

# The Genius of Berlin

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***Berlin Alexanderplatz***

directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder

Criterion Collection, seven DVDs, \$124.95

***Fassbinder: Berlin Alexanderplatz***

Catalog of the exhibition edited by Klaus Biesenbach

an exhibition and screening of the restored film at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, March 18–May 13, 2007, and at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York, October 21, 2007–January 21, 2008.

Schirmer/Mosel, 664 pp., \$90.00

Alfred Döblin's great novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, published in 1929, is pretty much untranslatable. Much of it is written in the working-class argot of pre-war Berlin. A translator can ignore this, of course, and use plain English, but then you lose the flavor of the original. Or he can go for an approximation, adopting a kind of Brooklynese, for example, but this would not evoke Döblin's louche Berlin milieu so much as Damon Runyon's New York.<sup>1</sup> John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, set in eighteenth-century London, was successfully reworked by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill into a Weimar Berlin masterpiece, but that wasn't a translation; it was a transformation, of place and time.

Franz Biberkopf, the hero of Döblin's novel, is a pimp, not a bad sort, but given to sudden helpless rages. He whipped one of his girls, Ida, to death with an eggbeater. But that is not how Döblin's epic tale begins. It begins when Biberkopf is released from Berlin's Tegel prison, paralyzed with fear at having to pick up his life again in the infernal metropolis. He meets a poor bearded Jew, who tries to comfort him with some Yiddish wisdom. Biberkopf's spirits are further revived by a rough sexual encounter with Ida's sister. He quickly finds a new girl, called Polish Lina. This time, he vows, Franz Biberkopf will be a respectable man, *ein anständiger Mensch*; this time, he will stay away from crime. But he can't. In Döblin's words (my translation):

Although he does all right economically, he is at war with an outside force, unpredictable, something that looks like fate.

Biberkopf wants to believe in human goodness. But the part of the metropolis he knows, concentrated in the mean streets around the proletarian Alexanderplatz ("Alex") in east Berlin, grinds him down. He is punished for his naive trust in others.

Biberkopf's fate, a sorry succession of shabby deals, drunken brawls, petty crime, and murder, is the stuff of a pulp novel or B-movie. At key moments in the story, he is betrayed by men he regards as his closest friends. Otto Lüders, the uncle of Polish Lina, gives him a share in his business as a door-to-door salesman of shoelaces. Biberkopf has sex with one of his customers, a grieving widow, whose late husband he physically resembles. In exchange for her moment of consolation, she gives him a fat tip. After he tells Lüders about his good fortune, Lüders proceeds to rob her. When he hears about this, Biberkopf goes on a drunken binge. But he still trusts his friend Reinhold, a petty mobster, who can't bear to stay with the same woman for more than a week or two and insists on passing on one after another to Biberkopf. Since he grows fond of the women, Biberkopf calls a halt to these sordid transactions. Reinhold feels insulted.

Soon after, Biberkopf is tricked into taking part in a heist, and Reinhold almost kills him by pushing him out of the get-away car, hoping he'll be run over. Biberkopf survives minus one arm. A new girlfriend, Mieze, moves into his room, passing on to him the money she makes in the streets. Reinhold, out of malice, envy, and contempt, wants to take Mieze away from Biberkopf. When she resists Reinhold's advances, he strangles her. Biberkopf, blamed for the murder, goes temporarily mad, but he is not prosecuted and he emerges a saner, more mediocre, less delusional man. He is offered a job as a security guard in a factory. In Döblin's laconic words: "He accepts. There is nothing more to say about his life."

The greatness of Döblin's novel lies not in the plot but, as Rainer Werner Fassbinder observes in his essay on the book, in the telling.<sup>2</sup> Franz Biberkopf is one of the modern world's richest literary characters, as memorable as Woyzeck, Oblomov, or Madame Bovary. We get to know him not just from the outside, as a fat, muscular, working-class Berliner, a lover of schnapps, beer, and women, an "unpolitical" man, a fixture of the bars and cheap dance halls around the "Alex," but from the inside too, in a constant stream of interior monologues filled with his dreams, anxieties, confusions, hopes, and illusions.

Döblin has often been compared to Joyce, and *Ulysses* is sometimes cited as his model. Döblin always denied this, however. He wrote:

Why should I imitate anybody? The living language I hear around me is enough, and my past gives me all the material I need.

