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Berlin Alexanderplatz: Brecht/Döblin/Fassbinder—in search of synthesis

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Abstract With its voice-over narrator, Gothic captions and distancing devices, Fassbinder's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980) has been compared to his 1974 adaptation of Fontane's *Effi Briest*. Döblin's novel, with its avant-garde and Brechtian aspects, appealed to Fassbinder from an early age, although mainly for personal, emotional reasons. However, Fassbinder's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* lacks the stifling rigidity and stilted artificiality of his *Effi Briest*. In the first thirteen episodes, he made Döblin's modernist masterpiece more accessible by simplifying the storyline and allowing mainly realistic, emotional, non-stylised acting. Günter Lamprecht and Barbara Sukowa as Franz and Mieze tug at the heartstrings. These episodes are closer to the amalgam of Naturalism and "Verfremdung" which we later find in *Lola* (1981). Fassbinder once said that he went further than Brecht. Perhaps, he has achieved here his desire of fusing Brecht and Sirk, of synthesising "Verfremdung" and emotionalism? Was Fassbinder, unlike Döblin, a bourgeois intellectual author and Olympian narrator, who kept his proletarian non-intellectual anti-hero at a distance, more sympathetic to Franz because of the novel's importance during his teenage years and the themes it provided for many of his films?

Keywords Fassbinder · Döblin · Brecht · *Berlin Alexanderplatz* · "Verfremdung"

This is the fourth (and probably the last) in a series of articles examining Brecht's influence on Fassbinder. In the first article,[1] I tried to show how Brecht influenced Fassbinder's style in his 1974 film of Fontane's *Effi Briest* (1895). Basically,

[1] Peter K. Tyson (2010), "Distancing Techniques in Fassbinder's *Effi Briest*", *Neophilologus,* 94, 499-508 and online DOI 10.1007/s11061-009-9187-3.

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Fassbinder introduced an array of distancing techniques to present Effi more critically and ironically than Fontane. Then, I assessed the relative influence of Sirk and Brecht on Fassbinder with specific reference to his film *Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant* (1972),[2] asking whether Fassbinder was able to blend Brechtian "Verfremdung" with Sirkian melodrama. The main difference between the two directors is the intensity of their distancing devices. Although Sirk was influenced to some extent by Brecht, his "Verfremdung" is so weak that it does not prevent his films from generating the great emotional empathy which reduced his audiences to tears and made him the "master of the weepie".[3] In contrast, Fassbinder's "Verfremdung" in *Petra von Kant* is far more intense and, because it is so effective, he cannot create the same emotional identification or catharsis as Sirk. Fassbinder proves much more ambiguous, complex and layered; his ironies and contradictions run deeper. In a third article,[4] I analysed Brecht's influence on Fassbinder's content with particular reference to his film *Lola* (1981), showing how Fassbinder shared with Brecht a materialist view of characters as dynamic products of their social relationships and situations. The main difference is that, whereas Brecht believed optimistically in changing society for the better, Fassbinder, the pessimist, only presents social wrongs without being able to offer any solutions—his films frequently end in failure, death or despair. The aim of this last article is to examine why Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) appealed to Fassbinder and how he adapted it to television.

Döblin's novel appeared as a newspaper serial in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and, when it was published in book form, sold more copies in its first few weeks than all of Döblin's other works combined. *Berlin Alexanderplatz* conflates Naturalism (Berlin dialect, realistic locations, the seedy life of the lower classes, sordid themes like murder, crime and prostitution) with modernism (montage techniques, epic narration, apocalyptic Expressionist imagery). Franz Biberkopf's proletarian fate "can be said to parody the conventions of the [bourgeois] *Bildungsroman*".[5] Scherer argues that the novel is not an "Entwicklungsroman" because these tend to have intellectual heroes, with whom the (bourgeois) novelists can identify, and portray an ideal version of their authors "whereas Döblin depicts a [non-intellectual, proletarian] hero from whom he is somewhat distant".[6] Others have seen *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as "Döblin's most Expressionistic novel",[7] as having "a montage and stream-of-consciousness technique comparable to James Joyce's *Ulysses*"[8] and "a narrative style reminiscent of John Dos Passos and James Joyce",[9] although

[2] Peter K. Tyson (2011), "Sirk or Brecht? Or Both? Determining the Guiding Influence in Fassbinder's *The Bitter Tears of Petra* Von *Kant*", *Bright Lights Film Journal*, 72, at www.brightlightsfilm.com/72/.

[3] Willemen (1991, 273).

[4] Peter K. Tyson, "Love and marriage in Fasssbinder's *Lola* (1981)", accepted by *Germanic Notes and Reviews* for publication in a future issue.

[5] Webber (2007, 171).

[6] Scherer (1977, 60).

[7] *Encyclopaedia Britannica* Online.

[8] Back cover, Koepke.

