

Passage in the underground

The train announcement “next station Stadtmittel, connecting to the U2 line” sounds quite natural; however, the still intact lines of the Berlin underground had, for a long time, lost their connecting value between the two city halves. On November 11, 1989, immediately after the fall of the Wall, a new border crossing was opened at Jannowitzbrücke underground station. It was with great excitement that further station-openings were anticipated. Today, “change at Stadtmittel” sounds perfectly normal, and yet: The underground is a narrow space of encounter between the cultures of the West and of the East. Where does a traveler leave the train, where does he get on? Does identification take place through clothing, shoes, language, or the newspaper? Here, the invisible crossing is more visible than elsewhere.

At first, the Wall was a mark, a simple line on the street. But this line was not only on the surface level, it divided the underworld, the tunnels of the underground.

In the night of August 12 to 13, 1961, following a resolution of the Ministerial Counsel of the German Democratic Republic concerning changes in the public transport network of Berlin, some underground lines were divided, others shortened. The routes C and D continued to function from start to finish. Within the territory of “Berlin, capital of the GDR”, however, West trains only stopped at Friedrichstraße; all other stations were closed.

For the inhabitants of Mitte, the Eastern historical center of town, the tunnel under their feet became a foreign land, prohibited, but not invisible. Despite the accesses being closed off or camouflaged as emergency exits and aeration shafts, one could still hear and feel the “run-through-trains”, as they were called, and every 6 minutes, the glasses in the cupboard rattled.

In the underworld, the border crossing was invisible. The trains ran through from Wedding to Kreuzberg, without stopping. The “ghost-stations” with their dim lighting, had nothing to do with the city above. And the warning announcement “last station in the Western Sector” was ignored. What remained in the tunnel was the line. The strangeness of the voyage was empty of any consciousness for the crossing of a border.

The white line in the tunnel still exists on the lines U6 and U8, between the stations Reinickendorfer Straße and Schwartzkopffstraße, Stadtmittel and Kochstraße, Voltastraße and Bernauer Straße, Heinrich-Heine-Straße and Moritzplatz. Today, the line stands for passage and no longer for territorial limits.

Close to the line, you will now see words, fugitive thoughts. They all start with the preposition “über” (over) and accompany us on our passage. They engender fictional images. They remind us of what we felt when the Wall was there. They describe the great change. They refer to the present and to the future.

The words are on gray-colored panels; mounted at eye-level on the dark tunnel wall, they reflect the light of the train.

The old white line is freshly repainted.

On your first trip, you may only see a glow or catch a glimpse at a single word. Is that enough to awaken your curiosity...

Susanne Ahner 1999

Quotation of: Susanne Ahner, “uebergang”, publication as part of the installation in the tunnels of the Berlin underground to the memory of the former inner-city border-crossings in the subway, edited by the Government Department of City Development, Berlin 1999, with illustrations and texts in german, english, french and russian. available for € 5,-- plus shipping.

Technical information: 69 panels of fibreglass-reinforced resin, gray-coloured with reflecting letters, mounted at train window level on the tunnel wall, dimensions vary with a height of 35 cm

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