

MOVIES

Wandering in Weimar Purgatory

By A. O. SCOTT APRIL 8, 2007

THE first episode of “Berlin Alexanderplatz,” Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s 13-part (plus epilogue), 15 1/2-hour adaptation of Alfred Döblin’s 1929 novel, is called “The Punishment Begins.” There is a heavy, obvious irony, since the hero of this modern urban anti-epic, a former pimp named Franz Biberkopf, has just been released from Tegel Prison, where he has served a four-year sentence for beating his girlfriend to death.

But a life at liberty in the bowels of a 20th-century metropolis, in Döblin and Fassbinder’s vision, is a purgatory without limit; by comparison, the brick fastness of the penitentiary has an appealing monastic simplicity. (In a later episode, at a crisis moment of drunkenness and dissolution, Franz will take a taxi out to Tegel and sleep on a bench in the shadow of the jailhouse, as though seeking a reminder of the comforts of his former home.)

In Berlin in the years between the Treaty of Versailles and the Reichstag fire, it seems, the pursuit of pleasure led inexorably to disappointment or sin, and the various delights and distractions that the city offered — sex, drink, politics, even friendship — become occasions for torment. For Franz Biberkopf, a stout, shambling Weimar Everyman with large appetites and small ambitions, the punishment never ends.

And yet Franz’s misery, which in any case can look suspiciously like merriment whenever he embraces a new woman or a fresh stein of beer, is our delight. A restored and remastered version of “Berlin Alexanderplatz,” a project of Bavaria Media and the Fassbinder Foundation, will be shown at the Museum of Modern Art this week, in advance of a long-awaited DVD release (from the Criterion Collection) later this year.

It may not be absolutely necessary to see Fassbinder's longest film, which was also one of his last, on the big screen all at once. Since "Berlin Alexanderplatz" was developed as a mini-series for West German television, where it was broadcast in 1980, watching it serially at home is arguably the more authentic viewing experience. But in the '80s it found greater appreciation among American moviegoers (it was shown in theaters here in 1983) than among German couch potatoes, and it is not hard, with a quarter-century's hindsight, to see why.

More opera than soap opera, it is one of those hybrid cinematic works that demand immersion and endurance — an element of punishment to sweeten the pleasure. If you dip in an hour at a time over the course of a week or a month, you risk missing its hypnotic, cumulative power. (An exhibition under construction in Germany will split the difference, presenting all the episodes simultaneously in separate screening rooms arranged around a space resembling a Berlin apartment-house courtyard).

The 35-millimeter print that will be shown at MoMA was struck from a digitally restored 16-millimeter negative — the smaller format was one of Fassbinder's reluctant concessions to the economies of television — and it is a strange and beautiful artifact in its own right. Xavier Schwarzenberger, the cinematographer responsible for the faded-silk sensuousness of Fassbinder's "Querelle" and "Veronika Voss," uses the chromatic limitations of 16-millimeter to great advantage, endowing color film with some of the haunting, shadowy textures of black and white.

After a while, the graininess that is a byproduct of the enlargement and transfer processes seems almost like an aesthetic statement in its own right. The atmosphere in which Franz and his fellow Berliners move is a thick, swirling soup of tiny particles. Walls, floorboards, streetlight-illuminated sidewalks: all of this inert, incidental matter looks menacingly alive, as though the Berlin air were a miasma of toxic elements suddenly visible to the naked eye.

In his novel, Döblin was able to transfer the seedy, chaotic glory of 1920s Berlin straight onto the page. Like other great Modernist prose monuments of the decade — James Joyce's "Ulysses," John Dos Passos' "Manhattan Transfer" — "Berlin Alexanderplatz" tries to find, in the pulsating round-the-clock rhythms of the modern city, the basis for a new literary form. The random encounters and

abrupt transitions that structure urban life, the sense of numberless human elements swirling through a bounded space, create a feeling of impersonality as well as energy. Döblin's book is a deadpan potboiler, an analytical melodrama, a true-crime tabloid chronicle related with the clinical detachment of a lab report.

It is also, like so much European art from the interwar decades, a story unaware of its own ending. In 1929, Döblin clearly suspected that the simmering cauldron of German society would boil over before long. Fassbinder, born in 1945, grew up knowing exactly how it had. And so his great historical films about the German past, many of them based on literary sources, have a ferocity rarely encountered in costume drama. In "Berlin Alexanderplatz," as in "The Marriage of Maria Braun" and "Veronika Voss," he tried to push beyond generalization and cliché to locate the pathology at the heart of the German temperament and, at the same time, to discover if there was anything there worth redeeming.

He conducted this cruel, therapeutic inquiry using every available artistic strategy and all the resources of his prodigious, reckless talent. "Berlin Alexanderplatz" may not be his masterpiece, but it does demonstrate, perhaps more than any of his other work, his range as a writer, a visual stylist and a director of actors. A few sets and locations had to stand in for the sprawl and bustle of the vanished prewar capital, but those cramped spaces are populated with figures that seem to spring from the grotesque, vibrant graphic work of Otto Dix and George Grosz.

Weimar culture — as English-language readers and moviegoers know largely from Christopher Isherwood's "Berlin Stories" and Bob Fosse's "Cabaret" — was a dizzy cocktail of the learned and the lewd. It is a mix perfectly suited to Fassbinder's *poète maudit* sensibility, which blended bawdiness and delicacy to the point where they were nearly indistinguishable.

The episodes of "Berlin Alexanderplatz" are sometimes uneven, and the tone can shift abruptly from one to the next. Staginess gives way to subtlety; arch narration interrupts moments of wrenching naturalism. But these jolts and disjunctions can be thrilling as well as baffling, as Fassbinder and his cast, frequently wrapping up scenes in a single take, veer from the operatic to the naturalistic, from the profane to the lyrical, from the cartoonish to the tragic.

The result is less a grand synthesis of modern popular culture than a brilliant pastiche, an anthology of influences and gleanings that nonetheless has its own grandeur and integrity. This comes, above all, from the performances, in particular Günter Lamprecht's indelible impersonation of poor Franz Biberkopf, a character about whom there is nothing exemplary, admirable or even especially interesting, but who is nonetheless one of the representative men of 20th-century literature.

Mr. Lamprecht — big, slow-moving, at once impassive and exquisitely expressive — grants Biberkopf a rough, poignant individuality that goes beyond what Döblin conceived. He is a philosophical brute, a sensitive sadist, a lurching fact of life. And he is surrounded by tramps, charmers and crooks, steadfastly served by a nosy landlady and a patient bartender, and loved by a series of women, including Barbara Sukowa and Hanna Schygulla, two of the great stars in Fassbinder's constellation. They bring glamour, heartbreak and sex into Franz's bleak world, even as they are also among the agents of his punishment.

"Berlin Alexanderplatz" has lost little of its force and fascination after 25 years. Whether it belongs to the history of television, cinema, literature or theater remains an open and interesting question, but is also somewhat academic. Whatever it is, "Berlin Alexanderplatz" is alive, and Fassbinder, though he died in 1982, is as vital and troubling a presence as ever.

The history of Germany in the 20th century is a wound in perpetual need of airing, and perhaps also of reopening — a task undertaken by a handful of difficult, frequently unclassifiable works of art that do not soften or date. The punishment never ends.

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