But he read Joyce after he had begun writing *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, and said that the Irishman's work had "put the wind in my sails."<sup>2</sup> In fact, both writers, living in the age of Freud and Jung, were attempting to do something similar, to break down the barriers between conscious behavior and subconscious drives by delving into the churning magma of their heroes' chaotic inner lives.

In a typical passage, Biberkopf talks to himself:

You swore, Franz Biberkopf, to stay decent. You led a shitty life, ran off the rails. You killed Ida and did time for it. Terrible. And now? Nothing's really changed, Ida's called Mieke, that's all, you lost an arm, careful, you'll end up being a lush, and everything'll start all over again, only worse, and that'll be the end of you.... Bullshit, can I help it? Did I ask to be a pimp? Bullshit, I say. I've done all I could, all that's humanly possible.... You'll end up in jail, Franz, you'll get a knife in your belly. Let them try. They'll first get a taste of mine.

Biberkopf is not the only one in Döblin's book to be turned inside out. All the main characters—Reinhold, Mieke, Lüders, a gangster named Meck, Eva, Biberkopf's former lover, and many more—reveal themselves in a mixture of salty Berlin speech and private thoughts. But it is not just the human characters whose consciousness, or subconsciousness, is opened up for the reader, but the metropolis itself. *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is constructed as a collage of often random images that flicker into view, as though one were clattering through the teeming streets on an electric trolley, taking in advertising slogans, newspaper headlines, popular songs, bars, restaurants, hotels, neon signs, department stores, pawnshops, flophouses, cops, striking workers, whores, subway stations, and so on. Again, Fassbinder put this very well:

More interesting than the question of whether Döblin was acquainted with “Ulysses” [is] the idea that the language in “Berlin Alexanderplatz” was influenced by the rhythm of the S-Bahn trains that kept rolling past Alfred Döblin's study.

Creating a collage of fleeting, fragmented impressions as a way to describe the modern metropolis is not unique to Döblin, of course. Walther Ruttmann's experimental documentary film *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*, made in 1927, did exactly that, through a montage of images as fast and cacophonous as the city itself. So did George Grosz, in his drawings of Berlin, which don't simply break up the view of metropolitan life into a jumble of impressions, but make the city dwellers look transparent, as though one could see through them to their most private desires, often of a violent sexual nature. And in their different ways, Picasso, Braque, and others were doing the same, fragmenting perspective in Synthetic Cubism.

Döblin adds his own all-seeing authorial voice to the patchwork of speech, songs, police reports, private thoughts, commercials, and other big-city noises. His voice is as complex as those of his characters. Sometimes it is didactic, like Brecht's theatrical texts, or drily analytical like a doctor's analysis of his patients. Döblin was in fact a doctor, and practiced as a psychiatrist in Berlin, where he heard many crime stories firsthand. Sometimes the voice is ironic, even sarcastic, and often it is given to metaphysical musings, quoting from the Bible, especially the stories of Job and Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. Sacrifice is one of Döblin's great themes: death as a necessary condition of rebirth.

Döblin was the son of a Jewish merchant in Stettin. While in American exile in 1941, he converted to Roman Catholicism, influenced, he said, by his reading of Kierkegaard and, more surprisingly, Spinoza. The questions of fate and personal choice, of man's place in an impersonal universe of unseen forces, natural as well as technological and political, are a philosophical leitmotif running through the entire story of Franz Biberkopf's downfall and final redemption.

How to translate this great literary stew into a film? The first, not inconsiderable attempt was made in 1931, by Piel Jutzi, with a script co-written by Döblin himself. Biberkopf is played by Heinrich George, one of the most admired actors of the time. Jutzi's *Berlin-Alexanderplatz* bears some resemblance to Ruttman's documentary film, with its wonderful images. But the many layers of Döblin's expressionist novel cannot be compressed into an eighty-nine-minute feature film. George was a great actor, and the movie is a precious document of what Döblin's Berlin actually looked like, but the richness of the novel is lost.

