

Dead Center: Berlin, the Postmodern Gothic,
and Norman Ohler's *Mitte*

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In “Berlin’s Architectural Citations: Reconstruction, Simulation, and the Problem of Historical Authenticity,” Rolf Goebel points out the crucial role that the architectural landscape of Berlin can play in understanding “German national identity after reunification” in its connection to “the postindustrial economy, political power, and cultural memory” (1288). Berlin, for Goebel, is a laboratory of German national and cultural identity, a space in which Germany conducts its own “complex investigation of its past” while “vigorously asserting its cosmopolitan newness” (1268). Goebel’s essay eloquently evokes Berlin as a center of gravity around which not only economic, social, and political forces gather, but which also draws around itself a complex network of discourses describing these larger forces and, at the same time, exacerbating their effects.

While I share Goebel’s assessment of Berlin’s centrality and significance, I want to use this essay to shift the contextual emphasis of Goebel’s analysis from the interplay of modernity and postmodernity to the lingering presence of the Gothic in both modern and postmodern discourse. My showcase for this argument is Norman Ohler’s novel *Mitte* [*Center*], which was published to great critical and commercial acclaim in Germany in 2001 but has not yet found a larger audience elsewhere. However, since Ohler’s writing is densely intertextual, I will have to start by putting some of its contexts into place first. I am taking, so to speak, the long way around to get to Berlin, first with some general remarks about Gothic tropes in critical discourse, then, more specifically, with a reading of these tropes

in one text about Berlin. So please bear with me as I'm taking you on a tour of the discursive surroundings of Berlin—we're on our way to the city's dead center.

The Postmodern Gothic and Critical Discourse

Recent critical discourse has discovered that there are indeed "some striking parallels between the features identified in discourses concerning postmodernism and those which are focused on the Gothic tradition" (6), Allan Lloyd Smith backs up his claim by drawing up a list of shared features. Among them are indeterminacy, epistemology, ontology, surfaces, affectivity, comedy, burlesque, grotesque, criminality, the unspeakable, excess, science, technology, paranoia, nostalgia, archaism, history, pastiche and reflexivity (6-20). Smith does concede, however, that "both areas are frequently contested as unacceptably vague and quite possibly even specious categorizations of tendencies or predilections . . . that are appealed to at the convenience of the critic or the cultural commentator" (6).

The relative vagueness of these terms, which Smith acknowledges in his classificatory caveat, have led other critics to reiterate the problematic lack of a single authoritative definition of either one of the two terms. David Punter points out that "the term 'Gothic' is more in use now as a description of kinds of writing than it has been since the 1790s, and in a far, far broader range of contexts," most of which are focused on the somewhat vague notion that "Gothic writing is not realistic writing" (119). Gothicism "as it manifests itself in late twentieth century fiction of quality," Lucy Armitt writes, elaborating further on Punter's idea that the two are linked specifically as forms of literature, "is becoming a rather more diffuse phenomenon than it was, for instance, in the work of Ann Radcliffe or Horace Walpole" (305). Still, Punter's range of examples and the qualities they manifest corresponds strikingly to the terms Smith puts forward. According to Punter, Robert Coover's work stands as an example of "unreality and incompleteness" (139), while J.G. Ballard represents the author as "self-conscious artificer" (136). Punter also quotes Leslie Fiedler's dictum, used as the epigraph to Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains*, that the "Gothic mode is essentially a

form of parody, of assailing clichés by exaggerating them to the limit of grotesqueness" (qtd. in Punter 139).

According to Fred Botting, "the play of fear and laughter," as it reverberates through Fiedler's conception of the Gothic, also appears as a feature it shares with postmodernism. Working his way through a keyword list reminiscent of Smith's ("powerful emotions rather than aesthetic judgements," "artificial assemblages," and "excess" (168-9)), Botting comes to the conclusion that both the Gothic and postmodern fiction thrive on "an ambivalence that disturbs critical categories that evaluate their seriousness or triviality" (168). Botting's section heading, "Postmodernist Gothic," testifies to this ambivalence since he lists "hybrid mixing of forms and narratives" as one of the two genres' defining characteristics (169).¹

What emerges from the intricacies of this critical discourse, with its moves and countermoves, its drawing up of lists of shared features and their elaboration, and its self-reflexive turns, is a discursive space that, however ill-defined, can be colonized by texts in which the awareness is merely latent that contemporary postmodern culture is somehow intrinsically Gothic. Even in the critics' expressions of doubt, and their careful delineation of argumentative limits, this space becomes increasingly real, its boundaries increasingly solid. Now, the question is how specific texts, both in fiction and criticism, make use of this space.

The Postmodern Gothic in Brian Ladd's *The Ghosts of Berlin*

Brian Ladd's book-length study *The Ghosts of Berlin* is a useful example of the overlap of the Gothic and the postmodern because it makes no attempt to hide the rhetorical origins of its critical conceit. Subtitled *Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape*, the book focuses on the urban text not, as its author states, as "an architectural history of Berlin in any conventional sense," but as a series of "attempts to understand Berlin's history and identity" through analysis of urban topoi—buildings, streets, city squares—"as symbols and repositories of memory" (4), especially as these spaces are negotiated and contested between the forces of remembrance and the forces of forgetting. Ladd's intention, in the final instance, is to unveil the machinations behind the "impulse to preserve or

to destroy--whether motivated by nostalgia, desire for prestige or for legitimacy, or even economics" (3) in order to understand the "uncertain national identity" of contemporary Germany within the space of the city of Berlin (3). This is a crucial project not only for those interested specifically in the city of Berlin, because "Germany has been called the first postmodern nation and the first postnational society" (234). As such, Berlin epitomizes an emergent global urbanity, a historical, social, and psychological condition to which, eventually, all industrialized nations will aspire. While it is fairly obvious that Ladd's description of Berlin is that of a postmodern urbanity, the privileged position of the city's history, however, is invoked in a language that is indebted to the Gothic.

Around the edges, so to speak, of his concise new historicist argument, Ladd mobilizes a vocabulary that is peculiar for two reasons. First, it is more poetic and evocative than analytical, and, second, it is less a language of utopian futurity than of troubled antiquarianism. Ladd's opening sentence, for example, reads: "Berlin is a haunted city" (1), which is hardly surprising for a book that carries the image of "ghosts" in its title. Confronted with the incessant, often traumatic, and politically ambivalent series of palimpsestic overwritings of the urban space, Ladd concludes that memories "often cleave to the physical settings of events" (1). Given the image of Berlin as a "haunted city," this idea of the persistence of memory as an almost physical presence imprinted upon cultural space is perhaps less striking than the slightly anachronistic and overly dramatic rhetoric he uses. Especially the word "cleave" registers as a stylistic oddity. The basic idea, however, is easily summarized: what is required for those living within such haunted spaces, in Ladd's words, are rituals "intended to exorcise the demons of the past" (217). The historical displacement and sheer oddity of such rituals Ladd discovers in the "bizarre ritual parody of militarism" of goose-stepping East German soldiers in front of the "Memorial to the Victims of Fascism and Militarism" (217).

