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Juliane Blank

- 1 When the television series *Babylon Berlin* (created by Achim von Borries, Henk Handloegten, and Tom Tykwer) was released in 2017, critics called it the “crown jewel” of a new era of television in Germany (Thompkins n.p.; my transl.). But the series is also an adaptation, and very explicitly so: seasons one and two are based on Volker Kutscher’s historical detective novel *Der nasse Fisch* (2008; Engl. *Babylon Berlin*, 2016) which is set in the later days of the Weimar Republic. For a long time, German productions had not been able to compete with the international standards of serial adaptation as established by shows like *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019). It seemed as if this was about to change.
- 2 *Babylon Berlin* tells the story of police detective Gereon Rath, who moves to Berlin in 1929. The cases he has to solve are connected to the world of organised crime and Berlin’s exciting night life, but also to political conspiracies on both the left and the right of the political spectrum. The series brings the 1920s to life as a time of political and economic “destabilisation” (Kiesel 67), in which the protagonist struggles to come to terms with his identity as part of a police force that is increasingly involved with nationalist forces, as well as a traumatised veteran of the First World War, and as an unloved son from a conservative family who has been having an affair with his sister-in-law since his brother supposedly died in the war.
- 3 *Babylon Berlin* aims to create a “Sittengemälde” (‘social portrait’) of Berlin in the 1920s (Handloegten, qtd. in Renner n.p.), focusing on the storyworld and its characters and exploring the political dimensions of this specific time and place. In this way, *Babylon Berlin* challenges traditional notions of adaptation that have been focused on film. While film adaptations often “streamline” the plot of the adapted novel (Stam 34), serial adaptations like *Babylon Berlin* experiment with expansion instead of reduction. The show’s glamorous aesthetics are influenced by German cinema and club culture of

the 1920s, but also appeal to international audiences by drawing on today's image of Berlin as a party metropolis and the queer capital of Europe. *Babylon Berlin* is therefore one of the first examples in the history of German television adaptation that crosses the border between aesthetic localisation and globalisation, thereby offering a unique opportunity to discuss localising and globalising as strategies of adaptation.

- 4 In the following sections, I will demonstrate *Babylon Berlin* to be a prime example of recent forms of serial adaptation that are new to German television. After discussing the fundamental elements of serial adaptation, I will roughly outline the relationship between Volker Kutscher's historical detective novel *Der nasse Fisch* and its adaptation in *Babylon Berlin*, by focusing on strategies of expansion and exploration in terms of world building. Finally, I will discuss the series' aesthetics in the context of strategies of localisation and globalisation.

1. Serial Adaptation as a Border-Crossing Concept

- 5 Many critics have pointed out that *Babylon Berlin* is a "loose" adaptation (e.g. Bühler 3; Kilb and Körte n.p.), suggesting that the adaptation "moves away" from the source text. The idea of proximity to the words of the adapted text still seems to dominate popular conceptions of adaptation in a German-speaking context – if only because of a lack of familiarity with alternative concepts of adaptation. It is closely connected to the notion of adaptation as the transition of a story across genres and/or media that has prevailed to this day. Answering the question as to *what* gets adapted, Linda Hutcheon has claimed that "equivalences" are sought in different sign systems for the various elements of the story: its themes, events, world, characters, motivations, points of view, consequences, contexts, symbols, imagery, and so on" (Hutcheon 10). The focus on narrative seems to be firmly rooted in adaptation studies' long-term preoccupation with the adaptation of a novel to a feature film (see for example Bluestone's *Novels into Films*, or McFarlane's *Novel to Film*) since the days of "Adaptation Studies 1.0" – the beginning of adaptation studies as a methodology and a discipline (Leitch 2). In her study on *Television and Serial Adaptation*, Shannon Wells-Lassagne shows that serial adaptations "challenge the very definition of what adaptation is, and thus force us to redefine the term for television" (Wells-Lassagne 6). One of the aspects of adaptation that needs to be revised in light of recent serial adaptations is the idea that the transition of narrative is the main element in adaptation. In revising her theory of adaptation, Hutcheon comments: "Thematic and narrative persistence is not the name of the new adaptation game; world building is" (Hutcheon xxiv). Indeed, world building seems to be the main principle of adaptation in the case of "hyperseries" like the Marvel Cinematic Universe franchise (Vignold 64), but also in serial adaptations like *Game of Thrones*, *The Walking Dead* – and *Babylon Berlin*.
- 6 As a theoretical concept, world building is closely connected to the notion of a "storyworld" that has gained popularity in recent (transmedia) narratology. Marie-Laure Ryan discusses storyworld as an essential tool for combining media-specific, semiotic approaches with cognitive approaches that focus on reception rather than production: "without the concept of world, one cannot speak of narrative as a lived experience" (Ryan 43). Storyworld means more than just a setting, it is "a dynamic model of evolving situations, and its representation in the recipient's mind is a simulation of the changes that are caused by the events of the plot" (Ryan 33). Drawing

on models of cognitive linguistics, Ryan theorises that a storyworld does not only consist of the objects represented in a text, film, series etc., but is instead constructed by the recipient who fills out the incomplete representations using their knowledge of the real world (Ryan 35). The concept has a special significance for historical fiction, since it stresses the importance of distinguishing between the “real” historical world (the “reference world”) and the historical world as it is created by the medium-specific means of a work of fiction (the “storyworld”) (Ryan 33).

