

Beyond the Stimulus Shield: War Neurosis, Shock and Montage in Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*

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Abstract When Alfred Döblin was writing *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, he was working as a doctor in Berlin. Influenced by Ernst Simmel, he was worried about the impact of the First World War on the mental life of the people in Berlin, and especially the phenomenon of war neurosis. War neurosis is an attempt to maintain psychic integrity and to ward off total dissolution and fragmentation. The phenomenon of war neurosis had devastating consequences on the capacity of people to 'read' the modern city and led to a problematic conception of self-protection. I situate the theory of war neurosis within a tradition of theorists, most notably Freud in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* and Walter Benjamin in his writings on Baudelaire, who attempted to theorize the 'stimulus shield' people develop to cope with the daily shocks of modern life. Benjamin regards Proust's *mémoire involontaire* or the *correspondances* of Baudelaire as tactics to retain a form of experience (*Erfahrung*) in times characterized by shock. Montage turns out to be an important tactic to make sense of the complex signs and stimuli that make up modern city life. By means of montage, Döblin wanted to restore the capacity to 'read' modern society and to overcome the 'defensiveness' of the traumatic state of society after the war, which made people incapable of finding their bearings in the modern city.

Keywords Alfred Döblin · Berlin Alexanderplatz · War neurosis · Walter Benjamin · Stimulus shield · Montage

When Alfred Döblin was writing his magnum opus *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, he was working as a doctor in the center of Berlin and an active member of the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute. Though he was cautious about conflating his two occupations, he nevertheless repeatedly pointed out that he was both a writer and

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a doctor. In his medical practice, he witnessed the devastating impact of the First World War and its aftermath on the mental life of the people. In 1921, Döblin had already written an article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* under his pseudonym Linke Poot with the title *Das kranke Volk*. The title was borrowed from his friend, mentor and Döblin's own psychoanalyst Ernst Simmel, pioneer in the study of the phenomenon of war neurosis (*Kriegsneurose*), and reflected the concerns of the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute. Its members were of the opinion that large-scale therapeutic interventions were needed to counter the devastating consequences of war neurosis on society at large. In line with their socialist agenda, and contrary to the opinion of Freud, they pleaded for the creation of free, or cheap, collective forms of therapy, intended primarily for working class patients because they were the most heavily duped by the war.

In this article, I will look at the technique of montage, the stylistic principle of the novel, as Walter Benjamin wrote in his essay on *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1974, Band III, 232), as an answer to the mental and physical condition of the people living during the unstable years of the Weimar Republic, a condition which was fraught with the symptoms of war neurosis. War neurosis can be characterized by a problematic attempt to shield off the constant shocks of life in modern society. It is an attempt to retain a sense of self and to stop the self from completely disintegrating under pressure of the shocks of modern life. But at the same time, the war neurotic will compulsively seek up situations of danger and try to restore a front experience. The person suffering from war neurosis, and by extension a society in which war neurosis is endemic, is suffering from a highly problematic and dysfunctional conception of self-protection.

If the people living in the post-war years were suffering from an inability to find their bearings in the city, an inability to 'read' modern life including the capacity to perceive threats and possibilities, and a problematic attempt to retain a sense of self in face of the shocks of modern existence, then montage is precisely a technique to overcome these problems. I will explain this by clarifying Benjamin's theories about literature as a means to cope with the shocks of modern life and his theories about the capacity of montage. In his last essay on Baudelaire, Benjamin took up Freud's theoretical reflections about the need for a stimulus shield, but also subtly moved beyond Freud's view. If war neurosis entails a problematic hypertrophy of the stimulus shield, then montage is beyond the stimulus shield.

War Neurosis and Its Consequences

When Franz Biberkopf is introduced in the beginning of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* he is about to be released from Tegel prison, where he served a sentence for violently murdering his girlfriend. Instead of looking forward to his release he dreads leaving the prison walls. The prison provided him with a tranquil regularity and order, while the outside world is experienced as overwhelming and confusing chaos. In the famous opening pages of the novel Franz's sheer panic and confusion is described when he is forced to enter the hustle and bustle of Berlin, with its noises of streetcars, crowded streets and vertigo-inducing motion. After the relative calm of

the prison, the sensory overload of the city almost threatens Franz with total mental breakdown and he has to seek shelter in a courtyard.

All we know about Franz is that he served at the front and that he, in a fit of rage and drunkenness, has beaten his girlfriend to death. He seems utterly unfit for life in Berlin during the difficult years of the Weimar Republic. The city was ravished by unemployment, unimaginable inflation, crime and political instability. Incapable of understanding life around him and always seeking to numb his senses completely with alcohol, Franz reacts enormously violent towards the people around him, even his loved ones, and he is curiously drawn to people and situations that will bring him in deep trouble. His mental and physical integrity is permanently threatened, not in the least by the fact that Franz compulsively seeks up situations which bring him and those near him in danger. In the world of theft and robbery, murder and violent crime, prostitution and pimping, the struggle for daily survival abused by diverse political fractions and opportunists, Franz comes across as shockingly naïve and unaware of his situation. He is unaware of the political leaning of people, singing fascist songs in bars full of communists or uttering offensive remarks at political meetings. He naively lets himself be abused by criminals and even after he lost his arm after being pushed out of the car by the ruthless gangster Rheinhold, he still returns to him which will lead to the death of Franz's lover Mieke.

