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FORUM

Babylon Berlin: Media, Spectacle, and History

Edited by Veronika Fuechtner and Paul Lerner

Introduction

BABYLON Berlin (henceforth *BB*) premiered in Germany on the pay channel Sky TV in October 2017 and in the United States on the streaming service Netflix in January 2018. It is based on Volker Kutscher's series of crime novels set in late Weimar Republic and early Nazi-era Berlin. At its center are the lives and investigations of the laconic and tormented police detective Gereon Rath and his charismatic and irrepressible assistant Charlotte (Lotte) Ritter. In anticipation of the series premiere on public television, marathon screenings took place in 150 cinemas across Germany, where audience members dressed up in 1920s fashion and enjoyed a *Currywurst* break. Its viewership in the Federal Republic was topped only by the global fantasy behemoth *Game of Thrones*. The series is clearly modeled on American series such as *Mad Men* (2007–2015) and *The Wire* (2002–2008) as it unfolds a complex web of characters and subplots with loving attention to the history and fashions of the time. Indeed, this collaboration of seasoned directors Tom Tykwer, Achim von Borries, and Henk Handloegten is the most expensive German TV series to date. The fact that *BB* premiered on pay TV while having been largely produced with public funds drew some ire. German reviewers questioned both the circumstances of its production and its creative ambition. While *Der Spiegel* called it "a masterpiece,"[1] one much debated blog review went so far as to call it "pure crap," which neither reflected historical truth nor carried artistic merit.[2] Many critics faulted the series for trading in postcard clichés and creating a 1920s "Berlin Disneyland." The weekly *Die Zeit* complained that there was a little too much cute dialect, such as "icke" and "kiek ma," which made the critic sometimes feel like wiping the dirt makeup off the proletarian faces. (And indeed, one of the numerous intertexts of this series are Heinrich Zille's unflinching depictions of proletarian misery.)

The reception in the United States was in general far more positive. NPR called it "*Cabaret* on Cocaine" and latched on to the theme of a city on the edge of an abyss as an accurate depiction of Weimar history and of "Berlin's criminal underworld, which was rife with sadistic murders, corruption and even cannibalism."[3] Unlike in Germany, scholars

[1]Christian Buß, "Serienmeisterwerk Babylon Berlin. Weltmeister der Angst," *Der Spiegel*, October 13, 2017.

[2]Kurt Scheel, "Warum ist 'Babylon Berlin' so abstoßend?", *Das Schema*, October 23, 2017 (https://das-schema.com/2017/10/23/warum-ist-babylon-berlin-so-abstossend/).

[3]Esme Nicholson, "Germany's 'Babylon Berlin' Crime Series Is Like 'Cabaret' On Cocaine," *NPR All Things Considered*, January 30, 2018 (https://www.npr.org/2018/01/30/581543050/germanys-babylon-berlin-crime-series-is-like-cabaret-on-cocaine?t=1591619899228).

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working in the United States more readily participated in shaping the series's reception. In the *New Republic*, Adrian Daub pointed out that, in contrast to earlier German history serials, this one was clearly selling Berlin to an international audience familiar with Germany from transformative backpacking experiences—"a few of the locations are even actual trendy spots you could find in the latest Lonely Planet guide." Clearly, *BB* picks up where the clever Berlin marketing of today's "poor but sexy" metropole leaves off. Daub's review also emphasized the presentist mindset of what is framed as historical fiction: "the wisest characters are the ones who can shrug off the past, while those who recall it are compelled to repeat it."[4] Noah Isenberg's essay in the *New York Review of Books* discussed the uncanny pleasure that a viewer, who has spent years exploring the world of Weimar Germany, experiences in recognizing the series's many cinematic allusions. Isenberg also unpacked what he called the "queasy allure of the Weimar period, with its decadence, underlying threat of violence, and palpable sense of gathering doom," which has never fallen out of fashion and proves irresistible in its "combination of the exciting and the disreputable." He concluded that the series "brings a fresh perspective to images and material that might otherwise seem shopworn."[5]

This fresh perspective is undeniably present in the series, whether one loves or hates it, and this forum seeks to explore what questions this perspective could raise for the critical study of the Weimar Republic and its representation. What lies beyond detailed explorations of the seemingly endless rabbit hole of intertextuality that this series offers up to Weimar scholars and Germanist nerds? Our first conversation took place at the German Studies Association annual conference in October 2018, and it was animated, even heated at times, above all around depictions of Jewishness (or rather the lack thereof) and assessment of its anachronistic soundtrack. In the meantime, the series has moved into its third season (more are to come), and it has already been the object of intense scholarly scrutiny. Film scholar Sara Hall, for example, stated that the very form of the series, *BB* as a "pastiche," allowed the viewer not only to see that particular historical moment as "a touchstone for discourses on anxious modernity," but also, in the words of film theorist Richard Dyer, to "feel the historicity of our own feelings."[6] The framing of history in this series continues to function as an emotional seismograph of sorts to present-day discussions in regard to the fragility of democracy. Although the *BB* producers at first made it a point to stage what they described as a Weimar Republic without the clear and present danger of fascism, the series now more pronouncedly foreshadows National Socialist terror.

The forum refers to the first two seasons (sixteen episodes in total) of *Babylon Berlin*. It is organized around four questions relating to representation, genre, spectatorship, and media politics, which are designed to address not only the question "Why Weimar now?" but also "Whose Weimar is it?"

Veronika Fuechtner

[4]Adrian Daub, "What *Babylon Berlin* Sees in the Weimar Republic," *The New Republic*, February 14, 2018 (https://newrepublic.com/article/147053/babylon-berlin-sees-weimar-republic).

[5]Noah Isenberg, "Voluptuous Panic," *New York Review of Books*, April 28, 2018 (https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/04/28/voluptuous-panic/).

[6]Sara F. Hall, "Babylon Berlin: Pastiching Weimar Cinema," *Communications* 44, no. 3 (2019): 304–22.

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The participants in this forum are, in alphabetical order: **Darcy Buerkle** (Smith College), a scholar of German and German-Jewish women's intellectual and cultural history, the history of emotions, and German visual culture of the early twentieth century, and author of *Nothing Happened: Charlotte Salomon and an Archive of Suicide* (2013); **Veronika Fuechtner** (Dartmouth College), a scholar of twentieth-century global networks of German scientific discourses and culture, as well as author of *Berlin Psychoanalytic: Psychoanalysis and Culture in Weimar Republic Germany and Beyond* (2011); **Mila Ganeva** (Miami University, Ohio), a scholar of German fashion and visual culture, as well as author of *Women in Weimar Fashion: Discourses and Displays in German Culture, 1918–1933* (2008) and *Film and Fashion Amidst the Ruins of Berlin: Between Nazism and Cold War, 1939–1953* (2018); **Paul Lerner** (University of Southern California), a historian of modern central Europe, as well as author of *Hysterical Men: War, Psychiatry and The Politics of Trauma in Germany, 1890–1930* (2003) and *The Consuming Temple: Jews, Department Stores and the Consumer Revolution in Germany, 1880–1940* (2015); **Jill Suzanne Smith** (Bowdoin College), a scholar of sexuality in German and Austrian culture, and author of *Berlin Coquette: Prostitution and the New German Woman, 1890–1933* (2013); and **Julia Sneeringer** (Queens College/CUNY), a social, cultural, and gender historian of Germany, as well as author of *Winning Women's Votes: Politics and Propaganda in Weimar Germany* (2002) and *A Social History of Early Rock'n'Roll: Hamburg from Burlesque to the Beatles* (2018).

1. How is Weimar Germany represented in the series? What parts of Weimar history are revived by the series, and which are ignored or underemphasized?