As "the haunts of Berlin's famous ghosts have provoked, and continue to provoke, impassioned and sometimes thoughtful discussion" (2), Ladd proceeds not so much by expanding the trope of the ghost or by exploring its metaphoric potential, but by adding to it other images drawn from a pool of images he assumes his

audience will share with him. First among these tropes is that of anthropomorphized architecture. "Berlin is fascinating," Ladd writes, "as a city of bold gestures and startling incongruities, of ferment and destruction. It is a city whose buildings, ruins, and voids groan under the burden of painful memories" (3). Ladd animates the urban space, conceptualizing it as a vast collective body, or as an assemblage of individual bodies endowed with the ability to express anguish and dread. Gothic architecture, on the whole, tends to be anthropomorphized, uncannily alive and animated. It often figures as a character in its own right, or, given the prominence of locations in the titles of Gothic romances, from *The Haunting of Hill House* and "The House of Usher" to *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Castle of Otranto*, as the central character of the narrative.

Second, Ladd makes some revealing choices in the architectural details he lists as metonymies for the otherwise elusive depth and complexity of the modern metropolis. "Buildings matter," he states before he draws up a list of what buildings exactly he has in mind: "statues, ruins, and even stretches of vacant land" (3). This is an odd list considering that Ladd continues to emphasize the vitality of the city. While the argument is ostensibly concerned with demonstrating Berlin's ability to weather all historical storms that have blown its way, a strangely contradictory theme emerges as Ladd characterizes the city as a glorious, enigmatic ruin in the romantic tradition. His images are drawn from a list of Gothic tropes, which are pragmatically pointless yet symbolically overdetermined—ruins, voids, statues, stretches of vacant land.

Third, Ladd's calling Berlin "a city of bold gestures and startling incongruities, of ferment and destruction" strikes me as rhetorically informed by the Gothic, or, be precise, by critical analyses of the Gothic. Much of the critical discourse emphasizes the excessiveness of Gothic texts, their fragmentary nature or incompleteness, and their structural oddities (multiple framings, uncanny repetitions, etc.). Not exactly hyping Berlin, Ladd is nonetheless operating in a rhetoric of superlatives, erasing subtle nuance, shades of gray, and fine distinction from his portrait of Berlin in order to emphasize, or posit, an almost Expressionist boldness and vigor in a Berlin composed, paradoxically, of "ruins, voids, statues, stretches of vacant land."

Ladd's argument takes a crucial turn when he links the Gothic, by way of its roots in European romanticism, to cultural phenomena in the twentieth century. "Current theories and practices of preservation," Ladd writes, "have their roots in the nineteenth century's growing awareness of historical change and decay, manifested in the Romantic fascination with ruins as well as the conscious re-use of many historical styles of architecture" (68). In other words, despite the fact that modernity "has tended to free cities from all traditional fetters" (18), the Gothic as well as the present postmodern sensibility are defined by a paradoxical coexistence of history as an atrophied and hypertrophied force within their thinking. As with the Romantic invention of history, contemporary preservation, "professionalized and bureaucratized" (68), expresses a sense that history is omnipresent and thus eclectically available. Moreover, a belief "in the authenticity of the original artifact has remained constant among preservationists, but the enormous destruction of World War II forced a rethinking of their practices in Germany and other European countries" (68). Surrounded by the traces of Allied carpet bombing, for example, Berliners might have a different sense of the pastness of the past than Americans, who have not witnessed warfare within the boundaries of their own national, communal, and personal space in more than 140 years. Rapid political changes, another example, have called for the changing of street names in Berlin, a process that yet again destabilizes any clear sense of historical continuity by raising the question, "To what previous era, then, might the clock be turned back?" (214).

Given the strong emphasis Ladd places on Berlin as a spectacular performative space, only a slight rhetorical shift is necessary to align the presence of Gothic tropes in *The Ghosts of Berlin* with a discourse on modernity in general and the postmodern in particular. In pursuit of the key idea, announced early on in the book, that "modernity has tended to free cities from all traditional fetters" (18), Ladd starts out by unmooring Berlin from all secure historical foundations, recasting all attempts by others to write the history of Berlin as an endeavor of foundational myth-making. Demonstrating "Berlin's poorly documented origins" (44), he argues that "Berlin never amounted to much of a medieval city" (43). Whatever historical identity the city might have had is immediately drawn into the

force field of inauthenticity, which Ladd associates with postmodernity. Because “the street pattern and scale of the medieval town has been virtually obliterated” (44), a blank space remained that invited, even demanded, some sort of performative intervention in the search of collective identity. The fate of the Nikolai Quarter, one of the oldest Berlin neighborhoods, serves Ladd as an example of this fabrication of urban origins. In 1979, “East German authorities authorized a plan by the architect Günter Stahn to re-create the neighborhood” (45), transforming it into that most beloved of postmodern icons, the simulacra—a copy without an original. Ladd hints at a similar fate for the Berlin Wall. Because “it was difficult to tell where the Wall had stood” (31) only two years after it had been demolished, Ladd rhetorically transforms its historical demise into a vision of its postmodern appropriation. “At the height of the Berlin crisis, in 1960,” he reminds his readers, “a British journalist proposed that West Berlin be abandoned and a new Berlin be built in West Germany on the empty land of the Lüneburg Heath” (37). Not surprisingly, then, Ladd’s keyword for his discussion of Berlin is “authenticity,” or rather the lack thereof.

Swept up in these postmodern appropriations are periods in Berlin’s history that many Berliners would much rather forget. While former Berlin major Eberhardt Diepgen outlined a model for the city that recreated Walter Benjamin’s vision of the cosmopolitan flaneur around 1900 (230), a model Ladd rejects because the “1890s or 1920s cannot be restored, except as a stage set for tourists” (231), architects like the American Philip Johnson have expressed a surprising, even puzzling, sympathy for East German state architect Hermann Henselmann’s conception for the Stalinallee, which had previously enjoyed notoriety as the epitome of “Communist centralization, regimentation and false pomp (187).” “A few postmodernists,” Ladd comments on Johnson’s glowing endorsement of the Stalinallee, “it should be noted, have sought to rehabilitate Speer’s reputation as well” (187).² The voraciousness with which contemporary culture appropriates its historical predecessors, as, in this case, the high modernism of Henselmann, can be subsumed under the postmodern emphasis on diversity, which, as Ladd notes, also happened to be “the watchword of Berlin urban planning in the 1990s” (228).