[9] *The Chemistry Encyclopedia*.

Clark describes Döblin as "more visionary, and even apocalyptic, than Dos Passos".[10]

The major difference between Fontane (in *Effi Briest*) and Döblin is their style of narration. Fontane, following nineteenth-century realist traditions, remains a cautious, neutral, third-person narrator who keeps himself in the background. Because facts are allowed to speak for themselves and the psychological reality of characters' inner lives is mainly left unspoken, Fontane's novel appears subtle and ambiguous. Fassbinder, in his film version, is more critical of Effi and, therefore, has to introduce a range of devices to distance her from the viewer. In particular, he juxtaposes himself as a voice-over narrator, who reads directly from the text, between the viewer and the action, thus creating an immediate layer of distance. Döblin's Olympian narrator proves very different. He looks down with superiority on the sufferings of Franz Biberkopf ("meines kleinen Menschen").[11] Sometimes, Döblin refers to himself as "ich" (or "wir") and he is like a doctor examining a specimen. In contrast to Fontane's anonymity, he addresses the reader directly, comments, interferes and generally makes his presence felt. His protagonist is called "unser Franz Biberkopf" (264) and addressed directly as "du" (265). The narrator is in charge and looks down, almost patronisingly, on his inferior object of study. Thus, the distancing, which was lacking in *Effi Briest* and which Fassbinder had to introduce himself, is already an integral part of Döblin's text. Together with the use of interior monologue ("erlebte Rede") to get inside the heads of various characters, we have a wide variety of narrative voices.

Indeed, there are many Brechtian features which are built into Döblin's novel and which would certainly have appealed to Fassbinder. Döblin distances us from Franz in a number of ways. Like Brecht, he uses captions at the start of his nine books to comment on the action, to anticipate events and to bring out the moral of the story. His montage style prevents a straightforward linear development of the narrative. Döblin breaks up the action with broad documentary realism. To give the flavour of Berlin in the 1920s, he includes weather reports, signs, adverts, tram routes, news items, etc. The story is underpinned with all sorts of factual details, statistics and technical information. He even digresses at times into literature and religion, making references, for example, to Aeschylus, Kleist and the Bible. To hold this loose, rambling, episodic structure together, Döblin uses a number of repetitive, rhythmic leitmotifs, often taken from songs.

Brechtian themes and images are also employed. The idea that it is not possible to be good in a cruel (capitalist) world is found throughout Brecht in works like *Die Dreigroschenoper* (written 1928) and *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* (written 1938–1940). Döblin condemns Franz's idealistic view that it is possible to be "anständig" (11) in a cruel corrupt world. Franz has to abandon his idealism and see the world realistically—"wie alles ist, nicht aus Zucker, aber aus Zucker und Dreck und alles durcheinander" (434). He also suffers from "Hochmut" (411), the arrogant belief that he can solve all his problems himself. Individualism is no longer possible and he has to learn the importance of the collective—that he needs others in order to survive. The image of the "Schlachthof" to symbolise the heartless brutality of

[10] See Clark article on website.

[11] Alfred Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (Munich: dtv, 2011), 192. All references are to this edition.

capitalism is found as well in *Die heilige Johanna der Schlachthöfe* (written 1929–1930). Döblin combines this image with a wide range of animal imagery to imply that Franz is no better than an animal ("der Mensch hat nichts mehr denn das Vieh", 146). The cruel blows of fate which batter him are no different from the hammer blows which the animals receive in the slaughterhouse. As in Brecht's *Der aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui* (1941), crime is merely another way of doing business. Pums behaves just like a "Geschäftsmann" (317) and the Pums gang carry out their robberies "geschäftsmässig" (318). Döblin shares with Brecht a love of boxing imagery to reflect the little man's fierce battle for survival.

Apart from the Brechtian themes, other aspects of the novel would have attracted Fassbinder. Franz is presented as a perpetual victim, as an apolitical average citizen who is only interested in himself ("'Selbst ist der Mann. Ich mache allein, wat ich brauche. Ick bin Selbstversorger!'", 272). Although Fassbinder leaned politically to the left, he distrusted political activism, rejecting direct action and armed violence,[12] preferring to criticise the social shortcomings of West Germany without offering any way forward. An ex-prisoner, who cannot avoid mixing with criminals and assorted low-life, Franz is stuck at the bottom of the social ladder. He dabbles in politics but, like Fassbinder, has no real commitment. Although Jews have been kind to him, he sells anti-Semitic "völkische Zeitungen" (82) opportunistically and sings "Die Wacht am Rhein" with its patriotic but also Nazi overtones. After losing his arm, he wears an iron cross to arouse sympathy and give the false impression that he is a war hero. When he attends political meetings, he only stirs up trouble, being denounced by the radical revolutionaries on account of his immoral lifestyle (living off Mieze as a pimp): "'Ihr seid Abschaum vom Kapitalistensumpf. Haut bloss ab. Ihr seid noch nicht mal Proletarier. Sowat nennt man Lumpen.'" (272). Echoing Fontane, he believes in "Ordnung": "Er hat nichts gegen die Juden, aber er ist für Ordnung. Denn Ordnung muss im Paradiese sein […]" (82). Eventually, Franz turns his back on politics to just look after his own interests.

