wertheim: 'The bazaar was originally located in the four storeys of a block of flats, and one had to walk through one hundred rooms of a Berlin apartment if one wished to shop. Messel's plans, in contrast, were of a splendid simplicity. A huge atrium and all around, on every floor, a single, endless room, its ceiling supported only by columns, the exterior walls articulated only by pillars. ... The first glance informed the passer-by what this building was and wanted to be: a department store, in which the crowd could disperse freely and unimpeded through every part of the space, and where the goods were not hidden in cupboards and crates, but laid out openly for all to see...'<sup>xvi</sup> Or one strolled around the theatres, cinemas, cabarets and art galleries and finally refreshed oneself in one of the countless cafés. And then, perhaps, one returned to the historic centre of Unter den Linden to enjoy the tea dance on the roof terrace of the Berolina and the view across the roofs of Berlin against the grand backdrop of the palace.

But these places were exclusive and their pleasures expensive. This, too, is very

apparent in Römer's photos: the demonstrative luxury enjoyed by the rich. The pictures delineate sharp contrasts and go out of their way to also show the cheaper alternatives: the drinks stands in the streets, the makeshift ice cream parlour in an entryway, which moved on to the next house if need be, when enough children had gathered, or naturally also the coffee and beer gardens in the suburbs and outskirts of the city. 'Thousands of Berlin families came here of a Sunday with bag and baggage to visit the many outdoor cafés; people actually prepared coffee, and ate the 'home baked' goods they had brought with them'.<sup>xvii</sup> The notoriously cheeky Berlin vernacular then turned this institution's inviting sign, 'Families can boil coffee here' (Hier können Familien Kaffee kochen), into the famous 'Kaffirs can boil families here' (Hier können Kaffer Familien kochen), a colonialist-inspired example of Berlin's renowned wit.

Fun fairs and sporting events were cheap and dear at the same time. Generally low in entrance fees and prices, but high in the expectations and enjoyment of their visitors – above all the children, young people and the many single young adults who populated Berlin's streets, factories and servants' quarters, for whom popular entertainments of all kinds now became sites of small pleasures. 'Everywhere in the suburbs where large vacant plots exist, a fairground fills the empty space for a time with its shooting galleries, wheels of fortune, dance floors on wooden disks, great sausage eating contests and the like'. And because there was so much 'emptiness' – both spatial and emotional – the fun fair soon became a permanent institution. 'Here at Luna Park everything is more modern and on a larger scale. In the evening, a gigantic firework display, the Halensee in flames, bursts over the swing boats, the Iron Sea, the roller coaster and the chain bridge, which compares favourably with the flaming Treptow and the other burning pleasure villages. ... All of Berlin comes here, little shop girls and grand ladies, bourgeois and bohemians. Luna Park is 'for everyone'.<sup>xviii</sup> And all of Berlin also came to the regatta route on the River Spree, the sport stadium or the Deutschlandhalle – or at least its male portion with the occasional female 'appendage'.

## **Types and Dramatisations**

In these pictures, Römer shows above all how strongly the dynamism and drama of the big city play out in its interior: in internal processes of massification and acceleration, condensation and intersection, work and pleasure. Technological and cultural developments blend here, feeding on each other and culminating in those segments of the social space that are marked especially prominently as places of ‘public life’ in the metropolitan landscape: major roads and squares, railway stations and the underground, cinemas and theatres, the Reichstag and the palace, the newspaper quarter and the cafés on Kurfürstendamm, the parks and fairgrounds, neighbourhoods and back courtyards, public swimming baths and lake shores. In this respect the Berlin landscape seems especially diverse because, as a result of immigration and incorporation after 1871, the city possessed countless sub-centres and quarters with a life of their own, but also because high culture and Bohemia happily entered into the wildest unions and, in the scenes surrounding the visual arts, music and cabaret, bore the traits of something approaching pop culture. For that reason, too, ‘public life’ in Berlin so frequently meant ‘street life’: much of what elsewhere or later would disappear into the separate spaces of the work or the family sphere or the leisure or culture industries was still present in public here: craft work and commerce, celebrations and love, Dada and children’s games.

