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Redeeming History? Foster's Dome and the Political Aesthetic of the Berlin Republic

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“You can't restart history by pressing a button.
It becomes a kitsch idea of history.”
Daniel Libeskind

In the second half of the 1990s German film culture has witnessed a symptomatic rise of historical melodramas converting German history into flamboyant spectacles of sight and sound. Feature productions such as *Comedian Harmonists* (1997, dir. Joseph Vilsmaier), *Aimée & Jaguar* (1998, dir. Max Färberböck), *Ein Lied von Liebe und Tod—Gloomy Sunday* (1999, dir. Rolf Schübel), *Marlene* (2000, dir. Joseph Vilsmaier), *Gripsholm* (2000, dir. Xavier Koller), and *Kalt ist der Abendhauch* (2000, dir. Rainer Kaufmann) thrive on panoramic views of the German past, including that of the Nazi era. They resort to Hollywood conventions and elaborate special effects so as to reinscribe blocked national alternatives and transform the work of memory into an overwhelming ride through space and time. Whatever one may think of its aesthetic qualities and political agendas, German cinema in the first decade after unification has manifested a new visual self-confidence, a dedication to professional standards of industrial filmmaking, virtually unknown among the celebrated German *Autorenfilmer* of the 1960s and 1970s.¹ It is the task of this essay to investigate the extent to which this self-assured reinscription of the visual and the historical may typify not simply the realm of postwall leisure culture but also the political symbolism and public self-representation of the so-called Berlin Republic. Sir Norman Foster's renovated Reichstag building and—more specifically—the structure's glass-and-steel cupola shall be the focus of my argument. Hailed as the foremost emblem of Germany's new role after the end of the cold war, and hastily embraced in the popular imagination as a fantastic tourist destination, Foster's dome raises a number of fundamental questions about the role of symbolic politics and

visual culture, about the stage-managing of political legitimation and the recollection of national history in postunification Germany, questions to which I hope to offer some tentative new answers.

In response to both the manipulation of the visual during the Nazi era and the provisional character of the postwar constitution, the Bonn Republic had placed a tacit taboo on all conspicuous forms of political symbolism, on the figurative repertoire of statesmanship and any excessive imagery of democratic will formation. It was therefore no coincidence that the architects of Bonn's government buildings favored function over form, modernist antimemorialism over historical reference.² Bonn's political architecture—with the possible exception of Villa Hammerschmidt and Palais Schaumburg—excelled in antitraditional modesty and demonstrative composure. While the mothers, fathers, and children of the economic miracle found their symbols of national identity after fascism in the private spheres of economic progress and consumption, Bonn's postwar architects rejected breathtaking public gestures. They created government buildings in the unassuming guise of provincial banks, municipal administration centers, and commercial management compounds. Bonn's architects designed the capital as a nonsensational configuration, as a laid-back city in which—to speak cinematically—neither dramatic pans nor overwhelming long shots could ever cast a spell over the viewer's sense perception.

The German *Wende* of 1989-90 stimulated many intellectuals and academics not only to review the paths of German national history but also to reject Bonn's aesthetics of humility and to demand a new self-confident political imaginary. The iconoclasm of the Bonn Republic was suddenly seen as a sign of political and aesthetic provincialism, while the prospective capital Berlin promised an "emotionally appealing addition of state representation,"³ one which could simultaneously heal the wounds of the cold war and aptly symbolize Germany's altered position in Europe and the new world order. Like Britain or France, which had always relied on predemocratic, feudal or imperial architectural forms in order to represent democratic politics, postwall Germany too, according to this argument, should espouse Berlin's architectural heritage for the purpose of celebrating national sovereignty and memorializing democratic openness. It is my intention in this essay to discuss whether Foster's Reichstag may fulfill such hopes for a new political culture in which democratic politics and impressive architecture, constitutional patriotism and affective symbolism could go hand in hand. Yet to read and understand the politics of Foster's dome, I suggest, entails more than solely probing the dramatic breaks and hidden continuities of German twentieth-century history; it requires a much broader perspective than one only reconstructing the vicissitudes of German nationhood or the peculiar course of democratic traditions in modern Germany. Foster's dome, aside from the specific problem of symbolic politics and national representation in Germany after Hitler, raises principle questions about the recoding of auratic experiences and the monumental in postmodernity; about the legacy of architectural modernism in face of the virtualization of sentience and

historical memory in contemporary cyberculture; about the calibration of domestic politics and transnational culture in an era of accelerated globalization; and, last but not least, about the crisis of iconographic representation and visual perception in a posthermeneutic age of digital reproduction. It is with these various issues in mind, I propose, that we must ask our questions as to the political meaning of Foster's dome; and it should come as no surprise if in our answers competing cultural, political, and historical lines of reasoning might both confirm and cut across any high-flying hope for a new German political aesthetic.

Back to the Future

In his seminal study on the mortuary, divine, celestial, and imperial meanings of premodern dome constructions, E. Baldwin Smith wrote in 1950 that, "because the conception and meanings of the domical shape were primarily derived from primitive habitations, many cultures had domical ideologies before they had domical vaults of masonry."⁴ In some sense, Smith's observation holds true of Foster's bold erection of a glass cupola over the plenary chamber of the renovated Berlin Reichstag as well. Approved by the parliament's council of elders in early 1995, and accessible for visitors ever since the spring of 1999, Foster's dome project wrestled with ideological legacies much older than German unification. It resuscitated corpses of the past and, in the eyes of some, converted repressed memories into an uncanny fantasy of metropolitan grandeur. Foster's dome, to say the least, has added yet another specter to what Brian Ladd calls the many "ghosts of Berlin."⁵ Neither the new dome's provocation nor its popular success can be fully understood without considering the ways in which Foster's structure—twenty three meters tall and forty meters wide—reworks Paul Wallot's original design of 1882 and 1889 and, in so doing, recalls some of the historical disputes prompted by Wallot's architectural concoction of *Gründerzeit* monumentalism and glass-and-steel modernism. Though vastly destroyed during the final days of World War II and therefore blasted away in its entirety in the early 1950s, Wallot's original dome figures as the hidden reference point of Foster's project, as a palimpsest concealed under the new 800-ton structure and yet secretly illuminating the new dome's public meaning and reception.