In *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Döblin depicted the general feeling of crisis in Berlin in the aftermath of the First World War. On top of the immense blows of war and inflation, trauma and unemployment, life in the modern metropolis had become an experience of constant shock threatening any sense of self-integrity or the comportment required to find a form of orientation. Franz is a character no longer capable of 'reading' the city, filtering and making sense of the constant flow of stimuli and information. Constantly busy to maintain a basic level of mental and physical coherence, unhinged by the sheer abundance of overwhelming stimuli, Franz attempts at self-preservation make him less and less able to find his bearings in the city. Moreover, his attempts at self-preservation are highly dysfunctional, driving him straight into harm to himself and others, brutal, self-destructive violence and consciousness-numbing alcoholism.

In his article from 1921, Döblin voiced the concerns shared by his colleagues of the Berlin Psychiatric Institute that the sheer amount of people returning from the front, or the quantity of those otherwise affected the war, will negatively impact society if no special care or treatment is provided. Döblin had joined the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute shortly after the First World War, during which he had served as a psychiatrist at the front, and started his own psychoanalytic training with Ernst Simmel. In her book about the history of the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute, Veronika Fuechtner has described the influence of Simmel on Döblin (2011). Simmel was a pioneer in the psychoanalytic study of the phenomenon of *Kriegsneurose*. From his clinical experiences with traumatized soldiers, Simmel tried to describe the effects of exposure to the terror of war and the experience of undergoing military drill on the regular psychic structure of a person. The front experience drastically alters the functioning of the psyche and these changes continue in peace time, strongly reducing the veteran's ability to function as a socially apt citizen and, given the quantity of people affected, threatening society in

general. It is important to stress that for Simmel, the symptoms of *Kriegsneurose* are a kind of security mechanism of the psyche (Selbstsicherungsprozeß der Psyche) (Simmel 1993, 24). They are an attempt to reconstruct the fractured personality and to protect the soldier from completely disintegrating into psychosis (23).

While normally one's most primal drives and impulses, the impulses coming from our *Id*, are kept under control by our *Über-Ich* (Simmel adopts the Freudian topology of the psyche), which has internalized society's moral norms, these 'normal' self-restrictions are broken during a military drill. The soldier is supposed to obey his superiors at all costs and, especially in a war situation, the soldier is drilled and forced to commit acts (murder, destruction, violence, etc.) which in civil life would be regarded as highly immoral. The soldier's system of self-control has become completely externalized. All aggressive energies are unleashed and projected onto the enemy. This has profound effects on the conduct and dispositions of a soldier, even as a civilian. Because of the destruction of psychic instruments of self-control, even of elementary instincts for self-preservation, and the unleashing of all the aggressive drives, the soldier will seek elements of protection and control outside of himself: in feelings of companionship, uniform mass behavior, sacrifice, external orders, strong leaders, marching rhythms and military cadences such as the rhythm of soldiers' songs... These external elements are experienced as structuring elements for the soldiers, a form of protection against primal fears now that the psychic instincts for the avoidance of danger have been broken.

Not surprisingly, the relation of the war veteran towards his surroundings will be profoundly altered. As Freud already noticed with a certain puzzlement, and which made him rethink his older views on the pleasure principle in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, war veterans seem to compulsively seek up certain situations. They display what is called a *Wiederholungszwang*, a repetition compulsion. Simmel writes: "Das Ich des Kriegsneurotikers scheint *die Angst zu suchen*" (220). Not only in his dreams but also in his daily practices the veteran seems to seek up similar anxiety-inducing situations. Like Freud, Simmel regards this phenomenon as a mechanism to find a way to release an excess of energies but also as an attempt to learn to cope with these anxiety-inducing situations. However, the soldier has been drilled not to run away when he is in an anxiety-inducing situation, but to attack (221). A soldier will respond to panic by a flight into combat.

If war neurosis was indeed as widespread as Simmel or Döblin claimed, this had serious consequences for life in Berlin during the fragile and unstable post-war period. The symptoms of war neurosis are a last-gasp attempt to retain a coherent self and to not completely fall apart under pressure of the constant barrage of shocks. It can be regarded as a cramped reaction to preserve the self by forming a shield to parry the constant shocks life in the modern city entails. This shielding emulates a front experience, whereby a sense of self is created by erecting a border around oneself, which is maintained by aggressive responses to perceived intrusions. The shield does not protect a self, it creates a form of self where otherwise only fragments would be. If this shield is breached by an overload of stimuli, then the entire defense mechanism collapses and the person would break down. At the same time, war neurosis entails a strong reduction of the complexity of one's surroundings, because too much complexity will induce anxiety. The senses

have to be numbed. Clear order, mass behavior and uniformity, military rhythms, marching songs and nursery rhymes are felt to be soothing. Any anxiety-inducing intrusion will trigger a fight-or-flight reaction. Finally, the war neurotic will compulsively seek up situations of danger and a reinstatement of a front experience, which was ruthlessly politically exploited.