And then there remained those images from the ‘other’ Berlin – a Berlin of artisans and workers who above all performed hard and strenuous physical labour: man- and maidservants, luggage and coal porters, boatmen in the ports on the River Spree and many unskilled child labourers. Römer shows bodies and faces that speak of effort and hardship, of early experience and premature aging. But he also shows us the colourful aspects of these scenes: the conversations and breaks, familiarity and encounters, negotiations and trade. Spatially, work is often directly associated with the market, and the city markets are thus distinct life-



worlds of this other Berlin. A contemporary account, for example, describes the old (and present-day) market on Kreuzberg's Maybach Ufer. 'Kottbusser Straße takes us back to the canal, and we come to the city of stalls belonging to a market that covers the entire Maybacher Ufer. All of Neukölln seems to have converged from the South to shop here. Everything is for sale: slippers and red cabbage, goat fat and shoelaces, neckties and kippered herring. Next to the old Jewish woman spreading out scraps of fur and unpacking silk, a neighbour eats a raw carrot from her vegetable cart. Bottles of essence of lily of the valley promise cheap, sweet fragrance to combat the vilest stench of fish'.<sup>xix</sup> And Römer discovers this market scenery everywhere in the city: the Italian trader exhibiting his plaster statues on the water wing at the bridge over the Landwehr Canal, the second-hand bookseller before his book cart and the lemonade seller, the old clothes dealer in the Scheunenviertel and the street stall on Potsdamer Platz selling the newest windscreen wipers complete with rubber blades.

Now he changes not his location, but his perspective, observing the city from a kind of worm's eye view: the focus shifts to Berlin's children. This begins in a cheerful vein, when he shows the banks of the Spree as an unofficial children's bathing establishment: 'all of a sudden there is a great crowing and shouting and someone falls into the water with a dull plop. ... A few windows open, people step outside, but everybody is laughing or smiling. A merry, noisy outdoor swimming bath in the middle of Berlin, between the Jungfern and Gertraudten Bridge...'<sup>xx</sup> Other photos depict boys in the street... wearing the latest roller skates on their feet. The year was 1919, and another transport strike was in progress. Everybody was trying to get where they were going – as quickly as possible, of course. Those who wanted to roll along in such a modern fashion required the most modern surface, however. Cobblestones were out of the question, as were the popular Berlin granite paving stones. What they needed was mirror-smooth asphalt, which gleamed inky black as the new basic urban colour of the 'asphalt jungle' (it is of course perfectly in keeping with this symbolism that the first asphalt in Berlin was laid in the 1880s by black labourers from the United States). On these streets

one could cruise at speed and ‘parade’ for the photographer.

This child’s perspective took Römer above all to the back courtyard, the place that was at once nursery, playground and parlour, a tight and compact world of experience for those growing up in the big city. What we see in the courtyard photographs is the backside of the street, a glimpse behind the urban scenes. ‘In order to gain an impression of the lives of the inhabitants, one must penetrate the courtyards, the sad first and the sadder second, one must watch the pale children who hang about there, squatting on the steps to the three, four or more entrances to the murky transverse buildings, pathetic, grotesque creatures like those Zille painted and drew’.<sup>xxi</sup> Here, too, a world of play certainly existed. Römer’s photos show marble runs and sandboxes, cartwheels, cycling and hopscotch as well as organ grinders and children’s parties, which always lend the photographed scenes the appearance of courtyard idylls. But they also reveal the decay and the rubbish, the children rooting through refuse in search of bread or coal. And they offer glimpses of the flats in whose gloom and poverty Römer occasionally discovered a pig living in the kitchen with the family.