Built between 1884 and 1894, Wallot's original Reichstag was intended as a monument to both German national history and the awakening of parliamentary self-confidence in Germany during the second half of the nineteenth century. However, in the face of what Wallot himself considered as the absence of a coherent "national style,"⁶ the Frankfurt architect mixed palatial allusions to the Italian High Renaissance with references to the then-fashionable Neobaroque; he forged an eclectic architectural idiom in which sheer size and historicist surplus were meant to give an impression of democratic dignity and national distinction. Seen in retrospect, the syncretism of Wallot's building bore testimony to the lack of democratic consensus and political unification during the Wilhelminian era much

more than to a self-assured step towards national democratization. Inaugurated at a time when the Wilhelminian Reich launched a concerted refeudalization of liberal culture and bourgeois public life, Wallot's synthetic structure foreshadowed the semantic ambiguity and multiplicity which has vexed the building's public reception throughout the twentieth century—and which, paradoxical though it may seem, was brought to view most clearly in the context of Christo's spectacular wrapping of 1995.⁷

Wallot's contemporaries were far from enthusiastic about the new Reichstag, even though it proves impossible to reconstruct whether Wallot's critics rejected the building primarily for political or for aesthetic reasons. What is interesting to note, however, is that Wallot's main opponents directed their criticism less against the structure's synthetic historicism or monumental gesture than against Wallot's extravagant glass-and-iron dome and its connection to the rest of the building. Originally, the dome was to ascend as much as 85 meters into the Berlin skies, but due to constructional problems and political obstructions the final cupola only reached 74.16 meters in height. Legend has it that Wilhelm II only permitted the dome's construction because in the emperor's (erroneous) calculation Wallot's design measured a few meters lower than the top of the imperial palace a few kilometers to the east. Upsetting the hierarchies of contemporary political architecture, Wallot's cupola could therefore hardly be viewed as a direct expression of imperial power, a monument to the Wilhelminian age. Though it surely reaffirmed dominant iconologies according to which a building's height and volume signified the occupants' political or social status, Wallot's dome was meant to relocate symbolic power from the crowned head of the state to Germany's still youthful parliamentary institutions. That Wilhelm II, only half a year after the dome's inauguration in April 1893, derided Wallot's structure as a "summit of tastelessness"⁸ manifested the Reichstag's polemical stature amid the capital of the Second Reich. At the same time, it testified to the curious ways in which architectural expressions around 1900 could be seen as unequivocal political messages.

Towering over a plenary chamber planned for four hundred parliamentarians, Wallot's original dome relied on highly advanced principles of structural engineering. According to Wallot's own explanations, the cupola anticipated an utopian future in which the three classical arts of painting, architecture, and sculpture would be harmoniously joined by a fourth sister: the decisively modern art of engineering. Fusing old and new, art and technology, into what he understood as a new kind of national *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Wallot hoped to embrace industrial construction methods and materials in order to conjure a dreamlike semblance of historical continuity. Though mostly used for transitory purposes such as the erection of exhibition halls and railway stations, glass and steel in Wallot's understanding was supposed to endow the Reichstag building with an aura of dignity and permanence. Yet what Wallot himself considered as an organic integration of the classical and the modern, the transitory and the timeless, in the eyes of most of his critics was seen as inorganic

and, hence, aesthetically deficient. Conservative critics praised the building's massive stone block design but ridiculed the dome's sobriety; more progressive critics, on the other hand, hailed Wallot's bold use of glass and steel yet at the same time rejected the building's onerous historicism. If no one really liked the building in its entirety, then mostly because critics on all sides of the ideological spectrum privileged organic integration over stylistic discontinuity, structural totalization over semantic ambivalence. Whereas Wallot had hoped to reconcile art and modern technology, the majority of his critics insisted on the radical alterity of formal and functionalist considerations in architecture. Rather than to understand the relation of art and industrial culture as a dialectical one, Wallot's critics on all sides of the debate disparaged the Reichstag building because it seemed to violate proper boundaries of taste and thereby blurred any clear separation between traditional aesthetic culture and modern industrial civilization.

Contrary to both Wallot's original intentions and his critics' rancorous responses, Foster's new structure unreservedly displays the relation between cupola and building as a disjunctive one. Neither does Foster—like Wallot—aim at organic integration of old and new, nor does he—like Wallot's many critics—phobically reject any outward sign of stylistic discontinuity, multiplicity, or ambivalence. The dome's deliberate staging of heterogeneity, it might be argued, reflects Foster's desire to interrupt any teleological view of history. It encodes in plastic form the many breaks and fissures of German twentieth-century politics, reveals the extent to which historical memories are products of present-day selections and constructions, and in so doing explodes the naturalizing view of history as continuous and triumphant that inspired the building's initial historicism and monumentalism. Like the historical materialist in Walter Benjamin's view, Foster's dome, one might continue this line of reasoning, presents history as the "subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now,"⁹ a now defined by the recollection of both the good and the disastrous chapters of German history. Foster's new Reichstag, one might conclude, trips up any chauvinistic or revisionist narrative of German history; it envisions a German future neither overshadowed by nor willing to forget the national past. I will come back to this question after detailing some of the technical features of Foster's dome.