Mila Ganeva: Part of *BB*'s phenomenal popularity is related to the fact that the series is set in the Weimar Republic and that it does not treat the period as merely a prelude to Nazism. It may come as a surprise to some, but Weimar Germany with the multitude of historical associations it provokes (other than being the breeding ground of the Nazi dictatorship) has been an underrepresented topic on German TV and film screens. Some of the most ambitious period dramas in the decades since unification have dealt with stories primarily related to the Third Reich, World War II, and the Holocaust, often earning themselves the label *Heimat films*. Others zoomed in obsessively on the Stasi in East Germany and on various Cold War conflicts, for example, *Weissensee* (2010–2018) and the mini-series *Der gleiche Himmel* (*The Same Sky*, 2017). For a very long time, Weimar Germany was a story just waiting to be told.

To be precise, not since Rainer Werner Fassbinder's filmic appropriation of Alfred Döblin's novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in 1980 has Weimar's metropolis enjoyed sustained attention by TV audiences. *Berlin Alexanderplatz* became a media sensation in ways similar to *BB*. Critics pointed to the prevalence of dark themes, crime, and the underworld in the fifteen-and-a-half-hour series, a production that was the most expensive up to that point in German television history, involving more than one hundred actors and three thousand extras.

Both Fassbinder's and *BB*'s Weimar are based on novels steeped in the ambiguities, conflicts, and controversies of the "golden" 1920s, and featured a rogue male character in crisis who navigates a treacherous terrain. The female protagonists, mostly secondary and subordinate to the male-centered storylines, bring in splashes of color and glamour (the costumes of the two female stars in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Hanna Schygulla and Barbara Sukowa, were designed by the famous Barbara Baum and drew a lot of critical attention). The principles

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of montage and collage also seem to underlie both projects. Despite the superficial similarities, however, the two series produced very different effects. Fassbinder's series did not spark the same popular success with broad audiences as did *BB*, which has to do with how Weimar Germany is represented in the latter series.

While *Berlin Alexanderplatz* embodies the consummate *auteur* reading of Döblin's complex novel—highly idiosyncratic, very subjective if not outright narcissistic—*BB* takes different kinds of liberties with Kutscher's novels. The screen adaptation twists multiple characters and story lines from the book beyond recognition and adds new sensational plots and implausible connections in an attempt to cater to the tastes and the viewing habits of a global binge-watching audience. The first Kutscher novel, *Der nasse Fisch* (*The Wet Fish*, 2007), is woven tightly around a specific historical moment—the bloody suppression of the demonstrations in May 1929. The novel's readers would appreciate the precision with which the locations, both interiors and exteriors, the street corners, department stores, and the whole ambiance of neighborhoods such as Kreuzberg, Moabit, and Friedenau of the 1920s are re-created. Kutscher has read complete runs of the *Vossische Zeitung* and the *Berliner Tageblatt*, and these two left-of-center newspapers serve as primary sources for the atmospheric details as well as the political plotlines. The choice of these newspapers is not insignificant. The liberal *Berliner Tageblatt* had the highest circulation in the Weimar Republic, and the liberal positions of the *Vossische Zeitung* were also well known—its publication stopped in 1934.

In contrast, *BB* has a much sexier title and mixes up in a playfully irreverent postmodernist way myriad themes associated with Weimar Berlin—wartime trauma, corruption, abject poverty, criminal networks, prostitution, drug use, night life, resurrection of right-wing militarism, and Soviet-German relations, to name just a few—often disregarding chronological order. It is then no surprise that there are multiple examples of historical inaccuracies, including the nonexistent border between the German Reich and the Soviet Union in 1929 or the presence on screen of the iconic Alexander House (Berolina), which wasn't completed before 1932, to name just two. Rather than being fastidious about historical correctness, *BB* constructs an image of the late Weimar Republic made up completely of the mythologies that the period created about itself.

Jill Suzanne Smith: Perhaps the best way to answer this question is to return to the question that Veronika Fuechtner posed at the beginning of the GSA roundtable: *Whose* Weimar is represented in *BB*? If I take a generous view of the series, then my answer is this: it is the Weimar of the female protagonist Lotte, the plucky *Berlinerin* who works as a police stenotypist by day and a prostitute by night in the hopes of escaping her working-class family's cramped tenement housing and becoming a homicide detective; it is the Weimar of Russian émigrés still reeling from the Bolshevik Revolution; it is the Weimar of elegantly clad gangsters reminiscent of those in Fritz Lang's filmic masterpiece *M*; it is the Weimar of muckraking journalists who value the truth over their own safety; it is the Weimar of a police force torn asunder by political violence and hamstrung by authoritarian elements; it is the Weimar of veterans and grieving widows still traumatized by the mass brutality of World War I; and it is the Weimar of industrial and military elites who yearn to bring the Kaiser back to Germany. *BB* seems to offer viewers a broad cross-section of Weimar Berlin's social milieus and to give them a more nuanced view of Weimar history as something other than a prelude to National Socialism. By making the main protagonist, Gereon Rath, a

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veteran of World War I, something that constitutes a significant departure from Kutscher's novels, *BB* does for mainstream television what Anton Kaes's scholarly book *Shell Shock Cinema* (2009) did for German film studies: it views Weimar culture through the lens of its foundational trauma (World War I) rather than its catastrophic end.

If I take a more critical view of the series, then my answer is this: if this series is supposed to give viewers a historically factual portrait of Berlin in 1929, then it is incomplete, especially when it comes to the representation of Jewishness and queerness. As Darcy Buerkle points out, the omission of Jewish characters is not only deeply troubling but historically inaccurate. Those familiar with the excellent scholarship on German Jews in the Weimar Republic published by some of the people in this forum (Lerner, Buerkle) as well as recent work by Jay Howard Geller, Sharon Gillerman, and Kerry Wallach expect to see beyond the clichéd images of Eastern European Jews with sidelocks who drift briefly across the screen in episode 1 and the acculturated German Jew August Benda, the Social Democratic head of the political police who bears the sole burden of defending Weimar democracy. The fact that it is Benda who dies in an explosion at the end of the series should also give us pause, for this act of racialized violence serves as the moment of introduction of the Nazis, who appear seemingly out of nowhere. The symbolic weight of this murder begs the question of whether contemporary German writers and filmmakers can envision *living* Jews in Weimar without resorting to clichéd images or without victimizing them.

The depiction of queer life seems to serve as a counterpoint to the example of the series's erasure of Jewish life from Weimar Berlin; after all, lavish scenes in Berlin nightclubs such as the Moka Efti and the Pepita Bar punctuate every other episode. Yet, once again, we encounter clichés in new, more glamourous packaging rather than characters who genuinely push the boundaries of gendered and sexual norms. A recent article in the *Siegessäule*, Berlin's magazine of queer culture, described the series as heteronormative (*verheterosexualisiert*) and criticized it for perpetuating the image of Berlin *as* Babylon, in which queer culture is celebrated only as an empty symbol of hedonistic nightlife.[7]

The aspect of the series that leaves me most conflicted as a scholar/viewer is that of gender. Even a cursory look at the series reveals that gender-bending characters such as Sveta/Nikoros and her aristocratic lover Alfred Nyssen are villainized. That said, there is at least subtler play with gender roles in the series than there is in Kutscher's novels. Gereon is a physically more vulnerable character. And by transforming the novel's rather oblique and idealized Charly Ritter into the scrappy and street-smart Lotte, the series presents an image of urban womanhood that is quite true to images of white-collar working women and commodified sexuality that circulated in Berlin throughout this period. That Lotte is not a feminist in the conventional sense of the word—meaning that she is not engaged in a political fight for women's equal rights—does not constitute a valid criticism of the series as a whole. As in Kutscher's novels, the main protagonists of the series, Gereon and Lotte, lack political consciousness and are preoccupied by their own ambitions. Is it historically inaccurate to portray Lotte as both a prostitute and a socially mobile working woman who can move deftly from one milieu to another, crossing lines of class, gender, sexuality,

[7]Jeff Mannes, "Babylon Berlin? Zum Mythos der wilden 20er Jahre," *Siegessäule.de*, August 28, 2019 (https://www.siegessaeule.de/no_cache/newscomments/article/4442-babylon-berlin-vom-mythos-der-wilden-20-er-jahre.html).

