

Jewish Textual Architectures

Jewish Spaces, Places, and Architectures in Literature. Online Anthology

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Between consumer culture and intertextuality: Jewish identity in Berlin modernism around 1900

SOURCE DESCRIPTION

In 1906, Edmund Edel (1863–1934), a popular poster artist and caricaturist in Berlin, made his debut as a writer with his satire *Berlin W. A Few Chapters from the Surface* [*Berlin W. Ein Paar Kapitel von der Oberfläche*]. The book sheds light on the new affluent social class that settled in the west of Berlin on Kurfürstendamm and its surrounding districts around 1900. There is no continuous plot and no protagonists. Instead, the nine chapters create a social panorama of caricature-like characters. These are also depicted in the numerous drawings made by Edel, which are inserted into the text. The focus is on family and social life, which was characterized by the newly emerging consumer culture with its department stores and fashions - the new 'surface culture', which is referred to in the subtitle. Edel presents a bourgeois class that can only be recognized as Jewish through occasional references and an intertextual play with the Torah. His satire is thus a revealing document about metropolitan Jewish life around 1900 between tradition and modernity, religious identity and secular everyday culture. *Berlin W.* was published by the Berlin Publisher Boll und Pickardt. In addition to the regular hardback bookshop edition, fifty numbered copies bound in parchment and signed by the author were also offered. The book has 160 pages in octavo format. The individual chapters are named: The family [Die Familie], The marriage [Die Ehe], The day [Der Jour], The time of the young love [Die Zeit der jungen Liebe], Art and artist [Kunst und Künstler], In the zoo [Im Zoo], On the journey [Auf Reisen], When they go out in the evening [Wenn sie abends ausgehen], U. A. w. g.

The author and the text

Edmund Albert Edel was born on the 10th of September 1863 in Stolp (Słupsk) in Pomerania, the son of the Jewish doctor Karl Edel and his wife Elisabeth, née Abel. The family soon moved to Berlin, where his father founded the *Edel'sche Heilanstalt für Gemüts- und Nervenranke in Charlottenburg*. Two of Edmund Edel's brothers, Max and Paul Edel, also worked there later. With his artistic existence, Edmund Edel thus occupied an outsider position in his family. He began his studies in painting in Munich in 1888, which he later continued in Paris and Brussels. Back in Berlin from 1892, he got in contact with the artists of the later Secession and in particular with Max Liebermann, with whom he formed a lifelong friendship. His artistic breakthrough came with his poster art, of which he is still considered one of the most important innovators today. Among other things, he designed numerous advertising posters for the Ullstein publishing company. He also worked as a caricaturist for *Ulk* and other satirical magazines.

With *Berlin W.*, he turned to writing and achieved a bestseller in Berlin bookshops for a few weeks. In his literary satire about the affluent society of the 'New West', he also utilized the caricature-like quality that had already characterized his posters and his drawings for magazines in his literary work by reducing his typecast figures to a few characteristic features such as age, gender, clothing and social status and exaggerating them. In this way, he humorously illustrates the social and cultural upheavals of modernity, in which he himself participated. These by no means only affected Jewish people. But their first legal equality with the founding of the German Reich in 1871 enabled social advancement and emancipation, while the simultaneous rise in antisemitism intensified the question of their own cultural identity. Edel's satire also provides an original answer to this in which the allusions to Jewish identity can be read or not. As a double-coded text, *Berlin W.* can be read as a satire about modern consumer culture, but at the same time as a contribution to the presence of Jewish culture in this everyday world. Whether this is seen in the text or not thus reflects the very differently perceived question of the extent to which Jewish identity and culture were visible and formative in the metropolitan bourgeois culture of the Wilhelmine Empire.