- 7 Furthermore, I would argue that the series *Babylon Berlin* creates a slightly different storyworld than the Gereon Rath mysteries written by Volker Kutscher, although they share the same local and temporal setting. However, the novels and the television series, as well as the illustrated short stories *Moabit* and *Mitte* (Kutscher/Menschik 2017 and 2021), the graphic adaptation of *Der nasse Fisch* (Jysch 2018) and the radio dramatizations of the first two Gereon Rath novels (Böhm/Quabeck 2018 and 2020) can be considered parts of a larger fictional world that is often called a “universe”.¹ In this way, Marta Boni understands “worlds” as “imaginary territories and perennial, collectively built, semiotic realms” and argues that they are “necessary for the understanding of media creation and for the interpretive processes it stimulates” (Boni 9).
- 8 Research has been focusing on how these worlds or universes are *built* across and in different media, paying special attention to serialisations in science fiction (e.g. *Star Wars*, *Marvel*) and the fantasy genre (e.g. *Game of Thrones*). World building is one of the most important processes in transmedia storytelling, but also in serial narration and serial adaptation. In this case, world building refers to the ongoing construction of a coherent storyworld in its temporal and spatial dimension, including aspects like characters and objects, setting, and physical laws (Lukoschek 77). Director and creator Tom Tykwer has named “world building” as one of the major benefits he gained from collaborating with the Wachowski sisters on *Cloud Atlas* (Weisbrod 2017).
- 9 In *Babylon Berlin*, “world building” can be attributed quite literally to the showrunners’ efforts to create the historical world of 1929 Berlin using modern aesthetics: set designer Uli Hanisch created a whole block of buildings (the so-called “Neue Berliner Straße”) at the grounds of Babelsberg Studios which serve to recreate four different 1929 Berlin neighbourhoods from working-class Wedding to bourgeois Charlottenburg (see Niedbalski n.p.). World building, in this context, means re-building the past as a tangible space. Furthermore, the series makes use of computer-generated imagery to recreate historically correct representations of famous Berlin sites like the Alexanderplatz (Hall 315; ARD/Das Erste).
- 10 But world building also applies to the expansion of the plot and characters of Kutscher’s novels, which is facilitated by the serial structure of the adaptation. Contrary to the notion that an adaptation “reduces” or “streamlines” the material of the adapted text to “make it fit” into the target medium (Stam 34), serial adaptations systematically use techniques of expansion. These techniques of expansion, as Cardwell observes in her study on television adaptations of “classic” novels, “open out the details of the [adapted] novel – its intricacies of plot, mood, and atmosphere, to build characters and our relationships with them more incrementally and carefully, and to sustain a sense of contemplation” (Cardwell 187). Wells-Lassagne also states that serial adaptations “almost systematically add in plotlines and characters”, and concludes: “The model for television adaptation is without a doubt an expansive one” (Wells-

Lassagne 7). As I will demonstrate in section 2 of this article, *Babylon Berlin* introduces these principles of serial adaptation to German television.

- 11 The expansive qualities of serial adaptation can be discussed as a form of complex seriality in the context of the so-called age of “quality television” (Johnson). Aspects of complex seriality in *Babylon Berlin* are, for example, the large ensemble cast, the multiple and complex connections between the numerous characters, and the high degree of intraserial coherence (Weber 82 and 84f.). The series creates multiple narrative strands (Weber 85) that are intertwined in a way which has been termed “flexi-narrative” (Nelson 34) or “multistrand” narrative (Corner 58). In the context of adaptation, these structural characteristics of serial narration serve to unlock another important feature of world building that complements the quantitative expansion: the in-depth exploration of characters and storyworlds. As von Borries, Handloegten, and Tykwer have stated, one of the series’ main adaptation principles is *Vertiefung* (“going deeper”; Rebhandl n.p.) which is accompanied by a slowing-down (*Verlangsamung*) of narrated time in order to expand further on one character, one place, one moment in time. As a series that sets out to “make the borders vanish that separate the periods from each other” (Tykwer qtd. in Weisbrod n.p.), *Babylon Berlin* uses in-depth exploration of characters and places as well as the slowing down of narrated time to create an immersive “social portrait” of Berlin in the “Golden Twenties” for the “Golden Age” of serial adaptation. In the following two sections, I will demonstrate these principles, focusing on the expansion of storylines and characters as well as the political dimension of the series’ storyworld.

2. Volker Kutscher’s Historical Detective Novel *Der nasse Fisch* and its Expansion in *Babylon Berlin*

- 12 The first two seasons (episodes 1 to 16) of the *Babylon Berlin* television series, which will be the focus of this article, are based on Volker Kutscher’s bestselling historical crime novel *Der nasse Fisch* (2008; Engl. *Babylon Berlin*, 2016). The novel is the first in an ongoing series that will cover the period from 1929 to 1938 as a time of political change and crisis. Kutscher has stated that the concept of the novel series was inspired by television series like *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) as a new model of serial narration in the context of crime fiction (Kutscher qtd. in Kühn 2013). In German crime fiction, the focus on the end of the Weimar Republic (1918–1933) and the rise to power of the Nazi party was unprecedented, although many historical crime novels about Nazi Germany had been published (Genç 50). As of yet, Kutscher has published eight novels about homicide detective Gereon Rath; the latest novel *Olympia* (2020) is set in 1936. Kutscher’s Gereon Rath mysteries have met with a remarkable commercial and critical success in Germany (Kniesche 47). As the increase in international translations after 2017 suggests, the international popularity of the series has been enhanced by the television adaptation *Babylon Berlin*.
- 13 Kutscher’s novels are meticulously researched and include a large number of historical events and persons (Kniesche 47). *Der nasse Fisch*, for example, is historically inspired by the events of the so-called *Blutmai* (“Bloody May”) in 1929, when the police took violent action against communist protests on International Workers’ Day. The protagonist Gereon Rath is introduced to this explosive situation as a newcomer: he has recently started work with the vice squad after being transferred to Berlin from his hometown

Cologne. In the 1920s, Berlin was considered the most “American” of the German cities with respect to its cultural life, but also to its social issues and the influence of organised crime (Siebenhaar 229). Rath soon realises that things are tougher in “this big, cold city and he’d better get used to it” (Kutscher, *Babylon Berlin* 22). After a nightly visit from a stranger who later turns up dead, Rath starts his own investigations. Due to his unusual methods, Rath finds himself under a lot of pressure from his superiors, the press, political forces, but also from criminal organisations – a pattern that is repeated throughout the series (Beck 118).