When Fassbinder made his fifteen-hour-long film of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* for television in 1980, Döblin's city was mostly gone, destroyed by Allied bombs, Soviet artillery, and East German wrecking balls. And what little was left, in the east, was hidden behind the Berlin Wall, and thus out of bounds for Fassbinder and his crew. A documentary approach was clearly impossible. And even if it had been possible to reconstruct the Alexanderplatz, Fassbinder felt that

you could tell how it really would look out on the streets better from the kinds of refuges people created for themselves, what kinds of bars they went to, how they lived in their apartments, and so on.<sup>4</sup>

So he recreated the city as a kind of theater set, confined to a few interiors—Biberkopf's room, his local bar, Reinhold's apartment, an underground railway station, and a few streets—built in a Munich movie studio. Since panoramic views or even long shots of the city were impossible, Fassbinder chose details, close-ups, window frames, blinking neon signs, bar tables, and stoops, a technique we are familiar with from television soap operas; think of *Seinfeld's* Manhattan, constructed on a Hollywood backlot.

Fassbinder's film was in fact made very fast and very cheaply, using 16-millimeter film. As Susan Sontag points out, the length of the work, consisting of fourteen episodes, lends itself particularly well to the cinematic translation of a novel. The viewer, like the reader of a novel, has the time to immerse himself in the narrative, become thoroughly familiar with the characters, live in the story, as it were. Limiting the number of locations (in the book Biberkopf dwells in various places, not one, and frequents several bars) is another common feature of soap operas; after a while you get to know these places—think of *Seinfeld's* coffee shop, or his apartment—as though you have been there many times yourself. In some ways, the concentrated form of the soap

opera is closer to theater than to cinema. This can be a virtue, as it is in Fassbinder's masterpiece. Highly stylized, it manages to combine theatricality with intimacy, which perfectly suits the tone of Döblin's narrative.

*Berlin Alexanderplatz* is also a story that seems perfectly natural to Fassbinder himself. He first read Döblin's book when he was fourteen, in the grip, as he put it, of "an almost murderous puberty." Confused about his homosexuality, deprived of his father, who left when Fassbinder was still very young, and generally living in a state of adolescent terror, he read *Berlin Alexanderplatz* not just as a work of art but as a book that could help him deal with his personal anxieties. Because of this, he reduced it, on first reading, to a theme that is certainly there, though perhaps not quite so predominant as Fassbinder made it out to be: the violent, sadomasochistic, but always intimate relationship between Biberkopf and Reinhold. Fassbinder sees a purity in Biberkopf's love for his friend, a purity that is dangerous, even terrifying, but needs to be cherished despite, or perhaps because of, the deep suffering involved. This reading of the book helped the young Fassbinder cope with his own demons. In his life as much as in his films, love was often mixed with violence: two of his lovers committed suicide.

Biberkopf, a man in search of love and dignity in a squalid world, was in some ways Fassbinder's alter ego. There are references to Döblin's novel in several of Fassbinder's earlier movies. In his first feature film, *Love Is Colder than Death* (1969), Fassbinder himself plays a pimp called Franz. He has a prostitute-lover named Joanna (Hanna Schygulla). But his deeper feelings are for a petty gangster named Bruno (Ulli Lommel). The power plays, the jealousies, the cruelty of love, the complex inner lives of marginal figures, all these reflect *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.

Franz turns up once more in *Gods of the Plague* (1970). Like Biberkopf, this Franz, played by Harry Baer, has various liaisons with women after being released from prison. But again, the most intense relationship is with another man, a violent gangster by the name of "Gorilla" (Günther Kaufmann). In *Fox and His Friends* (1975), one of Fassbinder's few treatments of openly gay life, he plays a naive carnival worker named Franz Biberkopf, who wins the lottery and is viciously exploited by relatives, lovers, and friends. The German title, *Faustrecht der Freiheit* (First Right of Freedom), hints more directly at one of the themes that runs through Döblin's novel too: the struggle for survival of a man who wants to be decent in a dog-eat-dog world.

Fassbinder might have played Biberkopf in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, but he chose instead Günter Lamprecht, who gives one of the most memorable performances in the history of film. First of all, he looks the part: large, shambling, like a performing bear, his pudding face a map of confusion, barely contained violence, and sweet innocence. Much of the movie is shot in close-up, registering every emotion. A drunken pimp who hero-worships a thug and beats up his lovers is not at first sight a prepossessing figure, yet Fassbinder, through Lamprecht's performance, gives an affectionate picture of

Biberkopf. The story is brutal, but the telling is full of tenderness. We learn to love this sad loser.

