NEW YORK SKYSCRAPERS, MADE IN HAMBURG: JERRY COTTON AS VISUAL EDUCATOR

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All external aspects of life are becoming more and more uniform, everything is reduced to a single cultural schema. . . . More and more, we see the evaporation of the delicate aroma of what is unique in each culture, its colors are fading more quickly and beneath the cracked layer of varnish, the steel-colored pistons of the modern world-machine are visible.

Stefan Zweig, Die Monotonisierung der Welt (1925)

In the 1920s, Western Europeans had the idea that radical industrialization in the United States would erase the characteristics of traditional cultures.¹ This seemed to be confirmed by the boom in International Style architecture in the late 1950s and 1960s. The reimportation of a commercialized Bauhaus aesthetic to West Germany and other countries which focused on high-rise buildings with glass and aluminum curtain walls made one cross-cultural feature of the modernization process obvious.² There was an almost unlimited topographic interchangeability of International Style skyscraper façades, which were reduced to a formula with globalized iconic and symbolic effects.

A certain conceptual contradiction is noticeable ever since the early radical visions of modern skyscrapers, such as those by Mies van der Rohe in the 1920s. On the one hand, this modern architectural typology refused any contextual compromise with local cultural and historical patterns. On the other hand, many utopian avant-garde skyscrapers stressed their “modernist” effects, in contrast to the material substance of the old city. The transparent glass and aluminum curtain wall façade, which covers the skeleton of the high-rise, reflects its urban context. As we can see in the famous photomontage of Mies’s 1921 proposals for the Friedrichstrasse high-rise in Berlin, and also in the graphic composition of the G magazine cover (1924, also by Mies), it was the contour of the surrounding traditional buildings which defined the enormous scale of the skyscraper and its innovative aesthetic.³

Since then, this image (Figure 1) has become a visual cliché for modernized cities across the world. In modern urban ideology, this contrast was coded as a clear expression of progress. Old buildings, small in scale and constructed with traditional materials represent an anachronistic,
decadent culture of poor inhabitants, while bright, International Style skyscrapers symbolize advanced industrial society.

We can find this motif in the case of the Unilever House in Hamburg, an International Style high-rise building constructed in the early 1960s. An entire traditional urban neighborhood with eighteenth-century half-timber houses was torn down in order to erect this huge administrative building for an international firm. Most urban planners and administrators in Hamburg welcomed this radical change as an act of modernization and Americanization. Near the Unilever House, only a few fragments remained of the traditional labyrinthine urban structures of brick houses and narrow courtyards (Figure 2). Contemporary criticism mainly applauded this modern urban damnatio memoriae which allowed West German architects like Hentrich, Petschnigg, and Partners (HPP) to offer American architectural modernism as the appropriate expression of the so-called German economic miracle.

In addition to modern architectural aesthetics, the terms of cultural criticism were also imported from New York. At the same time as Hamburg’s Unilever House was completed, the Greenwich Village activist Jane Jacobs published her influential manifesto The Death and Life of Great American Cities (their death allegedly caused by an urban renewal which emphasized high-rise blocks). The “American Dream” of modernism was deconstructed by American critics themselves. Many West German planners, especially those who were invited on postwar study trips to
Figure 2. Hamburg, Backyard at the Valentinskamp, photograph by Peter Krieger.
New York and Chicago, also began to articulate their doubts about unlimited, high-density urban development with clusters of skyscrapers. The Hamburg Unilever House, for example, reveals the contradictions of how American modernist architecture was introduced in West Germany. Europeans oscillated between a fascination with shiny curtain walls and a recognition of the horror of high-density capitalist urban development, which erased open spaces used for a multitude of social activities.

I briefly mention this background in order to explain the role of the New York-based “G-man” Jerry Cotton—a hero of popular crime fiction—in the twin processes of modernization and Americanization in postwar West Germany. Cotton was introduced in 1954 by a West German publisher as the protagonist of a widely circulated pulp novel. His fictional adventures take place in Manhattan, between modern skyscrapers and traditional low-rise tenements. As Cotton races through the streets of New York, he becomes a kind of tourist guide for the West German reader, most of whom still could not afford to visit the city. More than a decade later, in 1965, the Cotton adventures were presented in a series of films, and the collective literary imagination was transposed into cinematographic images.