Norman Ohler's *Mitte*

Norman Ohler's novel *Mitte* qualifies as postmodern Gothic.³ The novel's protagonist Klinger is a burned out refugee from the dotcom industry. After losing his temper with a client, Klinger rents an apartment in a condemned building in Mitte, the center of post-reunification Berlin, in order to lick his wounds, rethink his life, and find his own center. He takes an undemanding job as a security guard in a department store, makes a few casual acquaintances among the colorful neighborhood characters, and meets a young woman, Sophia Charlotte, who freelances as a prostitute to help pay for her college tuition. But soon Klinger's new apartment starts getting to him. He hears strange noises and begins to suffer from dreams of hallucinatory intensity. A half-hidden room, annexed to his apartment and adjacent to a dead staircase in the center of the building, begins to exercise an unhealthy influence on him. Gradually, Klinger discovers that the apartment's previous tenant, a young DJ named Igor, died in a fire in the annex while high on the designer drug Ketamin, having "left his body, but when he wanted to return, the body was no longer there. Burned" (113). As Igor begins to take control of the mentally unstable Klinger from beyond the grave, enlisting him in his unfinished plans to create "sounds like drugs . . . to be deployed on target" (112), Sophia tries to help Klinger free himself from possession by Igor. She organizes a midnight expedition to the cemetery where the two dig up Igor's corpse and cleanse his skull according to "an old Polynesian custom" (245). But the exorcism fails. As the demolition crews are approaching the house, and the first cracks are running through the walls of the abandoned building, Klinger finds himself still inside, trying to clear his head and overcome Igor's ghostly influence. In an act of emancipation from the past, which shifts the novel, literally in the last sentence, from apocalyptic conflagration toward personal salvation, Klinger manages to shake off the otherworldly lure of death and heads for the door.

In their first responses to *Mitte*, reviewers tended to notice the Gothic elements but disavowed or marginalized them. Detlev Kuhlbrodt writes, "Anyone who has lived in old buildings knows that objects eavesdrop on people; that old walls, wallpaper, floors, oddly

recorded what happened here.” Instead of articulating the Gothic idea of ghosts openly, however, the review concludes: “This strange trace of memory, which attaches itself to people and objects, is called aura.” The deployment of Walter Benjamin’s keyword from “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” aligns the novel with the period of the Weimar Republic and a specifically German discussion of modernity, instead of seeing it in the tradition of the Gothic. Thematically, the final verdict of Kuhlbrodt’s review is that “*Mitte* is the first serious drug novel after Bernward Vesper’s *Die Reise*,” an assessment echoed by Adriano Sack, who explicitly calls *Mitte* a “drug novel” in *Die Welt* (“Stadt als Wille und Vorstellung”). Dieter Hildebrandt, meanwhile, keeps repeating “This book is haunted” in his review in *Die Zeit*, promising to follow up on the idea that *Mitte* is a ghost story. But then his review begins to concentrate on Ohler’s language instead, in which he finds “a linguistic ethos” informed by “many layers of urban literature.” Of these layers, again, Anglo-American influences, from the Gothic via hardboiled detective fiction and film noir, are largely disavowed in favor of what Hildebrandt calls “electronic expressionism.” “It is this term more than any other, Expressionism, that nails shut most other reviewer’s perception of the novel’s Gothic overtones. Karsten Herrmann calls Ohler “one of the great-great grandchildren of the early Berlin expressionists,” and Eva Leipprand praises Ohler’s use of “strong colorful expressionistic imagery.” Though Leipprand does notice the Gothic inventory of the novel, she dismisses it as a necessary device to articulate “a predominantly interior process.” Tom Liehr’s choice of words reflects the same sentiment: “Though the author pulls out some old horror chestnuts [“tief in die Horrorkiste greifen”] . . . *Mitte* is not a horror novel or mystery in the conventional sense,” he writes. “Instead, it combines the mystery elements with those of the city and drug novel and with subtle social critique.” Ignoring the Gothic trope of the Byronic Hero as obsessed scientist, Liehr tries to praise the novel by telling his readers that “Igor does not appear as evil per se, but as a man obsessed . . .” In short, facing a choice between the lowbrow genre of the Gothic and the highbrow discourse of expressionism, the reviewers, on the whole, decide to suppress a crucial dimension of the novel. What they tend to overlook is the central importance of the Gothic in Ohler’s novel, and

the fact that the authors who have explored the postmodern Gothic, so far, have been authors from the anglo-American tradition, most notably among them in recent years Toni Morrison with *Beloved* and Don DeLillo with *The Body Artist*.

How crucial Ohler's choice of Gothic tropes is, and how strongly this choice is mediated through predominantly American postmodern authors, becomes obvious in the stylistic decisions that inform Karsten Herrmann's term "electronic expressionsm"—a term that misreads the stylistic subtext of the novel in order to integrate Ohler into a German tradition of Berlin novelists.⁴ Ohler pays tribute to a fully Americanized post-reunification Germany by liberally distributing English words throughout his text. In some passages, the choice of words characterizes figures like Klinger ("Sein unterer Rücken tat weh. Verfluchter Backbone"; "... ein Bildschirm langsam abgedimmt" 27), like Bonz ("Da bewahr ich meinen Stäsch drin auf" 34), and like Wallputzerstein ("Ein Glaskasten mit High-Speed-Zugang? Einen Meeting-Room—eine Loonsch? Was zum Chillen . . ." 183). All of them are, to one degree or another, new economy yuppies whose pretentiousness and shallow ambitions are being satirically dismantled in such passages.⁵ But even omniscient narration, which is poignantly unattached to any specific character, is often Americanized ("seinem hochgepitschten, schrill gescratschten..." 160; "Unstet scannte sie die Gegend . . ." 46), and it is this stylistic idiosyncrasy that suggests a more Anglo-American background to Ohler's project than the German expressionist one.