- 14 When Rath is promoted to the homicide department, he needs to sabotage his own investigations in order to keep his entanglement with the Berlin underworld a secret – a nod to the tradition of hardboiled detective novels (Kniesche 61). During his investigations, Rath discovers the conspiracy of a group of exiled Russians (“The Red Fortress”) who plan to overthrow Stalin, using weapons they want to buy with a hoard of smuggled gold that has secretly reached Berlin by train. Other parties interested in the gold and the weapons are a nationalist paramilitary group including SA storm troopers, and underground boss Johann Marlow.² Rath finds out that some of his colleagues are involved in the nationalist conspiracy and learns the lesson that in Berlin, everybody gets their hands dirty. With the help of Marlow, he manages to prevent the worst, even though the conspiracy is covered up in order to prevent a political scandal. Rath takes note of the complex political context but insists on not being a part of it. When he claims against better knowledge that “The police aren’t political. It’s their job to maintain law and order” (Kutscher, *Babylon Berlin* 516), this sets the tone for the following novels. In the Gereon Rath mysteries, the detective serves as an apolitical observer who watches as parliamentary democracy dissolves and a fascist regime is established as the new norm (Beck 119). Rath refuses to take a stand against the infiltration of the public authorities, much to the disappointment of his future wife Charlotte Ritter, who leaves the police force in 1934 (Kniesche 51).
- 15 As an adaptation of Kutscher’s novels, the television series *Babylon Berlin* picks up on the ambiguity of a “naïve” historical character who observes political change from within (Beier n.p.). As I will demonstrate in sections 3 and 4, the series predominantly uses strategies of expansion and exploration to create a complex storyworld. It is not surprising that the amount of historical detail that went into the production came at a substantial cost. With a planned budget of almost 40 million euros, *Babylon Berlin* is the most expensive German television production of all time (Thompkins n.p.). The project could only be realised as a cooperation between several production companies and television networks, i.e. X Filme Creative Pool, Beta Film, ARD Degeto, and Sky Deutschland. Seasons one and two premiered on Sky 1 (Germany) and Sky Atlantic (UK and Ireland) in the fall of 2017 and were subsequently released on the German television station ARD. Netflix released the sixteen episodes of season one and two as one block in the US, Canada, and Australia in January 2018. In France, the show was distributed by Canal + in August 2018. Season three, based on Kutscher’s second Gereon Rath mystery *Der stumme Tod* (2009; engl. *The Silent Death*, 2018) premiered on Sky 1 in January 2020 and was released on the ARD media library in October 2020. Von Borries, Handloegten, and Tykwer have confirmed that a fourth season will adapt the third Gereon Rath novel *Goldstein* (2010; engl. 2018). Overall, the show has been sold to more than 100 countries, making it “Germany’s first TV blockbuster of the streaming era” (Connolly n.p.).

- 16 But this is not the only novel aspect of *Babylon Berlin*. Even more than other series, *Babylon Berlin* is a collaborative project: Achim von Borries, Henk Handloegten and Tom Tykwer have created, written, and directed the series together. Although Tykwer's is certainly the most prestigious name of the team, the series defies notions of the "showrunner as *auteur*" (Wells-Lassagne 127) by refusing to promote a "certain directorial style" (Tykwer, qtd. in Roxborough n.p.). Tykwer, von Borries, and Handloegten all worked as directors in parallel filming units, making every single episode of the series the result of a collaborative effort on a new scale.
- 17 With respect to British television, Sarah Cardwell discusses serial adaptations of popular contemporary literature as "hidden" adaptations (191) and claims that they are more likely to be perceived as examples of an established television genre than as adaptations. It is certainly true that the choice of an albeit best-selling, but not "classical" novel is an unusual one in the context of German television as well. But in contrast to other adapted detective series, *Babylon Berlin* makes very sure that the series is perceived as an adaptation, not only of Kutscher's work in general, but of the individual Gereon Rath mysteries. The opening credits of seasons one and two explicitly state that the series is based on *Der nasse Fisch*. Furthermore, the *Babylon Berlin* website presents Kutscher's novels as an integral part of their cross-media marketing campaign (X Filme Creative Pool GmbH).
- 18 In comparing the storylines of Kutscher's *Der nasse Fisch* and *Babylon Berlin*, it becomes clear that "the implications of serial storytelling cannot be overstated in understanding the unique nature of the television adaptation" (Wells-Lassagne 7). In *Babylon Berlin*, the story arcs³ of Kutscher's novel have been multiplied and expanded: the conflict about the train is just one of many and it involves far more characters with complex motivations. Producer Stefan Arndt remembers that these concepts of complex serial narration were a novelty in German television when they started planning in 2013: "it was still one story arc per episode – and you focus on your one hero... But our story had 157 characters, all very specific, all very individual, and all with their own interacting stories" (Roxborough n.p.).
- 19 One example of these "very individual" stories is the series' creation of the main character Gereon Rath. Kutscher envisioned his main character Gereon Rath as an "Everyman" figure (Kutscher in Greengrass n.p.) who comes to Berlin with an (almost) clean slate. He is susceptible to the chaotic state of the world and Weimar Germany "since the world had been thrown off its gimbals. The revolution in 1919 followed by hyperinflation in 1923 had turned first moral then material values on their head" (Kutscher, *Babylon Berlin* 12). Still, he remains a "middle character" who reflects and observes but is not necessarily affected by the upheaval that characterises Weimar Germany (Kniesche 56). *Babylon Berlin*, however, builds a historically and psychologically specific character of considerable depth, using building blocks of cultural and historical significance. In the series, Gereon Rath (Volker Bruch) is a World War I veteran and secretly suffers from severe PTSD that has caused him to self-medicate. He is haunted by memories of the day he had to leave his injured brother behind at the front (e.g. S01 E7; S02 E16). In fact, the return to the "sources of [his] fear" ("Quellen der Angst", S01 E01) constitutes a narrative frame for the first sixteen episodes of *Babylon Berlin*.
- 20 By integrating the issue of war trauma into the first two seasons, von Borries, Handloegten, and Tykwer anticipate a story arc from Kutscher's fifth Gereon Rath