In these films, transparent glass curtain walls frame Cotton’s image. They not only attest to the postwar influence of American modernism and international capitalism, but they also embody the visual disorientation of an architectural style which had been invented by the European avant-garde in the early twentieth century, but later commercialized in the United States. As the camera focused on the transparent glass façades, movie-goers imagined themselves in the modern utopia of Manhattan. Only a few architectural experts would have recognized that Jerry Cotton was actually filmed in Hamburg, in front of the Unilever House. The visual effect of the glass façades in film stills was even stronger, when the building’s wings reflected each other. The glass panels looked similar and interchangeable. They were standardized products of modern industrial architecture, which film set designers used to visualize a territorial transposition.

Any detailed look at the façades of the skyscrapers assembled on Manhattan’s Avenue of the Americas (Figure 3) confirms modern architecture’s programmatic dissolution of local references, especially in the 1960s, when the sublime aesthetic prototypes of the 1950s (the United Nations Building, Lever House, the Seagram Building, and Chase Manhattan Bank) were endlessly reproduced in urban settings all over the world, even in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union. Yet, what critics of International Style architecture have described as the aesthetic neutralization of urban culture had some positive connotations in the 1960s, and therefore film producers used these visual formulae.
Figure 3. New York City, Manhattan, Avenue of the Americas, photograph by Peter Krieger.
Extreme photographic angles, looking up from street level, or from the top of a skyscraper straight to the bottom, gave drama to these interchangeable, monotonous architectural forms. These views were not overviews, but decontextualized visual constructions. Therefore, the Jerry Cotton filmmakers could switch from the original New York stills to the Hamburg stills, filmed in front of the brand new German skyscrapers of the 1950s and 1960s.

In aesthetic terms, these shots were not new; a worldwide public of comic strip readers already knew the dramatic perspectives of Superman, Batman, Spiderman, and other fictional heroes of New York. Exploding the central, head-on perspective, a destruction that Walter Benjamin had described in the 1930s as a principle of the avant-garde, became an established visual construct in postwar popular action films. The decision to film “New York” skyscrapers by using images of Hamburg in extreme perspectives was motivated by economic rather than aesthetic concerns. The West German film producer Arthur Brauner, responsible for the series of seven Cotton films, decided to film only a few aerial views of New York, some skyscraper façades, and streets scenes without actors. With this rough material, he later composed the Hamburg (and also Berlin) settings, which he combined into a convincing simulation of New York.

This blended imagery had an important narrative function. As in almost every action movie, a breathtaking architectural setting compensated for the simplicity of the story. The New York skyscrapers “made in Hamburg” were leading players in the cast; the actor George Nader (Jerry Cotton) served merely as a visual educator of the masses. He taught his West German fans how to live and work in modern, international, and metropolitan architecture. In this way, I suggest, West German high-rise buildings became more widely accepted. The same public which wrote letters to local newspapers criticizing the imposition of huge office blocks in traditional urban settings now learned how to appreciate transparent and brilliant curtain walls. They ended up sharing the elitist fascination of Mies van der Rohe’s avant-garde shocks from the 1920s. Thus, European avant-garde architecture returned from America to its geographical origin as an established aesthetic of economic progress.

The narrative space in the Cotton films, constructed from a range of existing high-rise buildings in West Germany, is in some respects a continuation of Fritz Lang’s mythic vision of New York, filmed in the 1920s with different techniques of cinematographic illusion. Both Lang’s Metropolis and the Jerry Cotton films demand visual training from the spectator: the ability to complete fragmentary images of modern façades to form a comprehensive vision of the modern American city, an ability that oscillates between critical and affirmative modes of perception. The
movie aesthetics of modern, International Style architecture thus respond to what the German architect Peter Behrens had described as a new possibility for the image of the city: a dynamic view of the cityscape, from the window of a car or train, leading to a simplification and increased interchangeability of architectural forms. The single building was no longer as important as a montage of similar façades in the mind of the spectator.