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and race/ethnicity? No, not according to my own research on prostitutes and new women in Weimar Berlin. Is it historically inaccurate to allow the corrupt police commissar Bruno Wolter to coerce Lotte into both sleeping with him and spying on Gereon because her work as an unregistered prostitute is illegal? Yes, given that prostitution was decriminalized by the 1927 Law to Combat Venereal Diseases. For casual viewers, such inaccuracies may not matter. For scholars of the era, they are maddening. But for both audiences, the omissions of key elements of Weimar history or the continued perpetuation of stereotypes (of Jews, of queer people, of women) can be dangerous.

Julia Sneeringer: It's hard to enjoy historical dramas when you're a Germanist. But when I first saw *BB*, I was thrilled at its depiction of 1929 as something more than the Nazis in waiting. I marveled at its CGI Alexanderplatz and costumes made from vintage textiles, which weigh down the body and force the actors to move more like people of the era. I've read the same Berlin dailies Kutscher used to research his novels, and the series's *Mietskasernen* (tenement) scenes felt like *Die Rote Fahne* (the Communist newspaper) come to life. References from films such as *Berlin. Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (*Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis*, 1927) abound, while the faces of supporting characters such as Franz Krajewski looked like paintings by Otto Griebel or Jeanne Mammen brought to life. The series's Twitter feed even offers a glossary of historical references. Hard as it may be for us Germanists to remember, most viewers (certainly in the United States) know little about Weimar other than its descent into Nazism. So when *BB* depicts the 1929 *Blutmai* demonstration on Hermannplatz, or the irredentist plots of the right, it informs even as it entertains. The choice to introduce the Nazis only at the end of the series feels both like an attempt to show that most Germans of the time had little clue about what was coming (making the series eerily relevant to our own time of creeping fascism), as well as a dramatic device that enhances the tension.

But *BB*'s meticulous attention to detail also opens up the producers to charges of historical inaccuracy or even willful distortion. As Jill Smith mentions, prostitution was decriminalized in 1927 (though the threat of Bruno's blackmail does accurately reflect continued police harassment of sex workers). Of course, *BB* is not a documentary or even a docudrama like *Unsere Mütter Unsere Väter* (*Generation War*, 2013). But its choices do force us to think about the film's politics, which are a muddle. Its near erasure of Jewish Berlin is problematic, as others in this forum argue. It exhibits a vague affinity for the republic through the sympathetic figure of Benda, who goes up against the evil Black Reichswehr. But it's up for grabs whether the main protagonist, Gereon, is a republican (his primary loyalty is to the police, which raises tantalizing questions about where he will land after 1933). The KPD is not presented with nuance, though the accidental police killing of two women after the *Blutmai* demonstration is designed to elicit viewer sympathy (which is in turn strained when Gereon is beaten for refusing to break the blue wall of silence). The cumulative effect of these gestures is less to engage with Weimar politics than to flash a series of signs to advance the storyline.

BB's portrayal of the "new woman" is more interesting. Lotte, a composite of references from the silent film *Menschen am Sonntag* (*People on Sunday*, 1930) to Irmgard Keun's novel *Gilgi—eine von uns* (*Gilgi—One of Us*, 1931) is the beating heart of the story. She embodies the "new woman" who fashions herself out of pop songs and chewing gum, but who has internalized many of the era's gendered limitations. She's also a proto-feminist who thinks

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she should get paid for her work, that women belong on the homicide squad, and that her body belongs to her. She transcends the flapper cliché to reveal a struggling young person my students would call "relatable." Lotte is also the vehicle for the series's emphasis on queer Berlin. She is the ultimate (mostly) straight supporter, linked to queer people throughout, such as the transvestite Herr Gräf, who gives her the job that sets her police career in motion.

A similar nod to the social politics of modern-day viewers is the way *BB*'s Berlin is visibly multiethnic, with key characters from Europe's fallen empires, such as the Austrian journalist Katelbach, the Russian émigrés, and the gangster Edgar, whose office lined with old family photos silently invokes the Armenian genocide. Jewish Berlin, conveyed mainly in side references (such as the Scheunenviertel, where Benda sneaks off for his diet-busting sausages), is subsumed to the series's greater interest in Catholicism as a signifier of difference. *BB*'s use of actors of African descent tips the filmmakers' hand in regard to their ultimate intentions. There were no old Delta bluesmen playing in Berlin speakeasies in 1929—these are visualizations of a desirable, sexy Berlin created by a generation born in the 1960s.

Paul Lerner: *BB* has brought Weimar Germany to screens across the world in ways that far transcend the impact of prior films, television series, and works of literature set in the period. Its enormous international resonance owes, of course, to its glitzy production values, its availability on streaming platforms worldwide, and the current revival of interest in the Weimar Republic, as commentators and pundits seek historical precedent for the contemporary rise of populism, nationalism, and xenophobia, for the fragility of democracy and its inability to resist incipient fascism.

Questions of historical accuracy are therefore nearly inescapable because we are dealing with a series that will form viewers' image of Weimar for years to come. Indeed, as a historian of twentieth-century Germany, I am frequently asked "Is it accurate?" I find myself uncharacteristically tongue-tied when so queried, which has led me to the realization that we too often take it for granted that we know what historical accuracy means. So, yes, the series's unprecedented dissemination and the fraught political stakes burden *BB* with a particular responsibility, but what is that responsibility?

When it comes to plot, *BB*, with its outlandish twists and turns, its identity games, its double and triple agents, and its fantastical underwater rescue, is far from plausible. On another level, this baroque storyline is anchored in the real world, the fictitious and composite are carefully, if not always rigorously—as Smith, Ganeva, and Sneeringer remark upon—tethered to real political events, places, and characters, which works to assuage much of the historian's natural skepticism.

But the question of historical accuracy is obviously getting at something deeper than plot: Is this slice of Weimar German life representative? Who is shown and who is not shown? Did Berlin look like—or more importantly, feel like—that? *BB*'s Berlin is one of extremes, of debasing, soul-crushing poverty and glamorous high society, often rubbing up against each other in an erotic dialectical tension. Those extremes certainly existed, but the space between the extremes, where most people lived and died, doesn't make for as compelling a spectacle and is largely ignored. One Jewish character (Benda) carries an extraordinary burden on his shoulders, standing in for the entire spectrum of interwar German Jewry, with the exception of a few fleeting glimpses of black-hatted, orthodox men in transit.

What *BB* contributes to the historical memory of Weimar Germany is, in contrast to the nearly unavoidable historical *telos* through which we read the period, its backward-looking

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quality. It presents a Weimar soaked in nostalgia and loss, a memory landscape saturated with aging photographs, medals, and persistent scars on body and mind from World War I, a shattered Germany coping with its loss of overseas empire and the shrinking of its territory. It presents, to paraphrase Anton Kaes's *Shell Shock Cinema*, a culture that is more "post-traumatic" than "pre-fascistic," a useful corrective to standard representations, to be sure, but perhaps one that pushes too far away from constructive engagement with Weimar's outcome.[8]

Veronika Fuechtner: In its representation of the Weimar Republic's politics, *BB* draws from the 1980s West German *Historikerstreit* about the theory of totalitarianism. The series uses iconic Weimar Republic imagery to make the point that radicalism comes in different ideological expressions, which are structurally completely parallel and, in consequence, potentially equally destructive. It projects a particular type of historical analysis into the past, so that it seems like an expression of the time itself. Good examples of this strategy are the references to Fritz Lang's images and politics, which loom large in this series. The evil Russian aristocratic artist Sorokina and the altruistic German communist Dr. Völcker (woman of the *Volk,* of course) evoke the Weimar film star Brigitte Helm and her portrayal of the two Marias in *Metropolis* (1927). The evil Maria stood for the dehumanization of capitalism, whereas the good Maria embodied an earthy communal motherly spirit. How these extremes were politically charged was open to interpretation and, in hindsight, both have been connected to visions of fascism.