mystery, *Märzgefallene* (2014; Engl. *The March Fallen*, 2020). Rath's trauma is established as part of the historical storyworld from the outset, thereby adding another layer to the moral portrait of a society that treats traumatised veterans like "broken machines" ("kaputte Automaten", S01 E1). The historical phenomenon of the so-called *Kriegszitterer* ("war quiverers") is translated into an intense physical experience of discomfort and disorientation embodied by the character's shaking, sweating, heavy breathing, blurred and distorted vision, and muffled hearing (e.g. S01 E02, S02 E09). In this way, the series literally "fleshes out" the period of Weimar Germany and makes history come painfully alive. The strategy of expanding the protagonist's background story so that it goes back to the war underlines the fact that Gereon Rath is created as the representative of an era, as a member of the "lost generation" of young men who came back from the war but could not be completely reintegrated into society (Becker 13).

- 21 By making a well-known cultural phenomenon part of the protagonist's history, the series pays homage to a change in the perception of the Weimar Republic. Recent studies on the era have stressed the importance of the First World War as an initiating trauma of the young Republic, thus opposing older theories that interpreted the Weimar Republic from the perspective of its ending in 1933. This form of expansion illustrates how the series *Babylon Berlin* contributes to a reservoir of cultural knowledge that Halbwachs has termed the "collective memory" and Aleida and Jan Assmann have specified as "cultural memory", describing it as an important part of collective identity (Erl 26). Today, popular culture and mass media play an important role in creating and sustaining the collective memory of historical events (Korte, Paletschek, and Hochbruck 13). Thus, *Babylon Berlin* can be seen as a contribution to the cultural memory of the Weimar Republic as a period of crisis and trauma. The fact that the series goes beyond the scope of the novels in expanding on their characters' backstories in a way that is representative of the era confirms that the showrunners are aware of their responsibility in creating an image of history.

3. Exploration of a (Political) Storyworld in *Babylon Berlin*

- 22 While the example of Gereon Rath's war trauma illustrates the series' adaptation strategy of expanding and exploring the characters on a psychological level, the exploration and connection of plot lines serve as an instrument of world building. In following the story of the train carrying illegal chemicals (the poisonous gas phosgene) and presumably a hoard of gold, the series examines in more detail the interconnected worlds of the players who are interested in the gas, the gold, and the weapons that can be bought with it. We follow exiled Russians into their secret hideout in a run-down printer's shop; we are introduced to the paramilitary structures of the nationalist forces who want to reinforce the German army with chemical weapons; and we get a peek into the seedy underworld of organised crime and its influence on the police. But the series adds yet another player to the mix that Kutscher does not explicitly mention: the nationalists are supported by the old nobility and industrial magnates who want to reinstate the monarchy. The world of the old elites and their entanglement with the military is represented by the industrialist Alfred Nyssen (Lars Eidinger) – a character

who does not exist in Kutscher's storyworld, but who resembles German steel magnate Fritz Thyssen who initially supported Adolf Hitler in his rise to power (Daub n.p.).

- 23 In *Babylon Berlin*, the character of Alfred Nyssen serves as an opportunity to show that antisemitism and nationalism were deeply rooted in the social and economic elite even before Hitler, and how it was connected to fragile masculinity and privilege. When *Regierungsrat* August Benda (Matthias Brandt), who is of Jewish descent, interviews Nyssen and asks him about the train full of chemicals he has ordered, Nyssen very pointedly responds that he needs the poisonous gas "to kill vermin" ("Um Schädlinge zu bekämpfen", S01 E08). Benda's comment, "I know exactly who people like you call vermin" ("Ich weiß ganz genau, wen Leute wie Sie als Schädlinge bezeichnen", S01 E08) calls out the antisemitic implications of Nyssen's remark. The use of vermin metaphors has a long tradition in antisemitic propaganda and became very popular after World War I (Herzig 8). Benda's comment builds a bridge for today's (German-speaking) audience who are certain to make a connection between the use of the antisemitic metaphor and the mass murder of millions of Jewish people by means of poisonous gas during Hitler's regime.
- 24 Nyssen is only one small cog in an interlocking system of political favours and unofficial, even illegal, collaborations. This system is summarised by the phrase "Hand wird nur von Hand gewaschen" ("hand is only washed by hand"), which is repeated throughout the series by several characters from different political backgrounds. For example, members of the military involved in a coup against the young democracy ("Operation Prangertag", S02 E13 to 15) are free to go because the government and the military are closely connected, and members of the Reichstag look the other way while nationalist forces, supported by Nyssen, form an illegal army (S02 E11). In fact, Rath himself is faced with a hard choice between his commitment to the police and his ethical obligations to the innocent victims of a police shooting. In episode 5, he becomes a first-hand witness to the murder of two women by armed police forces during the May revolts. Later, he is nudged by his colleagues and superiors to write a fake report (S01 E05) that states that the police were attacked and only used guns in defence. In episode 16, he repeats this lie in court, even though the communist activist Dr Völcker (Jödis Treibel) has tried to appeal to his conscience (S02 E10). As in Kutscher's novel, Rath insists he can remain untouched by politics and just do his work by the book, upholding law and order. Based on the sheer number of elaborate connections between the different players that are shown in seasons one and two, the audience can deduce that his view is naïve.
- 25 In general, the storyworld of *Babylon Berlin* is more explicitly political than Kutscher's novels. The series explores in great detail how the political intricacies of Weimar Berlin tangibly influence life in the city. In episodes 4 and 5, mass scenes with communist protesters serve to illustrate the support the left enjoyed in many districts of Berlin and the brutality of the police. The series envisions the protest at Herrmannplatz (S01 E4) almost like a battle in which the protesters clash violently with the police, thus evoking images of recent May protests in Berlin. On the other hand, the rising right is portrayed as a serious threat to the fragile democracy of the Weimar Republic, planning concrete attacks on representatives of the democratic government and the police, whereas "the Nazis" in Kutscher's *Der nasse Fisch* are often presented as nothing more than arrogant idiots (e.g. Kutscher, *Der nasse Fisch* 458). As the showrunners have remarked on several occasions, the goal of reinforcing the nation eerily reflects