Scholars such as Veronika Fuechtner have demonstrated the presence of the symptoms of war neurosis in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (Fuechtner 2004, 2011). The reader never gets any reference whatsoever to the previous life of Franz Biberkopf, nothing about his youth or his parents, other than flashbacks to his experiences as a soldier on the front and the violent murder of Ida. It is as if the past does not exist for Franz, besides fragments, sound bites and sudden associations from the war, which are inserted into the narrative in unexpected places, seemingly out of place with the rest of the narration. Moreover, Franz is a remarkably violent character, constantly seeking to numb his senses with copious amounts of alcohol. For a figure who is so anxiety-stricken as Franz, barely being able to cope with the chaos of Berlin street life, even longing to be back in the relative calm and order of the prison where he spent 5 years, he seems to repetitively seek up the same forms of danger and perilous situations. Though he suffers from impotence in the beginning of the novel, he soon violates the sister of his former girlfriend. The fact that Franz is barely capable of keeping himself together, that he can only cope with the sensorial chaos of the city with the greatest effort, that he never has any recollection of the past other than flashbacks of the front, that he compulsively seeks up danger and that he can only deal with problems in terms of violent, destructive reactions suggests that Franz too suffers from war neurosis. He is drawn to party meetings though he doesn't seem to care whether they are on the far-left or the far-right and often has associates of song fragments and children's rhymes, suggesting that he needs a simple cadence or rhythm to face the chaos around him. Children's rhymes such as the following repeatedly recur in the novel: "Mit den Händchen klapp, klapp, klapp, met den Füßchen trapp, trapp, trapp" (Döblin 2007, 119). When his misfortunes finally become too much for him, he completely breaks down and is taken to the psychiatric hospital Buch in an almost lifeless stupor, to the psychiatric hospital Buch, where Döblin had also worked.

Sometimes a passage with war associations is inserted into the novel in a seemingly random manner, completely out of place with what precedes or follows it. Even certain chapter-titles are references to war or combat, such as: "Verteidigungskrieg gegen die bürgerliche Gesellschaft", "Vorwärts, Schritt gefaßt, Trommelgerassel und Bataillone" or "Die beginnende Schlacht. Wir fahren in die Hölle mit Pauken und Trompeten" (264, 291, 396). Sometimes during a violent scene, such as when Reinhold kills Franz's lover Mieke in a forest while a storm is coming, references to the war are inserted. The sound of the coming storm is associated with the sound of bombs: "Wumm, da kommt er wieder, Achtung, wumm, wumm, wumm, das sind Fliegerbomben, er will den Wald abreißen, er will den ganzen Wald erdrücken" (354).

Maybe the most striking usage of war flashbacks, songs or sounds, suggesting the effects of war neurosis, can be found in the passage where Franz, after Reinhold and his gang of criminals had already thrown Franz out of a driving car, goes to visit

Reinhold once again.¹ To the reader it is incomprehensible that Franz actually goes to the house of the ruthless devil-like character who nearly killed him. It is as if Franz is compulsively driven to get into the same kinds of danger, as if the hardships that befell him had not been awful enough and he wants even more. Not surprisingly, Franz is highly agitated when he approaches the house of Reinhold, not knowing what will happen. This agitation is intensified by the repeated insertion of war flashbacks into the narrative, which gives the impression that Franz is going in ‘combat-mode’. The danger he is facing triggers raw associations from the front, mixed with fragments from famous soldiers’ songs or children’s rhymes, as if Franz is trying to call up more persistence and courage, but at the same these child-like rhymes suggest some kind of a psychic regression in need of simple nursery rhymes, used to soothe little babies.

Constructing the Stimulus Shield: From Freud to Benjamin

The dizzying sensorial complexity of life in the modern metropolis has provoked some of the greatest analysts of the impact of modernity on the psyche, Georg Simmel, Freud and Benjamin most notably, to propose the notion of a ‘stimulus shield’ (*Reizschutz*). In *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, which Döblin reviewed favorably in 1922, Freud had claimed: “Für den lebenden Organismus ist der Reizschutz eine beinahe wichtigere Aufgabe als die Reizaufnahme” (1940, 27). In section 4 of the essay, introduced as ‘speculation’, Freud gives the example of the development of an elementary living organism: “Dieses Stückchen lebender Substanz schwebt inmitten einer mit den stärksten Energien geladenen Außenwelt und würde von den Reizwirkungen derselben erschlagen werden, wenn es nicht mit einem Reizschutz versehen wäre” (26). Trauma is defined precisely as the breach of this protective shield by an overload of stimuli, upsetting the regular order and functioning of the psyche.

Freud is adopting a figuration of the defensive mechanism which works along a spatial pattern of an ‘intioriority’ that has to be protected from threats coming from the ‘outside’. Though he acknowledges the complication that stimuli causing displeasure can come from the ‘inside’, these will be dealt with by projecting the displeasure onto specific objects on the ‘outside’. In *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, several of such defensive mechanisms are proposed as working hypotheses: from the famous example of Freud’s grandson learning to cope with absence by means of the disappearing and reappearing spool, the Fort/Da game, to forms of ‘sampling’ or isolation of threatening stimuli so they can be localized and anticipated. While they are formulated as attempts to safeguard the integrity of an organism or the psyche, maintaining the border between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, Samuel Weber remarks that these defensive mechanisms displace spatial categories of inside and outside and split the supposed ‘inside’ from itself. Or better, these mechanisms can be regarded

¹ For a more elaborate and detailed analysis of this and other passages in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in terms of war neurosis, see Fuechtner (2011, 39–46).

as attempts to avoid this process of splitting by turning them into clearly demarcated spatial categories.