This, then, was the *Kiez*, the *Miljö*, the poor, old, genuine and folksy Berlin. The attributions and clichés are virtually random, and they increase the more picturesque these courtyard scenes appear to the curious bourgeois beholder. And this *Kiez* or neighbourhood is often also an ‘ethnic’ Berlin, that of the Jewish, Polish and Russian immigrants from the East, such as was perhaps particularly embodied by the Jewish street culture of the Scheunenviertel with its blend of trade and habitus. Photography turned it into both: new realism and new exoticism. It also simultaneously documented and staged an often ‘alien’ Berlin, which frequently only became alien when it was accentuated as a remarkable postcard motif, robbing it of its normality, its context and perhaps its innocence as well.

Thus these social and ethnic milieus also made an apparently seamless transition into moral milieus. The neighbourhoods of the poor, homeless and foreign were also the quarters of love, especially and frequently the kind that was for sale. Every city guide and newspaper features

section was well aware of and fond of repeating this, in a tone at once censorious and prurient. ‘Our German capital has the unfortunate reputation of being the most pleasure-rich city in the world, and thus also that most filled with temptations. One need only observe the nightlife in the “Passage”, the *bunte Ecke*, the “Scheunenviertel”! Watch as the theatres and cinemas, the operettas and music halls, the ballrooms and barrooms empty between 11 p.m. and 2 a.m. and overstimulated youth give themselves up to the temptations of the nocturnal streets’.<sup>xxii</sup> Naturally this also became a central motif of the discourse on the moral jungle of the metropolis, the moral decay and criminality that appeared to imperil young people and women in particular. This became tangible in social and real terms as an environment, but also in literary form in the exploding genre of pulp literature (*Schundliteratur*), against which the massed forces of moral and educated Germany promptly began a determined campaign for the hearts of German youth and women. Fears centred on nights in the big city, as both a material and a literary scenario.

Philistine fantasies and literary nights were somewhat ahead of the photographer, since they simply needed to record their ‘inner’ images. This nocturnal world remained closed to the external, photographic images because it was generally too dark to be captured even by gaslight, electricity or flash photography. The last already existed, but its mighty eruption of light rendered nocturnal observation difficult, since it made the photographer resemble an exploding grenade more than an inconspicuous flâneur.

In any case, Römer was not interested in sensationalist photography of nightlife or the red-light milieu. His aim was, rather, to capture what was defining and typical in the everyday life of metropolitan worlds. And this was also true in the naïve sense in which the preface to a 1905 book on ‘Berlin and the Berliners’ promoted itself and the city: ‘It both replaces a journey to the imperial capital and tempts us to go there. We read of people, places and deeds that awaken memories and longings. But it is not just the individual personalities, palaces and monuments that arise before our eyes. The people in all their multifaceted unity, a unique,

valuable and often underestimated part of the young German nation, stand broad and massive behind the incomplete series of individuals listed by name'.<sup>xxiii</sup> Römer, too, was doubtless seeking something of these people and their faces, and he also helped to mould these faces.

After all, the mass of encounters and actions in the big city gave rise to a sense of the typical and of types. In them, the metropolitan landscape seems to have entered into a special relationship with the human landscape, a relationship they embody as striking figures and routines. For example, the housewife queuing for milk at a handcart, the flower seller tying her bouquets at the market, the housemaid with a shopping basket over her arm. Or the barefoot street urchin who shines men's shoes but also self-confidently claims the street as his playground. Or the coachman, the chauffeur, the ticket collector, the policeman: each with his particular habitus, which consists on the one hand of robust, uniform-like jackets, gaiters, caps and helmets, and on the other of a sort of majestic body language, because the uniform seems to have been transferred from the men's clothing to their limbs. Or the 'exotics', the peddlers, barrel organ players and bear tamers, whose little spectacles became courtyard sensations for an afternoon. And finally, and naturally above all, the 'unknown passer-by' walking down some Berlin street, one standing in for millions, the part for the whole.