political developments in the USA following Trump's election, as well as similar developments in Europe. Comparing 1929 and 2018, director Tom Tykwer states: "The party system in Germany is restructuring; actually, in all of Europe it is, with new parties rising [e.g. the right-wing populist party *Alternative für Deutschland*, J.B.] that have a huge influence on politics. And they usually are from the far right. It was the same back then" (qtd. in Weisbrod n.p.).

- 26 One particularly haunting example is that of the character Greta Overbeck (Leonie Benesch) who comes from a poor rural background and works as a maid for Benda's family. She falls in love with Fritz (Jacob Matschenz) who pretends to be a communist, but is actually a member of the SA stormtroopers. He and his friend Otto (Julius Feldmeier) manipulate Greta, playing on her empathy for the innocent victims of the May murders as well as her solidarity for working-class people, and nurture her mistrust in "die Bonzen" ("the bigwigs", S01 E08). When Fritz is allegedly shot and killed by the police on Benda's direct order, Otto persuades Greta to get revenge on her boss and plant a bomb under his desk. In preparing the attack, Otto's real motivation begins to shine through when he attributes Benda's alleged abuse of power to his being Jewish.
- 27 In the context of a historical interpretation of the Nazis' rise to power, Greta's dramatic story arc is potentially problematic since it seems to draw on the critically discussed narrative of the Nazis 'seducing' honest German citizens. But Greta's story illustrates the seductiveness of a populist political rhetoric that abuses the individual's feeling of being systematically wronged and mistreated, of being ignored and abandoned by their political leaders. In this way, the series seems to be a reflection on the rise of right-wing populism all over Europe and the US (Daub n.p.) which is often associated with an emotional and moral approach and a discursive construction of an "essential opposition between 'the people' and 'the elites'" (Waisbord 224). Yet the showrunners state that the similarities between the political landscape of the 1920s and today only became obvious when the series was already in planning: "We were overrun by reality", Tykwer remarks (qtd. in Beier n.p.; my transl.). Still, the series tries not to let anachronistic knowledge about what came after dominate the series' storytelling: "In 1929, no one had a clue that three-and-a-half years later society would turn upside down" (Tykwer, qtd. in Weisbrod n.p.). In this way, the series also concurs with recent historical theories that advise against a purely "retrospective" interpretation of the era from the viewpoint of its culmination in the election of Adolf Hitler. *Babylon Berlin* seeks to tell the historical time period from the "naïve" perspective of the characters who are caught up in it (Beier n.p.). It does so by expanding the individual worlds of the characters and their perspective on the storyworld, thus creating a social portrait of a city in turbulent times.

4. Social Spheres in 1929 Berlin: Adaptation of Time and Space

- 28 Although *Babylon Berlin* develops a large number of characters and explores many of them in psychological detail, the main character is 1920s Berlin itself (cf. Dowling n.p.). The title *Babylon Berlin* refers to a contemporary notion of ancient Babylon as a "cipher for modernity [...] that can lead to new summits of progress as well as to apocalyptic doom" (Polaschegg and Weichenhan 13; my transl.). Showrunner and director Achim

von Borries referred to the series as a “declaration of love” for the city and has stated that the show wanted to celebrate 1920s Berlin as an epicentre of radical modernity with a strong sense of a new beginning, thus avoiding the narrative of the Weimar Republic as merely a prelude to Nazi Germany (qtd. in Rebhandl n.p.). It is worth noting that the showrunners’ idea of working together on a project about the 1920s was discussed long before the opportunity to adapt Volker Kutscher’s bestselling novels (Renner n.p.). Like many historical series, *Babylon Berlin* aims to “mak[e] the 1920s come alive” (Renner n.p.).

