

## **Berlin Babylon**

made 1996-2000

Title Berlin Babylon refers to Tower of Babel, from Genesis.

Links to our class: Nietzsche, Byatt, Vinterberg, Kieslowski.

Documentary about post-Wende reconstruction

### **Q: what is a documentary?**

Ideally, images speak for themselves, no voiceovers

Here, there aren't even any interviews

Siegert tells Berlin's story with pictures—from present and past

The human subjects include prominent architects

like Rem Koolhaas

see [www.wellesley.edu/.../architecturalforum/photos/laura.html](http://www.wellesley.edu/.../architecturalforum/photos/laura.html)

and Renzo Piano,

[http://www.GreatBuildings.com/cgi-bin/gbi.cgi/Centre\\_Pompidou.html/cid\\_2348201.gbi](http://www.GreatBuildings.com/cgi-bin/gbi.cgi/Centre_Pompidou.html/cid_2348201.gbi)

as well as contractors, politicians, city officials and  
construction workers.

You get to see underwater construction by hard hats in wet suits,  
concrete being poured,

and arguments about whether the building where

Albert Speer designed monuments for Hitler

should be preserved and rebuilt, or

demolished.

So, Berlin after the wall. Berlin Babylon recounts the melancholy of a city that wants  
to win back its destroyed structure, power, and profile...

A city that wants to "vanquish" the specters of its past.

We see the scars of Germany's history, from first unification under Bismark in 1871 to  
reunification in 1989

Q: What should belong there? What should be torn down?

Places that were once empty are now teeming with action

meanwhile, some buildings that stood are now being torn down

Siegert captures a moment when Berliners hesitate between  
fear of emptyness, horror vacui  
and the drive to bring everything to completion

A quote:

Ein Film über die hoffnungslose Bauwut, die in den Himmel wächst und seltsam flach und  
mittelmäßig bleibt, über die verführerische Faszination und prosaische Brutalität des Bauens. Die  
babylonische Zivilisationsfabel scheint in der wiedervereinten Metropole an der Schwelle zum 21.  
Jahrhundert fortzuleben.

Man muß sich beeilen, die Stadt noch ungeschminkt zu erleben, bevor sie ganz geliftet ist-- und  
zugebaut. Hubertus Siegert

(translation)

A film about the hopeless Building-Rage, that grows in the skies, that rarely remains flat and  
even.

A film about the seductive fascination and prosaic brutality of building and architecture.

At the turn of the 21st century, the babylonian fable of civilization seems to live on in the reunited  
metropolis.

here are some links about the tower of babel

Genesis 11

<http://www.cforc.com/kjv/Genesis/11.html>

Tower of Babel

[www.pop-up.org/europa/ words/babeleng.gif](http://www.pop-up.org/europa/words/babeleng.gif)

**Q: what is the organizing principle of the film? Is there a narrator of any sort?**

**Q: what is the chronology of the film?**

No real chronological order, just collection of conversations and images

Is it coherent?

**Q: Siegert says he wants to slow down the accelerated pace of German transition. How does he do this?**

**Q: What is the language of this film?**

body language, mimicry, gesture... it's fragmented

Siegert calls Berlin a "Zivilisationsfabel" (tale, code, Rosetta Stone)

Here's the home link for the film:

<http://worldfilm.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http://www.berlinbabylon.de/>

Berlin Babylon situates itself at the turn from modern to postmodern.

**Q: What was the modern? When did it start and end?**

**Can answer this in terms of architecture and public space...**

start: French Revolution, storming of Bastille, 14 July 1789

end: two structures

1. opening of Berlin Wall, 9 November 1989
2. 3.32 pm on 15 July 1972, "when the Pruitt-Igoe housing development in St. Louis (a prize-winning version of Le Corbusier's "machine for modern living") was dynamited as an uninhabitable environment for the low-income people it housed

Jürgen Habermas, one of the most prominent living German thinkers, has argued that modernity remains an unfinished project, that it is too late to turn the postmodern corner and leave behind the Enlightenment project.

If Enlightenment agents saw reason and experience (education, formation) as the universal foundations of modernity, Nietzsche was writing against this, before his time.

(we could also include notions of order, pragmatism, and progress)

When we look more closely at Nietzsche, and his take on civilization, and on God, after the film.

question: How to think together: Twilight of the Idols, Berlin Babylon, and Babel Tower?

asking this question is also asking about our condition in modernity...

Nietzsche spoke of a “weightlessness” or “lightness” of existence following the weight of God.

Yeats said, “things fall apart”

Marx said, “all that is solid melts into air”

Architects of Tower of Babel were trying to make something more concrete than what God had given them.

Their questioning, doubting nature marked them as proto-modern

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