One particularly interesting aspect of the novel is that Döblin uses images and ideas which feature prominently in many of Fassbinder's films. Indeed, his view of women anticipates one of Fassbinder's regular themes. Fassbinder is a cynic who believes that love is a trap, a devious means of social coercion.[13] He constantly emphasizes the commodification of human relationships. Maria Braun exchanges her body for cigarettes and is traded, without her knowledge, by the two men in her life. Her husband Hermann and her boss Oswald agree a pact that allows Oswald to possess Maria provided that Hermann stays away until Oswald's death when Hermann and Maria will inherit Oswald's estate in his will.[14] Lola, as a prostitute in a brothel, is a commodity available to the highest bidder in the 1981 film of the same name.

[12] On the poster for his film about terrorism, *Die Dritte Generation* (1979), Fassbinder wrote: "Ich werfe keine Bomben, ich mache Filme".

[13] Fassbinder called love "das beste, hinterhältigste und wirksamste Instrument gesellschaftlicher Unterdrückung", quoted in Pott (2002, 178).

[14] Pott (2002) describes Maria in *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (1978) as a "Tauschobjekt" (158), noting that "Jede Beziehung hat ökonomische Bedingungen" (34). She continues: "Sie ist von beiden Männern, denen sie ihr Leben gewidmet hat, hintergangen worden. Sie ist zu einer Ware in der Tauschaktion geworden" (38). Maria's "Liebesbeziehung" has degenerated into an "Austauschbeziehung" (33).

At various times, Esslin, Schukert (who calls her his "Privathure") and von Bohm all try to buy her. As a reviewer remarks, "*Lola* is perhaps more directly concerned with the cost and effects of materialism than the others in the trilogy. The presence of commodities such as TVs and radios permeate the film, and the construction of a new building […] is central to the plot. Lola herself is one of these very 'commodities' (has any other woman in Fassbinder's oeuvre been so willfully objectified?), and one that's desperate to become socially-acceptable—to the point where she denigrates the institution of marriage to mere *deal-breaking*".[15] Fassbinder's Effi Briest, too, proves a commodity who is traded to a much older rising political star in a loveless mismatch: "Effi never was anything but *property*—property that changes hands".[16]

This prominent Fassbinder theme is anticipated by Döblin and plays an important part in Franz's downfall. Reinhold, the sickly, stuttering chief villain of the novel,[17] can only maintain a relationship with a girlfriend for about 4 weeks before he gets bored and wants a change. He enters into an agreement with Franz whereby Franz takes the old girlfriend off his hands so that Reinhold can then start a new relationship with a fresh girl for another 4 weeks. This process of passing on female cast-offs is referred to as "Kettenhandel" (180). The beginning of Franz's fall out with Reinhold, which leads eventually to him losing his arm and Reinhold murdering Mieze, comes about because Franz wants to put a stop to this "Mädchenhandel" (178)—"ich mache nicht mit, der ruiniert Menschen" (187). Franz believes that women are not mere commodities but actual human beings: "Ein Mensch ist ein Mensch, und ein Weibsstück auch" (188).[18] Nevertheless, Franz lets Eva give him Mieze as a present and becomes her pimp, living off the money she makes by hiring out her body. Mieze even says to Franz: "ick gehör ja dir" (335) and she is worried that Franz wants to trade her with Reinhold –"Du willst mir an den [Reinhold] verkoofen." (337). Aaron Winslow remarks: "Like the rest of the people in metropolitan Berlin, Mieze has become objectified, her emotions and her self a mere commodity. Her death is a pointless and brutal faux sacrifice, and her link to the rest of the Berliners suggests that they are sacrificing their humanity daily. One wonders if a sacrifice is worth anything when a human life is meaningless outside of purely numerical, economic terms".[19]

Another of Fassbinder's favourite themes is that of caged love. Pott writes: "Fassbinders Liebesdarstellungen sind mit einem Eingesperrtsein zu umschreiben.

[15] See anonymous reviewer at www.filmislove.blogspot.com.

[16] See Grunes review of *Effi Briest*.

[17] Webber (2007, 167) says that Reinhold kills Mieze "apparently as further punishment for Biberkopf" and sees him as "ambiguous". Reinhold's motivation does not seem that vague to me. Reinhold, who had pushed Franz out of the getaway car causing him to lose his arm after Franz had stopped the "Mädchenhandel", is further provoked by Franz's arrogant behaviour and feels the need to teach him a lesson: "Jetzt geht das Kamel [Franz] wieder rum und strahlt und protzt mit seine Braut; als wenn da was bei ist. Vielleicht nehm ich ihm die [Mieze] doch weg." (340). Fassbinder does not really elucidate Reinhold's motivation, leaving the viewer to decide, although in the Epilogue he does imply that Reinhold is driven by latent homosexuality.