- 29 It must be noted that 1920s Berlin was already a *topos* in literature and film long before *Babylon Berlin*. In fact, the author, Volker Kutscher, states that his interest in Berlin was originally kindled by the Berlin novels of the Weimar period, e.g. Alfred Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) or Irmgard Keun’s *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* (1932) (qtd. in Greengrass n.p.). In the tradition of these novels, Kutscher has his protagonist explore the city on foot and by car, paying close attention to social differences between the districts, cultural life, especially night life, and political activities like protests and public meetings (Kniesche 47). Kutscher’s narrator also observes processes of modernisation evident in the city’s architecture and its public transportation (see for example the almost Döblin-like comment on construction at Alexanderplatz; cf. Kutscher, *Der nasse Fisch* 23; Döblin 165). As an adaptation of Kutscher’s novel, *Babylon Berlin* also draws on the literary tradition of the Weimar Berlin novel as well as the visual inventory of Weimar cinema and its representations of Berlin (Hall 308–312; see section 5 in this article). In this way, the series creates and recreates an aesthetically charged constellation of a “chronotope” – as Mikhail Bakhtin has termed “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships” in artistic representation (84).
- 30 In *Babylon Berlin*, the period of the 1920s is brought to life in connection with the (social) spaces of the city and how they are inhabited by the characters. One of the most striking examples of this treatment of space is the character of Charlotte Ritter (Liv Lisa Fries). In *Der nasse Fisch*, Charlotte (“Charly”) is from a lower middle-class family and studies law when she is not working as a stenographer in the homicide department. In *Babylon Berlin*, Charlotte (“Lotte”) comes from a working-class background and struggles to support her poor family. Showrunner Henk Handloegten has stressed the importance of Charlotte’s background in terms of historical authenticity: “We felt very strongly that we should have a main character from this proletarian background, because Berlin was always a poor city” (Dowling n.p.). In spite of her educational, social and gender disadvantages, she manages to work her way up in the police force and become a deputy homicide detective.
- 31 The series translates her “way up” in the character’s movement through space. In episode one, we see Charlotte move through the city into ever larger and more open spaces, while crossing borders of social class. The sequence begins in the tiny flat in which Charlotte lives with her whole family (**Fig. 1 and 2**). It represents the less glamorous side of Berlin: the working-class districts with their over-populated tenement buildings and closed courtyards that have been part of the visual history of the proletarian “milieu” since the beginning of the 20th century (see, for example, Heinrich Zille’s drawings, but also so-called Proletarian films like *Mutter Krausens Fahrt ins Glück* or *Kuhle Wampe oder: Wem gehört die Welt?*).

Figure 1. Liv Lisa Fries as Charlotte Ritter (S01 E01).



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Figure 2. Liv Lisa Fries as Charlotte Ritter and Pit Bukowski as Erich (S01 E01).



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- 32 In episode one, we see Charlotte's sister Toni (Irene Böhm) wake up at dawn and realise she is not there. Toni finds Charlotte smoking at the bathroom window, having apparently just arrived home from a party. When her sister asks her how she deals with not having slept at all and going straight to work ("Jar nich jeschlafen? [...] Und gleich wieder zur Arbeit? Wie schaffstn dit immer?") she counters with a sassy couplet that

could easily be a quote from a contemporary song: “wer schläft verpasst dit wachsein und ick muss ja uff acht sein” (‘if you sleep you miss out on being awake – and I need to be on the lookout’) (S01E01 14:58–15:01). Both characters speak a Berlin dialect that points to their working-class background and sets the tone of the scene.

- 33 In this scene, Charlotte’s golden dress forms a stark contrast to the obvious poverty of the dingy flat with its bare walls. She changes into her work attire and fixes her face in a pocket-mirror, thus preparing herself for the world outside. But there are more traces from the previous night than just smudged mascara – her sister notices a bruise on her neck that Charlotte brushes off as “nothing”. It is made very clear that there is hardly any private space in the small flat: while Charlotte changes, her brother-in-law Erich (Pit Bukowski) comes in to use the toilet, remind her of the rent, and casually harass her. The hand-held camera stays close to the characters, conveying a sense of narrowness and restriction. In fact, Charlotte and her sister are the only characters from the Ritter family who are repeatedly shown looking out of the window, thus being connected to the idea of getting out. Charlotte’s exit from this enclosed space resembles a flight. She steps into the staircase, then the courtyard, and progresses onto the street, running after the tram. The camera setting changes from a medium to a wide shot, showing more and more of the urban space, while the music (a song named “A Woman in Berlin”) picks up momentum.
- 34 In the next scene focusing on Charlotte, she arrives at Alexanderplatz, which is first introduced to the viewers in an extreme wide shot from above, showing the powers of stage settings, costume, and computer-generated imagery that have transformed today’s Alexanderplatz into another world. On her way across Alexanderplatz, Charlotte passes a group of disabled people and encounters a boy in grubby clothes who grabs her hand and begs for money. In order to shake him off, she warns him: “Ick jeh zur Polizei, unjelogen – willste mit?” (‘I’m going to the police, I’m not kidding – you want to come along?’) (S01 E01 19:15–19:18). In this way, she is using her workplace as a means to get rid of any connections to her working-class background. She proceeds to the brick building of the “Castle” (police headquarters) with her head held high and a proud smile on her face. As Weber points out, Charlotte quite literally crosses between different worlds (93): the working-class environment of her family, the professional men’s world of police headquarters, and the glamorous Berlin night life (see section 5). In this way, to follow Bakhtin, “time [...] thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (84).
- 35 The “social spheres” that Charlotte moves through are used to address issues of class and gender (Hallet and Neumann 26), but they also illustrate the complexity of the city itself, which is made up of different worlds. By literally following a character through the spaces of the city, the series uses an established technique of literary and cinematic depiction of urban space which allows the audience to experience space in a concrete and meaningful way (e.g. Misek 57f.). Although Charlotte Ritter – and Gereon Rath – explore the city by walking, driving, and taking public transport, their movement is in no way comparable to the leisurely stroll of Walter Benjamin’s *flâneur* (Neumeyer 17). They are driven by questions and desires, and their paths form straight lines on an imaginative map of the city.
- 36 Another sphere of 1929 Berlin that Charlotte is part of is only hinted at in the first episode by the bruise on her neck as a trace of the night’s events. The glamorous night

club Moka Efti, where Charlotte goes to dance, but also to moonlight as a sex worker, represents the “Babylon” aspects of 1929 Berlin: the excessive night life is a counterpart to the turbulent political times that is often referred to as a “dance on the volcano” (Becker 521–524). In *Babylon Berlin*, the representation of night life offers an opportunity to cross the borders between historical periods, but also between strategies of aesthetic localisation and globalisation.