One of the key sentences, repeated several times throughout the novel, either as the mantra of Klinger's cultural exhaustion or as the lure of Igor's fatal seduction, is "You have to die first before you can have some fresh thoughts" (11). In the closing scene, this statement recurs as the final sentence of the novel, albeit crucially revised: "you have to live first before you can have some fresh thoughts" (255). Heading for this symbolic rebirth into authentic experience, Klinger appears as a vaguely feminized character, akin to the female heroine of the Gothic novel. His name, Klinger—as in "Klang," sound—suggests his being a body that picks up or amplifies sound. He is susceptible to suggestion and penetration, which come to him as vibrations, echoes, and reverberations. He is relentlessly pursued by Igor, the dark Byronic Hero with overtones of the mad scien-

tists, a man “who lost sight of the larger picture and was working with dark forces he didn’t really control” (196). The prior tenant of Klinger’s apartment quickly turns out to be “consciousness still present, despite being brain dead,” as Klinger begins to suspect that “the night of his death keeps replaying itself in my apartment, like a stuck record” (151).⁶ True to generic form, the novel provides one of the minor characters, Roger Bundschuh, as the voice of enlightened skepticism (“There are no ghosts, there is only thermionics... Ghosts are nothing more than oddities of sound and frequency” 80), and yet it ultimately attempts to link the realm of “sound and frequency” to that of the supernatural. “Perhaps these past sounds were creeping, like ghosts of the auditory world, across walls and through atoms, . . . becoming imprisoned, ghostly conglomerates, which only he, the tenant, the owner of two ears . . . could hear” (27). As in William Gibson’s brand of cyberpunk, the discourses of technology and of the supernatural are not mutually exclusive.⁷

Besides Igor’s ghostly machinations, other markers of the Gothic are scattered throughout the novel. Klinger’s apartment building appears first as an inactive item in the real estate agency’s files, or, as it is called in German, a ‘filing cabinet corpse’ (“Karteileiche”) (16). The door to the apartment is opened with—what else?—“a large rusty key” (19), just as one of Igor’s attempts at communication from beyond the grave results in a “dead phone in [Klinger’s] hand” (50). One of the remaining holdouts in the building is an old man named, significantly, Erben (i.e. inheritor), “a ghost who wasn’t surprised by anything any more” (71), who lives in such a state of isolation and dissociation from the outside world that he may not have realized that East Germany does not exist any longer. During a visit to the tomb of the Hohenzollern, Sophia Charlotte encounters her uncanny double and namesake, the Queen of Prussia, which elicits her wry comment that now she knows “where the bodies are buried” (133). A sign on the wall of the crypt (“He is not here. He has risen” 134) even transforms Christ into a ghost who has returned from the dead. With a sense of amused unease, Berliners have also noticed “the first ghost trains” of the Berlin transit authority: “No more driver, you understand? Everybody is sitting spellbound and silent, and when there’s conversation, it’s hesitant. Some people have been dead for years and are still taking the U 5 to Hönöw, then back

again to the Alex, then back to Hönow . . ." (41-2). The trope of the endless loop is reiterated later, combining the discourse of technology with that of spectral hauntings, as speculation that, most likely, there are "millions of [such ghosts]—existence frozen into data loops" (239).

In these metaphoric conflations of bodies and buildings, of the intimate space of the body and the public space of the city, Ohler works through the realization that the "whole of (social) space proceeds from the body, even though it so metamorphoses the body that it may forget it altogether (Lefebvre 405). The use of the Gothic, with its emphasis on uncanny repetition, helps to prevent such forgetting. In fact, by metaphorically aligning Klinger, through Igor, with the condemned building, Ohler makes it perfectly clear that forgetting is lethal; social space and the body are vitally linked, and only if we forget this link do we risk that social space "may separate itself so radically from the body as to kill it" (405). The anthropomorphization of Klinger's decrepit apartment building may be nothing more than "a stock Gothic property" (Kilgour 120). But the fact that, in many respects, the building has "a livelier and more active role than that of any character," as Kilgour puts it, functions as "a sign of the total power of its ruler" (119). While Igor serves as this figure of archaic power, the Gothic allows for a more ambiguous gendering of the architectural metaphor. Despite being the "private domestic sphere of feudal power, based on the absolute authority of the despotic lord" (119), Gothic architecture can also function as the symbol of the maternal body, signifying that underneath "the present male owner of the castle is a female possessor" (120). Consequently, when Klinger first sees it, the building appears with a human face, albeit one of non-specific gender. "Its blind, unwashed windows were glowing in the dark and were watching the street" (18). Like an unhealthy patient, its "skin" is "pike-gray, its eyes sunk-en, and [there are] dagger-like teeth of the pigeon defenses on the window sills" (37). On the inside, the building is a "vast, echoing skull, segmented into staircases, floors, and rooms," as it sits "on the collar of the sealed surface of the city" (79). Like all buildings, it has "neuralgic pressure points" (201), and when it collapses under the wrecking balls of the demolition crew in the novel's final scene, it "lets itself go, with a sigh" (253). It was, Ohler writes, "as if the house

was exhaling for the last time, blowing out all stories" (253).

Just as the urban architecture has human features, human beings in *Mitte* often appear metaphorically dressed up as buildings. "The body is one of the key locations on the postmodern landscape," Brian Jarvis points out, "a space subjected to colonization, commodification and redevelopment like any other" (9). Ohler concretizes this condition in his depiction of the prostitutes across the street from Klinger's building. They are decked out in corsets, boots, and coats, grotesque contraptions and layers of clothing reminiscent of martial architecture designed to protect rather than attract. Generally fascinated by their outfits and personally intrigued by Sophia, Klinger engages in an act of what Jarvis calls "corporal cartography," or "mapping of the body," trying "to look behind all the plastic and leather, where a person was located who was still young, shadowy in all the structures of the uniform" (141). Other characters are even more intimately linked to the architecture around them. Igor muses: "my heart is a room in berlin central in the light of the welders on the tracks" (204), while Klinger wonders whether the ear is the "antechamber of the soul" (121) and admits to difficulties in determining whether "the roaring in his ears [is] the noise from the streets or from his blood circulating" (144).⁸

In some passages, Ohler manages to infuse yet another dimension into these Gothic anthropomorphisms. Bonz, for example, tells Klinger that the building reminds him "of Marlene Dietrich . . . concrete facade, 1920s—very elegant . . . Probably had a very lush front, but then: new make-up, after World War I" (199). Besides harking back to Kilgour's assertion that the Gothic castle is often gendered female, the reference to Dietrich, a figure biographically and sentimentally linked to the city of Berlin, and the transformation of her appearance from pudgy chorus girl to sleek art deco goddess at the hands of Josef von Sternberg, adds a further intertextual dimension. Not only is the architecture metaphorically conflated with the human body, it is also conflated with bodies that are fully textualized, overwritten by culture, and in constant process of revision and re-invention; bodies, as in the case of Marlene Dietrich late in her career, that have themselves taken on an objectified, architectural rigidity and solidity.