Foster's dome is composed of twenty-four steel vaults sustained by seventeen horizontal steel rings. Three thousand square meters of glass cover this steel frame, broken up into seventeen rings of glass panels (5.1 x 1.7 meters) which overlap like transparent fish scales. The dome's interior is dominated by a funnel-shaped mirror construction whose main function is to carry diffused daylight into the plenary chamber. This futuristic cone consists of 360 individual mirrors (4.2 x 0.6 meters). With the help of a computer-aided shading contraption, selected areas of mirrored glass can be covered so as to block out any direct reflection of sunlight into the chamber below and thus readjust the building's natural illumination according to seasonal irradiation angles. Additionally, the cone helps control the air quality of the

plenary chamber; it channels used air to an opening at the dome's top with the assistance of a ventilator positioned inside the mirror shaft. Two access ramps of 230 meters each spiral around the light cone. Staggered by 180 degrees, both ramps connect the roof terrace at the base with the observation platform (200 square meters) close to the apex of the dome. Doubling the circular walkways of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, Foster's ramps climb (or descend) at a steady angle of eight degrees without ever meeting each other. The ramps' purpose is entirely tourist, even though some final interventions outruled the possibility of peeking into the inside of the plenary chamber. Open for the general public, the ascent to the top of Foster's glass dome—according to the public relations office of the Bundestag—offers the opportunity to “enjoy an overwhelming panorama of the whole of Berlin,”¹⁰ an experience of panoptic mastery and scopic plenitude unknown in the humble political aesthetic of the Bonn Republic.

Throughout the 1980s, many German cities witnessed a resurrection of impressive public architecture in the construction of museum buildings such as the Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart or the Museum Ludwig in Cologne. Mostly built by foreign architects (Stirling, Hollein, Meier, Dissing-Weitling), these new museum structures appealed to what Andreas Huyssen has called the memory boom of the postmodern condition. They reinscribed auratic gestures by means of an almost cultic panoply of historical references; they invited visitors to halt temporarily or even actively contest the ways in which new technologies of communication and information today erase conventional notions of past and future, experience and anticipation, and thus obliterate a “basic human need to live in extended structures of temporality.”¹¹ In accord with international trends of the time—Canberra's extravagant New Parliament House of 1988 comes to mind—Foster's new Reichstag incorporates the museal gaze of the 1980s into the design of a political building; it recodes the nation's core of democratic representation and will-formation as a site halting the dissolution of time in contemporary cyberculture. However, unlike Canberra's parliament, whose spectacular musealization of Australian history literally takes place underground,¹² Foster's cupola wants to direct the museal gaze both at and away from an architectural structure; it presents itself as a spectacle, but as importantly it also functions as a viewing machine, as a prosthetic apparatus enabling the visitor to experience, not the building and its various layers of historical substance, but the surrounding city as the primary thrill. Spiraling along the dome's many panes of glass, Foster's ramps take the tourist on an astonishing ride through space and time. It is to the curious dialectic between the symbolic and the prosthetic use of glass, between looking at and looking out from the dome, that I shall turn my attention in the remainder of this essay.

The Symbolic Politics of Glass

In Albert Speer's megalomaniac vision of future Berlin, massive stone structures were meant to provide, even after hundreds or thousands of years, impressions of

overwhelming beauty and sublimity. While Goebbels encouraged his subjects to hold out with poise because “in one hundred years’ time they will be showing a fine color film of the terrible days we are living through,”¹³ Speer in his infamous “Theory of Ruin Value” suggested the use of sturdy construction materials ensuring that even in a state of decay, as ruins, the colossal new buildings of future Germania would “more or less resemble Roman models.”¹⁴ It is safe to say that Speer’s poetics of monumental disintegration has had little impact on the designers of public architecture for the new Berlin Republic. Contrary to Speer, the architects of Germany’s new capital have sought to emphasize the transitory, open, and contingent rather than to encode the course of history as fateful, closed, and inevitable. Instead of Speer’s gigantic stone blocks, glass has emerged as one of the Berlin Republic’s most privileged construction materials. For the use of glass, one might contend, defies Speer’s theory of ruin value. Neither can glass—like Speer’s monumental stone designs—assault perception, overwhelm the senses, and deny the private body as an autonomous site of corporeal pleasure; nor can it ever decay in an aesthetically pleasing fashion, whether tomorrow or in one hundred years’ time. Already celebrated as the *locus classicus* of Berlin’s new glass architecture, Foster’s dome is consequently understood by many as testimony to the spirit of pluralistic openness of German politics after Hitler and Honecker. In the eyes of most commentators, Foster’s use of glass is seen as the most appropriate way of symbolizing the fact that parliamentary democracies cannot survive without unhampered interaction between citizens and their representatives, without unconstrained transparency and accountability, without a public sphere in which values, orientations, and decision-making processes are in open contestation. By interconnecting interior and exterior spaces, Foster’s glass, so the argument goes, signifies nothing less than the formal principles of a democratic body politic. The language of glass, according to this logic, is instantly recognizable: it casts Germany’s new constitutional patriotism into a plain architectural expression.

Does it, though? The popular equation of glass and democracy, of transparency and antitotalitarianism, raises fundamental issues not only about the relation between architecture and politics but, on a more basic level, about how public buildings produce meanings in the first place. It therefore is warranted at this point to recall briefly that the view of glass as a catalyst of democratic values, as a panacea for division and discord, as a cure against despotism and hatred, already played an important part in the programmatic writings and designs of architectural modernism during the early decades of the twentieth century. For the modernist champions of glass architecture, in particular German science fiction writer Paul Scheerbarth and *Werkbund* architect Bruno Taut, glass did not simply *signify* progressive politics or egalitarian ideals; it did not simply *symbolize* modernism’s campaign against entrenched traditions or *encode* the advent of a literally enlightened civilization. Rather, for architects and ideologues around 1900 glass moved architecture beyond language, metaphor, discourse, and representation; it reformed the body politic and

influenced social practice without any mediation of signs and symbols. Thanks to their material qualities, their paradoxical immateriality, glass buildings could address the inhabitant's sense perception directly. They overcame the past's obsession with signification and, in so doing, enabled the modern architect to become a social engineer. In one of Scheerbart's inscriptions for Taut's famous Glass Pavilion of 1914, this conception of glass architecture as practical politics found its perhaps most emblematic expression: "Glass opens up a new age / Brick building only does harm."¹⁵ Interestingly enough, however, neither Scheerbart's nor Taut's programmatic understanding of glass architecture broke as radically with the past as it may have suggested at first. Taut's glass buildings translated theological concepts and sacred traditions into secular forms; they alluded to gothic cathedrals or cultic sites so as to foster communal bonds and elevate architecture to the status of a civil religion. Glass might have offered a radically modern construction material, yet it also had the power to recall forgotten pasts and project mythic desires for collective redemption and reconciliation into the future. Nowhere did this mythic and metaphysical subtext of glass become clearer than in Taut's publication *Alpine Architecture*, which detailed Taut's fantastic plan to reconstruct the Alps with the help of glass, to radically remake the alterity of nature in the image of sacred iconographies, and to thus promote the architect to a godlike figure who had magical powers over the world.