This principle characterizes the production of the Cotton movies in the 1960s. Visual decontextualization and remontage of modern architectural details, like the glass-aluminum panels of a transparent curtain wall, configured the image of booming postwar West German cities. Thus, the cinematographic representation of the International Style aesthetic had an impact on the collective memory and architectural self-image of a whole generation in West Germany. Modernism, reimported from New York and Chicago, found its most striking expression in the high-rise. Jerry Cotton became an influential aesthetic reeducator of the masses. Using characteristic elements of postwar Hamburg architecture, the film makers made American modernism appear near and understandable (Figure 4).

To avoid collective visual disorientation caused by the accumulation of anonymous modern forms, the Cotton film makers decided to include traditional, mainly classicist, architecture into the visual narrative. As in

Figure 4. Hamburg, Esplanade, BAT, and Finnland House, neoclassical building, photograph by Peter Krieger.
the G image by Mies, the transparent curtain walls on the screen were contrasted with relics of traditional architecture. In the Cotton movies, New York bankers lived in neo-classical villas (note the building on the left side of Figure 4), built in early nineteenth-century Hamburg; “FBI headquarters” was the rotunda of the Hamburg Art Museum (in the film *Die Rechnung eiskalt serviert*, 1966). It is important to note that these historical references do not allow a specific local identification, because classicism was an international style too, from Neo-Palladianism up through Walt Disney’s New Urbanism in Celebration, Florida (thus easily interpreted as another architectural cliché from the United States).

Some examples serve to illustrate the forms, context, and content of the visual montages in the Cotton films. In one of the scenes in *Der Tod im roten Jaguar* (1968), Jerry protects a nice “Fräulein” from a group of gangsters. She lives alone in her modern “Manhattan” apartment. The scene was actually shot in West Berlin’s Hansa Viertel, a paradigmatic urban renewal of the late 1950s, designed by a selection of internationally oriented architects such as Walter Gropius, Alvar Aalto, and Oscar Niemeyer. As the camera recorded the urban street setting of the Hansa Viertel, and then entered the upper floor apartment, the cliché of Manhattan modernism seemed to be perfectly captured, although experts know that it is hard to find a similar urban scheme in the New York grid system. But what counted for the film directors was an atmosphere of “Manhattan” lifestyle, where people lived and worked in contemporary, chic high-rise buildings (Figure 5).

Most of the Cotton scenes were filmed in Hamburg. In another dramatic scene from the film *Die Rechnung eiskalt serviert*, Jerry climbs like Tarzan down the modern façade of the Deutscher Ring building. The recently constructed curtain wall serves as a shining background for the action, and the architecture thus elicits a ready response from the spectator. This filmic image served as a quasi-advertisement for the international building materials and construction industries.

Another scene, from the film *Der Mörderclub von Brooklyn* (1967), takes place in between two Hamburg high-rise buildings, the BAT and the Finnland House, designed in the late 1950s by Hentrich, Petschnigg and Partners, the West German version of the American architectural firm Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (Figure 4). The BAT Building serves as Jerry’s apartment, and the Finnland House as an office space where criminal activity is planned. For architectural historians, there is a certain irony in the decision to define this specific Hamburg setting as Manhattan scenery simply because the erection of these two high-rise buildings was a result of a strong legal controversy between Hamburg’s urban planning administration, which wanted to create open spaces with limited building heights, and the building owner, who tried to push through Manhattan-
Figure 5. Hamburg, Deutscher Ring, photograph by Peter Krieger.
like construction density in order to generate more space and income. While the city administration warned the developer not to copy Manhattan’s problematic urban density, the Cotton movies unintentionally promoted his position through their fascination with the Manhattan skyscraper.

Here, too, Jerry Cotton acts like Tarzan, and the curtain wall structure is again imprinted in the collective visual memory of the West German movie public. Together with the cases discussed above, this modern Hamburg office building not only appeared in the Cotton movies, but also in many other contemporary West European action movies.\(^{15}\) Obviously Arthur Brauner’s technique of blending Hamburg and New York seemed to be a successful mode of cinematographic production, efficient in economic terms (for the producers) and in mental terms (for the public).