Edel continued with several more books, including the novels *The snob [Der Snob]* (1907) and *The glasshouse. A novel from the world of film [Das Glashauss. Ein Roman aus der Filmwelt]* (1917). In the 1910s, he also worked as a screenwriter and director for films. From 1933 on, he was defamed by the National Socialists. Edel died on May 4, 1934. His grandson is the writer and graphic artist Peter Edel, who also writes about his grandfather in his autobiography *When life is at stake [Wenn es ans Leben geht]*.

The context of origin: Berlin's 'New West' around 1900

The title "Berlin W." is derived from the Berlin postal districts, which around 1900 consisted of an abbreviation for the cardinal points and a number. In the narrower topography of the book, Edel is referring to the still independent towns and districts of Charlottenburg, Schöneberg and Wilmersdorf, which belonged to Berlin in postal terms but were not incorporated into Greater Berlin until 1920. In the first chapter, *The family [Die Familie]*, which is reproduced here, Edel describes the emergence of Berlin W., which had not yet existed twenty-five years earlier, around 1880: "Berlin W. had not yet been invented [Berlin W. war noch nicht erfunden]". From the mid-1880s, Kurfürstendamm developed into a boulevard, surrounded by ever more imposing wilhelminian-style villas. A new metropolitan social class emerged here, which Georg Simmel described from a sociological perspective in *The big cities and the intellectual life [Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben]* and which he must also have had in mind for his numerous analyses of the philosophy of money, fashion, etc. This society was primarily characterized by the new consumer culture, as embodied by the department stores, and a new culture of pleasure, which included going to the theatre and restaurants in particular. At the same time, it was important to demonstrate this consumption of goods and entertainment, as Thorstein Veblen had described a few years earlier using the example of the USA under the catchphrase '-conspicuous consumption-'.¹

The first chapter devotes a lot of space to this new consumer culture and its proliferating object culture (Georg Simmel speaks of a "hypertrophy of objective culture [Hypertrophie der objektiven Kultur]" [1] when describing the interior of the flats with their countless objects, ranging from Art Nouveau furniture and Meissen porcelain to paintings from the gallery of Bruno and Paul Cassirer and, finally, unread volumes by Nietzsche, Heine or from Engelhorn's library of classics. The things that 'one' has in Berlin W. and that can be found in contemporary department stores' catalogues are listed here like a catalogue.

Consumer and entertainment culture as elements of Jewish identity

Unlike the Scheunenviertel, Berlin W. was not an explicitly Jewish neighborhood within Berlin's topography around 1900, but it is precisely through the surface culture of consumption and entertainment that the role of Jewish entrepreneurs and cultural figures in Berlin Modernism is present in the text from the very beginning: for example, through the Gerson cloak, which "had to last six to eight seasons" in the period "before" Berlin W., the department stores' of the Jewish merchant Herrmann Gerson on Werderscher Markt is mentioned. Later, in the chapter *The time of the young love [Die Zeit der jungen Liebe]*, it says of him: "And Mum ran all day with Grete to N. Israel and to Gerson and Grünfeld [Und Mama lief den ganzen Tag mit Grete zu N. Israel und zu Gerson und zu Grünfeld]" (p. 64). Two more Jewish department stores are named: the Nathan Israel department store in Spandauer Straße and Heinrich Grünfeld's department store in Joachimsthaler Straße. Tietz and Wertheim are also mentioned, both department stores owned by Jewish entrepreneurs. Not all of these department stores were located in Berlin W., where the Jewish merchant Adolf Jandorf opened the Kaufhaus des Westens in 1907. However, they play an important role in the everyday lives of the people Edel depicts in his satire.