If Biberkopf is the Job-like character, constantly tested by increasingly savage misfortunes, Reinhold, played beautifully by Gottfried John, is a Satanic figure, a brute, but a fascinating, even seductive brute. John, too, is often filmed in close-up, usually from a low side angle that brings out his sly malice. As is often the case in life, his slight physical disability—a stammer—adds something to his dangerous charm. Reinhold is described in the book as slim and disheveled, a sad-eyed man with a “long yellowish face” who walks “as though his feet are always getting stuck.” John slinks and slouches, snakelike; you expect him to start hissing at any moment.

The third extraordinary performance is by Barbara Sukowa as Mieke, the provincial girl who came to Berlin “to have some fun” and ends up being Biberkopf’s whore. Her mannerisms—the licking of her fingers to smooth her eyebrows, the coltish hopping onto Biberkopf’s lap, the giggly flirtations, the fits of hysterical screaming—are marks of a kind of innocent sluttishness, if such a thing can be imagined. Dressed in white, she looks the picture of innocence, just waiting to be sacrificed in this wicked world. When Reinhold tricks her into taking a walk with him in the dark, ominous, Hansel and Gretel-like woods outside Berlin, he takes off his shirt to show her his tattoo of an anvil. Why an anvil, she wants to know. “Because someone has to lie down on it,” he says. “Why didn’t you have a bed tattooed there instead?” she wonders. “No,” he says, “I think an anvil is closer to the truth.” “Are you a blacksmith?” she asks. “That, too, a little.... No one should get too close to me...they will get burned right away.” And she does. She flirts with Reinhold, then she curses him. Reinhold strangles her in a rage.

In these emotional cocktails, it is hard to get the balance just right between brutality and charm, sweetness and callous self-regard, innocence and sauciness. The brilliance of Fassbinder and his cast is in the way they manage to express all these feelings in a work that is so tightly structured, formal, aesthetic. Fassbinder composed every frame with the eye of a painter, and manipulated his actors rather like a puppet master. Almost every scene is filmed in artificial light: yellow streetlamps and headlights glowing in the misty night; grays and sulphurous greens in the stuffy subway stations; oranges and shades of brown in the apartments. The only bright colors penetrating the gloom come from flashing neon signs. The sun shines rarely. To give the light a diffuse, 1920s feel, reminiscent of Josef von Sternberg’s films, Fassbinder covered the camera lens with a silk stocking. The woods are filmed through a haze. Indoor scenes are sometimes lit through a veil of reflective particles stirred by rotating fans to blur and soften the light even further.

By pressing his characters into confined spaces, framed by window panes or iron bars, crowded by furniture and objects in cluttered rooms, or reflected in mirrors, Fassbinder creates an atmosphere of claustrophobia, of people feeling caged in the metropolis. His great hero, the director Douglas Sirk, who often used similar effects, might have been an influence. The paintings of Max Beckmann, of human beings stuffed into narrow

attics or pushed together in tiny dance halls, could have been another source of inspiration. The last shot of Biberkopf, before he goes mad, after he finally realizes what his friend Reinhold has done to his lover, Mieze, shows him laughing hysterically through the bars of a birdcage hanging from the rafters of his room. (The original inhabitant of this cage, a canary, had already been squeezed to death by the despairing Biberkopf.)

We would never have been able to appreciate the full beauty of Fassbinder's film if it had not been remastered for the new DVD collection and the Berlin and New York exhibitions. The original screening on television certainly didn't do it justice, and it is only now that the colors look the way Fassbinder intended. For a director who worked as fast as Fassbinder, often finishing one shot in one take, the control of his material is stunning. We owe the pleasure of seeing this new version largely to Fassbinder's editor, last partner in life, and heir, Juliane Lorenz.

Fassbinder did not play Biberkopf. He played Döblin. The narration is in Fassbinder's voice, tender, ironic, poetic, and entirely faithful to the book. But the movie is far from a literal translation of the text. Fassbinder made the story his own. First of all, he added a character who wasn't there in Döblin's version: Frau Bast, Biberkopf's ever-loyal, all-understanding, blindly loving, warmly maternal landlady. She is the consoling presence, always ready to excuse, to clean up, to arrange things. Frau Bast is also rather nosy. Like his Biberkopf, Fassbinder himself was deeply drawn to mother figures, first of all his actual mother, Liselotte (Lilo) Pempeit, who acted in several of his films, including *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, where she appears as the silent wife of a gang boss. In 1970, he actually married one of his muses, the singer Ingrid Caven. Juliane Lorenz was only the last of his devoted women, who did everything from buying his groceries to cutting his films.