Aside from the types, Römer's photos also annotate the era's stylisations, for example the theme of tempo and hurrying that underlies virtually every street and traffic scene as a leitmotif to document 'public haste' and the 'fast city'. Or the urban noise that renders Römer's pictures nearly audible, since they are forever recording the street surfaces and tram wheels, the hobnail boots and horses' hooves, the building sites and machines – Walter Benjamin recalled the 'rhythm of the metropolitan railway and of carpet-beating' that had rocked him to sleep as a child.<sup>xxiv</sup> Or those other 'sounds of the city' – snatches of music from radios and gramophones, barrel organs and children playing in the courtyards, street singers and musical taverns. And the vital need for modernity, which meant that everything from street lighting to the latest model of automobile, from fashions in dress to lifestyles, required

constant technological and aesthetic affirmation. Finally, there was struggle and conflict: the street as a site of politics, of strikes, demonstrations, revolution – and the photographer as chronicler.

Thus Römer looked deep into the city, and he helped to shape it – in his/its images. But he did not get too close, deferring to its boundaries and those of its people. He maintained a certain distance that had nothing to do with a lack of sympathy or empathy, but everything to do with respect and recognition. His pictures never expose, hurt or denounce their subjects. And although Römer did sell them, he did not sell himself and his actors out in the process. His camera was not yet the relentless and insatiable eye of a media industry that, rather like a highwayman, could imagine people only before the camera lens or the screen: Your life or your money!

No, Römer lets life be life. His street photography delineates a human transit space: a transition between inside and outside, between arrival and being here, between private and public worlds, between the various scenes and neighbourhoods, between poverty and elegance. And his pictures are sometimes composed like paintings, with intense chiaroscuro effects, with almost stylised groups of persons, with framing spatial perspectives. This quality in turn helps us nowadays to ‘see’ the everyday world of a Berlin that was at once disappearing and arising anew.

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<sup>i</sup> Quoted in Dieter Glatzer and Ruth Glatzer (eds), *Berliner Leben 1900–1914*, 1986, p. 22.

<sup>ii</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 1999, p. 421.

<sup>iii</sup> Anonymous, *Berlin und die Berliner*, 1905, p. 3.

<sup>iv</sup> Hans Mackowsky, *Häuser und Menschen im alten Berlin*, 1923, p. 15.

<sup>v</sup> Rolf Lindner and Ruth Alexander (eds), *Wer in den Osten geht, geht in ein anderes Land*, 1997.

<sup>vi</sup> Walther Classen, *Großstadttheimat*, 1915, p. 122.

<sup>vii</sup> Franz Hessel, *Ein Flaneur in Berlin*, 1984, p. 145. Translator's note: This is a new edition of *Spazieren in Berlin*.

<sup>viii</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 1999, p. 417.

<sup>ix</sup> Franz Hessel, *Ein Flaneur in Berlin*, 1984, p. 8.

<sup>x</sup> Quoted in Dieter Glatzer and Ruth Glatzer (eds), *Berliner Leben 1900–1914*, 1986, p. 27.

<sup>xi</sup> Franz Hessel, *Ein Flaneur in Berlin*, 1984, p. 80.

<sup>xii</sup> Alexander Meyer, *Aus guter alter Zeit*, 1909, p. vii.

<sup>xiii</sup> Willy Hellpach, *Mensch und Volk in der Großstadt*, 1939, p. 68.

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- <sup>xiv</sup> Georg Simmel, “Spatial and Urban Culture,” in *Simmel on Culture*, 1997, p. 160.
- <sup>xv</sup> Bart Kennedy, *The German Danger*, 1907, p. 59.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Quoted in Dieter Glatzer und Ruth Glatzer (eds), *Berliner Leben 1900-1914*, 1986, p. 61.
- <sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 661.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Franz Hessel, *Ein Flaneur in Berlin*, 1984, p. 149.
- <sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 174–5.
- <sup>xx</sup> Adolf Heilborn, *Die Reise nach Berlin*, 1925, p. 9.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Franz Hessel, *Ein Flaneur in Berlin*, 1984, p. 220.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Quoted in Joachim Schlör, *Nachts in der großen Stadt*, 1991, p. 21.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Anonymous, *Berlin und die Berliner*, 1905, p. 5.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, 2006, p. 39.