In contrast, *BB*'s women are less ambiguous and, almost thirty years after the end of East German state communism, *BB* is less interested in providing answers to the rise of fascism but seeks to answer the question of what kind of political purchase radical leftist politics still may hold. We see "good" communism (the Trotskyists, the exploited workers, the idealistic Dr. Völcker) and "bad" communism (the Stalinists). And in the figure of the ever-changing Sorokina, bad communism, reactionary politics, and fascism are rolled into one gender-bending deadly package. She performs her signature song "Zu Asche, zu Staub" ("To Ashes, to Dust") in a sort of Hitler drag, and the song bears more than a passing resemblance to Zarah Leander's fascist wartime ballad "Ich weiss, es wird einmal ein Wunder geschehen" ("I know, a miracle will happen"). Here, however, *BB* doesn't buy completely into the theory of totalitarianism: its lesson is that cynical political opportunism presents the biggest danger to a fragile democracy and not necessarily the clash of radical parties from both sides of the political spectrum as some Weimar histories still might have it.

Darcy Buerkle: In this series, Weimar Berlin *is* Weimar Germany. With this premise, *BB* installs the viewer in a series of common meta-emplotments of the period that resonate through the series's narratological details and that characterize its rendering of Weimar Germany. However, via its central character, Gereon Rath, his occasional phone calls and involuntary intrusive memories of home, *BB* also nuances the too-common, mostly unstated claim that Weimar Berlin swallowed up regionalisms and spat out the edgy avantgarde: although the first episodes set the stage for the story's unfolding by foregrounding the centrality of Weimar Berlin, events in faraway Cologne insert themselves as *raison d'être* on the level of narrative; events, moreover, that have as their genesis the misdeeds of the father.

[8]Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 5.

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On the one hand, World War I veteran Gereon Rath's arrival in Berlin from Cologne seems driven by a search for justice, but we quickly learn that his move is all pretense, a deeply personal paternal errand steeped in guilt, marked by perpetual lies, dramatic vulnerability, and earnestness, animated by humiliation from which, again, only the truth can free him.

The framing of the series argues for the tenacity of the unconscious and the brutality of its actualization. All is not what it seems, and, moreover, there is photographic evidence, some of which must be destroyed to both please the father and finally separate from him. The primacy of gendered-generational divides, particularly the paternal as the source of fissure, guilt, and emasculinization in this rendering of Weimar's past, suggests a further metahistorical matter relating to the status of photographic evidence of National Socialism in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). That is, the series makes the destruction of evidence of the father's lies its central concern—relying on the scratched-out frame, a soft focus for a range of pivotal but barely recognizable, blotted out faces and bodies that are characterized not only by the need to squint to see them at all, but by the intensity of the blatant sexuality and obvious violence. Repeatedly, dialogue and action pivot around the taking, developing, and handing off of photographs for work, money, evidence, or barter. The truth claim of the image is both elided and all too present. The sheer volume of grotesque photographic images of murder and dismemberment represent a constant thread throughout—but so does the cavalier treatment of these images, in which the series's spectator participates. In this, the series advances an important pretense of ignorance about what is to come that cannot hold for the postwar spectator.

This brings me to the question of *BB*'s rendering of Jewish presence and the antisemitic threat in the Berlin cityscape of 1929, which operate in the background. The overheard and the innuendo are made more poignant by virtue of the fact that, without Jews, there would have been no Weimar avant-garde on which the spectator feasts in this series. Moreover, violence against Jews proliferated throughout the 1920s; the notion that this was not a factor in the city is a willful deletion. In this *Stadt* [*Fast*] *Ohne Juden*,[9] the Jew exists by virtue of her absence, in occasional and dependent clauses, and by way of the "accident" of assassination, thus relegating Jewishness to the seemingly incidental.

The single fully developed Jewish character, Benda, refers to an early target of the Nazi Party, Deputy Police Commissioner Bernhard Weiss. In *BB*, Jewish presence is not explicitly engaged. Glances of recognition are exchanged behind closed doors, as between Dr. Schwarz and Benda. Benda turns away, is silent when his wife proclaims to Rath in the back of a church that her husband has "refused to convert." And in what seems to me in keeping with the suspension of the future that is our past, having discovered the presence of the illegal import of phosgene gas, Rath asks Benda "What was the gas for?" Benda answers: "Well, why don't you guess?" Gazing at a menorah, Greta Overbeck—in an allusion perhaps to the Weimar artist Gerta Overbeck?— overhears as she dusts and Benda prepares to arrest members of the Black Reichswehr: "They hate us, Social Democrats and the Jews; we are their personal enemies." In their later discussion of the arrests, Stresemann and Benda exchange a Yiddish phrase. But unlike the character Benda, Weiss was a vocal member of the Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens (Central Association of Germans of Jewish Faith). He repeatedly interrupted Nazi activities in the early Weimar years, ordered the shuttering of their Berlin branch in 1927, and had several hundred members of the

[9]Hugo Bettauer, *Die Stadt ohne Juden [The City without Jews]* (Vienna: Löwit, 1922).

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NSDAP arrested. In his 1928 text *Polizei und Politik*, Weiss counseled police to adopt "a certain reserve" when it came to political questions because, as he cautioned, "all political parties vie for the soul of the police so that they might influence the police force politically." But by 1932, Weiss was publishing public appeals, calling on Jews to stop stepping away from the political, to have more self-confidence and, as he put it, "Let us protect ourselves from the overly sensitive types who preach restraint in these times, and let us without fail hold ourselves instead to the achievements of Emancipation!"[10]

Other characters coded Jewish appear—but usually from some distance. *BB* could be seen, then, as availing itself of these conventions of discerning Jewishness as the marked unseen as a matter of old habit, but it does so in relationship to a spectatorship that will not reliably interpolate as the Weimar-era spectator would. Instead, the formidable casting of Matthias Brandt—Willy Brandt's youngest son—in the role of Benda adds to the historical specificity of our spectatorship and thus the complexity of this series as aesthetic adventure as well as historical document. *BB*'s version of Jews in Weimar thus produces an undeniable problem for those of us who study this history.

The marginalization of Jewishness and the flattening of women's history limit both the narrative and any claims to historical accuracy. These decisions are interwoven with the directorial ambition to make a series about what it *felt like* in Weimar Berlin to cinematically convey an affective history. I find the project most generative in these terms—as an elaborate and detailed portrayal of the history of emotion grounded in claims to ignorance shown by absence. In other words, the directorial and writerly commitment to staging ignorance of the future that is our past renders a vision of Weimar Berlin that does not shy away from taking liberties with historical accuracy when it comes to gender and Jews. But these decisions also stipulate an interestingly complex spectatorial position for the contemporary viewer. The viewer is, after all, not ignorant of what was to come.

Finally, regarding gender: The centrality of Charlotte Ritter's character points to the significance of Weimar as a site of women's increasing emancipation—and some of its costs—but overall this version of women's history pales in comparison to the detail and centrality that is afforded to masculinity and its affective history. While Lotte seeks accountability on the basis of her keen eye for evidence, she remains nonetheless linked to the cipher of the "new woman" in historiography and popular culture. Furthermore, with the exception of Lotte, the women in this series are silent, dead, or lie prolifically either implicitly or actively. Greta Overbeck, Emmi Wolter, Elisabeth Behnke, Anne-Marie Nyssen, Minna Ritter, and obviously Svetlana Sorokina do not tell and often do not know the truth; they evade and, in some cases, succumb to death in silence. Gereon's mother "could not take" the death of her son in World War I. *BB* includes the historically accurate event of the murder of two women on a balcony on May 1, 1929—though to have the fear of Nazi violence play no role at all in this version of events is conspicuous. There were a total of eight women dead by May 3. This is another example of the (Jewish) history that did not make the cut: the so-called "Committee for the Investigation of the May Events," which held daily hearings and public interviews, was chaired by Alfons Goldschmidt, included Alfred Döblin—whose sister Meta had been killed by shrapnel in March 1919—and the pacifist Carl von Ossietzky; it was here that Hans Litten made his first forays and, as Pamela Swett has observed, Fritz Loewenthal and Eduard Alexander were the lawyers for one of the women victims.

[10]Bernhard Weiss, "Mehr Selbstbewusstsein," *C.V Zeitung*, June 3, 1931.