Weber writes that “the protective shield is required in order to establish the very difference between outside and inside”: “The protective defense against this danger always involves the effort to reduce multiplicity to unity, difference to identity, sameness to self” (2008, 641). But the effect of the defense mechanism is always more displacement and a split ‘inside’.

In another text, Weber has argued that psychoanalysis precisely puts into question the coherent unity of a certain ‘interiority’ of the psychic processes he describes, separated by a clear ‘borderline’ (separating rather than joining) from a hostile outside:

And by thus questioning their interiority, he implicitly disrupts the paradigm and hierarchy of the ‘inside’ over the ‘outside’ and thereby transforms the notion of ‘border,’ if not of the ‘line,’ so that it no longer separates the inside from the outside, or one inside from another. Rather it traverses what has previously been considered to constitute a homogeneous domain – that of the ‘psyche,’ thereby fracturing it and redefining it as a force-field in which conflicts play themselves out but are rarely resolved in a unified manner. For Freud then – and this is surely one of the distinctive and innovative contributions of psychoanalysis as he introduced it – the ‘borderline’ does not separate two self-contained and self-identical units or realms from one another: it separates the unit from itself. It is ‘internal,’ but only insofar as it dislocates the interior, spacing it out as a stage on which conflicts play themselves out. (2010, 46)

Walter Benjamin took up Freud’s ideas about the protection shield in his reworked essay on Baudelaire, after the first version was rejected by Adorno, causing a now famous discussion about their stylistic and theoretical differences. When Benjamin rewrote the text as *Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire*, Freud and his ideas of the stimulus shield were a new element, though Benjamin is only partly willing to follow Freud.

In Benjamin’s view, Baudelaire wrote his poetry in times in which the experience of shock has become the norm. This profoundly changed the people’s comportment towards their surroundings. Due to the constant exposure to shocks, the ability to build up a lasting experience, what Benjamin calls *Erfahrung*, has been lost. Benjamin takes up Freud suggestion that there is a reverse correlation between consciousness and memory. In *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, Freud had written: “[D]as Bewußtsein entstehe an Stelle der Erinnerungsspur” (1940, 25). The more an experience has been experienced consciously the least it will leave behind a lasting memory trace. And reversely, when a memory trace becomes conscious, the memory trace will expire in the process of becoming conscious. Thus, the most powerful, enduring and haunting memory elements will be those that have never entered consciousness. This is precisely what Proust aimed for with his *mémoire involontaire*. In the ephemeral experience of the scent of a woman or the taste of eating a Madeleine cake, a rich reservoir of memory traces is accessed which had never been consciously elaborated. As we have seen, for Freud, consciousness does

not serve the function of creating memory or building up a lasting *Erfahrung*, but its main function is to protect against stimuli. Consciousness is supposed to ward off the over-excitation of shocks and to make them manageable. As Benjamin writes: “Je geläufiger ihre Registrierung dem Bewußtsein wird, desto weniger muß mit einer traumatischen Wirkung dieser Chocks gerechnet werden” (1974, Band I-2, 613). Consciousness, however, will isolate experience into a series of discrete experiences, what Benjamin calls *Erlebnis*, at the cost of the capacity to develop long experience, *Erfahrung*. He claims the writing of lyrical poetry, grounded in *Erfahrung*, had become problematic in times for which the exposure to shocks and consciousness required to parry these shocks had become the norm, a situation Baudelaire was well aware of.

Three years earlier, in 1936, Benjamin had already made a similar claim in his essay *Der Erzähler*. In this essay, he famously claimed that the capacity to communicate experience (*Erfahrung*) through the telling of stories had been lost. This loss of communicable experience had become even more evident after the First World War:

Sie sagt uns, daß es mit der Kunst des Erzählens zu Ende geht. Immer seltener wird die Begegnung mit Leuten, welche rechtschaffen etwas erzählen können. [...] Es ist, als wenn ein Vermögen, das uns unveräußerlich schien, das Gesichertste unter dem Sicherem, von uns genommen würde. Nämlich das Vermögen, Erfahrungen auszutauschen.

Eine Ursache dieser Erscheinung liegt auf der Hand: die Erfahrung ist im Kurse gefallen. Und es sieht aus, als fiele sie weiter ins Bodenlose. [...] Mit dem Weltkrieg begann ein Vorgang offenkundig zu werden, der seither nicht zum Stillstand gekommen ist. Hatte man nicht bei Kriegsende bemerkt, daß die Leute verstummt aus dem Felde kamen? nicht reicher – ärmer an mittelbarer Erfahrung” (1974, Band II-2, 439).