The modernist use of glass was marked by a curious dialectic between the sacred and the secular, the monumental and the ephemeral. Though glass on the one hand articulated modernism's negative view of the monumental as kitsch, totalitarian, inauthentic, and narcissistic,¹⁶ it on the other hand revealed the extent to which the monumental was a hidden dimension of modernism itself, a product of modernity rather than its radical opponent. Taut's and Scheerbart's glass architecture set out to celebrate the transitory and provisional, but precisely in exploring contingency and discontinuity as the central parameters of modern life their designs at the same time communicated a desire for auratic contemplation and monumental profundity. Foster's glass dome reconfigures in contemporary terms the uneasy questions and quixotic desires that propelled the monumental antimemorialism of modernism. Similar to his modernist precursors, Foster's grasp for the profound and the contemplative concurs with a renewed belief in the power of architecture to reform individual attitudes and collective identities. If the modern glass architect aspired to salvage humanity from hatred and disunity, the construction of Foster's glass cupola is driven by a vigorous impulse to redefine and redeem what it means to be German today, to improve society by means of reorganizing public space. Germans, Jane Kramer has noted hyperbolically in *The New Yorker*, "live in a capital from which the worst of Germany's history was decreed, and now that the government is moving back to that capital they have convinced themselves that the right buildings will somehow produce the right attitudes in the people inside them. They like the transparency of the Reichstag dome—it's the most visited place in the city

now—because they think it will somehow guarantee that openness and democracy thrive in the Reichstag. They think that the right number of stone slabs in a Holocaust monument will possess a memory of mass death; that the right balance of concrete and glass in a building for their chancellor will temper authority with accountability.”¹⁷ Foster’s glass cupola, like Taut’s and Scheerbart’s architecture of illumination, wants to enlighten those who behold of it from a distance; it wants to generate through the use of very specific construction materials political transparency, openness, and unity; it appeals to the sacred so as to overcome segregation and remake secular politics in terms of a civil religion. The dome conceives of history as project and progress, yet at the same time expresses a desire to engineer something lasting and auratic amid the decentered topographies of contemporary life.

Yet even though Foster’s dome clearly alludes to the programmatic use of glass in architectural modernism, it is not difficult to see that his implementation of glass breaks away from Taut’s and Scheerbart’s naïve notions of built space as a non-representational sign, of public architecture as a form of music accessing the deepest recesses of the German soul. Glass might insinuate or even orchestrate transparency and introspection, yet it is meant to do so not by regulating perception and channeling desire directly but rather by presenting itself as a signifier, as a code and metaphor. As seen from afar, Foster’s cupola is designed to be read and interpreted, to be decoded and conceptualized. Reclaiming glass as a symbol rather than a direct conduit to our emotions, Foster hopes to historicize the utopian program of modernism, to uncover the extent to which Taut’s monumental antimemorialism relied on historically contingent categories, and to thus recode the monumental for new purposes. Foster’s glass intends to emancipate the monumental from being seen as essentially complicit with Hitler’s and Speer’s megalomaniac urban projects—with totalitarianism and fascism. The dome wants to suggest the advent of a postmodern language of monumentality which no longer associates desires for the auratic and lasting, for the impressive and the miraculous, with masochism, perverse self-annihilation, and despotic narcissism.

Foster’s resurrection of the monumental and auratic echoes wide-ranging efforts in postmodern art and culture to rehabilitate monumentality as a testing ground for reflections on temporality and subjectivity, as an antidote to the dematerialization and displacement of experience in cyber-culture.¹⁸ Viewed in a more political perspective, however, some of the more precarious ramifications of Foster’s project can hardly be denied. First, in symbolically identifying secular politics as a civil religion, Foster’s glass visualizes democracy in terms of identity and homogeneity; it imagines political will-formation as a form of public communion rather than recognizing culture, nation, and state as differential, heterogeneous, and internally contested. Second, by showcasing the plenary chamber as the foremost symbol of the entire political process, Foster’s dome clearly obscures the fact that political deliberation and decision-making today takes place in lobbies and at back-

office telephones rather than in idealized zones of interest-free argumentation.¹⁹ Foster's monumentalism insinuates a form of political and national autonomy long overturned by the internal complexity of modern society and the post-Fordist spreading of decision-making processes over the ever-more global, variegated, and accelerated spaces of transnational capital.²⁰ And thirdly, in celebrating the astonishing outlook of glass as a historically proven way of symbolizing political transparency, Foster not only conceals all the other uses of glass in postunification Berlin, he also reifies the manifold relationships between historical signs, architectural styles, and political meanings and thereby, in some sense, replicates the historicist shortcuts of nineteenth-century political architecture.²¹