The art business is also Jewish influenced: the list of furnishings includes pictures from Bruno and Paul Cassirer's art salon and from Rudolph Lepke's art auction house, in which two Jewish co-owners, the brothers Adolf and Gustav Wolffenberg, had entered a few years earlier. The entire chapter *When they go out in the evening [Wenn sie abends ausgehen]* revolves around the Jewish theatre director and entrepreneur Max Reinhardt, whose theatre evenings were the main topic of conversation in Berlin W. His intimate Theatre is already mentioned in the opening chapter in the characterization of the mother. In the last chapter, the Jewish bohemian Erich Mühsam makes an easily decipherable appearance as the "private revolutionary Emil Brühwarm [Privatrevolutionär Emil Brühwarm]" (p. 155f.), who gets to become the sensation of an evening party. Edel's satire thus makes visible within the diegesis, i.e. within the world depicted, that Berlin's modernity is (also) characterized by Jewish influence - without, of course, equating modernity and Jewish culture, as was later done under the auspices of anti-modernism and antisemitism. The Berlin W. described by Edel is rather a cultural space in which Jewish culture has a natural part alongside non-Jewish culture.

Jewish identity as an intertextual game

The residents of Berlin W. appear in Edel's satire as a wealthy bourgeois class that indulges in the new superficial culture. There are hardly any references to a Jewish identity among the people of Berlin W. The fact that the satire can nevertheless also be read as a self-understanding of Jewish identity in the modern age can be seen on another surface: the surface of the text, which opens up an intertextual game with quotations from the Torah. The aforementioned cloak of Gerson, together with other key words from the first chapter such as 'apartment [Wohnung]' and 'west [Westen]', forms the conceptual framework of the migration of the people of Israel through the desert towards the Promised Land, as described in the book Bemidbar of the Torah: "The families of Gershuni camped behind the dwelling towards the evening [= towards the west, B. W.]. [...] And the power of the sons of Gershon in the tent of meeting was: the tabernacle and the tent, its covering and the covering of the entrance of the tent of meeting, and the cloaks of the court [...] [Die Geschlechter Gerschuni lagerten hinter der Wohnung gen Abend [= gen

Westen, B. W.]. [...] Und die Macht der Söhne Gerschon's im Zelte der Zusammenkunft war: die Wohnung und das Zelt, seine Decke und die Decke des Eingangs des Zeltens der Zusammenkunft, und die Umhänge des Hofes [...]"[2] In this playful reading, Edel's satire deals with the contemporary discussions about Jewish assimilation, such as those vehemently demanded by Walter Rathenau in his 1897 essay *Hear, Israel! [Höre, Israel!]* At the end of the first chapter, this question is once again addressed twice, namely as a generational issue and as a further, now explicit allusion to the book *Bemidbar*, when it is said that Grandpa "jokes from time to time that everyone longs for the saucepots of Egypt" [von Zeit zu Zeit den Scherz, dass sich schließlich alle nach den Fleischtöpfen Ägyptens sehnen]"

Selected bibliography

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Notes

[1] Georg Simmel, *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben*, in: Ders., *Gesamtausgabe*, hrsg. von Otthein Rammstedt, Bd. 7: Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1901-1908, Frankfurt am Main 1995, S. 116-131, hier S. 130.

[2] *Die Israelitische Bibel, Enthaltend: Den heiligen Urtext, die deutsche Uebertragung [...]*. Herausgegeben von Dr. Ludwig Philippson. Erster Theil: Die fünf Bücher Moscheh. Zweite Ausgabe. Leipzig 1858: Baumgärtner's Buchhandlung, S. 697.

About the Author

Dr. Björn Weyand is a literary and cultural scholar and lives in Nuremberg. He has been republishing Edmund Edel's literary work at Quintus Verlag since 2022. Previously, in his doctoral thesis "Poetik der Marke. Konsumkultur und literarische Verfahren 1900-2000" (Berlin/Boston 2013), he examined Edel's satire "Berlin W." and analyzed it - alongside Thomas Mann's "Zauberberg" and Irmgard Keun's "Das kunstseidene Mädchen", among others - against the backdrop of modern consumer culture. He is currently working on his habilitation project "Reisen durch die Ordnungen des Wissens", which is dedicated to the production of knowledge in literary travelogues from Adam Olearius to Christian Kracht.

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