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2. Why/how is genre important? If we want to think of the series as a kind of mash-up, what are the different mash-ups that each of us sees at work in the series?

Smith: The concept of the mash-up—originally used to describe the blending of two or more contrasting styles or genres of music—clearly applies to *BB*. Its soundtrack combines popular songs from the 1920s with jazz and blues, mournful *chansons*, classical *Lieder* (I'm thinking here of the diegetic use of Mahler in episode 3), Roxy music (Brian Ferry makes a cameo appearance in episode 10), and techno. Its visual style is an equally rich genre mix, in which hard-boiled crime meets Spielberg-style action movie (the showdown between Rath and Wolter on the top of the train in the final episode), and serialized melodrama meets expressionist nightmare. The opening credits alone are an impressive homage to Weimar film greats such as F. W. Murnau, Georg Pabst, and Robert Wiene, and, as Sara Hall has argued, it mimics the horizontal pulsing of celluloid projection and the experience of watching silent films. The rich mix of genres and cultural references is, for me, a strength of the series, one that conveys the Weimar era's sense of cultural vibrancy.

Lerner: Because Weimar culture was so obsessed with questions of mass culture, spectatorship, and mimesis in ways that continue to shape our own intellectual horizons, any satisfying and robust depiction of Weimar Germany has to show awareness of these issues. *BB* foregrounds these representational questions, not only by making frequent visual references to the period's iconic cinematic and artistic works, but by representing Weimar through the vernacular of Weimar visual culture, as if the series itself had been produced in late 1920s Babelsberg.

BB is framed through the hypnosis sessions Gereon Rath undertakes with the mysterious, peripatetic Dr. Schmidt. Fantasy and reality, past and future are enfolded in a disorienting Möbius strip. Associations between film as medium, trauma, and suggestion stretch back to the period of the war itself: the psychoanalyst Ernst Simmel recounts telling his patients that they should "roll the film" of their memories to gain access to buried traumatic incidents. Dr. Schmidt's Institute of Suggestive Therapy evokes the asylum in *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1920), and Schmidt himself is surely an extended reference to Fritz Lang's Mabuse. And the idea that hypnosis and barbiturates can brainwash and turn subjects into killers also evokes a long media history of panic including *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962). Schmidt's film is a clear and explicit reference to the instructional film made by Hamburg neurologist Max Nonne on the treatment of war neurosis through hypnotic suggestion. Nonne traveled around Germany during the war, demonstrating his techniques and screening his reel to promote his methods.

Finally, the series dramatizes the return of the repressed in a kind of surreal, drug-induced Freudian haze: most vividly embodied in Gereon's struggles with his buried war memories, but we see this in subtler ways, too, for example, in the case of Lotte's mother, who learns she has syphilis from an isolated affair many years in the past or in the revisionists/nationalists who celebrate World War I–era heroics and reassert German territorial claims. In short, the series's genre mash-up simultaneously roots it in the cultural context of Weimar and broadens its exploration of trauma, memory, and fantasy beyond the boundaries of time and space.

Ganeva: The series becomes a sort of compendium of all things Weimar, disciplined by the classical, popular German genre, the *Krimi*. Like the successful long-running *Tatort* murder mystery show that situates clusters of episodes in different cities and incorporates the

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specificity of geographic location and social context into the plotline, *BB*, too, reflects the ambience of Berlin. But it is a fictional Berlin that echoes our contemporary perception of modernity's ambivalences and crises, while at the same tapping into the myths that Weimar Berlin wove around itself. The latter trend is particularly obvious in *BB*'s quotations from Weimar cinema. Footage from *Westfront 1918* (1930) and *People on Sunday* (1930) is interspersed into different episodes. Carefully crafted shots reference *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* (1933), *M* (1931), *Die freudlose Gasse* (*The Joyless Street,* 1925), *Victor und Victoria* (1933), and many other films. Some of the characters seem to be lifted straight from Irmgard Keun's *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* (*The Artificial Silk Girl*, 1932) and other popular novels from the period (by Hans Fallada, Erich Kästner, and Gabriele Tergit). Mixed into all of this are refractions of Weimar and the late 1920s obviously shaped by previous iconic Hollywood productions, such as Bob Fosse's *Cabaret* (1972) and various classic film noirs. Finally, this postmodern mash-up interweaves multiple references playfully into an epic format with multiple story lines, a format that corresponds to today's need for on-demand streaming or binge-watching.

Fuechtner: The question of genre is central to this series. First, it's pitched as a series that follows in the footsteps of epic cinematic American TV series such as *The Wire* and *Mad Men*, and in the German context Dominik Graf's Berlin Russian mob drama *Im Angesicht des Verbrechens* (*In the Face of Crime*, 2010), which broke the ground in Germany for series that aim to represent the macrocosm of a city through the narration of many interweaving microcosms. Second, *BB* explicitly cites genres that defined the culture of the Weimar Republic. For example, it evokes the cinematic novel, particularly Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and its film versions—police detective Wolter seems cast as a doppelgänger of actor Günther Lamprecht, R.W. Fassbinder's Biberkopf. In the narration of Rath's war trauma, *BB* also engages in the genre of the criminological and psychological case study—the subject of entire book series such as *Aussenseiter der Gesellschaft* (*Outsiders of Society*, 1924–1925) by the publishing house Die Schmiede. This genre is strongly connected to the Neue Sachlichkeit, and *BB* cites iconic images by painter Christian Schad and photographer August Sander.

Thus, besides the mash-up of genres, one could also speak of a mash-up of styles ranging from expressionist imagery (Otto Dix and George Grosz) to proletarian realism (Pabst, Phil Jutzi, Zlatan Dudow). In its depiction of poverty and corruption, *BB* certainly pays homage to *The Threepenny Opera* (1928); however, it steers clear of Bertolt Brecht's communist politics: it is Mackie Messer without Marx. Similarly, it quotes Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) via the images of Fosse's *Cabaret*, but without taking on the queer sexual politics of the time, as Jill Smith has outlined, let alone crucial historical discussions on feminism or sexual reproduction. This example shows that it might be productive to think about which Weimar culture styles and genres the series truly *doesn't* engage. Most importantly, it is clearly not a social satire (irony has no place in this series); instead it adheres to the stylistic conventions of melodrama, particularly in the close-up shots of Lotte's stoic suffering.

Sneeringer: If every generation creates its own Weimar, directors Tom Tykwer, Henk Handloegten, and Achim von Borries, and composer Johnny Klimek—all born in the 1960s—have created one filtered through 1980s West Berlin, where each spent time. There they would have witnessed that decade's particular Weimar nostalgia, marked by major exhibitions on the Ufa studios, the Comedian Harmonists revival, and ubiquitous

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popular books on the "new woman." They would have also experienced gray, divided Berlin, whose ruined Potsdamer Platz served as a blank screen on which to project fantasies of the golden twenties.

A related filter I see is a 1980s post-punk aesthetic. This emerges in the series's use of music, with the free-jazz-meets-industrial track over the opening credits planting the flag sonically. When Lotte—the embodiment of "poor but sexy" Berlin (itself now an object of nostalgia as grungy Berlin gives way to gentrification)—dances her troubles away at the Moka Efti, she recalls another iconic post-punk German visual: the trapeze artist Marion in 1987's *Himmel über Berlin* (*Wings of Desire)*, who dances away her despair to the music of sometime West Berliner Nick Cave.

The centerpiece musical numbers at the Moka Efti are also shot through an eighties filter. Bryan Ferry's performance of Roxy Music's "Bitter-Sweet," with its German-language chorus "Das ist nicht das Ende der Welt," captures the end-of-the-world feeling associated with both Weimar and 1980s West Berlin. (That filter also works in reverse: Roxy's "Dance Away," reworked in a 1920s style, appears as diegetic music in another scene.) "Zu Asche, zu Staub" conjures up both Marlene Dietrich and David Bowie through Sorokina/Nikoros' deep-voiced crooning and androgynous costuming. It also echoes Madonna, particularly her *Metropolis*-inspired video for "Express Yourself" (1989), while the robotic moves on stage and on the dance floor echo Michael Jackson. (Volker Bruch recently Instagrammed a clip of himself in character doing the moonwalk.)