5. Berlin Night Life: Aesthetic Localisation and Globalisation

- 37 In translation theory, the term *localisation* refers to the strategy of making a translated text suitable for the target culture (Pym 29) and is part of a globalisation of markets. Since adaptation can be considered a form of translation between two different media (Hutcheon 16), the concept of localisation can be applied to adaptation as well. The concept is particularly productive for *Babylon Berlin* since the adaptation was produced for the German-speaking market, but clearly had an international audience in mind as well. In the series, localisation goes beyond the use of Berlin dialect and set designs that are immediately recognisable to a German audience as part of the iconography of Berlin, like the courtyards of tenement buildings or subway stations. In fact, the series engages in a strategy of visual localisation that is connected to the history of German film and can thus be called a form of “remediation” (Bolter and Grusin 49). The series pays homage to silent film classics, like *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* or *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (Hall 310), but also incorporates fragments from Walter Ruttmann’s experimental animated film *Lichtspiel Opus 2* (1921) or *Menschen am Sonntag* (1930). Although recognising these references may be part of the “pleasure” an adaptation provides (Hutcheon 21), *Babylon Berlin* primarily uses them to create an aesthetic atmosphere and a vivid feeling for 1929 Berlin. As Sarah F. Hall indicates, the series draws on the canon of Weimar Germany’s cinema as “the country’s entrée into transnational commercial movie culture on a grand scale, and as a high point of its internationally recognizable aesthetic of individual and social crisis and anxiety” (Hall 309). Thus, the remediation techniques in *Babylon Berlin* allow the adaptation to cross the borders between localisation and globalisation, between the culturally specific and internationally recognisable markers of 1929 Berlin.
- 38 In light of the broad international acceptance of and increased demand for complex serial narratives since the rise of streaming platforms like Netflix (Nesselhauf and Schleich 46f.), the choice of a serial format for the adaptation of Kutscher’s novels alone can be interpreted as a result of globalisation. The series draws heavily on today’s image of Berlin as the party capital of Europe and as a centre of queer culture. *Babylon Berlin* celebrates the excessive night life of 1929 Berlin, especially in terms of a liberation of gender roles that directly connects to today’s club scene. Commenting on the depiction of Berlin night life in the series, Tom Tykwer observes that “we had LGBT issues 90 years ago. All of that fell apart, of course. Basically it later had to be rebuilt over the course of half a century. I guess back then in Berlin and in a few other places in the world, we were pretty close to where we are now” (qtd. in Weisbrod n.p.).
- 39 In episode 5, Charlotte Ritter takes Gereon Rath to the illegal night club *Der Holländer*. As an outsider from provincial Cologne, Rath is surprised to meet one of his colleagues from the police department, openly presenting as female in a glamorous red dress and

hat. By underscoring how familiar Charlotte, as a Berlin native, is with the (queer) night life, the series establishes diversity in terms of gender, sexuality, but also race and class, as a norm Rath has to get used to. In this episode and throughout the series, music and dancing serve as an opportunity for the characters to engage with a culture, or even become part of a community. This sense of community is most vividly conveyed in the mass-choreographed dance scene at Moka Efti (S01 E02) in which Charlotte Ritter, her colleague Stephan Jänicke (Anton von Lucke) and his friend Rudi (Johann Jürgens) become part of a large crowd of dancers (Fig. 3). A singer in male drag (Severija Janušauskaitė) performs the song “Zu Asche, zu Staub” (‘To Ashes, to Dust’, composed by Tom Tykwer and Johnny Klimek). During the drum solo, the crowd enthusiastically joins in a choreography that seems to be a recurring event known only to insiders. Many critics have commented on the obvious parallels between the Moka Efti scenes and today’s club culture in Berlin, as represented by legendary locations like Berghain or Kater Blau (e.g. Denk, Thompkins, Ströbele, Buß; see also Weisbrod). Thus, scenes with music and dancing also allow the audience to emotionally relate to the historical storyworld of *Babylon Berlin*.

Figure 3. Liv Lisa Fries as Charlotte Ritter, Anton von Lucke as Jänicke, Johann Jürgens as Rudi, and others (S01 E02).



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- 40 While the mass choreography establishes a sense of community and fun, the following scenes from Moka Efti introduce a darker perspective. They are part of a montage (Daub) that parallels the excessive dancing, sexual adventures, and political violence. Set to an instrumental piece of music that picks up themes from “Zu Asche, zu Staub” and is aptly titled “Boeser Zwilling” (‘Evil Twin’), the montage crosses the borders between different worlds. On the Moka Efti dancefloor, the dancers go wild. Except for the costumes and the Charleston-inspired dance moves, these images could easily be taken from a 21st-century Berlin club night. At the same time, Charlotte comes to an

agreement with a client and leads him through the crowd to a private room in the basement where they get undressed and put on BDSM equipment.