[18] Cf. also: "Die Weiber tun einem leid, die doch auch Menschen sind wie wir" (193). Franz's naive, kind-hearted nature leads to his downfall!

[19] See Winslow article.

Es ist ein Eingesperrtsein in eine Ordnung. Fassbinder wählt Gitter, hinter die er die Liebe verbannt, in *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* verdoppelt er sogar die Gitter. In manchen Filmen, wie in *Fontane Effi Briest* (1972/74) und in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1979/80), hat er das Motiv des Vogelkäfigs zur Verdeutlichung der 'eingesperrten Liebe' genommen".[20] These caged images are also seen as a link between Fassbinder and a director he greatly admired, Douglas Sirk, who liked to portray his characters as repressed by social conventions and living in homes which are little more than prisons or cages: "They are always behind those window crossings, behind bars or staircases. Their homes are their prisons […] You are caged. In melodrama you have human, earthly prisons rather than godly creations".[21] However, Döblin already provides this image for Fassbinder when Mieze delights Franz by buying him a caged bird as a present (259).

Therefore, compared with Fontane's classic novel, Döblin's text contains many more images, techniques and themes which are suited to Fassbinder's style. The rhythms of the big city, the colourful low-life characters, their gritty language and the vast range of Döblin's epic narrative give plenty of scope to Fassbinder's powers of imagination and creativity. One important aspect, which seems appropriate because the novel had first appeared as a newspaper serial, was Fassbinder's decision to turn the text into a fourteen-part TV series rather than a shorter feature for the cinema. Films of novels often disappoint because, in order to fit a 2–3 h format, they have to omit or condense events and characters, causing the viewer to complain that the film is not as satisfying as the original. Some of the Harry Potter films are good examples of this. Films or TV adaptations tend to work best when the director has plenty of screen time at his disposal to explore the detail of a text and to bring out its intricacy. Successful examples of this approach are Visconti's lush 1971 production of Thomas Mann's short story *Der Tod in Venedig* (1912) or the lavish eleven-hour British (Granada) TV series (1981) of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945). Having 15 h available allowed a slow-moving director like Fassbinder, who loved to indulge in posed tableaux and lingering atmospheric shots, time to bring out the detail and subtlety of Döblin's modernist masterpiece and this is probably one of the key reasons for its success.

In 1930, Döblin wrote a "Hörspiel" version of his novel, toning down his original and experimenting with multilayered sound. This 78-minute production, which starred Heinrich George as Franz and was directed by Max Bing, was postponed out of political caution after the September 1930 Reichstag elections in which the Nazis dramatically increased their power from 12 to 107 seats. A fairly conventional 90-minute film version, also starring Heinrich George (1893–1946) as Franz, was directed by Phil Jutzi (1896–1946) in 1931. A former Communist, Jutzi was really a political opportunist and joined the Nazis in 1933. Döblin helped on this tame version which avoided all references to political, homosexual and Jewish themes. Even an optimistic, feel-good happy end was added as the producers played cautious, worried about political censorship and losing money because of Nazi protests or a boycott on its release in the cinemas (towards the end of 1931).

[20] Pott (2002, 41–42).

[21] See "Interview with Douglas Sirk".

At least, it made good use of the birdcage imagery and the montage scenes were praised.

It comes as no surprise that the expensive (13 million DM) TV series of a provocative, uncompromising director like Fassbinder should prove "probably the single most controversial production ever to appear on German television"[22] when it was first broadcast in 1980 despite its high quality cast which included many Fassbinder regulars: Margit Carstensen (Sarug), Irm Hermann (Trude), Brigitte Mira (Frau Bast), Hanna Schygulla (Eva), his mother Lilo Pempeit (Frau Pums), Hark Bohm (Lüders) and Günther Kaufmann (Theo). The main parts went to Günter Lamprecht (Franz), Gottfried John (Reinhold) and the wonderful Barbara Sukowa (Mieze). Peer Raben composed the evocative, haunting music. Filmed on 16 mm, it was too dark and dismal for many TV viewers and numbers dropped off as the series progressed. Cameron Abadi says it "flopped as a German TV mini-series in the 1980s […] flopping with critics and viewers alike".[23] Thomas Elsaesser reports that it was "greeted with howls of protest"[24] and was considered by many viewers "unacceptably disturbing".[25] Matt Saunders writes: "Lambasted by the conservative Springer press, it was denounced for various depravities […] Some critics found it tedious, while others indignantly noted that *Alexanderplatz* cost more than any television production in German history."[26]