In the work of architects in postwall Berlin, the fragile material of glass is meant to signify and do all kinds of things. It in fact means and does so many things at once that it is tempting to argue that it doesn't mean anything at all anymore. In Helmut Jahn's colossal Sony Center at Potsdamer Platz, glass is supposed to make a "bold corporate statement"²² enshrining in crystalline form the transnational power of a global media giant. In Hitler's former Reichsbank building and Göring's former Air Force Ministry innovative glass foyers are meant to break the spell of an oppressive past and endow Germany's relocated Foreign and Finance Ministries with a spirit of civic modesty. In Jean Nouvel's spectacular design for Galeries Lafayette on the Friedrichstrasse, glass provides for a "kaleidoscope of luxury, status, and fashion,"²³ a surreal comedy of visual effects and optical illusions exciting desire for frenzied shopping and extraordinary profit-making. And in the so-called Holocaust Tower of Daniel Libeskind's celebrated Jewish Museum, the absence of glass evokes an experience of entrapment and thereby opens a space for reflection on the fate of Berlin's Jewish population during the Third Reich. True to Scheerbart's utopian hopes, glass in all its different uses in postwall Berlin might indeed show German culture in a different light and transform dominant notions of history, memory, and identity. But given the highly diverse functions and designations of glass in the Berlin Republic, iconological clichés according to which glass signifies transparency, transparency signifies pluralistic openness, and pluralistic openness necessarily eliminates hatred, strife, and authoritarianism, simply miss the mark. To read Foster's use of glass as a straightforward triumph of democratic principles in public architecture buries historical nuances under a squall of neoliberal triumphalism. Like the phantasmagorias of nineteenth-century industrial culture, Foster's dome is a wishful fantasy cast into plastic form; it intermingles the old with the new, memory with anticipation, utopian imagination with primeval past. A dreamt configuration as much as a real one, Foster's glass cupola, with its ubiquitous visibility, may give the city of Berlin a new "emotional and physical scale as well as a suitably fractured scale of time."²⁴ Yet similar to the enigmatic ciphers of our own personal dreams, Foster's monumental reverie is best understood as necessarily equivocal and polysemic, a site of discursive ambiguity and contestation rather than of straightforward lucidity and illumination.

Prosthetic Looking

But then again, is Foster's cupola really meant to be seen and read at all? What if we change our point of view and, instead of looking *at* the dome from afar, look out from its top into the distance, look *away* from it? What if we follow the itineraries of Berlin's new tourist guide books, walk up on of the dome's spiraling ramps, and install ourselves on the public viewing platform so as to consume a breathtaking view of Tierpark, Unter den Linden, and Potsdamer Platz? What if we abandon the realm of signification and interpretation and explore Foster's glass dome as a vehicle of pure scopic mastery and plentitude, as a viewing apparatus which seemingly unchains visual perception from the laws of gravity and thus recalls the angelic camera of Wim Wenders's *Faraway, So Close!* (1993) hovering freely over postwall Berlin?

Berlin modernism, in particular that of the Weimar era, has often been associated with the figure of the flaneur, the observing city stroller who drifted aimlessly through urban spaces in order to collect fleeting impressions and consume the transitory markers of modern life. Flaneurs such as Franz Hessel, Walter Benjamin, and Siegfried Kracauer transformed the streets of Berlin into virtual playgrounds of the visual imagination. As Anke Gleber has argued recently, these urban rambler replicated film cameras as they tried to redeem visual reality by means of an unprecedented sharpening of their optical awareness.²⁵ In *Berlin Diary*, British writer Christopher Isherwood summarized the flaneur's visual passions in 1930 as follows: "I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking."²⁶ With its two modestly graded ramps, Foster's glass dome aspires to redeem this peculiarly modern art of taking a walk for the new Berlin Republic. Foster's dome is designed for present-day flaneurs who wish to slow down their pace amid the city's ever-more accelerated temporality. Rather than dwarfing the viewer through overwhelming porticos or historicist ballast, Foster's renovated Reichstag structure enables the visitor literally to transcend the building, to roam *on* the building *beyond* it, and to thereby experience the city—not the Reichstag—as the primary spectacle. Instead of inhibiting motion and sense perception, instead of anaesthetizing sentience and pleasure, Foster's dome encourages its visitors to become leisurely walkers who, in the mode of Hessel and Isherwood, behold a transitory capital with their shutters wide open. The thrills of physical mobility, elevation, and empowerment, and not totalitarian stasis and subjection, thus seems to be at the core of Foster's recoded monumentalism.

The link between Foster's ramps and Weimar sidewalks is no doubt suggestive. Similar to the Weimar flaneur, the contemporary dome Rambler regards the city as a screen of visual stimulation. Similar to the modernist stroller, the latter-day dome tourist can collect astonishing impressions of Berlin through deliberate activity, through taking a slow walk. And yet, we would do well, I believe, not to push the analogies between Berlin's street walkers of the Weimar era and Foster's contemporary sightseers too far. For Foster's structure might recall the scopic

regimes of urban modernity; at the same time, however, the dome engages the visitor in actively superseding and displacing them. It is in fact, I suggest, precisely in what separates the Weimar flaneurs from their successors on Foster's cupola that some of the most striking political features of the new Reichstag, and by implication the aesthetic self-representation of unified Germany, become the clearest.

The Berlin flaneur of the 1920s experienced the modern metropolis as a site of radical fragmentation and physiological shock, as a discontinuous series of punctualized ecstasies that defied any kind of meaningful totality. Flanerie during the Weimar era indulged into the peculiarly modern demise of reliable and stable points of view. It thrived on contingency, physical immersion, decentered perception, distraction, and transitoriness. Prototypically embodying the scopic regimes of modern life, Weimar flaneurs such as Hessel or Benjamin found pleasure and aesthetic excitement not beyond but in the very texture of modernity's accelerated temporality and heterogeneous spaces. Foster's dome, by way of contrast, entertains contemporary flaneurs with the pleasure of highly detached viewing positions. His ramps and viewing platform invite the public to gather undisturbed views amid wide-ranging historical transitions. They enable the sightseer to gaze at the city from a distance, to set eyes on the new capital as a panoramic scene, and to thus supplant mundane experiences of discontinuity and amorphousness with a magnificent prospect of homogenous space. Rather than to replay the Weimar flaneur's sensation of contingency and ocular destabilization, Foster's dome reconstructs the commanding standpoint of a premodern traveler safely resting on a mountain top and beholding urban or—even more so—natural topographies from a “monarch of all I survey”²⁷ position, a pose in which aesthetic sentiments, the production of knowledge, and the assumption of authority aspire to become one and the same.²⁸