- 41 In between these scenes, the camera cuts to a run-down printer's shop in Köpenick, where Alexey Kardakov (Ivan Shvedoff) watches his Trotskyist comrades being murdered by two henchmen with machine guns as the music at Moka Efti – now off-screen – picks up speed. Across the levels of narrative and across the borders of two different worlds, violent death and excessive partying are visually aligned. The dancers' jerking movements at the night club seem to echo the victims' twitches as they are being hit by machine gun fire, while the sound of shooting and screaming almost drowns out the music. The montage visually presents the idea that in 1929 Berlin, dancing at glamorous parties and being shot in a backyard can happen at the same time, thus evoking the metaphor of a "dance on the volcano". The montage picks up speed in sync with the music. After the last member of the Trotskyist group has been shot, Charlotte blows out a candle in the basement and the music abruptly dies down. The dancers at Moka Efti suddenly freeze, and the camera moves slowly over their heads as if scanning the crowd for signs of life. This remarkable last shot can be read as a meta-reflexive comment on the way the series "freezes" historical time, but at the same time makes 1929 Berlin "come alive" by visually presenting it according to an internationally accessible aesthetic.

Conclusion

- 42 *Babylon Berlin* is the first large-scale German-speaking project that can be connected to a trend in serial adaptation (Wells-Lassagne 4). As a collaborative project of unprecedented proportions, the series endeavours to make 1929 Berlin come alive in grand style. Von Borries, Handloegten, and Tykwer focus on the city itself as the protagonist and create a "social portrait" of Berlin at the end of the Weimar Republic. This includes fundamental strategies of world building which the showrunners have referred to as *Vertiefung* ("in-depth exploration") of characters and their connections, but also of social space and historical time. *Babylon Berlin* expands and explores the political dimensions of Weimar Berlin by adding dramatic story arcs that "flesh out" the experiences of the characters caught up in history. In this way, the series makes use of strategies of expansion which are characteristic of serial adaptation (Wells-Lassagne 7), thus breaking with German television traditions. The series strives to "make the borders vanish that separate the periods from each other" (Tykwer in Weisbrod n.p.). To do so, the show creates an aesthetic that pays homage to local film history, but also appeals to an international audience by recreating an image of Berlin as party and queer capital, thereby drawing on adaptation strategies of localisation and globalisation at the same time.
- 43 From the perspective of Adaptation Studies, the series presents a ground-breaking example of serial adaptation that crosses multiple borders. As one of the first large-scale serial productions that can compete with international standards, it paves the way for a new concept of television in Germany. The series creates a complex historical storyworld that sometimes defies comparisons to Volker Kutscher's novel *Der nasse Fisch*. Nevertheless, the series explicitly affirms its status as an adaptation, not only of the "Rath universe", but of one particular novel. In this way, *Babylon Berlin* introduces new ideas of what an adaptation can be to the German market, illustrating Hutcheon's

argument that world building is one of the most important principles in recent forms of adaptation (Hutcheon xxiv). In a broader research context, *Babylon Berlin* presents an interesting example for the study of multiple serialities, i.e. serial adaptations of serialised source texts. Taking genre conventions of both crime fiction and historical fiction into account, one could further investigate how the “case structure” of the series of novels is broken down and rearranged into a multifaceted storyworld, and how world building as a major principle of serial narration and adaptation contributes to the collective visual memory of the Weimar Republic in popular culture. The use of adaptation strategies of expansion and exploration, rooted in structures of serial narration, is connected to the exploration of a historical storyworld by means of narrating time and space. *Babylon Berlin* connects time, space, and characters to cross the borders between 1929 and today, and to firmly establish Berlin as the capital of serial adaptation.

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NOTES

1. In fact, the publisher Kiepenheuer & Witsch has already integrated the idea of a "Gereon Rath universe" in its marketing strategy (<https://www.kiwi-verlag.de/magazin/extras/volker-kutschers-erfolgsserie-um-gereon-rath>; my transl.).
2. In the book series, underground legend Johann Marlow is a background character who has control over Gereon Rath. Kutscher's seventh Gereon Rath Novel *Marlow* (2018) explores in more detail the connections between the gangster and Rath's family as well as his attempt to gain power by joining the Nazis.
3. In the context of serial narration, "story arc" refers to a storyline within a larger episodic narrative. Story arcs are often connected to a character and unfold over many episodes.

ABSTRACTS

German television series have only recently caught up with the new international standards of serial narration in this "Golden Age" of television. One of the most prestigious – and most expensive – new television series is *Babylon Berlin* (2017–). As an adaptation of Volker Kutscher's historical detective novels, *Babylon Berlin* challenges conventional notions of adaptation, as it crosses the border between reduction and expansion, localisation and globalisation. My analysis of seasons one and two of *Babylon Berlin* will demonstrate the importance of world building in recent serial adaptation. In particular, I will focus on how the series explores the political storyworld, analysing the re-creation of historical and social spaces in Berlin in 1929 and their connection to the characters.

Ce n'est que récemment que les séries télévisées allemandes ont intégré les nouvelles normes internationales en matière de narration sérielle dans cet "âge d'or" de la télévision. L'une des nouvelles séries télévisées les plus prestigieuses - et les plus coûteuses - est *Babylon Berlin* (2017–).

Cette série qui est une adaptation des romans policiers historiques de Volker Kutscher, remet en question les notions conventionnelles d'adaptation, car elle franchit la frontière entre réduction et expansion, localisation et mondialisation. Mon analyse des saisons 1 et 2 de *Babylon Berlin* démontrera l'importance de la construction du monde dans les adaptations récentes de séries. Je me concentrerai plus particulièrement, sur la façon dont la série explore le monde narratif politique, en analysant la recréation des espaces historiques et sociaux du Berlin de 1929 et leur lien avec les personnages.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Berlin, expansion, télévision allemande, monde narratif politique, adaptation en série

Keywords: Berlin, expansion, German television, political storyworld, serial adaptation

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