Yet Ohler's intertextual and self-referential play works through

the same Gothic imagery of death, decay, disintegration, exhaustion, and doubling that is scattered throughout *Mitte* in more conventionally realist forms as well. When Sophia comments on the increasing invisibility of death in public spaces, accompanied by the increasing popularity of war memorials during the same historical period, she closes with the comment: "Death is not a master—he is sick" ("Der Tod ist kein Meister—er ist krank" 240), an intertextual nod to the canonical poem "Todesfuge" by Paul Celan ("Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland"). Similarly, a trip to the final destination of the ghost train, Hönow, elicits her comment: "Unpaved sidewalks . . . How very Fontane," acknowledging the famous Berlin author's *Walks Through the Mark Brandenburg* (217). Wallputzerstein, the entrepreneur who buys Klingers building and remodels it for resale, makes this pitch to a potential client: "Hackescher Markt! Former neighborhood of jews and criminals. Franz Biberkopf. Neighborhood of whores and freaks—a different vibe than the Adlon" (183).⁹ What the reference to Alfred Döblin's novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* suggests is that the simulacra of a romanticized 1920s Berlin is for sale. Igor, meanwhile, describes himself as "a wide field [ein weites Feld], nothing more, . . . truly constituted only through delimitation" (166), and thus plays both on Fontane's *Effi Briest* and on Günter Grass' *Ein Weites Feld*.¹⁰ The phrase "Death in Mitte" (122) presents Berlin as a place of sexually sublimated longings for death similar to the Venice in Thomas Mann's novella. Even when Klinger dreams, his own fate and Berlin itself appear filtered through film: "In a dream, he heard: cries for help--dripping with sweat, he woke up: Don't want to, but have to. DON'T WANT TO, BUT HAVE TO" (84), the climactic lines spoken by Peter Lorre as the child murderer Beckert in Fritz Lang's *M*. Another passage recasts the novel's plot in terms of Gothic television: "All this is built on ancient swamp land—. . . Music over opening credits. Then the siren of an ambulance . . .", which introduces Lars von Trier's soap opera *The Kingdom* into the text.¹¹

In contrast to these overt intertextual references (Celan, Fontane, Grass, Mann, Lang, Döblin), the covert level of intertextual play is dominated not by German but predominantly American sources. In one passage, for example, Ohler's narrator speaks about beauty "condensed into buildings in virtually imperceptible move-

ment, and yet continuously changing under the gigantic fast-forward button of a Unesco development program" (130). This is a paraphrase of Gibson's famous description of Night City in *Neuromancer*.¹² Gibson also looms large in a story Bonz, the nightclub owner, tells Klinger, about a matrix cowboy who becomes immortal in the matrix (125). Meanwhile, the descriptions of the department store in which Klinger works as in-house security are strongly reminiscent of DeLillo's *White Noise*; vignettes and scattered observations, brief conversations and random encounters, add up to a playful metaphysics of shopping (193). The narrative premise of the burned out refugee from the business world withdrawing into an empty space in the center of an urban no man's land is strongly reminiscent of DeLillo's *Great Jones Street*, just as Klinger strikes me as a close relative of the protagonists in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*—men alone in rooms, somewhere in a large city, working out the mysteries of an enigmatic text. Finally, there are references to Chuck Palanhiuk scattered throughout the text. Though there are five condoms in the toilet, Klinger cannot remember, just as the nameless protagonist of *Fight Club*, whether he slept with the woman in his room or not (176). Another passage reads: "Mrs. Fechter-Schmidt [Klinger's boss at the department store] was all in eggplant today, it had to be a Thursday" (190)—a paraphrase to *Fight Club*'s main character commenting on his boss's periwinkle blue tie. Thematically more relevant are the conversations that Klinger has with Igor, which increasingly resemble those between the two halves of the main character's mind in *Fight Club*, especially since Igor's politics have a strong romantic anarchic bend; "a materially oriented world must necessarily go down the drain," he lectures Klinger at some point (206). Consequently, Klinger acts as Igor's doppelgänger, wanting to help, but also to "defuse" Igor, "not only out of pity, but also out of a respect for this desperate attempt to create something to counterbalance this merciless conventionalizing under the pretense of liberty" (197).

Since Gibson and Palanhiuk belong to a second and third generation of postwar American fabulists, their presence also opens the door for earlier writers in the same tradition, such as Thomas Pynchon. Having been bounced off his job in London, Klinger works as an in-store detective, making the rounds tirelessly like "a human

jo-jo" (83), an epithet applied to Benny Profane, bouncing up and down the East Coast, in Pynchon's *V*. In another passage in *Mitte*, Bonz, the owner of the Café Nadine, tells a story about the haunted ground beneath his own building, in which echoes of Pynchon's "Entropy" are audible in the background. Under their feet, so the urban legend goes, there used to be "one of the most legendary basement bars of the 1920s. Real avantgarde-drunks, insane physicists taking groups of girls with the clap to bed, palmtree girls wearing hats shaped like amanita muscara . . . They all must have created their own subculture down there . . . but then, during World War II, a missile from the victorious Red Army hits—buries the hidden entrance, and they say nobody even tried to get out to start building something new in the ruins outside" (35).¹³

The trope of history spectrally alive in the rubble of the past is reiterated in images of the city as palimpsest. Read correctly, the urban architecture is a record of historical revisions, some of which are reabsorbed as active ingredients into the postmodern present. Modernity itself, embodied especially in the traces the Weimar Republic has left in the urban landscape, is the main target of contemporary appropriation.¹⁴ Adriano Sack, in his review of *Mitte*, has called this selling of the "cultural life of the capital between the two World Wars, the theatrical mixture of greed for life and imminent doom," with a keen sense of the postmodern appropriation of history, "one of the great clichés in Germany." And he adds a list of stereotypical ingredients: "Gustaf Gründgens, Liza Minelli as Sally Bowles, Kurt Tucholsky, page boy haircuts, Ben Becker in 'Comedian Harmonists', Charleston—all this blends together in one fetid cocktail that's tirelessly being served up again and again" ("Stadt als Wille und Vorstellung"). Bonz' telling of the urban legend of the ghostly speakeasy underneath the Café Nadine points back to the imaginary Berlin of the Roaring Twenties; Wallputzerstein's reference to Döblin's Berlin Alexanderplatz rewrites the city according to the same model. Ohler discredits both speakers; Wallputzerstein is the epitome of the slippery new venture capitalist, while Bonz is, after all, the man who names a drink he invented, and hopes to trademark, "Rosa Luxemburg." "Rührt auf, is how he describes the drink's effect"—"Agitates!" (36).