Foster's dome, then, incorporates industrial building materials in order to restore preindustrial modalities of viewing the city. Though his cupola showcases spectacular advances in construction technology and ecological know-how, Foster encourages the tourist flaneur to revel in sensations of unmediated presence. Technology here denies technology. Whereas the spread of digital reproduction during the 1990s has dismantled conventional notions of optical certainty, scopic objectivity, and photographic closure,²⁹ Foster's dome resuscitates visual constructions of the world seemingly untroubled by the course of technological mediation. Unlike the digital windows of the computer age, which disrupt the traditional experience of the window as an interface connecting continuous spaces and times,³⁰ Foster's self-effacing windows emphasize the continuity between the spaces and times that are on this and on the other side of the glass. The dome engineers paradoxical illusions of self-contained being so as to enable domical strollers to regard the new German capital as a “unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be.”³¹ Surely, when seen in its larger aesthetic and cultural context, Foster's discontinuous restoration of auratic looking may document the

fact that, as Jim Collins has put it, in postmodern media and information societies “rather than being *eliminated* by ever more sophisticated forms of distribution and access, the production of ‘aura’ has only *proliferated* as it has been dispersed through the multiplication of information technologies and agents responsible for determining value.”³² When viewed from a more narrowly political and specifically German perspective, however, this re-vision of Berlin as an auratic presence and enclosed totality raises a number of concerns of which I would like to address here only two.

First, in transforming the new capital into a homogenous object of visual consumption, Foster’s cupola tends to erase our memory of the many ruptures and discontinuities that have marked the history of Berlin, not just after Hitler or the building of the Wall, but ever since the city’s original foundation. Whereas authors such as Heinrich Heine and Theodor Fontane had mocked Berlin’s lack of tradition and architectural coherence as early as in the nineteenth century, Foster’s ramps eclipse any awareness of the tangible fissures that have remained present in Berlin’s urban texture even today. By coaxing the public into a curiously celestial viewing position, the dome reconstitutes the city as a meaningful totality in space and time; it shrouds the fact that Berlin’s most prominent urban tradition is its absence of tradition and continuity.³³ Moreover, by delivering the city as a tourist attraction, Foster’s new Reichstag ironically depoliticizes the uniquely politicized urban landscape of Berlin, a landscape “whose buildings, ruins, and voids groan under the burden of painful memories.”³⁴ While much of Berlin’s most explosive architectural history—the debris of the Nazi period—remains buried somewhere under ground, Foster’s ramps secretly assist the cause of postunification urban planners such as Hans Stimmann, whose primary mission was to reconstitute a nineteenth-century city that had never existed as such. Foster’s ramps capitalize on nostalgic desires for envisaging Berlin, not as an unwieldy site of open wounds, systematic displacements, traumatic projections, or uncanny introversions, but as a self-confident space of continuity, authenticity, and historical identification. Like Stimmann’s project of so-called “critical reconstruction,”³⁵ Foster’s ramps urge the sightseer to reimagine Berlin’s history as uncontested and homogenous. They convert urban history into a theme park, a simulacrum, an event-space which subjects historical memory to present-day demands for instantaneous diversion, and in which instrumental reason systematically outrules the possibility of encountering the past as something incommensurable, unexpected, or painful.

Second, by revamping a parliament building not simply into a tourist destination but a viewing apparatus offering virtual rides through space and time, Foster’s dome promotes a dramatic shift in present-day processes of political legitimation. Though often indexing incompatible architectural traditions and styles, European political architecture throughout the modern era has always served the purpose of endowing political regimes and historically dominant conceptions of statehood with mass justification. Whether they were considered as vehicles of constitutional equality or

national integration, as patrons of democratic modernization or welfare distribution, modern states have called upon architects and artists to cast their central principles into visible forms and thus produce mass loyalty. Foster's ramps, I suggest, evidence a curious change in both the object and the methods of political legitimation. They engineer mass loyalty by offering citizens spectacular and seemingly depoliticized sights, distractions, and adventures. Foster's dome legitimizes postunification Germany—to allude to Gerhard Schulze's influential study of contemporary German society—as an *Erlebnisstaat* and a *Spasskultur*, a state of exhilarating events and diversions.³⁶ Under the sign of this new statal configuration, political authority justifies itself no longer by simply assuring constitutional principles, securing national unity, or supplying consumer goods. Instead, mass loyalty now rests on the government's ability to organize cultural spaces in which citizens may experience their life as beautiful, meaningful, and exciting; it is based on the government's capacity to establish seemingly nonpolitical spaces in which one may reap corporeal thrills, highly individualized diversions, and instantaneous existential gratifications.

Between Culture and Barbarism

An event hotly debated in the German public sphere, Christo's spectacular veiling of the Reichstag in 1995, rather than simply redeeming Germans from the burdens of their history, functioned as a strategy to reveal views of history hidden under the building's stolid postwar facade. Systematically blurring the lines between high art and popular culture, *Wrapped Reichstag* neither resulted in a mere Hollywoodization of avant-gardist practices nor did it reproduce, as some critics had feared, the monumentalist orchestration of public life during the Nazi era. On the contrary, to the extent to which Christo's project explored the monumental as a temporal process and transitory product, *Wrapped Reichstag* "stood as a monument to a democratic culture rather than a demonstration of state power."³⁷ Any attempt to celebrate Foster's new dome in similar terms as a triumph of constitutional patriotism in postwall Germany will find little support in my above considerations. Neither the initial reading of the symbolic politics of glass, nor the subsequent discussion of Foster's dome as a prosthetic viewing device, supplied compelling arguments to uphold such a position. Foster's cupola surely does many things at once. Its recoding of the monumental is fraught with instructive tensions and deliberate contradictions, with ironic inversions and surprising self-cancellations. Yet to contend that Foster's dome offers a monument to the self-reflexive negotiation of political traditions in unified Germany, that it commends the putative achievements of Germans in redefining national identity today solely in terms of the institutions, codes, and practices of democratic exchange, misses the point.