The re-release of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as a remastered DVD box set in 2007 also turned out controversial in Germany. Responding to criticism that the original had been too dark, Juliane Lorenz[27] complained that the technology in the television studios had been inadequate at the time and explained that most viewers did not get a good picture because of their inferior quality black and white TV sets. Therefore, she brightened up Fassbinder's original in the remastering process. This led to criticism that she had doctored his masterpiece for commercial gain. Former Fassbinder associates condemned her re-issue for being "markedly brightened' in order to make it more palatable to consumers, despite the fact that RWF himself fought long and hard against the production company and the television network to keep his dark visual tones intact when it was broadcast in 1980".[28] However, Fassbinder had deliberately used filters to create a hazy, dusky atmosphere and to avoid clear delineation. Responding to complaints, Fassbinder had remarked in his usual uncompromising manner: "'There's a scene which is, and is supposed to be, very dark… that's supposed to be so dark in fact that you can only make out hands or the outlines of faces, and of course the German television viewer isn't used to that…

[22] Kuhn (1984, 119).

[23] See Abadi article.

[24] Elsaesser (1996, 232).

[25] Elsaesser (1996, 234).

[26] See Saunders article.

[27] Juliane Lorenz, Fassbinder's controversial second wife and head of the Fassbinder Foundation, has alienated many of his former colleagues and associates. See Katja Nicodemus, "No morals without style", an interview with Fassbinder's first wife, Ingrid Caven. Lorenz worked as an editor on Fassbinder's later films.

[28] See "Battle over RWF's legacy".

They just don't have the patience. I guess the viewers fiddled with the knobs on their TV sets and tried to make the picture brighter, and of course that didn't help'".[29]

In contrast, Fassbinder's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was acclaimed abroad. Its premiere at the Venice Film Festival was "a triumph" and in the US it was acclaimed by the "ecstatic" critics,[30] becoming an art house success. Susan Sontag considered it "a great film […] not a TV series" and thought it was best seen, not in fourteen separate episodes but in five sections of 3 h.[31] Fassbinder himself labelled it "einen Film in 13 Teilen und mit einem Epilog". By blending the episodes into each other, he creates the impression of one very long fluid film. It seems slightly strange that, after so many years of finding Fassbinder too slow-moving, too stylistically self-indulgent, too avant-garde and too challenging,[32] foreign critics should now lavish praise on Fassbinder, although *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was not considered the most experimental or extreme of his works.

Time rated the new version the #9 best DVD of 2007 and Clark lauded it as the "Best DVD of 2007".[33] It was praised as a "grand masterpiece […] a work of staggering ambition, a crowning achievement"[34] and as "a riveting, haunting experience" with its "murderous intensity".[35]*Newsweek* called it "Amazing", the *New York Times* "Magnificent". This lavish foreign acclamation can be attributed to the fact that many overseas critics saw *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as mainly lacking Fassbinder's usual avant-garde pyrotechnics and radical stylisation. Clark describes it as his "most straightforward and conventional movie, at least until the epilogue".[36] Jared Rapfogel makes a similar remark: "it is ultimately one of Fassbinder's most direct, emotionally transparent films, disarmingly free of irony or affect".[37] *Time Out* observed that Fassbinder "tells the story surprisingly naturalistically"[38]; Joe Ruffell called it a "naturalistic adaptation of Döblin's novel"[39]; Wilhelm Roth argues that Fassbinder "intensified the emotions and largely dispensed with Döblin's irony".[40] Finally, Dave Kehr goes even further: "Fassbinder discards the mannerism of his late films in favor of a noble simplicity, concentrating on a single point of view as it operates across a wide range of experiences and environments. All of the usual distancing effects drop out […]".[41]

[29] Fassbinder, quoted in Saunders article.

[30] See Saunders article.

[31] Sontag, "Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*". Megahey (2007) agreed with Sontag, describing *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as "essentially a 15 h movie rather than an episodic serial". See his review.

[32] See, for example, the foreign critical reactions to *Effi Briest* in my earlier *Neophilologus* article, 502.

[33] See Clark article.

[34] See Howard review.

[35] See Pulver review.

[36] See Clark article.

[37] See Rapfogel review.

[38] See *Time Out Film Guide*.

[39] See Ruffell article.

[40] See Roth review.

[41] See Kehr review.

Let's now examine how much of this is true. Is this an accessible, straightforward, non-ironic, naturalistic film without any distancing devices? The critics are partly right, partly wrong. At first glance, Fassbinder seems to go about filming *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in exactly the same way as he approached *Effi Briest*. Megahey notes: "Despite the thematic similarities to many of Fassbinder's own films, the one *Berlin Alexanderplatz* comes closest to resembling is his other classic literary adaptation—Theodore Fontane's *Effi Briest*".[42] As in *Effi Briest*, Gothic Brechtian-style captions not only add period detail but also break up and comment on the action. Again, a voice-over narrator, who reads directly from the text, is juxtaposed between the viewer and the action, creating a layer of distance. As well, Fassbinder uses a wide range of framing devices to close in the action and hammer home the message that Franz is no better than a caged animal, that he is trapped and imprisoned in Berlin. The frames come between us and the events depicted, reminding us that we are just watching a film.