Especially to the degree that gentrification mobilizes tropes of

Berlin as the Weimar Republic, Ohler's use of the Gothic, which, in its conventional forms, tends to treat setting as character or destiny, serves as a critique of the postmodern. The simulacra of Berlin's past glory legitimize the forcing out of old constituents, and an upscaling and remodeling policy that has little to do with "the official goal in the 1990s . . . the 'critical reconstruction' of the inner city" (Ladd 108). The house in which Klinger elegantly goes to pieces, Ohler's Gothic castle, is a Berlin *Mietskaserne*, i.e. a style of residential housing, the term borrowed from the trope of military billeting, in which several apartment buildings are arranged around a series of inner courtyards, and in which the social hierarchy determines location in regard to front of back location, and upstairs or downstairs location (Ladd 100-2). While in "middle-class minds the *Mietskaserne* came to embody all that was wrong with the industrial city" (Ladd 103), and it thus became "the preeminent symbol of Berlin as industrial metropolis," it also arrives in the late 20th and early 21st century obscured by layers of historical and mythical overwriting. "There is no point in offering a precise architectural definition," Alan Ladd writes, "the notion of the *Mietskaserne* reflects a myth rather than an objective description . . . the image of the *Mietskaserne* embodies a set of beliefs about the history and identity of Berlin" (100).

While classic modernity, from the turn of the century on when the *Mietskaserne* was at the height of its popularity as a lived form of architecture, all the way into the 1980s, was set on abolishing it altogether, a strange rediscovery took place when "new historians, influenced by academic social history as well as community activism, proposed to enter the world of the working-class residents" (Ladd 106). While the varied periods of historical apperception of the *Mietkaserne* are too difficult to summarize here, it is important to note that their image remained attached to a middle-class conception of working-class reality, and to a general perception of unorganized political opposition, dissent, and marginal practices (Ladd 107-9). The most recent rediscovery of the *Mietkaserne* also went hand in hand with the gentrification of areas on the Berlin map that used to be topographically marginal toward the center of West Berlin during the Cold War—the neighborhoods of Charlottenburg and the main commercial street of the Kurfürstendamm—and suddenly became central (i.e. Berlin Mitte) when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989.

This is the area in which Ohler places his haunted house, and this is the period—the years of the Weimar Republic when Berlin was a European capital of the first rank—that architectural reconstruction has its deepest stake in.

Mitte works with the urban iconography of the Weimar Republic, but distances itself from its more egregious instrumentalization as postmodern lifestyle accessory. Instead of the excoriated postmodern city, whose center is first sucked dry by its surrounding suburbs and then disneyfied into a simulacra of urban modernity, Ohler gives us glimpses of the urban core as a vital, aggressive space of modernity. The imagery he mobilizes is one of sensual attack, of bewildering and overwhelming shock that has survived underneath the glossy surface: “The sidewalks: overpopulated. Kaleidoscopic condensation of catalogue-colored tourists” (223). This description would sound familiar to readers of *The Ghosts of Berlin*, as Brian Ladd conjures up Berlin in the ’20s: “For Germans, the incessant movement of Berlin was the real and visible embodiment of the hypermodern urbanity they associated with the United States [...] The cosmopolitan restlessness also seemed somehow Jewish. A favorite word of the time was ‘Tempo’” (117). Ladd’s description and Ohler’s line dovetail with Walter Benjamin’s discussion of Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” and the modern urban experience. “Fear, antagonism, and horror were the feelings invoked by the urban crowd in those who first set eyes on it,” Benjamin writes (125). However, the “manic demeanor” of the observer in Poe, in response to this overwhelming spectacle, quickly makes room for the detached floating enjoyment of the flaneur, famously enshrined by Benjamin in the figure of Baudelaire (114-28), one of whose poems happens to be quoted during the graveyard exhumation of Igor’s corpse in *Mitte*. Ohler’s line mirrors this process of habituation and desensitization, as it moves from the modernity of “kaleidoscopic condensation” to the postmodernity of “catalogue-colored tourists.” Where Benjamin still sees a “shock experience corresponding to the ‘experience’ of the worker with the machine” (128), Ohler already sees the transformation of Benjamin’s discourse and its subject matter into a prefabricated leisure experience, not unlike that of Berlin mayor Diepgen’s theme-parked concept of urban reconstruction. Tradition, Dean McCannell reminds the readers of his study of tourism in a postin-

dustrial global culture, “remains embedded in modernity, but in a position of servitude: tradition is there to be recalled to satisfy nostalgic whims or to provide coloration or perhaps a [false] sense of profundity for a modern theme” (34). As the premodern is “museumized” (McCannell 8), all that remains to maximize the enjoyment of the urban environment as historical simulacra is to screen out the other observers. “Tourists dislike tourists,” McCannell notes wryly (10).

Similarly, yet less centrally than the Weimar Republic, the Cold War period lingers as a ghostly trace in Ohler's Berlin. A sign on the wall of the Café Nadine reads “First Aryan, then Proletarian, now just Prol” (31). A sign on a doorbell has been partially covered up, the part that used to read “*of the German Democratic Republic* had been haphazardly and apparently more than once been taped over with a rancid band aid” (18). East Germany, though historically obsolete, seems more resilient as a corpse, requiring repeated acts of suppression despite its abject state. As the novel's central spatial metaphor, Klinger's apartment building provides a simultaneous presence of all historical periods. As Klinger descends the dead staircase in the center of the building, he spots “the partly flaked-off mural of Morpheus, who was holding a bouquet of poppies with an expressionistically exaggerated facial expression” (67). The image conjures up fin de siècle visions of romantic death, prefigured by the reference to Mann's *Death in Venice*, overwritten in a modern style—expressionism—, evocative of the 1920s. But Klinger's journey does not stop here. “Each floor seemed to take him deeper into the past, until he stood all the way down there, in front of a kind of stone altar, from the massive foundations of which the time-eaten mug of a devilish creature was grinning at him . . .”¹⁵

Just as the city appears as palimpsest, the image of the center, “Mitte,” has been given a postmodern treatment. The center appears inaccessible, provoking the desire in Klinger to penetrate that from which he is excluded. Sophie, for example, takes great caution to prevent “any genuine penetration” when she works as a prostitute, which is “why her customers, who were greedy for her untouched center, were never satisfied” (220).¹⁶ Therefore, she scolds Klinger for withholding himself, in exactly the same manner from herself: “Why do you show so little of yourself? As if your center is supposed

to remain vacant—but where does that leave your heart?” (211). Once attained, in other words, the desired center proves disappointingly vacant.

Lack of authenticity translates into an emptying out of affect. Künster, one of Klinger’s casual acquaintances, muses about Berlin: “Back in the old days, people used to move to Berlin out of desperation, and they idly populated cafés and clubs. Today, this happens out of opportunism and peer pressure” (226). The emptying out of affective categories into categories of life style also applies to Klinger’s creeping insanity. “That thing about split personality is something that every other person here is hoping for . . . Whenever one identity fails as a result of aversive circumstances, the other one is ready to jump in right away” (227). Künster’s cynical aside radically demystifies the romantic notion of the tormented hero, or its Gothic equivalent, the persecuted heroine swooning in the clutches of unbearable sensation. In a culture accustomed to sophisticated reproduction technologies and in relentless pursuit of maximizing performance, schizophrenia might actually be an asset. Künster is Ohler’s mouthpiece of a coldly calculating rationality, not Roger Bundschuh with his belief in “thermionics.” While Bundschuh represents science, Künster represents a neoliberal subjectivity for which science is merely one raw material, one force, one source of legitimizing institutional and procedural power, among others. This is the rationality from which Klinger tries escapes in the beginning of the novel, and which catches up with him in the shape of the newly excoriated, gentrified Berlin.