These cultural mash-ups also participate in the long German tradition of using blackness to evoke bodily liberation and "authentic" feeling. Placing a Delta bluesman in 1929 Berlin allows the filmmakers to display a defiantly miscegenist Berlin, diametrically opposed to Nazi visions of racial purity. Josephine Baker is referenced at the Moka Efti by a troupe of white dancers in banana skirts. But this army of female automatons is less Baker than Devo with their identical plastic *Bubiköpfe*—again, Weimar meets the eighties. In contrast, women (and men) of color feature prominently among the dancers in the club scenes, where they convey a sensuality that is both intoxicating and dangerous—a rather lazy cliché. In the filmmakers' rejection of strict "papier-maché nostalgia," *BB* uses music to blur time and space, scrambling notions of authenticity and reality.[11]

Buerkle: *BB* makes the destruction of evidence a central narratological matter. But in its citation of genre, it has itself also demonstratively "destroyed the film" by barely obscuring the Jewish history that enables its scaffolding. For example, *BB* highlights *People on Sunday*, and in interviews cast and crew regularly point to the film as a central inspiration. Accepting the influence that this film and others, such as *Symphony of a Great City*, had on *BB* means that the frantic pace of this series has as its site of origin the pacing that Jewish filmmakers chose on the brink of exile. *People on Sunday* is typically read as a last gasp of innocence, but it is also a film organized around multiple chases and is about fleeing the threat of violence in an environment that asserts the bucolic.

BB underlines the complexity of the apparently benign in *People on Sunday*. First, in the Wannsee scenes that most obviously mirror *People on Sunday*, the menace of a predatory masculinity that claims to quote Lenin while actually quoting Hitler is no laughing matter. Greta's frivolous call for help pierces the "boys being boys" presumption that has typically

[11]Lars-Olav Beier, "Schluss mit Pappmaché-Retro-Nostalgie!", *Der Spiegel*, October 12, 2017.

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accompanied readings of *People on Sunday* (which has recently been questioned by Carrie Collenberg-Gonzalez). Second, in a related poignant scene, Lotte sits in the cinema clearly despondent while the audience watching *People on Sunday* laughs. In the following scene, Stephan Jänicke signs for his deaf parents Mahler's "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen" ("I am lost to the world") from his *Rückert-Lieder*. Mahler claimed as inspiration for his composition the fact that Rückert composed hundreds of texts in mourning for the loss of his children. The song's original manuscript was stolen by the Nazis in 1941. As Stephan signs for his deaf parents—who are unable to hear the song's rhythm—the story prefigures their loss and Stephan's murder.

There are also cinematic tropes relevant to the matter of passing, which Kerry Wallach has written about extensively. In what might be read as an enactment of German Jewish assimilation, Benda invokes religion in his first encounter with Rath, asking him, "Are you Catholic? You should come to Mass. I play the organ there." Rath does go to Mass, and in an evocative scene, we see Benda at the organ, with a knowledge of the ritual that rivals many in the pews. He is an observer and an able facilitator of the events below. We might think of this scene as inviting a relationship to the 1923 film *Das alte Gesetz* (*The Ancient Law*), in which the stage manager spies the Jewish lead as he sits alone backstage davening on Yom Kippur. *BB* mirrors Weimar-era film in this way, too, for its staging of shadows and unclear identities.

3. How do we read *BB* as a work of art—albeit a highly commodified one—rather than primarily a media event/historical document/sociological study?

Sneeringer: Clearly, the production team has studied the period's look, and their visual references indicate which Weimar interests them. One reference to Grosz that I found striking comes in the scene when Bruno looks out at the lake after he thinks he's killed Gereon and Lotte. As he stands by the water smoking a cigarette, I thought of Grosz's *Feierabend/ich dien* (*After Work/I Serve*, 1919), which depicts a Freikorpsman having a smoke by the Isar River while surveying the bodies of his victims. That framing of Bruno strips away any sentimentality around his Berliner *Schnauze* and cements his identity as a fascist thug.

I've already discussed *BB* as a Weimar-post-punk mash-up. It uses music to convey the interplay of locations and the fluidity of time (one of Tykwer's trademarks). *BB*'s use of the song "Mackie Messer" from *The Threepenny Opera* aurally links physical and social space. It's the signal among the conspirators plotting to assassinate Gustav Stresemann. It's played on a gramophone in the Mietskaserne courtyard by a blind organ grinder (recalling *M*). It's whistled by middle-aged Bruno and middle-class Moritz. In the latter case, it not only serves the *Prangertag* plot—it flags the generation gap between square uncle Gereon and the budding adolescent embracing pop culture ("everybody knows it").

Another artistic element is the series's clear debt to Scorsese's oeuvre. Gangster film tropes evoke Berlin's nickname "Chicago an der Spree." The filmmakers have cited *Boardwalk Empire* (2010–2014) as an influence (also set in a post–World War I gangster milieu). Other Scorsese references abound in the series's use of Catholicism. Gereon gets his drugs at the Severin apothecary, a reference to the fourth-century Cologne saint (and, in line with the post-punk aesthetic, also an allusion to the Velvet Underground song "Venus in Furs"). In flashbacks, Gereon is ever the Catholic boy, small and alone. Like nearly all Scorsese protagonists (from Charlie in *Mean Streets* to Jesus himself in *The Last Temptation of Christ*), Gereon seeks absolution and redemption. His increasing openness to Berlin's

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sensual pleasures signifies his rejection of hierarchical, Catholic Cologne. That said, he may be leaving that world behind, but it never fully leaves him.

Fuechtner: Reading *BB* as a work of art means reading it against the interpretative framework it lays out for itself, its own truth claims in regard to social and political history. As Darcy Buerkle mentions, Tykwer has described the series as an atmospheric depiction of a milieu, which the viewer should want to enter to experience "how it felt." However, *BB* falls into the trap of equating "the feel" of Weimar-era Berlin with the aesthetics of what was an elite art cinema. Weimar cinema, let alone Weimar Berlin, was not just *Caligari* and *Metropolis*, as Anton Kaes has written, but mainly light entertainment fare "without any pretensions to artistic quality."[12] In contrast, *BB* is all shadows and angles, and one might think that the sun never shone in Weimar Berlin. It's authentic not to Weimar Republic history but to its iconic art. In fact, it feels like walking through a modernist avant-garde novel or film, and in that way, it delivers on the pleasure of seeing some of the most amazing, groundbreaking, and complicated art of the early twentieth century creatively reimagined. There are mash-ups with art of the 1980s, as Sneeringer has shown, but also with the 1990s, in the techno rave scenes or with Tykwer's earlier films, particularly *Lola rennt* (*Run Lola Run*, 1998).

Buerkle: As I see it, as a work of art, *BB* participates in the unerasable trace, invoking a cultural imaginary that, once reread, permeates the story. In addition to the matters of Jewishness and gender, there is the central foregrounding of irrefutable evidence through the image (photos, film, paintings), all of which can be and are treated with grotesque lack of care or destroyed—with consequence. The close relationship between these images and the perpetual corpses linked to those images throughout—on the autopsy table, in the woods, in the Spree—makes vivid, in my view, the post-1945 indictment of looking away. But the historical specificity of the visual vocabulary does not end there. The fetishizing of the train, the assertion that there is gold when there is none to be found, except the train-as-fetish itself and that, of course, what the train holds mostly is poisonous gas: none of these markers appear without the weight of history, nor does the number that Lotte spies on the arm of the dead train operator. Calling attention to it gets her kicked out of the room. The popular song composed for the series, "Zu Asche, zu Staub," might itself be read as an incantation of the history that the series ostensibly seeks to banish. There are historical claims being made here that complicate the status of apparent absence—depending on who is listening or watching. In other words, although it could be argued that the elaborate aesthetics might seduce the spectator into abnegation, I prefer to read the series otherwise. That is, to think of the spectacularity of its aesthetics and high production value as part of the indictment that it makes and to reconsider the metaphorical terms within which it makes that claim as a part of its power.