The shocks of modern life require constant vigilance of consciousness. Benjamin writes that consciousness has the ability to assign a sudden incident or exposure into an isolated experience by assigning it a precise point in time in consciousness, at the cost of the integrity of the content of the incident (1974, Band I-2, 615). It was this situation which Baudelaire placed at the center of his poetry and which explains some of his recurring motifs: “Baudelaire hat es zu seiner Sache gemacht, die Chocks mit seiner geistigen und physischen Person zu parieren, woher sie kommen mochten. Das Gefecht stellt das Bild dieser Chockabwehr” (616). The image of combat that is prevalent in Baudelaire’s poetry defines his relation to what Benjamin finds the most important feature of his writings: the crowd. The urban masses are for Benjamin so present on every page of Baudelaire’s texts that it is never explicitly mentioned. Benjamin writes poetically that action in Baudelaire’s poems hinges on the confrontation with the masses, “wie die Fahrt des Segelschiffs auf dem Wind beruht” (622). It is the confrontation with the urban masses that gives jolts and shocks to the individual. The images of combat, such as the image of the fencer, reflect Baudelaire’s attempt to force for himself a place in the crowd. Baudelaire noticed the same combat-like approach in the drawings of his friend Constantin Guys, who he elevated in his classic text as the painter of modern life. Guys stabs away with his pencil, rapidly sketching out his ephemeral observation

before it vanishes. As Benjamin cites from Baudelaire, Guys is “streitbar, wenn auch allein, und parierte seine eigenen Stöße.” (616) Someone who has lost the capacity for long experience (*Erfahrung*) will approach the world with rage: “Für den, der keine Erfahrung mehr machen kann, gibt es keinen Trost.” (642) Baudelaire has to struggle to pry his lyrical poetry from the isolated experiences of modern life. His poetry is the result of constant battle with the crowds, a combat-like fight where the fencer’s sword is replaced by a pen.

At the end of the essay, Benjamin emphasizes twice that the pieces written by Baudelaire could not be written by a *flâneur*: “Von der Menge mit Stößen bedacht worden zu sein, hebt Baudelaire unter allen Erfahrungen, die sein Leben zu dem gemacht haben, was es geworden ist, als die maßgebende heraus, als die unverwechselbare. Ihm ist der Schein einer in sich bewegten, in sich beseelten Menge, in den der Flaneur vergafft was, ausgegangen” (652). His relation to the crowd can only be one of battle and rage: “Verraten von diesen seinen letzten Verbündeten, geht Baudelaire gegen die Menge an; er tut es mit dem ohnmächtigen Zorne dessen, der gegen den Regen oder den Wind angeht” (652). The lack of experience to rely on will lead to a constant combat-like comportment to the surrounding world with its overload of stimuli and constant threat of shocks. The city will be viewed with caution and suspicion, like a detective scrupulously surveying the scene of a crime for evidence.

The people who are exposed to these shocks will try to build a protective buffer by certain forms of mimetic behavior and by adjusting their sensorium. Benjamin writes that just as factory life makes the body of the worker undergo a specific training, so does modern technology, such as photography and film, subject the people to a complex training and change of their sensorium: “Was am Fließband den Rhythmus der Produktion bestimmt, liegt beim Film dem der Rezeption zugrunde” (631). Benjamin cites Marx, who wrote that in a capitalist mode of production, the worker does not make use of the working conditions, but, reversely, the working conditions make use of the worker (631). This mimetic adjusting to machines is transposed by Benjamin to daily street life, where the facial expressions of the people, even the smiles they give to the fleeting passer-by on the street. These facial expressions are part of the uniform behavior by means of which people can move through the crowds, functioning as a “mimetic shock absorber” (*mimischer Stoßdämpfer*) (631). The exposure to the functioning of the machine further isolates experience at the cost of long experience (*Erfahrung*). Benjamin writes: “Seine Arbeit ist gegen Erfahrung abgedichtet” (632). Instead of slowly developing and perfecting a skill, the worker at the assembly line simply has to make the same gesture over and over again, as if always starting anew. Benjamin compares the situation of the worker with the passer-by in the crowd as two instances of the isolation of experience: “Dem Chockerlebnis, das der Passant in der Menge hat, entspricht das ‘Erlebnis’ des Arbeiters an der Maschinerie” (632).

Benjamin will grant the poetry of Baudelaire, and especially his theory of *correspondances*, Proust’s *mémoire involontaire* and modern media technology such as photography or film the capacity to restore in a certain sense the lost long experience (*Erfahrung*) in times characterized by shock: “Was Baudelaire mit den *correspondances* im Sinn hatte, kann als seine Erfahrung bezeichnet werden, die

sich krisensicher zu etablieren sucht” (Band I-2, 638). As Benjamin famously elaborated in *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, modern technologies allowing for the reproduction of works of art have robbed the art work of its former aura. Formerly, the art work was embedded in a ritualistic context, always retaining a certain distance from the viewer. The capacity to reproduce art works on a large scale had rendered the art work more readily and widely available for the masses but at the cost of its aura. With the loss of the aura what Benjamin calls ‘perceptibility’ had declined as well: “Die Krisis der künstlerischen Wiedergabe, die sich so abzeichnet, läßt sich als integrierender Teil einer Krise in der Wahrnehmung selbst darstellen. [...] ‘Die Wahrnehmbarkeit’, von welcher er derart spricht, ist ‘eine Aufmerksamkeit’. Die Wahrnehmbarkeit, von welcher er derart spricht, ist keine andere als die der Aura” (645–646). In the writings of Proust and Baudelaire, Benjamin finds a capacity to restore perceptibility and long experience (*Erfahrung*) in times when the aura of an art work, long experience and ritual had become obsolete. As he writes about the Proustian *mémoire involontaire*: “Wenn man die Vorstellungen, die, in der *mémoire involontaire* beheimatet, sich um einen Gegenstand der Anschauung zu gruppieren streben, dessen Aura nennt, so entspricht die Aura am Gegenstand einer Anschauung eben der Erfahrung, die sich an einem Gegenstand des Gebrauchs als Übung absetzt” (644). Once again, Benjamin finds a parallel of the experience of *mémoire involontaire* in photography: “Die auf der Kamera und den späteren entsprechenden Apparaturen aufgebauten Verfahren erweitern den Umfang der *mémoire involontaire*; sie machen es möglich, ein Geschehen nach Bild und Laut jederzeit durch die Apparatur festzuhalten. Sie werden damit zu wesentlichen Errungenschaften einer Gesellschaft, in der die Übung schrumpft.” (644)