Ohler presents Klinger’s building in the same manner. In its center is “the dead staircase” (70), a “round staircase, rising up through the house, forgotten by time, seemingly without connection to the outside” (71). The house itself occupies a center, “high-tech construction sites all around,” in a state of siege (222). “Einkesselung” is the term Igor uses, a term with military connotations. The official jargon of urban renewal uses the term “Entkernung,”—excoriation—to describe the process by which a “dead” center is removed, supposedly in order to revitalize the architectural urban space around it. In fact, however, excoriation strips the center of any sense of spatial essence, readying it for its colonization by the simulacrum, as Ohler points out.¹⁷

Following the Gothic conflation of urban spaces and human bodies, the presence of the ghost in the annex is also tied to the discourse of dead centers. Igor himself explains that the annex is the “perfect music room, that old maid’s chamber. experimental cell. right in the middle of the building, absolutely central, and yet completely separate” (94).¹⁸ The center, in other words, is a space isolated from its environment, a space of ambivalent power, its deadness predicated on its inability to interfere directly in the material world around itself. The ambivalence of the center as a space of both empowerment and impotence harks back to Gothic traditions; here, being in the architectural center means occupying “a private space where the freedom of uncontrolled individualism is destructive” (Kilgour 119).

The effect of a center that has been historically and spatially emptied out is the deformation of the space around it. In agreement with most critical discourse on the postmodernization of urban space, Ohler defines this deformation largely as a lack of authenticity. “Functionalism, featurelessness, and uniformity the systemic erosion of difference in accordance with the drive of hyperefficiency [“the placelessness of place across the postmodern landscape”]—these are the hallmarks of the “postmodern American city” into which Ohler’s Berlin is rapidly transforming itself (Jarvis 88).¹⁹ Ironically, this “Americanization” of Berlin takes place under the icons of the Weimar Republic, an indication that the postmodern simulacrum produces the same inhuman spaces no matter what its ostensible cultural, historical, or geographic content may be.

Apart from the psychological dimension of the “center” metaphor, Ohler’s use of the image in a historical context is what makes *Mitte* a novel worth reading in years to come. With the move of the German capital from Bonn to Berlin, decided in 1991 and put into effect in 1999, the city itself has become a center of the country again, analogous to the annex in Klinger’s building. Containing a “time bubble” that must be popped, the annex provides a “distorting mirror of the city’s deformation, this process that’s stirring up the entire community—the bone-chilling cold of the birth of the capital” (198-9). No doubt, Ohler is skeptical about the success of this process of redefining German identity after the end of the Cold War. At one point in the novel, Klinger catches a glimpse of a newspaper

clipping, arranged, significantly, in the annex “at the head of the charred stain of the mattress.” It is from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 1st, and reads: “Destruction of Mitte: Annihilation of Transcending Thought Processes through Massive Investment of Capital. And for all that, Mitte had been expected to serve as a space of coping [Überwindungs-Raum] for Germany . . .” (77-8). Just as the urban space has been historically blighted by excoriation, the country is at risk to follow suit. In both cases, the loss of a soul is the result of “Massive Investment of Capital.” This is what ultimately vacates the center, cuts it off from its surroundings, and renders it powerless.

Notes

For her assistance in gathering invaluable Berlin experiences, this essay is affectionately dedicated to Liu Wenyin.

1 All this suggests to Ruth Helyer that the process by which the definitions of the Gothic and the postmodern are being contested performs a self-reflexive turn. As “both discourses are vague and difficult to define,” she writes, “they encourage the use of the imagination, and become associated with an incoherence that, because it is at the whim of individual interpretation, is sometimes shunned by intellectual schools of thought” (727). Turning in on itself, then, “the very nature of Gothic narratives relies on an emotional response rather than an intellectual one” (727), which explains “the comparatively dismissive attitude toward the Gothic in academic studies of canonical literature” (Riquelme 588). One aspect that, therefore, is also overlooked is “the significance of Gothic traditions for literary modernism” (Riquelme 588).

2 Ladd’s reference is to Albert Speer, Hitler’s official state architect and representative of fascist architecture.

3 In His review of *Mitte* in *Die Zeit*, Dieter Hildebrandt discovers an “ecstasy of precision” in Ohler’s language, which stages “lightning strikes of old and new, of hallucinatory and virtual language”; his final verdict is: “Fantastic.” Eva Leppbrand, in *literaturkritik.de*, praises the novel’s ability, “which happens rarely in German literature, to step outside of the system just once (which is condensed around Berlin Mitte) and to experience it in all its uniqueness from the outside.” Tom Liehr’s review closes with this

statement: "Among all the so-called Berlin-novels and novels of the capital of recent years, Ohler's *Mitte* stands out, and we may hope that it will also be read elsewhere."

4 Adriano Sack actually criticizes the sudden massive rediscovery of the "Berlin Book": "So much have the literati been enamored with the center of the new Berlin Mitte that even last year a reviewer in *Die Zeit* sighed upon reading the novel *Hampels Fluchten*: "Finally a book that dares to steer clear of the capital. Whenever the experts are fed up with a trend, so it goes with one of the rules of the culture industry, then it's only about to start for real" (Sack "Stadt als Wille und Vorstellung"). Among the works that Sack and the *Zeit* reviewer might have in mind are notable Berlin novelist Peter Schneider's *Eduards Heimkehr* (1999), written with a keen eye on social realism, Uwe Timm's *Johannisnacht* (1998), a more picaresque, carnivalesque journey through Berlin in the aftermath of the fall of the Wall, or Horst Bosetzky's *Wie ein Tier* (1997), a "documentary novel," as the book's subtitle tells us, that chooses as its setting the Berlin of 1940 and the serial killer genre as a means of portraying Berlin as a space of modernity in crisis.

5 In some passages, the interplay between German and English is also used to generate interpretive ambiguities. A female bouncer, for example, is wearing a t-shirt that says "WAR GEGEN DRUGS" (31), in which the word "WAR" can mean either a military conflict (in English) or the past form of "to be," "was" (in German); this means that the woman is either a radical opponent of all drugs, or used to be one and is no longer—"War against drugs" or "Used to be against drugs."