Lerner: *BB* is many things, and there is nothing to be gained from revisiting outmoded distinctions between fine art and mass culture, or high- and low-brow forms of art. The series clearly delights in its boundary and genre crossings as much as its gender-bending characters: at once a revenue-generating media event, a product, so to speak (content, as it is called in the

[12]Anton Kaes, "Film in der Weimarer Republik," in *Geschichte des Deutschen Films*, ed. Wolfgang Jacobsen, Anton Kaes, and Hans Helmut Prinzler (Stuttgart and Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 1993), 46.

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entertainment industry), but also a provocation for sustained reflection about history, democracy, class, gender, and indeed mass culture itself. Of course, its spectacular qualities, its vivid Weimar surfaces (to invoke Janet Ward's work on this topic) can hold one's attention on the superficial level and work against this kind of reflection, and this viewer, for one, found that it was often difficult to resist becoming absorbed in the plot twists and romantic suspense in ways that stifled that very reflection. Yet, for all of its slick production values and lavish numbers, *BB* invites us to think about the past, to place ourselves in relation to that past, and to ponder the possibility of representing the past in ways that few series do.

Ganeva: There is no doubt that *BB* places a premium on the complex visual effects of Weimar Berlin. The series's visual extravaganza and its staging strategies in particular—from sets, to costumes, to choreography—confirm the sense of postmodern mash-up that blends the sartorial fetishism of a period drama such as *Downton Abbey* (2010–2015) with the intricacies of a computer-animated reality. French designer Pierre-Yves Gayrand is well known for his award-winning, carefully researched, and yet amazingly imaginative costumes for, among others, *Indochine* (1992) and two Tykwer films, *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* (2006) and *Cloud Atlas* (2012). His extensive iconographic research for *BB* involved some three thousand documents (including illustrated magazines and newsreel footage of the time). Gayrand's team designed costumes for some two hundred leading roles, 150 supporting roles and smaller parts, and close to eight thousand extras. The preparation included more than a thousand dress rehearsals, and even the leads were surprised by the huge amount of time spent on finding just the right authentic look for their character: Volker Bruch recalls trying on ten to twelve hats before deciding on one. As Gayrand stated in a promotional documentary, his team "tried to create a small world of its own for each actor and actress." Experts have noted the whole register of possibilities—from professional wear to evening gowns, and from the rags to police uniforms to party outfits—all realistically reflecting the specifically German version of 1920s fashion; at the same time, various international trends in Weimar Berlin are made visible as well, for example the "Oxford bags" worn by a man on the street in one scene, that is, loose-fitted, wide-legged men's trousers popular among students at Oxford University after 1924.[13] In contrast to the impeccable gloss of *Downton Abbey*'s costumes, the realism of *BB*'s carefully crafted, gritty styles remains indisputable. Yet the costumes cannot be tied to the specific timeframe of May–September 1929; they are, by design, a composite image of the long 1920s. As Gayrand himself admitted, this could be a problem for the continuation of the series because one would not be able to show the evolution of fashion over time.

The costumes are closely coordinated with the set designs by Uli Hanisch, another early collaborator of Tykwer, who benefited from both advanced computer technology and the stroke of luck. Since much of the 1920s metropolis either does not exist anymore or has been radically transformed, there were limited possibilities for filming on location. Popular locations for historical shoots such as Prague and Budapest were ruled out. Just as the series was in its early stages of conception, however, Babelsberg Studio planned to raze its twenty-year-old "Berliner Straße" and build a completely new metropolitan backlot. *BB*'s creators turned out to be the very first client and had a say in the construction process.

[13] "Video-Teaser 9: Costume Design" (https://babylon-berlin.com/en/press/video-teaser-9-kostuem-bild/).

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Their complicated plot lines were literally written at the same time as the new sets were created. This circumstance gave Hanisch enormous freedom. As with the costumes, the streets of Berlin on the screen were a hybrid product, a blend of traditional sets and digital reality. A team of graphic designers and computer specialists worked with hundreds of historical photographs to "extend" the fifty-four three-story uncompleted buildings on the backlot to their full height and endow them with elaborate facades. Some of the mass scenes—for example, the aerial shots of Alexanderplatz or the chase after the attempted Stresemann assassination in the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm—are composites of on-location shots and CGI images.

Smith: Again, I'll take the generous view and then the critical view. This series deserves the prizes it has won for acting, sets, cinematography, and original music. It is a stunning, alluring work of art. Its critical acclaim and its popularity create both challenges and opportunities for us as scholars. For my own research, I am keen to offer close readings of the series's cultural references in order to explore how *BB* contributes to contemporary aesthetic reflections on Weimar culture. I also feel obligated to draw critical attention to the way in which the series perpetuates a stereotypical image of Weimar Berlin as Babylon—that can be traced back to the Wilhelmine era but became cemented in the popular imagination with the film *Cabaret*.

Babylon carries with it the biblical connotations of sin, excess, and imminent demise that still cling to stories about and histories of Weimar Germany, no matter how hard we try to complicate such clichés. With *BB*, it seems that this rhetoric is back with a vengeance, and certainly most reviews that appear in English-language media help to perpetuate it by repeatedly using terms such as *doom* and *debauchery* and by bringing up the image of the "dance on the edge of the volcano."[14] What I call "the *Cabaret* syndrome" contains the absurd notion that the so-called sexual decadence of Weimar played a key role in the republic's end and the rise of the Nazis. The most blatant example of this syndrome comes at the end of episode 2, when an elaborate song, dance, and sexual subterranean sequence in the Moka Efti is cross-cut with the assassination of a group of Russian Trotskiites by two Stalinist agents—a cinematic nod in itself to *Cabaret*, which relies heavily on cross-cutting for dramatic effect, but also connecting bawdy cabaret numbers with increasing political violence. This is mass murder to the beat of a jazz drum, and I feel obligated as a scholar to detach the images of bodies writhing in sexual ecstasy or dance from those of bodies bloodied by gunfire.

4. What is *BB*'s place in the new media landscape, which is very different from what it was between the 1970s and the early 2000s? How does this connect to questions of spectatorship and viewing pleasure?

Fuechtner: *BB* allows for many different types of pleasure, and they render this series seductive despite my reservations about it. First, the scholar's pleasure of entering the rabbit hole of references: from the depictions of proletarian life via Heinrich Zille's imagery to the evocation of war trauma through Wiene's horror classic *Orlacs Hände* (*The Hands of Orlac*, 1924). Furthermore, the guilty pleasure of immediacy of a historical experience. As scholars, we work with the notion that a historical series is a form of highly selective and contingent narration, and here we have a narration that simultaneously claims to be both: a contemporary

[14]Cameron Hood, "Babylon Berlin," *The New Yorker*, May 21, 2018 (https://www.newyorker.com/recommends/watch/babylon-berlin); and Isenberg, "Voluptuous Panic."

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homage to a time and its total historical reality. There is an immense pleasure in having your cake and eating it too, precisely because you know it's all wrong. It's pornography for scholars—Weimar porn.

That term also connects to the more sinister pleasures involved in watching *BB*. Like *Mad Men*, this series also allows for the pleasure (for some) of watching misogyny without censure. Though ostensibly framed as a historical phenomenon, the images are imbued with nostalgic sentiment and melodramatic sadism. As Darcy Buerkle has noted, the series allows for the suspension of the painful knowledge of the Holocaust. What if we Germans were good after all? What could have been? There is an escapist pleasure in being allowed to imagine German innocence. It also supports the view that the emergence of fascism was linked to human failure, particularly a culture of corruption and opportunism, rather than to clearly identifiable political and economic interests. We were once innocent, and then we let ourselves be seduced. Killing Jews becomes a matter of choosing the wrong boyfriend, like the young apolitical Greta Overbeck did. Not only is the Shoah momentarily erased, but so is the richness of Weimar Berlin's Jewish history. Most egregiously, *BB* imagines the history of psychiatry and psychoanalysis without Jews. On the one hand, as Julia Sneeringer has mentioned, Weimar Berlin is visualized as a contemporary multiracial global hub of pleasure; on the other hand, the lens through which this vision is framed, Dr. Schmidt's hypnosis, is shaped by a fraternity (literally) that obscures actual historical diversity.