International Style skyscrapers, like the Inland Steel Building in Chicago, designed by SOM in the late 1950s, served as a tool for the cultural transfer of modern, industrial, and technological aesthetics from the United States to West Germany (Figure 6). The striking visual similarities between this transparent façade and its Hamburg reproduction indicate how the modern architectural forms of American corporate culture served as a blueprint to promote the political and economic values of the United States worldwide, especially in Western Europe. In the Cotton films, these curtain wall façades functioned as an aesthetic medium in which modernism was not only encoded as a necessary condition for a contemporary urban life style, but also defined as the “politically correct” urban aesthetic for the Cold War. With this visual strategy, the West German culture industry tried to harmonize the spatial and cultural conflict caused by the introduction of International Style buildings in the traditional urban settings of West German cities.\(^{16}\)

Yet by the time Jerry Cotton disappeared from the screen around 1969, modern International Style architecture from the United States was increasingly rejected in West Germany. Psychological and sociological critiques of Functionalism attacked the endless repetition of standardized architectural patterns as an expression of capitalist inhumanity, or even interpreted them as a totalitarian, anti-democratic form.\(^{17}\)

Moreover, the political encoding of modern glass façades as “American” was in doubt when, under the Krushchev administration, all satellites of the Soviet Union began to renew their capitals with modern high-rise buildings equipped with transparent curtain walls. The “Teachers’ House” (Figure 7) built in East Berlin under the Communist government illustrates the dilemma of modernist architectural ideology. When this high-rise structure was completed in the late 1960s, only the third floor mural indicated its political message, with its socialist iconogra-
Figure 6. Chicago, Inland Steel Building, photograph by Peter Krieger.
Figure 7. East-Berlin, Teacher’s House, photograph by Peter Krieger.
If West German movie producers had covered up the mural, they could have filmed another New York Jerry Cotton story there.

The problem of the almost unlimited interchangeability of architectural forms among different cultures and political systems is not new; earlier generations also dealt with the difficult question of describing and defining local urban identities (Figure 8). Petrus Appiamus, author of a famous sixteenth-century survey of the world, confronted the same problem. He structured his approach to urban images using Ptolemaic modes of describing the world in three categories: cosmography, geography and chorography, the last term derived from the Greek word chorus, which means place. Chorography records the specific elements of a topographical situation, the characteristic elements of a city’s construction. Like a portrait painter who takes pains with all the details of a face, the chorographer tries to catch the detailed architectural characteristics of a city or town. Yet in 1533, a chorographer had to face a tradition of standardized urban visual representation, as we know from Hartmann Schedel’s world chronicle, published only four decades earlier, where different cities were presented in identical woodcuts. Reviewing the Cotton case, we find similar principles at work. The image of the city is composed of interchangeable and standardized visual clichés, reduced to abbreviations, the visual equivalents of “sound bites,” which serve as symbols for the idea of the city, in this case the international and modern metropolis of New York. In this modern metropolitan chorography, the architectural detail of the transparent curtain wall façade serves as an elemental stereotype with which to construct a global urban identity, transferable to Hamburg or even to Russian cities.

Ernst Gombrich, in his influential book Art and Illusion, based on lectures given in 1959, introduced the topic of exchangeable urban representations in the fifteenth century. And although I doubt that Gombrich ever watched a Cotton movie, or that film producer Arthur Brauner had ever read one of Gombrich’s books, it is striking to see how visual analysis and the production of city images at the same time refer to a common principle with a tradition over 500 years old. Woodcuts with stereotyped views of castles, town halls, and churches once constituted the image of “the city”; in the 1960s, International Style high-rise buildings performed this function. In both cases, topographic exactitude is replaced by a collage of virtual architectural details to satisfy the exotic phantasies of those who can not travel. What is more, these visual constructions helped to export the self-perception and power pretensions of both fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe and late twentieth-century North America.

