

Paul Nolte (ed.): Die Vergnügungskultur der Großstadt. Orte – Inszenierungen – Netzwerke (1880–1930) (= Städteforschung A: Darstellungen, vol. 93), Köln: Böhlau 2016, 180 S.; Len Platt, Tobias Becker, David Linton (eds.): Popular Musical Theatre in London and Berlin 1890–1939, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 284 S.

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Modern forms of popular culture emerged at the intersection of accelerated urban development and increasing transnational interactions in the decades around 1900. The urban entertainment sector was a hotspot of globalisation, characterized by intense cross-border transfer and exchange, making cosmopolitan culture accessible for the majority of leisure-seeking urban dwellers. Only just recently however, has research in this field begun to catch up with developments and debates in transnational and global history, and vice versa.

These two edited volumes give an overview of current trends, new conceptual debates, as well as of remaining open questions in research on popular culture in the modern metropolis. The volumes stem from conferences organized by interconnected research projects at Freie Universität Berlin and Goldsmiths College, University of London. These projects dealt with urban entertainments from a transnational perspective, spanning from the late 19th cen-

tury to the 1930s. [1] The volumes bring together established scholars as well as younger researchers from the fields of history, theatre studies, musicology, literature and cultural studies.

The volume entitled “Die Vergnügungskultur der Großstadt” (amusement culture in the metropolis), edited by historian Paul Nolte, traces different forms of urban popular culture in one city. Without having explicitly named the city of Berlin in the title, most of the contributions centre around the German capital. The chapters analyse operettas, musical comedies, community celebrations and festive culture, circus, dance, visual culture, theatre, opera and concerts, cultural offerings in taverns, ballrooms and summer gardens, as well as workers’ culture. The notion of “amusement culture” is used here to avoid social limitations (it includes both lower and middle class as well as elite culture) and also extends beyond purely commercial entertainments (also comprising of publicly sponsored and non-profit ventures), which ultimately enables the volume to reveal the diversity of urban popular culture and the different social and spatial entanglements within which these forms were embedded.

The volume “Popular Musical Theatre in London and Berlin”, edited by a team of German and British researchers including Len Platt, Tobias Becker and David Linton, has a slightly different focus. The chapters closely analyse related forms of musical entertainment – especially operetta, musical comedy, revue, popular music, song and dance – in London and Berlin. Attention is paid however to contextualize these cities and their entertainment zones (West End and Friedrichstraße) within

larger transnational transfer and networks of exchange which extended to Paris, Vienna and New York.

The volume takes popular musical theatre as an example to study historical transformations of cultural cross-border entanglements. It is organized in three sections: first “mechanics of transfer and translation” in the wider context of Anglo-German relations at a time when these were characterized by intense connections, competition, but also open hostility. The second section addresses “Atlantic traffic”, most notably the growing cultural influence of the US. A third section analyses representations of “others” on stage, which brings questions of nationality, gender and race to the forefront. The strong focus, consistent composition and many references between the chapters result in a useful overview of the development of musical theatre. It encompasses the emergence of new, highly cosmopolitan genres, the collapse of cultural connections during the First World War, and the further transformations of transnational exchanges and perceptions up to the 1930s.

Together, these books represent important trends in studying and conceptualizing the cultural sector in the metropolis at the turn of the 20th century. First of all, both volumes reflect upon the position of culture and entertainment in the wider history of urbanisation, globalisation and modernisation. In the introduction to their volume, Platt, Becker and Linton underline the strong interconnections of popular culture and modernity. Theatres and entertainment venues were prominent sites of the modern urban experience. Musical theatre itself was going through a radical modernizing process in the period in ques-

tion. It also staged, reflected and promoted modern and cosmopolitan life styles and attitudes, often in dream worlds that stood in stark contrast to daily life.

In a similar vein, Nolte in his introduction makes the most welcome plea to move culture and entertainment from the margins more to the centre of both urban history and the study of modern societies at large. He frames the cultural sector as a constitutive element of the modern metropolis rather than a supplement or decoration. His argument however falls slightly short of its declared ambition when he subsequently defines the amusement culture as a sphere where modernity is “doubled”, reflected, and aestheticized. It is certainly relevant to further explore urban popular culture’s function to experiment with, express and process the complexities of modern life. Then again, the notion of re-enacted modernity cannot fully grasp the productive force and structuring effects which urban popular culture had within rapidly and radically transforming societies. It was a new cultural field, a growing public sphere and a booming economic sector, with lasting consequences for sociability, knowledge formation, identity building, consumerism, city development and much more.

Many of the contributions give insights into these effects, and more particularly into the interactions between different social spheres of production. Kaspar Maase’s chapter (in Nolte), for instance, discusses knowledge circulation in urban visual culture. It emphasizes pedagogical concerns regarding the urban youth’s exposure to supposedly indecent or harmful knowledge through cinema, the popular press, dime novels, postcards and shop window

displays. These debates reflected the flip-side of modern urban culture: it made unregulated and undisciplined knowledge accessible and was therefore perceived as a serious threat to established morals and authority. Beyond Maase's contribution, other chapters move in a similar vein while addressing changing gender relations and the emergence of new subjectivities like the "modern girl" (Frey; Bailey; Gardner in Platt et al.); or people of colour and concepts of race both on and off stage (Linton and Platt; Lewerenz, *ibid.*).