6 Another prior tenants of Klinger's apartment is Mori Ogai, "Goethe of Jappan [sic]," as a Japanese tourist, Dr. Takeda calls him, when he arrives at Klinger's door on a literary pilgrimage. "This is where Ogai used to live," he tells Klinger. "In center of building" (105). The traces he left are "transparent papers, which hung like laundry" in the attic (106). Again, in a play on the ghost metaphor and on the uncanny animation and humanization of the material world, one of the papers carries an ideograph behind which the artists disguises his signature: "Ogai made me," it says, "and I will still be here when Ogai won't be any longer" (107).

7 "Indeed, a number of recent critics have argued that cyberpunk deserves to be seen as a postmodern variation on the Gothic, refunctioning the classic tropes of that genre to produce an array of machine-monster hybrids, from the biomechanical atrocities of Swiss artist H.R. Giger to the voodoo spirits animating Gibson's version of cyberspace. Cyberpunks' deployment of quasi-occult images and themes in high-tech settings links up with the

neo-pagan trends in contemporary technoculture” (Latham 229). Indeed, among the “number of recent critics” Latham refers to is, aside from Dani Cavallero, with *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture* (2000) Allan Lloyd-Smith with his essay “Postmodernism/Gothicism” I have discussed before.

8 In passages reminiscent of interior monologue, Ohler often renders all of Igor’s words in lower case. He also has Igor speak in a Berlin dialect, which functions as a marker of the character’s spatial and cultural rootedness, which is impossible to reproduce in translation.

9 Removed from competition with West Berlin’s Hotel Kempinsky during the years of the Cold War, the Hotel Adlon, located on the central shopping mile of Berlin, Unter den Linden, stands for the glamour and prestige of the new Berlin, and thus a return to the imaginary 1920s of which Döblin’s novel is cited as an example.

10 Grass has named his novel, which deals with the perambulations of two characters through and around Berlin right around the time of so-called German reunification, after the catchphrase from Theodor Fontane’s *Effi Briest*; Effi’s father, in a contemplative mood, repeats the sentence, and Fontane closes his novel with it.

11 Detlef Kuhlbrodt mentions that Ohler’s first novel, *Die Quotenmaschine*, reminds him of Lars von Trier’s first film *The Element of Crime*, which also happens to be the name of a Berlin band, whose singer, Sven Regner, is among the new Berlin novelists, with his novel *Herr Lehmann* (“Gift ordern am Tresen”).

12 “Night City was like a deranged experiment in social Darwinism, designed by a bored researcher who kept one thumb permanently on the fast-forward button” (Gibson, *Neuromancer* 7). It is worth noting that Ohler’s riff on Gibson’s quote shifts emphasis from the Reagan years and their feel of brutal social Darwinism, as Gibson sees it in 1984 when *Neuromancer* was published, to a neoliberal sensibility in which global aid programs and organizations attempt to stimulate economic growth and monitor Third World development, a vision more akin to the Clinton years. What remains, despite the changes and updates, is the image of the city as post-modern palimpsest, and a poetic style that oscillates between punk brevity, noir aperçus, and Gothic excess.

13 “eine der legendärsten Kellerbars der 20er Jahre. Wirkliche Avantgarde-Säufer, durchgedrehte Physiker mit Tripper-Girls im Massenhimmelfahrt, in einem Saal unter Flegelpilzhüten . . . Die müssen da unten

ihre eigene Subkultur rausgebildet haben . . . aber dann, im Zweiten Weltkrieg—eine Lenkrakete der siegreichen Roten Armee schlägt ein—verschüttet den getarnten Eingang, und da sollen sie erst gar nicht wieder versucht haben, wieder rauszukommen, um in den Ruinen vielleicht was Neues aufzubauen” (35).

14 This means the Berlin of the pre- or non-fascist modernity. Ladd reminds his readers: “The Third Reich, after all, was the dark side of speed, motion, and industrial modernity” (124).

15 “. . . das teils abgeblätterte Wandbild des Morpheus, der mit expressionistisch überzogenem Blick einen Strauß Mohnblüten hielt. Jedes Stockwerk schien tiefer in die Vergangenheit zu führen, bis er ganz unten stand, vor einer Art Steinaltar, aus dessem massiven Sockel die zeitzerstörte Fresse einer teuflischen Gestalt grinste . . .” (67)

16 The conflation of the city with the female body is reminiscent of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, in which complex metaphoric exchanges between the female body, as the object of male lust and the political anxieties, and the city, as surrogate for the lost mother, take place. Though Lang’s urban iconography was inspired by New York, the location where the film was shot, as well as the period of its production, would suggest that Ohler is interested in this text as another source of intertextual citation.

17 Aside from other postmodern writers who show themselves fascinated with empty centers—one might think of William Gass’s massive postmodern novel *The Tunnel*—Ohler himself has returned to the metaphor in his follow-up to *Mitte*, a novel about South Africa entitled *Stadt des Goldes*. Eschewing the Gothic elements of *Mitte* in favor of generic conventions of the political thriller, *Stadt des Goldes* takes place primarily in Cape Town’s Ponte City, a vast apartment building the center of which is taken up by a “gigantic vacuum” (54), which gives observers the sense of “looking out of a gun barrel” (55). Obsessed as much with the trope of the ‘dead center’ as *Mitte*, *Stadt des Goldes* makes frequent thematic reference to its predecessor (e.g. “dass wir sterben ist absolute bedingung dafür, dass wir überhaupt etwas verstehen” 129), extending Ohler’s intention, openly declared on his website www.sayheykey.com, to write a series of novels all dealing with global experiences of urbanity. Adriano Sack, in a perceptive reading of *Stadt des Goldes* and its description of global urbanity, writes: “The giant shaft in the center [of Ponte City] appears like a garbage chute, in which this architectural utopia, thirty years later, swallows itself. The building is a strikingly accurate metaphor for the current schizophrenia of contemporary urban planning: in East Asia, they are building fantasies of omnipo-

tence which are already on the verge of obsolescence in Europe" ("Gehen der Großstadt die Lichter aus?").

18 "perfekta musiiikraum, das alte dienstmädchenzimmer. experimentiierzelle. mittendrin im haus gelegen, absolut zentral, dabei völlig für sich" (94).

19 It is no coincidence that Brian Jarvis' characterization of American cities occurs in the context of a larger discussion of the work of Paul Auster. As I mentioned before, Auster's *New York Trilogy* stands as a ghostly shadow in the background of the young Norman Ohler's writing, not just as an example of an "anxiety of influence," but, more significantly, as a marker of the Americanization of both German popular culture (as in the architectural transformations of Berlin) and contemporary German literature (as in the use of Americanisms in Ohler's poetic language, and the way they reflect the transformation of spoken German in daily life under the influence of an Americanized global culture).

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