But in spite of these concerns, I certainly do not want to suggest that all news about Foster's glass dome is bad news. As a deliberately syncretic and heterogeneous structure, a building exhibiting its own past without suturing architectural memory

into a unified totality, Foster's new Reichstag opens a space for multiple and principally open appropriation. It enables diverse uses and competing interpretations. Yet what Foster's building clearly does not do is to feed directly into postwall hopes for a self-confident, *nationally* specific language of political self-representation. Unlike Wallot, whose primary ambition was to manufacture a peculiarly national idiom in order to reach into the German psyche, the style of Foster's cupola is confidentially transnational. It might bestow more state representation to the new Berlin Republic, but it does not aspire to ground this more in reified notions of national specificity and cultural particularity. Foster is not a Speer, nor does Berlin's new political architecture actualize Nazi visions of Germania. Rather than to orchestrate a unified national public sphere from above, Foster's new dome effaces the boundaries between the private and the public, between the pleasurable and the political, and in doing so it converts public discourse and civil society into a playground for self-entertaining monads, not for resolute nationalists. Showcasing the nearly full integration of economics, politics, and culture under the postmodern condition, this conversion may evince the extent to which legitimate political authority today relies on a competent management of cultural materials and experiences. At the same time, however, the dome might feebly remind us of the possibility of a cultural politics that could progressively intervene in the course of economic and political development.

Architecture critic Herbert Muschamp has argued that if Germany's new capital has a soul at all, then it may be found, not amid Berlin's many new glass constructions, but in the Holocaust Tower of Libeskind's Jewish Museum. Whatever one may think about Libeskind's attempt to evoke history and memory through sensual experience, it is the bottom of this shaft—according to Muschamp—that should be understood as the starting point of all cultural reflection in postwar and postwall Germany. Though meant to help recollect the savagery of the Third Reich, Libeskind's shaft at the same time resonates with many other historical references, echoes, and questions. A point at which all flanerie comes to an end, this dark, unheated tower for instance urges us to reconsider the visual pleasures of Weimar flaneurs and their discontinuous reinscription today. "Was there not," Muschamp asks, "something irresponsible in . . . their willingness to be bedazzled by spectacle in the pursuit of modernity? Did their passivity invite their fate? Did their preoccupation with subjective vision render them powerless in the face of objective political reality?"³⁸ This is not the place to answer these surely disturbing questions, questions which cast doubt on contemporary academic criticism and its heroization of modern flanerie as a practice of nonconformity and resistance. Yet what, in conclusion, is important to note is that Foster's glass dome, in stark contrast to the concrete tower, is clearly not designed to generate Libeskind's daunting historical self-interrogations. Foster's dome invites the visitor to view history from the perspective of the victorious, not the victim. Foster's glass displays the new capital of Berlin as if lined up for a triumphal procession; it transforms history into a

treasure box so as to gratify the scopophilia of the new German flaneur. What Foster's spectacularization of Berlin, on the other hand, causes the visitor to forget is that there is—to recall the words of Walter Benjamin—“no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”³⁹ Foster's dome wants us to interrupt the course of history and leap into the open air of completely fulfilled self-presence. As if mending the glass splinters of *Kristallnacht*, the dome encourages the visitor to behold past and present from the standpoint of redemption. Such a standpoint, however, as Max Horkheimer insisted already in 1937 in a famous letter to Benjamin, not only fails to provide persuasive interpretations of historical events. It also denies concrete trauma and disregards the painful irreversibility of history: “Past injustice is done and over. The dead are really dead.”⁴⁰

¹For critical overviews of the German cinema of the 1990s, see Gerd Gemünden, *Framed Visions: Popular Culture, Americanization, and the Contemporary German and Austrian Imagination* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1998), 195-213; and Eric Rentschler, “From new German cinema to the post-wall cinema of consensus,” *Cinema and Nation*, eds. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (Routledge: London, 2000), 260-77.

²See, for instance, Heinrich Klotz, “Ikonologie einer Hauptstadt—Bonner Staatsarchitektur,” *Politische Architektur in Europa vom Mittelalter bis heute—Repräsentation und Gemeinschaft* (Cologne: DuMont, 1984), 399-416; Mathias Schreiber, “Selbstdarstellung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Repräsentation des Staates in Bauten und Gedenkstätten,” *Staatsrepräsentation*, eds. Jörg-Dieter Ganger and Justin Stagl (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1992), 191-203.

³Jörg-Dieter Ganger, “Staatsrepräsentation,” *Staatsrepräsentation*, eds. Jörg-Dieter Ganger and Justin Stagl (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1992), 16.

⁴E. Baldwin Smith, *The Dome: A Study in the History of Ideas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 7. For a more recent account of the course of domical traditions from premodern to contemporary societies, see Felix Escrig, *Towers and Domes* (Southampton: Computational Mechanics Publications, 1998).

⁵Brian Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997).

⁶Quoted in Rudolf Speth, “Der Reichstag als politisches Kollektivsymbol: Anmerkungen zum deutschen Nationalmythos,” *Kunst, Symbolik und Politik: Die Reichstagsverhüllung als Denkanstoß* (Leverkusen: Leske und Budrich, 1995), 275.

⁷Lutz P. Koepnick, “Rethinking the Spectacle: History, Visual Culture, and German Unification,” *Wendezeiten, Zeitenwenden: Positionsbestimmungen zur deutschsprachigen Literatur 1945-1995*, eds. Robert Weninger and Brigitte Rossbacher (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1997), 151-70.

⁸Quoted in Michael S. Cullen, “Dem deutschen Volke: Das Reichstagsgebäude in Berlin,” *Architektur und Demokratie: Bauen für die Politik von der amerikanischen Revolution bis zur Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Hatje Verlag, 1992), 144. See also by the same author, *Der deutsche Reichstag: Geschichte eines Parlaments* (Berlin: Argon, 1992).

⁹Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 261.

¹⁰“Der Deutsche Bundestag in Berlin: Ein Gang durch das Reichstagsgebäude,” <http://www.bundes-tag.de/blickpkt/arch_bpk/rtg_12.htm>.

¹¹Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memory: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 9.

¹²For a very detailed description of building and interior, see Jon Murray, Tom Smallman, and David Willett, *New South Wales* (Hawthorn: Lonely Planet, 1997), 503.