The two volumes at hand form part of a trend to focus more explicitly on the cultural transfers, cross-border entanglements and globalisation processes which thoroughly shaped the field of modern urban entertainments. The cosmopolitan character of new cultural genres in the modern city has always been evident and was the subject of controversial debates by contemporaries. This aspect has not necessarily been reflected in existing research approaches which to the most part retained a focus on single cities or on national frameworks.

In contrast, the volumes at hand include comparative approaches, transfer analyses and studies of networks and circulations. Kerstin Lange and Tobias Becker, who each contributed to both volumes, are among the authors who draw upon the concept of cultural transfer. They focus on actors, networks and mechanisms of cultural exchange in the fields of dance (tango as a transatlantic import to Europe) and musical theatre (interactions of British musical comedy and continental operetta). Special emphasis lies on processes of appropriation, but likewise also on processes of rejection which were heavily influenced

by travelling artists, dance teachers and translators. These transfer agents developed various strategies to manage cultural differences. They turned cities into transfer hubs, adapted cultural genres and practices, but also started critical debates about the effects of growing transnational entanglements and cultural "invasions".

With case studies like these, the two books outline the very complex web of cultural interconnections which Berlin and London were involved in. They also illustrate that focusing on these cities alone is not enough to explain the mechanisms of cultural exchanges between them. These metropolises were nodes in a wider city network, with their relevance and functions, as well as the extent and direction of cultural interactions, changing over time.

The volume on popular musical theatre succeeds particularly well in mapping out larger European, imperial, and transatlantic entanglements. Its authors outline how genre formation, audience preferences and production structures evolved – starting with Paris and Vienna as pioneers and long dominating centres of musical comedy and operetta production. Later on, London and Berlin emerged as transfer hubs with their own local brands of popular musical theatre that subsequently became exported and adapted elsewhere. Meanwhile, transfer flows from Europe to the US slowly reversed, with American revues, ragtime and jazz crossing the Atlantic and adding new themes and forms to the evolving cosmopolitan culture.

Token together, the volumes point to a lasting challenge for research on popular culture in the modern metropolis. As the extent and variety of spatial connections and networks has been further revealed,

the question is how to conceptualize them. One proposal, by theatre historian Peter W. Marx (in Nolte), uses the concept of circulation to rethink interactions between different spaces and social spheres, thus bringing together the two fundamental questions of the function of urban culture in modernisation, and the sector's transnational (or trans-urban) connections. He takes the example of actress Jenny Groß to analyse the entanglements of theatre and the fashion industry against the background of a rapidly evolving consumer culture. Metropolitan culture and lifestyles, he argues, were not place-bound, but a sphere of circulation of goods, imaginations and emotions that extended beyond the city space – to other metropolises, but also to suburban and rural areas. Taking this transgressive character of urban culture seriously thus calls for a de-centring of the metropolis in research on urban culture and entertainments.

Other contributions highlight the fundamental tension between cultural differences on the one hand, and growing transnational convergence on the other. They all show that while the metropolises were going through similar processes of modernisation, and were further connected by intensifying exchanges, this did not necessarily lead to homogenisation. The authors outline the complex relationship between local idiosyncrasies, national or racial differences and stereotypes and a converging cosmopolitan style of musical theatre in all these cities.

They also show how these cultural boundaries and imaginations were constantly transcended and mixed up. After the First World War for example, Vienna style operettas were mass-produced in Berlin and

exported to Britain disguised as “Austrian” or “continental”. Musical comedies and operettas were being marketed by local or national branding, while the transnational biographies and careers of many of the composers, writers, translators and stage directors made any definition of the cultural “origin” of the product almost impossible (see chapters by Becker and Platt). Demarcating and explaining cultural differences and exchanges becomes difficult under such circumstances.

Between place of production, exchange routes, transformations in transfer, local reception and different cultural imaginations and identity constructions, the contributions reveal a complexity of various aspects of space and spatial interactions in modern urban culture. They open up a promising route to further unravel these entanglements in a more systematic manner within subsequent research.

Notes

- 1 DFG project “Metropole und Vergnügungskultur. Berlin im transnationalen Vergleich, 1880–1930”, Freie Universität Berlin; conference: “Metropolenkultur im Transfer. Orte – Inszenierungen – Netzwerke. 1880–1930”, in cooperation with Institut für vergleichende Stadtgeschichte an der Universität Münster (2010). DFG and AHRC project “West End and Friedrichstraße: Popular Musical Theatre in London and Berlin, 1890–1939”; Freie Universität Berlin, Goldsmiths, University of London; conference “West End and Friedrichstraße. Cross-Cultural Exchange in Popular Musical Theatre, 1890–1939”, Freie Universität Berlin (2012).