Other aspects, however, must be taken into account. How is the visual communication of fragmented metropolitan images accomplished?
Que cosa es Chorographia.

Horographia (según dice Vernero) es la misma cosa que Topographia, la cual se puede decir traza de lugar, descripción y consideración de los lugares por sí aparte, sin comparación ni de los mismos, ni de los con otros. Empero con gran diligencia considera todas las particularidades y propiedades, por mínimas que sean, que en esos lugares no hayan dignas de notar. Como son puertos, lugares, pueblos, vertientes de ríos, y todas las cosas semejantes: como son los edificios, casas, torres, murallas, y cosas tales. El fin de la Chorographia es pintar un lugar particular, como si un pintor pintara una oreja, o un ojo, y otras partes de la cabeza de un hombre.
Why do isolated film stills of a modern transparent skyscraper automatically evoke a metropolitan atmosphere in the viewer’s mind? To answer these questions, we need to supplement the established linguistic analysis of urban images (as text) with architectural psychology and research in neurology.\textsuperscript{21} I believe that these auxiliary disciplines allow for a deeper understanding of how a focused architectural image can represent the essence of a city. Sociologists may explain how the mass media, in this case film, that show urban images can function as effective filters in evaluating the politics of those cities that allowed large-scale urban renewal with International Style skyscrapers. Anthropology may help us understand how an architectural consciousness produced in the cinema can lead to political intervention by a city’s inhabitants. A complete analysis of the urban imaginary would include all these aspects and more. Thanks to Dietrich Neumann’s book on film architecture,\textsuperscript{22} this sort of cultural history already has a solid precedent. Urban images contain a specific epistemological potential beyond written documents, and therefore historians need to revise their methods when they analyze them. Techniques of visual manipulation, their perception, and their effects allow one to draw conclusions about the contradictory cultural values within transatlantic transfers.

The Cotton case reveals how mass-produced cinematographic images of the modern American metropolis determine collective consciousness and memory, and not only in West Germany.\textsuperscript{23} Film directors choose a set of efficient visual stereotypes and organize them in coherent schemes which direct the viewer’s attention. For film producers, if the effect is strong enough to convince the masses, it is less important where these images are created, whether in Hamburg, Berlin’s UFA studios, Hollywood or, more recently, in the virtual nirvana of digital design firms. Selected images of modern corporate architecture in the American metropolis constitute an “imagineering”\textsuperscript{24} with metonymic representations: an International Style skyscraper gives concrete form to American metropolitan modernity.

Although it is difficult retrospectively to measure the mass reception of film images, art history offers a complex understanding of propagandistic mechanisms in the movies. In our case, it reveals how the export of architectural fashion was subsumed into the postwar propagandistic mechanisms of “Americanization” and “Westernization.”\textsuperscript{26} Thus, Jerry Cotton was more than a simple hero of low-budget action movies. In the 1960s, he became a visual educator, promoting urban aesthetic standards for West German cities.
Yet the “topographic transfusion” between New York and Germany flowed both ways. The December 2000 edition of The New Yorker thematized the fact that the cultural give-and-take in a globalized world now even questions the hegemonic image of Manhattan’s skyscrapers. A cartoon entitled “Renovation of Daimler Chrysler Building Almost Complete” shows the architectural icon of American car production crowned by a traditional southern German house, replacing the emblematic art deco top of the Chrysler Building in midtown Manhattan. Choreography has to be revised permanently, and not only in New York.

Notes

1 Heiko Christians, “Gesicht, Gestalt, Ornament. Überlegungen zum epistemologischen Ort der Physiognomik zwischen Hermeneutik und Mediengeschichte,” Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte (Heft 1, 2000).


5 Jane Jacobs, Tod und Leben großer amerikanischer Städte (Frankfurt/Main, 1963).


7 Carol Herselle Krinsky, Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (Cambridge, MA., 1988).
15 For example, *Operation Taifun* (1967), a German-Spanish-French-Italian co-production filmed partly in Hamburg’s modern high-rises of the 1950s and 1960s.