The most important departure from the original text, however, is Fassbinder's attempt to eroticize the male relationships, especially the one between Biberkopf and Reinhold. In his essay, Fassbinder makes it clear that the two characters in Döblin's book were "by no means homosexual—they don't even in the broadest sense have problems in this direction." But in the last delirious episodes of the movie, when Biberkopf lies in the mental institution and Reinhold is in jail, where he falls in love with his Polish cellmate, Fassbinder makes explicit what in the book is barely even hinted at. In the book, Reinhold has strong feelings for the Pole. Though not impossible to imagine, there is no suggestion that these feelings are physical. In the movie, the camera lingers sensuously on the Pole's naked body as the two men kiss on their bunk bed.

The epilogue of the story, when Biberkopf goes through hell inside his own head, is described in some detail in the book. Biberkopf has visions of Death slashing him with an axe. In the movie, it is Reinhold, stripped to the waist, wearing black leather boots, who wields the axe, and, in another sequence, a whip, which he takes to Biberkopf while another man crawling on all fours is whipped by a blond beast. This looks less

like Döblin's vision of hell than an orgy in a 1970s Berlin leather bar, an impression heightened by the sounds of Lou Reed and Janis Joplin instead of Peer Rabe's melancholy score, hauntingly played through the rest of the film. And there, peering at the scenes of sadomasochistic carnage, half hidden behind a door, is Fassbinder himself, in dark glasses and a leather jacket. The idea, no doubt, was to bring the movie up to date, to show that political decadence and sexual violence were no less relevant in the 1970s than in the 1920s. The effect, however, is to make these scenes look oddly dated, not timeless but rather typical of the underground theater scene from which Fassbinder emerged in the 1960s.

Perhaps he went over the top in this hallucinatory epilogue, but if so, he went bravely, gloriously over the top, with all guns blazing. Some of Fassbinder's visual inventions are brilliant elaborations on Döblin's own imagination. The religious imagery, for example, already heavily present in the novel, which is, after all, a kind of passion play, is filtered through Fassbinder's peculiar perspective in the last part of the movie: Biberkopf nailed to a cross, watched by the women he has killed or abandoned; Reinhold wearing a crown of thorns; and one especially striking scene of Frau Bast as the Virgin Mary cradling a puppet of Biberkopf with a Nazi armband. A hint, perhaps, that Biberkopf, once he recovered his sanity, would become a perfectly normal little man, and thus, in Fassbinder's words, "no doubt become a Nazi."

Döblin could not have known quite what was in store for Germany just a few years after he published his novel. But the specter of Hitlerism is already hovering over the work. Biberkopf and his gang show a total contempt for politics, especially the politics of the Social Democrats, who were hanging on to the last threads of the Weimar Republic. The political meetings, described in the novel, of anarchists and Communists are pregnant with latent violence. Fassbinder did know what happened, of course, and hints at the future by having brown-shirted storm troopers march through the last scenes of Biberkopf's delirium. We also hear the sounds of the Horst Wessel Song clashing with the Socialist International. It is fitting that he should end his movie on this note. The novel, in Fassbinder's words,

offered a precise characterization of the twenties; for anyone who knows what came of all that, it's fairly easy to recognize the reasons that made the average German capable of embracing his National Socialism.

Fassbinder ends his essay, written in 1980, with the hope that more people will read Döblin's great book—"For the sake of the readers. And for the sake of life." I share that hope. Those who are not blessed with the good fortune to be able to read the novel in German can still enjoy Fassbinder's great film. But it is high time for the book to find a new translator brilliant and inventive enough to do justice to the text in English. Of course it is untranslatable, but that is no reason not to try.

- 1 Eugene Jolas, who translated the novel in 1931, was an interesting man, an American who knew James Joyce and was active in modernist circles in Paris. But his translation is inadequate. He chose to use American slang: “Now I getcha, wait a minute, m’boy...” And so on. ↵
- 2 Fassbinder’s essay, written in 1980, is included in the catalog of the P.S.1 show, along with an essay by Susan Sontag, “Novel into Film: Fassbinder’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz*” (1983). ↵
- 3 Quoted in the 1965 paperback edition of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (Munich: Deutsche Taschenbuch Verlag). ↵
- 4 Interview with Hans Günther Pflaum, reprinted in *The Anarchy of the Imagination: Interviews, Essays, Notes*, edited by Michael Töteberg and Leo A. Lensing (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 47. ↵

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