From Proust, Benjamin retains the insight that memory traces are only accessed in an unintentional manner. Similarly, Baudelaire wants to account for the fleeting and the ephemeral. But Proust also managed to construct a huge cycle, which Benjamin compared to a web. And Baudelaire manages through hard struggle to wrest his lyrical poetry from the experience of the crowd. Though Baudelaire had to write his poetry in a time in which the aura had disintegrated in the experience of shock, he was nevertheless able to elevate his immediate experiences into a more durable *Erfahrung* in his poetry: “So ist das Erlebnis beschaffen, dem Baudelaire das Gewicht einer Erfahrung gegeben hat.” (652–653) What Benjamin seeks is the seemingly paradoxical combination of unintentionality and construction, to retain a form of experience (*Erfahrung*) in a time characterized by shock.

Beyond the Stimulus Shield: Montage in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*

Though a few years earlier he had critiqued Döblin’s *Wissen und Verändern* for his insistence on a critical individualism,² in 1930 Walter Benjamin praised *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in a review article. He emphasizes that the main stylistic principle at work in this novel is montage: “Die Montage sprengt den Roman, sprengt ihn im

² In *Der Autor als Produzent* (Benjamin 1974, Band II-2, 683–701).

Aufbau wie auch stilistisch, und eröffnet neue, sehr epische Möglichkeiten" (1974, Band III, 232). In words that strongly recall his essay *Der Erzähler*, Benjamin claims that montage brings back elements of the epic which otherwise were lost in the modern novel. In his review, which has the title *Krisis des Romans*, he contrasts the novel with the older epic. The epic writer observes, collects and transmits what he finds. The epic transmits the dreams and experiences of the people. The novel, on the other hand, is born out of solitude: "Die Geburtskammer des Romans ist das Individuum in seiner Einsamkeit, das sich über seine wichtigsten Anliegen nicht mehr exemplarisch aussprechen kann, selbst unberaten ist und keinem Rat geben kann" (230). The novel is concerned with isolated experiences: "Einen Roman schreiben heißt, in der Darstellung des menschlichen Daseins das Inkommensurable auf die Spitze treiben" (320–231). Furthermore, as opposed to all other forms of prose (folktale, saga, proverb, comic tale), the novel does not go back to an oral tradition. Benjamin cites Döblin's public address *Der Bau des Epischen Werks*: "Das Buch ist der Tod der wirklichen Sprachen" (231).

However, in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* by means of montage, Döblin has achieved a form of novel in which epic elements are present once again. Benjamin writes that authentic montage is based on the document. Like in the work of the Dadaists, reality has to be turned into an ally to give the work greater authenticity. One of the techniques Döblin used to achieve this effect was collecting newspaper articles and other printed material such as announcements or postcards and literally 'paste' them into the manuscript. In the review, he lists petty-bourgeois printed matter, scandalmongering, stories of accidents, the sensational incidents of 1928, folk songs, advertisements, biblical verses, statistics, lyrics from songs and the usage of Berlin dialect as examples of documental elements inserted by Döblin into the novel.

Benjamin's description of the return of epic qualities in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* by means of montage, which blast open the narrative, bears a close resemblance to his different descriptions of Brecht's epic theater. For Benjamin, what distinguishes the epic theater of his lifelong friend from other forms of performance is that the action is interrupted. The interruptions, the famous *Verfremdung*, are what make Brechtian theater 'epic'. Elements are inserted in the text which disrupt the course of the action: "Ich spreche vom Verfahren der Montage: das Montierte unterbricht ja den Zusammenhang, in welchen es montiert ist" (Benjamin 1974, Band II-2, 697–698). The interruptions bring the audience out of the theatrical illusion, baring the theatrical device to paraphrase the famous principle of the Russian formalists, and forces them to take a position towards the action. Benjamin writes about Brecht: "Das epische Theater, erklärte er, hat nicht sowohl Handlungen zu entwickeln als Zustände darzustellen" (697). The situations which are developed in epic theatre come about by means of an experimental process. Elements of reality are not presented as such but as part of a series of experiments. Benjamin writes that these situations are not simply reproduced or presented, but rather revealed or uncovered. Consequently, the situations revealed are an effect of the experimental process and not their point of departure: "Am Ende, nicht am Anfang, dieses Versuches stehen aber die Zustände. [...] Sie werden dem Zuschauer nicht nahegebracht, sondern von ihm entfernt" (698). Benjamin leaves no doubt about the fact that the human being

is the central subject of the experimental process: “Er stellt dem dramatischen Gesamtkunstwerk das dramatische Laboratorium gegenüber. Er greift in neuer Weise auf die große alte Chance des Theaters zurück – auf die Exponierung des Anwesenden. Im Mittelpunkt seiner Versuche steht der Mensch” (698).