Kehr is, therefore, completely wrong in saying that the distancing devices have been dropped. In the first episode alone, the characters are repeatedly framed—by trees, doorways, railings, mirrors, window panes, bed rails, net curtains and a table (when Franz has sex on the floor). However, the captions and the narrator are more restrained compared with *Effi Briest* and *Berlin Alexanderplatz* lacks its stifling rigidity. Fassbinder has made the film's overall structure (the first thirteen episodes) more accessible and less complicated than Döblin's ambitious modernist novel. He manages to cleverly work in many of Döblin's authentic documentary/montage features (radio adverts, excerpts from magazines, product details, magazine adverts, Newton's laws, scientific formulae, newspaper headlines, advertising columns, political posters, snippets from songs and rhymes, etc.) but his structure is not as fragmented as Döblin's original.

The film concentrates on Franz's story and the magnificent presence of Günter Lamprecht holds the thirteen episodes together. Further momentum is maintained by the later introduction of two other strong characters, Reinhold and Mieze (as in the novel). Fassbinder shows how dire social conditions (mass unemployment and poverty) force Franz to make compromises, go against his better beliefs and do anything just to make a living—selling tie holders and gay magazines, even wearing a swastika to sell the *Völkischer Beobachter*. It is practically impossible to avoid associating with criminals and getting dragged into crime. Fassbinder does break the linear narrative at times but the end result is not as stylised or as stilted as *Effi Briest*. He makes changes to condense the action, simplifying the locations,[43] replacing the character of Klempnerkarl with Meck and avoiding Döblin's stylistic extravagances (I never expected to say this of Fassbinder!). The voice-over narrator remains calm, dry and detached, adding some distancing as in the extended murder scene in episode 1 when the voice of the narrator reading from the text distances us from the brutality of Franz's reckless action. The linear narration is broken by flashbacks (to Ida and prison), by montages (the opening credits depicting historical scenes of

[42] See Megahey review.

[43] Fassbinder concentrates more on Frau Bast's room where Ida was killed. The repeated appearances of the landlady Frau Bast also help to unify the action.

Berlin's social deprivation and the slaughterhouse montage of historical photos) and by songs. Just as Döblin uses leitmotifs to hold his loose narrative structure together, Fassbinder uses the flashback to Ida's murder as a leitmotif to break up the linear narrative flow and also to serve as a constant reminder of Franz's violent side. The "Schnitter" motif, which is associated with Reinhold, is used to build up tension and to anticipate Mieze's death.

Despite all these distancing devices, Fassbinder's overall style in the first thirteen episodes is retrained and subtle. We have some of his trademark features but they do not dominate and are not self-indulgent as in some of his other films. They are used sparingly, for careful effect, e.g. Fassbinder uses an unusual camera angle, shooting down from the ceiling when Franz is lying on the floor of the kindly Jew's room; he uses a rotating camera to convey Franz's apocalyptic/Expressionist concern on his release from prison that the houses might cave in on him (as in Döblin, the collapsing houses reflect Franz's fragile state of mind). When Lina decides to move in with Franz, we are introduced to one of Fassbinder's favourite images, the bar's bird in a cage.[44] After Mieze's disappearance, Fassbinder, for once, indulges himself by letting a drunken Franz wear her clothes and lipstick.

The interiors are deliberately claustrophobic to heighten the feeling that Franz is trapped and under constant pressure. The streets and the rooms are dark and dismal. Flashing lights (from storms and neon signs) puncture the gloom of the rooms, adding to the tension.

So, the distancing devices and the gloomy atmosphere indicate that Fassbinder did not want to produce a typical, lightweight, melodramatic TV soap opera. There is an element of the usual Fassbinder provocation. However, despite these features, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (the first thirteen episodes) proves, on the whole, more accessible and straightforward than much of Fassbinder's other work. This is due not only to the simplified storyline which concentrates on Franz (compared to Döblin's fragmented modernist complexity), but also to the different acting style. We do not have the artificial, posed, stylised acting of *Effi Briest*. We are a long way from the over-the-top, wordy theatricality of Petra von Kant[45] and the robotic stiffness of Marlene. The acting style of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* remains predominantly realistic/naturalistic and the use of earthy Berlin dialect adds to the effect. Hanna Schygulla would not work with Fassbinder for 5 years after *Effi Briest* because she found the Effi which Fassbinder wanted her to play too constricting.[46] Here, in the scene where Bruno offers Franz money from the Pums gang for his lost arm, she is allowed, as Eva, wild melodramatic hysterics. Lina and Fränze are