Sneeringer: *BB* is not on a pedagogical mission à la *Roots* (1977) or *Holocaust* (1978), and it's folly to judge it on those terms. It has to justify its production cost by reaching a broad audience beyond the German market. Thus, it has to make Weimar accessible, leading to the kinds of shorthand discussed in this forum. It also has to compete in a crowded media landscape in which prestige series tumble forth almost weekly. Hence, it offers suspense, action, and sex appeal. Episode 1 opens with this combination as Gereon and Lotte meet cute over strewn police photographs of corpses and pornography. Gereon is an exemplar of the broken male detective who currently rules the small screen on shows like *True Detective* (2014). Like any high-profile crime drama made today, *BB* relishes in police procedure, fetishizes guns, and meets audience desires for "authenticity" in its visceral autopsies and greasy slums.

BB also offers the "pleasure" of seeing parallels between Weimar's unraveling and today's politics—the same itch that is scratched by *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017–present), *The Man in the High Castle* (2015–2019), even *Chernobyl* (2019). These dystopian series hit a nerve with audiences seeking something—validation of our worst fears? mastery of our anxieties?—to cope with the endless stream of demoralizing news since 2016. In the end, however sophisticated its production values or deeply researched its story, *BB* is ultimately a *Krimi*. If it doesn't deliver audiences a satisfying ride, all the historical verisimilitude or mash-up tricks in the world won't mean a thing in the modern media landscape.

Lerner: For a German historian, the experience of watching *BB* might compare to the thrill others feel when visiting Disneyland, coupled with the anxiety of a fact checker. It is breathtaking to see Weimar Berlin come to life in the kaleidoscopic opening credits, in the film's carefully choreographed spatial geography, which nods and winks to those of us who know Berlin's streets and its architectural history. In our conference symposium, several speakers compared the experience to playing a video game, but for me, it was more akin to time travel or virtual reality. One feels and is exhilarated (though also troubled) by the power of the media yet constantly on edge for missteps or anachronisms.

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Of course, the exhilaration of seeing Weimar Berlin brought to life comes at a cost, and in this context I wish to introduce my concerns about the series. I would like to pose the possibility that there is a danger in presenting the last gasps of Weimar democracy as entertainment, wherein a society on the verge of fascism, a country riven by economic crisis and political polarization is served up as a playground for the erotic adventures of two glamorous if seedy protagonists for our viewing pleasure and titillation. Perhaps Kutscher's *Krimis* are ultimately a poor vehicle for getting at larger issues around Weimar's unparalleled cultural and intellectual legacies; its ambitious public health and housing initiatives; its progressive if halting steps toward gender equality; and its flourishing LGBTQ subcultures. The erosion of democracy, espionage, and pornography rings makes better TV. More significant than the declared adherence to historical accuracy, it's not enough for *BB* to gaze backward and disrupt the historical teleology; my appreciation of this enormously captivating achievement would be less conflicted if the series had somehow faced the additional demand of not mining Weimar's downfall purely for entertainment value and not merely glamorizing this consequential moment in German and European history.

Ganeva: As pointed out earlier, *BB* marks a clear departure from previous filmic appropriations of Weimar. One last reference to *Berlin Alexanderplatz*: Although Fassbinder's Berlin as an iconographic decor was filmed almost entirely in the old Bavaria studios and the city was reconstructed primarily acoustically, with language, dialect, music, and radio sounds, *BB* is more of an extravagant visual compendium of all things Weimar or, more precisely, of the mythologies about Weimar. In addition, it whetted the appetite of TV audiences for more Weimar. Capitalizing on the popularity of *BB*, a new eight-part docudrama series premiered on different TV stations across Europe in September 2018 reflecting on the interwar period and targeting audiences beyond Germany: *Krieg der Träume* (*Clash of Futures*) was created by the documentary filmmakers Jan Peter and Gunnar Dedio and interweaves the life stories of thirteen personalities—from Pola Negri to Hồ Chí Minh—between 1919 and 1939.

BB's place in the contemporary media landscape will be determined not only by the novelty of the episodes released so far, but also by how it continues: How is the "seriality" of the series going to be sustained, without reaching a point of saturation with its visual extravaganza and repetitions? Will it gravitate closer to the themes in Kutscher's novels, follow their precise chronology, and attempt to achieve greater historical authenticity in a more conventional way?

Smith: I cannot help but to use a rather crude comparison to the German economy and the way Germany as a nation is marketing itself in the era of Angela Merkel. Germany's economy is driven by exports, and the quality of those exports offers the global market a different image of Germany than one that is overshadowed by its violent past. *BB* is first and foremost a high-gloss export—a lavish production with a complex plot, made in the German language and set in the German capital. This mythicized Berlin of the golden twenties is gritty and violent, but also sexy and sleek. And just as the series's creators remind us of the 1920s tourism slogan "Jeder einmal in Berlin" ("A Visit to Berlin for Everyone!") at several points in the series, *BB* is sponsored in part by the capital city's marketing agency, Visit Berlin. In fact, the director of Visit Berlin, Bernhard Kieker, was master of ceremonies at the series's Berlin premiere in 2017, and when perusing Visit Berlin's website, I found that it relied heavily on the series as a vehicle for tourism. The series, therefore, not only serves as the dominant lens through

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which 1920s Berlin is viewed, but it also projects an image to global audiences of contemporary Berlin as sexy, hip, and Nazi-free, yet also a bit dangerous.

The problem with this image is that it relies on a troubling mixture of sex and violence, particularly gratuitous and aestheticized violence enacted upon the body of the female lead. In the final episodes of the second season, Lotte is beaten, chloroformed, kidnapped, chained by an iron ankle brace, choked, shut in a freezer, and nearly drowned by various male characters. The opening scene of episode 13 dwells on her growing desperation when she wakes up to find herself chained in a secret room within the Moka Efti; the audience hears her quickened breathing and her strained moans as she pulls on her chains, while the camera sharpens its focus on those chains and leaves Lotte's face in a soft haze. Such scenes of aestheticized violence remind me to view *BB* with a critical, feminist eye, a perspective that in turn reminds me that the target audience for this series is heterosexual, white, and male, just like the series's creators.

Buerkle: The extraordinary production values of *BB* succeed masterfully in demonstrating the viability and vitality of a fully German television production (except for the impressive and enormous job of costume design, which, as Mila Ganeva illustrates previously, was French). The directors insisted that *BB* should be shot in Germany, in German, thus also specifying a German audience. All this, before it was at all clear that the series would be an international success, and even before it was understood that it would portray a perilous moment of right-wing violence, just when right-wing violence would again take meaningful root in both Europe and the United States. A guiding principle was clearly the intention to cultivate a representation of ignorance about what was to come. In this, the series may have its most profound relation to the present moment in the United States—the realization that anticipations of doom in 2016 could not have anticipated what it means to live through the reality of daily assaults on democracy.

The questions framing this roundtable sound different to me now, more than a year after we first started thinking together about this series. Part of the reason for this has to do with one of the central points that I tried to make at the time, namely the significance of the fact that the US market first embraced this series when the comparisons to the undoing of democracy in the United States enjoyed regular invocations of Weimar Germany as an instructive foreshadowing comparison. Enthusiasts often made these analogies and thus cultivated a particular spectatorial zeal related to the timing of *BB*'s appearance in 2017. Since then, searching for precedence brings cold comfort, mired as we are in a disaster so great, both specifically US-American as well as total, that the impulse to reach for precedent has largely passed. "There is nothing less than the future of democracy at stake," Benda claims as he stages an effort to stop the Black Reichswehr. By now, in 2020, it is his last conversation with Rath that echoes through more convincingly: "We played and we lost."

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