In *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, the montage also interrupts the narrative and inserts elements from reality. Like Benjamin describing Brecht’s work as a dramatic laboratory with mankind at the center of the experiment, undergoing trials, Eva Horn has highlighted the epistemological consequences of Döblin’s usage of montage (2003). She situates the work of Döblin in a tradition of novels that aim less for ‘representational mimesis’ of the world than for conducting literary experiments, wherein the characters are placed in a given constrained situation to observe the consequences. Döblin wanted to describe what he called the “Elementarsituationen des menschlichen Daseins” or “Elementarhaltungen des Menschen” (Döblin 1963, 106).

I would like to turn now to the question of *Bildung*. Benjamin called *Berlin Alexanderplatz* the “äußerste, schwindelnde, letzte, vorgeschobenste Stufe des alten bürgerlichen Bildungsromans” (236). In the scholarship on *Berlin Alexanderplatz* the ending has sometimes been regarded as the ‘cure’ of Franz, a clear turn towards a more stable character who is able to face the future with more confidence and insight. However, the dark, brooding and openly military undertones inserted in the ending by means of montage give it a distinctly and unmistakable foreboding tone, foreshadowing the reign of barbarism and war that would soon fall over Germany. Still others point out that Döblin expressed dissatisfaction with the ending, which he considered to be a rather hasty attempt to conclude the novel despite his expressed wish to write a sequel. The question to what extent *Berlin Alexanderplatz* can still be regarded as a *Bildungsroman* is inseparable from the central function montage plays in the novel.

In her article *Konstruktion als Bildung: Refashioning the Human in German Constructivism*, Patrizia McBride describes the refashioning of *Bildung* on constructivist terms after the First World War. At first, *Bildung*, the self-development of a character towards full alignment with the order of things in a closed temporality, and the projects of the different artists and thinkers who endorsed a constructivist approach, with an externalized and open-ended development, embracing modern technologies and the fragmented character of modern society, seem to be complete opposites. McBride clarifies that constructivism “conjured a fully exteriorized notion of poesis, that is, a kind of making that conceived of experience as a surface endlessly inscribed by the interaction of technology and perception. *Konstruktion* intervened into this relational network by subjecting its elements to infinite permutations in producing new forms” (2013, 236). What the different constructivist projects have in common is a rejection of the traditional psychological postulates about a self-contained, self-possessed and self-forming person in favor of a view in which the self is constantly formed and reformed in a displaced and externalized co-development with its technological environment. Art, even relatively autonomous art, still has a function as a space of experimentation in which the constantly shifting and developing interface between perception, technology and the forms of life are explored, negotiated and actively refashioned. If *Berlin Alexanderplatz* still depicts a process of *Bildung*, then it is no

longer the *Bildung* achieved by a certain conclusion or a future-orientation with a linear temporality, but by a new experience of immersion and co-development in a constantly developing and changing environment, which is achieved by means of montage.

Similarly, Devin Fore argues that the entire narrative structure of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is simply a means for Döblin to display his new, Fritz Mauthner-influenced, ideal of a literary practice “that fused production and reception together at the scene of the text’s performance and that thereby bound the author, narrator, audience, and character together as ‘part of a real, existential present’” (2006, 187). As opposed to Döblin’s older attempts at reportage, which relied on a theory of correspondence between literature and experience, also implying their separation, literature is now a form of experience which like all experience is part of the dynamic, constantly changing swirl of everyday life. Döblin preferred to let his writing be guided by the sensory experience of life in Berlin.³ According to Fore, Döblin’s new approach reflects what Mauthner called a “verbal picture of the world”, “which is oriented not toward ontology (*Sein*, a word that Mauthner despised) but toward morphology (*Werden*), toward transformation and mutability...” (201). The experience of life in Berlin which Döblin evoked in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was a highly dynamic one.

Döblin wanted to let his writing be formed by the sights and sounds of Berlin, as if he tried to let the experience of the city direct his writing. He originally just wanted to call his novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* but the publisher Samuel Fischer claimed a square could not be the subject of a novel, ordering the addition of the subtitle *Die Geschichte vom Franz Biberkopf*. In what is probably the most commented-upon passage of the novel, the hustle and bustle of Rosenthaler Platz is described by means of series of shifting techniques. Beginning with the enigmatic statement “Der Rosenthaler Platz unterhält sich” (2007, 51), several pages follow in which the diverse activities taking place on the square are presented from an impersonal perspective. Some of the snippets of daily life inserted into the complex montage are: tram stops, names of streets, the offices of the AEG firm, the narrated life story of a boy called Max Rüst, the announcement of the granting of a hunting license, the depiction of a man who was almost killed in an accident, conversations between downtrodden characters, a weather forecast, the different tram fares,...