[44] This image was introduced by Döblin when Mieze gives Franz an unexpected present and also appears in Jutzi's film. Fassbinder uses the image far more than Döblin. As mentioned earlier, his mentor Sirk was fond of caged and prison imagery. The bird cage features as well in *Effi Briest*. Fassbinder also uses a cage of monkeys in the scene where Mieze visits Eva's posh apartment. On learning that Mieze, his "liebe kleine Nachtigall", is dead, Franz kills the bird which she had given him. When Mieze is murdered in Freienwalde, Fassbinder uses the trees and the mist to hem in the action and to give the impression that there is no escape for Mieze—she is trapped and doomed. Even if you leave the big city, the outside world is still a prison.

[45] Willi comes the nearest to camp theatricality and also the Whore of Babylon sequences.

[46] See Hodgkiss article.

depicted close up and full on, showing all their intense emotions. Barbara Sukowa presents the lovable childlike Mieze with the powerful pathos of a Charlie Chaplin heroine. Lamprecht's Franz, for all his gullibility, naivety and brutality, tugs powerfully at our hearts.

Thus, the foreign critics are partly right. The first thirteen episodes are accessible and naturalistic with a lot of authentic period detail although there are some distancing devices and some slight irony[47] but these remain muted and restrained and do not dominate. The "Verfremdung" lacks Fassbinder's usual intensity, probably because, over the long hours of the first thirteen episodes, it becomes dissipated and diluted. Instead of the mannered stylisation of *Effi Briest*, we are closer to the combination of Naturalism and "Verfremdung" which we find in *Lola*. However, these two aspects are more counterbalanced here than in *Lola*.

Whereas Fassbinder has kept faithful to Döblin in the first thirteen episodes and has made changes mainly to condense or simplify the action, in the epilogue he gives full rein to his imagination and creativity. While the first thirteen episodes toned down Döblin's original, the epilogue is truer to his radical spirit of modernism. Here we have the extreme, challenging Fassbinder which foreign critics sometimes struggle to cope with. The final episode has been described as "out and out surreal",[48] as "camp with fatal earnestness",[49] "a gloomy Pasolini-like phantasmagoria,"[50] a "Bavarian kitsch version of the 'hell' which is our century",[51] and "some sort of Punkxpressionist update of the *Sturm und Drang* […] a demoniacal mélange of fascism, religion and S&M".[52] Fassbinder combines themes from the text with modern music, anachronisms and personal visions. We have a weird mixture of nightmare images, hallucinations and fantasy—a modern human slaughterhouse, flashing lights, rotating cameras, distorted music, a disco ball, Nazis, a nuclear explosion and birds in cages hanging surreally in Freienwalde.

Fassbinder does at least provide some hints with regard to character motivation. Reinhold is ashamed of his gay love towards Konrad in jail. The implication is that he could not maintain his relationships with women and had to keep passing them on because of his latent homosexuality. The inference is that he killed Mieze either out of jealousy/spite (she possessed Franz and was fiercely loyal to him) or to clear the way so that he could have Franz to himself.[53] Franz is depicted as a masochist

[47] There is very little irony. One rare example is when Lina's attack on the newspaper vendor is compared ironically to the heroism of Kleist's Prinz von Homburg, but this ironic comparison already occurs in Döblin. Another example occurs when Mieze is travelling with Meck in the car to meet her doom and she says, ironically, of Freienwalde: "Es ist ein guter Platz für mich".

[48] See Srinivasan review.

[49] See Saunders article.

[50] See Roth review.

[51] Elsaesser (1996, 296).

[52] See Reehan review.

[53] Elsaesser (1996, 228–229) explains the murder of Mieze as "a second attempt to maim Franz's symbolic body. By taking away Mieze, Reinhold once more 'amputates' Franz […] Mieze dies, because in Reinhold's world the gift is merely the other side of possession. He wants women, in order to give them away, and although he does not want Mieze for himself, he wants her in order to be able to give her (back) to Franz. Since she refuses, he eliminates her: not being able to give her away, he throws her away".

who is whipped by Reinhold and later crucified. Brecht's proletarian boxing match is transformed into a gay love fest, as Franz and Reinhold embrace each other. The implication is that Franz is a masochist like Marlene in *Petra von Kant*—he keeps going back to Reinhold and makes the mistake of introducing Mieze to him because he is in love with Reinhold and likes being hurt by him. Elsaesser describes Franz and Reinhold as enjoying a "repressed homosexual/bisexual" relationship.[54]

Döblin's ending proved problematic, controversial and disappointing to many critics. The reader has waded through hundreds of pages of complicated text only for Franz to end up as a tamed "Hilfsportier in einer mittleren Fabrik" (453). Scherer calls the ending "unreconciled" and "contradictory",[55] describing Franz as a "broken, former individual".[56] Clark condemns the "defeatist ending" with "the born-again neutered Franz" finishing off as nothing more than a tiny cog in a much bigger wheel.[57] Fassbinder, too, tries to tie up the themes from the book and bring in some personal touches but, although we have the uncompromising, avant-garde Fassbinder here, his ending turns out just as anticlimactic as Döblin's.