¹³Quoted in Karlheinz Schmeer, *Die Regie des öffentlichen Lebens im Dritten Reich* (Munich: Pohl, 1956), 168.

¹⁴Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, trans. by Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 56.

¹⁵Dennis Sharp, ed., *Glass Architecture by Paul Scheerbarth. Alpine Architecture by Bruno Taut*, trans. James and Shirley Palmer (New York: Praeger, 1972), 14.

¹⁶Andreas Huyssen, “Monumental Seduction,” *New German Critique* 69 (Fall 1996): 181-200.

¹⁷Jane Kramer, “Living with Berlin: How do you rebuild a city that wants to settle its account with the past, but can’t decide what the future should be?,” *The New Yorker* (5 July 1999): 54.

¹⁸See chapter 8 of my, *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

¹⁹Klaus von Beyme, *Die Kunst der Macht und die Gegenmacht der Kunst: Studien zum Spannungsverhältnis von Kunst und Politik* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1998) 338-39.

²⁰David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

²¹Winfried Nerdinger, “Politische Architektur: Betrachtungen zu einem problematischen Begriff,” *Architektur und Demokratie: Bauen für die Politik von der amerikanischen Revolution bis zur Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Hatje, 1992), 21-22.

²²Kramer, “Living with Berlin,” 61.

²³Herbert Muschamp, “Once Again, a City Rewards the Walker,” *The New York Times* 11 April 1999, Section 2: 36.

²⁴Muschamp, “Once Again,” 36.

²⁵Anke Gleber, *The Art of Taking a Walk: Flanerie, Literature, and Film in Weimar Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

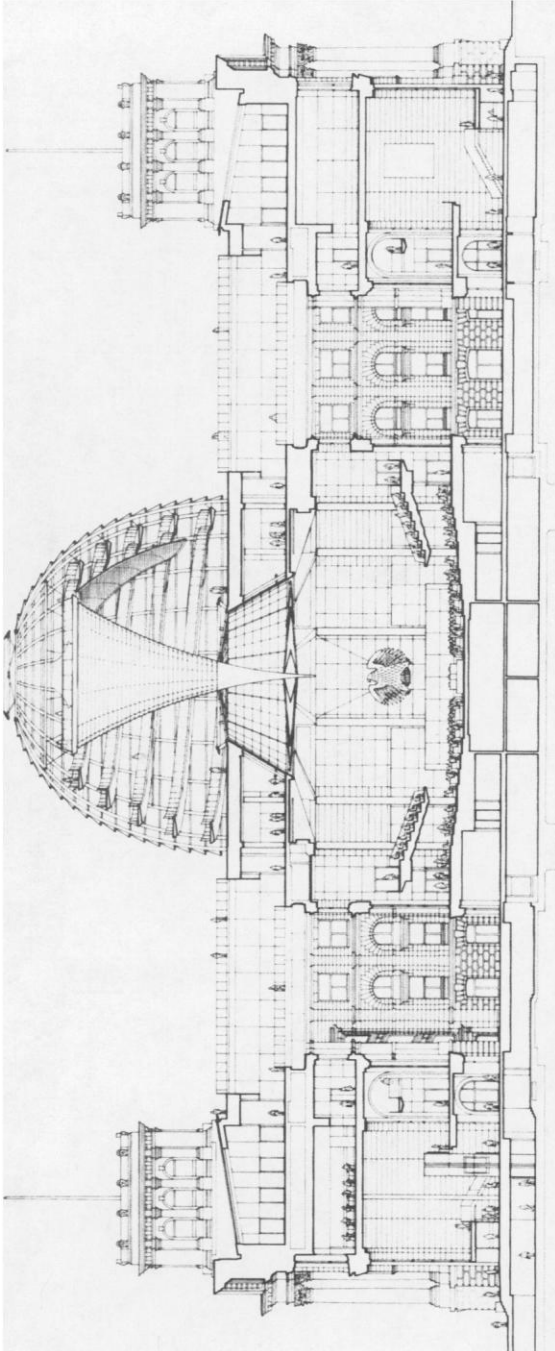
²⁶Christopher Isherwood, “A Berlin Diary,” *The Berlin Stories* (New York: New Directions, 1963), 1.

²⁷Mary Luise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992) 201-27.

²⁸David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 16.

²⁹Digital imaging, according to William J. Mitchell, is “a medium that privileges fragmentation, indeterminacy, and heterogeneity and that emphasizes process or performance rather than the finished art object” (8). Foster’s ramps, by contrast, direct the viewer to reconnect with pictorial and scopic traditions associated—to use Mitchell’s terminology—not with the post-photographic but rather the photographic and prephotographic era. William J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).

- ³⁰ William J. Mitchell, *City of Bits: Space, Place, and the Infobahn* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 31-34.
- ³¹ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 222.
- ³² Jim Collins, *Architectures of Excess: Cultural Life in the Information Age* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 25.
- ³³ Peter Reichel, "Berlin nach 1945—eine Erinnerungslandschaft zwischen Gedächtnisverlust und Gedächtnisinszenierung," *Architektur als politische Kultur: Philosophica Practica* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1996) 273-96.
- ³⁴ Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin*, 3
- ³⁵ Stimmann in his recent interview with the *New York Times*: "I was a 1968 man, interested in social and political problems, but not in history. We associated nostalgia with conservatives. But step by step my ideas changed. We slowly saw that old things were not bad. And with the International Building Exhibition, we accepted history. You know, the Berlin of 1989 was not the result of bombing, but of politics and bad planning by people who were against history. For me, 90 percent of old things are better, so let's stop with experiments." Alan Riding, "Building on the Rubble of History: A Capital Reinstated And Remodeled," *The New York Times* 11 April 1999, Section 2: 38.
- ³⁶ Gerhard Schulze, *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft: Kulturosoziologie der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus Verlag, 1992).
- ³⁷ Huyssen, "Monumental Seduction," 187
- ³⁸ Muschamp, "Walker's Rewards," 39.
- ³⁹ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 256.
- ⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1982), V, 588-89.



Reichstag : Plenary Chamber : Natural ventilation and lighting concept