Instead of simply reporting about life in the city, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* evokes the experience of being immersed in the highly dynamic city life, in which everything is in development. In *Einbahnstraße*, Benjamin wrote: “Die Zukunftsdrohung ins erfüllte Jetzt zu wandeln, dies einzig wünschenswerte telepathische Wunder ist Werk leibhafter Geistesgegenwart” (1974, Band IV-1, 142). A heightened, ‘embodied’ presence of mind towards the present situation is to be preferred over trying to anticipate the future. It was this heightened presence of mind that for Benjamin the epic theatre of Brecht with its interruptions evoked in

³ Fore claims that “Biberkopf operates as a sort of textual prosthesis for Döblin: he is not a person but an instrument for Döblin to give form to his own experiences from the time he began writing mid-October 1927 to the spring of 1929” (2006, 198).

the audience. It was a different way of ‘perceiving’ the present, that is, if ‘perceiving’ or ‘reading’ is no longer heard as the activity of a completely separated and self-contained individual observing the signs and images projected before him or her. ‘Reading’ should be interpreted here in its Greek form, *legein*, or gathering: it is a process of gathering the pieces of experience or perception and collect them into a constructive picture. Brechtian montage is for Benjamin a modern counterpart of the emblem or allegory he described in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, Proust’s *mémoire involontaire* or Baudelaire’s *correspondances*. It no longer requires the melancholy of allegory described in the *Trauerspiel* book. With the technique of montage, an openness towards the accidental, the non-intentional, is combined with a form of construction. Instead of needing to parry the shocks modern city life entails, montage is an active formative technique which makes use of shock to achieve a change in perception. Stanley Mitchell writes: “Montage became for him the modern, constructive, active, unmelancholy form of allegory, namely the ability to connect dissimilars in such a way as to ‘shock’ people into new recognitions and understandings” (Benjamin 1998, xiii). Protection against shocks “is no longer needed by the revolutionary artist who welcomes ‘shock’ with critical distance, with ‘heightened presence of mind’. Thus Benjamin came to regard montage, i.e. the ability to capture the infinite, sudden or subterranean connection of dissimilars, as the major constructive principle of the artistic imagination in the age of technology” (xiii). This ‘heightened presence of mind’ occurs where “the representation is never complete in itself” (xiii).

The phenomenon of montage seems to combine two different effects. Firstly, there is the effect of experiencing a radical shock. A montage often presents a drastic rupture or interruption by means of which two or more images are allowed to contrast maximally. Images are shown as radically disjointed, conflicting or contradictory and the montage construction aims at highlighting the contrast or conflict. The paratactic co-presentation of different elements without providing a smooth transition is what characterizes the montage structure. However, a montage also brings seemingly different elements together. It makes unexpected connections and affinities light up, as if mending or suturing broken fragments. But such a mending never ends up in the presentation of an organic, total picture. As Georges Didi-Huberman has written in his study of montage in Brecht’s *Kriegsfibel* and *Arbeitsjournal*, montage only disperses things in order to be better able to expose their relations: “It creates connections between differences, it places bridges over abysses which it has opened up itself” (2009, 239).⁴ In montage there is an interplay between the destruction of total or organic presentations and construction of new connections which do not lead to a new total picture, but to a different, transformed view of the world. Didi-Huberman writes that montage in art “questions *singularities* rather than *individualities* (the classic figure of the hero, for example) and continues to bring these singularities in conflict with many others, to create by means of montage an entire world of heterogeneities which are connected but also conflicted, co-present but also different” (90). Whether in Brecht’s *Kriegsfibel*, Eisenstein’s cinema of attractions or Heartfield’s photomontages, the montage

⁴ All translations from Didi-Huberman are the author’s.

presents a world in motion with gaps and shocks, bifurcations and divergences, alterations and transformations. After the montage, the picture of the world is never self-evident or unproblematic. It restores ‘perceptibility’ by revealing connections between singularities, which are never completely joined nor completely separated. It presents virtual affinities and possible developments with gaps and interruptions instead of a single order with a single line of development. In the words of Didi-Huberman, montage aims “*to recompose the imagination of other possible connections in the immanence itself of that reality*” (72).

Conclusion

The widespread symptoms of war neurosis increased an incapacity of the people to find their bearings in the modern city with its permanent onslaught of shocks. War neurosis is basically an extreme way to shield off the shocks and to ‘protect’ the self from completely falling apart. However, it also implies a highly problematic conception of self-protection, based on the restoration of a front experience. The elementary and frail self can only be retained with a lot of effort and numbing of the senses, and has to be protected from the threatening surroundings. But because war neurosis is also an attempt at self-healing, however dysfunctional, as Simmel wrote, the person suffering from war neurosis will also compulsively seek up situations of danger and conflict. In summary, war neurosis could be defined as the installment of a protective shield, which constructs a self by aggressively shielding off the outside world and its stimuli. The self is placed here in a relation of aggression-defense to its surroundings. The stimulus shield is a border, which separates but not joins, as Weber wrote about Freud.

As Benjamin has shown, montage is a technique which makes use of shock to restore what he calls ‘perceptibility’ and provokes a heightened sense of presence. Montage corresponds with an entirely different kind of experience than the defensive-aggressive relation towards the surrounding world of the war neurotic. In this new experience, a person is no longer a distinct entity which is separated from his or her surroundings, but part of a constantly evolving and changing world. By keeping all figurations open, montage breaks with the closed shield the war neurotic needs to retain a sense of self. Instead of a monolithic, threatening ‘outside’, the technique of montage finds productive new connections and possibilities. As the passages about Rosenthaler Platz reveal, Döblin allows the city to guide his experience. Döblin does not try to ‘represent’ city life, but allows his construction to retain an openness to new, fleeting and unexpected experiences. By combining these singular experiences in the process of montage, he explores affinities and connections which never completely fuse into one organic, static picture. In a montage, singular elements never completely merge nor are they completely separated.

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