To conclude, Clark praises Fassbinder for producing "that rarest of adaptations—a film as great as the literary masterpiece that produced it".[58] The foreign critics have been proved mainly correct. Although there is a little irony and a lot of distancing devices, the film on the whole is more accessible than usual because the narrative structure has been simplified and emotional, naturalistic acting has been allowed. Despite the apparent similarities, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is a long way from the stilted artificiality of *Effi Briest* and much closer to *Lola*'s amalgam of Naturalism and "Verfremdung".[59] There may be some theatricality (long lingering shots, frozen tableaux)[60] but, unusually for Fassbinder, his distancing devices in a long, drawn-out context seem restrained, diluted and not that effective. As we also find with Sirk, Fassbinder's weaker than usual "Verfremdung" does not prevent emotional intensity. Fassbinder once said in 1977: "With Brecht you see the emotions and you reflect upon them as you witness them but you never feel them. That's my interpretation and I think I go farther than he did in that I let the audience

[54] Elsaesser (1996, 229). Cf. Reehan's remark, in his review, that "Reinhold offers the sort of sadistic sexual allure that's a masochist's—aka Franz's—wet dream".

[55] Scherer (1977, 69).

[56] Scherer (1977, 63).

[57] See Clark article.

[58] See Clark article.

[59] For Rob Burns (1995, 57), this conflict between realism and stylisation runs through all of Fassbinder's oeuvre. In the same year (1972), Fassbinder was capable of creating films with totally contradictory styles—his adaptation of Franz Xaver Kroetz's drama *Wildwechsel* with its "remorseless realism" and his cinematic adaptation of his own earlier play *Petra von Kant*, "one of the most stylised of Fassbinder's movies". Anna K. Kuhn (1984, 95) writes: "Together these two films of 1972 paradigmatically embody the stylized and realistic poles of Fassbinder's oeuvre".

[60] Rapfogel, in his review, says about the theatricality: "Of course Fassbinder, with his roots in an experimental, Brechtian-influenced theater practice, had from the beginning rejected a naturalistic approach to filmmaking. And *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, like all his films, is theatrical and stylized, if more subtly so than usual".

feel and think".[61] In my article on *Petra von Kant*, I concluded that Fassbinder was unable to generate Sirk's emotional intensity and catharsis because of the film's strong stylisation and Fassbinder's powerful, effective distancing devices. Perhaps, in the first thirteen episodes of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, it may be possible to argue that Fassbinder has at last managed to achieve this long desired fusion of "Verfremdung" and feeling through his muted style, accessible storyline and charged emotional acting. At least, he accomplished this with one critic who concluded that Fassbinder "gives us more vividly real people, heartfelt emotion, and tears (oh yes, I cried many times) than in any of his other films".[62] Döblin, a bourgeois intellectual author and Olympian narrator, kept his proletarian, non-intellectual anti-hero at a distance. Perhaps, Fassbinder felt closer and more sympathetic to Franz because of the novel's importance for his own teenage years and the wealth of themes it provided for his films? And this is why his treatment is less distanced and more emotional than usual?

"*Berlin Alexanderplatz* didn't only help me in something like a process of ethical maturation. No, it also provided genuine, naked, concrete life support when I was really at risk during puberty, because I was able to apply the story to my own problems and dilemmas, oversimplifying, of course I read it as the story of two men whose little bit of life on this earth is ruined because they don't have the opportunity to get up the courage even to recognize, let alone admit, that they like each other more closely than is generally considered suitable for men."[63]

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[61] Fassbinder, quoted in Pott (2002, 125). Aitken (2001, 150) writes: "Fassbinder combined Brechtian alienation devices with melodramatic techniques derived from Sirk to make films which are often, and sometimes contradictorily, both affective and distancing. Fassbinder adopted this approach because he wanted to make his audience feel, as well as think, and went so far as to argue that he had 'gone further' than Brecht in achieving such a synthesis". Barnett (2005, 174) concluded his study of Fassbinder's theatrical work in a similar fashion: "The confluence of feeling and thinking marks Fassbinder as a post-Brechtian in that he was happy to offer empathy as long as the audience was prepared to reflect on their allegiances within the theatre".

[62] See Clark article.

[63] Fassbinder, quoted by Clark who, in his article, sees links between *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and 22 of Fassbinder's films. Clark describes *Fox and His Friends* (called in German *Faustrecht der Freiheit*) as "Fassbinder's explicitly gay reworking of Döblin".

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