The Weimar Imaginary

My thanks to Claudia and Katharina for the invitation to speak, and for organizing this wide-ranging and engaging symposium.

Let's begin with something completely unrelated to Weimar. Steven Spielberg's 1998 film *Saving Private Ryan* was praised for its realism and authenticity. Spielberg took great care to stage the storming of Omaha Beach as realistically as possible, using period weapons and hiring amputees to play soldiers who lose limbs in the battle. But his most successful tactic was to emulate newsreel and military footage of similar landings from World War II, adjusting the cameras to 1940s specifications, having camera operators stay low to the ground, and processing the colour film stock to reduce saturation. The battle was filmed in colour with modern cameras, but it looked almost black and white, as if it were newsreel footage.

This is how historic authenticity works in visual culture: we have expectations of historical representations which form an *imaginary* - in this case, an imaginary of what the landing at Omaha Beach would look and sound like. These expectations have been formed and structured by other media we've encountered. If the new media confirms or echoes our imaginary, we deem it authentic.

I bring this to your attention because I'm going to argue today that contemporary representations of the Weimar Republic rely on a complex of previously acquired images, knowledge, and understandings of the period - a Weimar imaginary. This imaginary 'sums up' or 'signifies' the turbulence of this 14-year period in Germany's history. It defines and sets the expectations of how Weimar Germany should look or feel.

The new material under discussion - the graphic novel *Berlin* and the tv series *Babylon Berlin* - succeed with critics and the general public alike in large part because they meet the expectations of their readers and viewers. We'll consider how these two works make use of the Weimar imaginary to tell their stories, and we'll investigate whether or not they expand the scope of that imaginary.

Let me make clear that I'm not an apologist for authenticity in the arts. The pedants can argue all they want over arcane details, but leave me out of it. I do agree, however, that a lot of people engage with historically situated narratives based on their perception of the works' authenticity, and I find it worth investigating how they arrive at that conclusion.

Before I go any further, a note on the term "Weimar imaginary." Here I'm adapting Benedict Anderson's "imagined community" idea that he used to explain the emergence and attraction of nationalism. An imagined community relies on shared assumptions about which values belong in that community and which ones do not. The "national imaginary" became a durable method of summarizing the various interactions that create national ideologies and collective memory.

By extension, a cultural imaginary is a shared understanding of a cultural phenomenon (such as the Weimar Republic). Other terms are often used to express a similar idea - myth, for example ("the myth of Weimar") or Weimar's cultural landscape. This latter term seems too external to me, as if it were something over which human beings have no control, whereas myth strikes me as too grandiose and also too fixed - a myth is a narrative that has generally accepted contours. The Weimar imaginary, by contrast, allows us to capture the kind of expectations that I described in my description of *Saving Private Ryan*, reminding us that what we call "Weimar culture" is to some degree a product of our own creation. Less set in stone than myth, it is continually negotiated as our collective understanding of Weimar culture broadens.

Berlin by Jason Lutes is either one graphic novel, three graphic novels, or 22 comic books - it depends on when you bought it. Begun in 1996, the first eight issues were collected into *Berlin: City of Stones* (2000), followed by *Berlin: City of Smoke* (2008) and finally *Berlin: City of Light* (2018). With the final book instalment, all three books were

collected into one 555-page volume simply titled *Berlin* - "a beautiful, fully baked brick" according to reviewer Sarah Boxer - which also contains references and historical notes.

In its entirety, *Berlin* spans the final years of the Weimar Republic, beginning in September, 1928 and continuing until Hitler's assumption of the chancellorship in January, 1933. The opus opens and closes with two characters whom we see throughout the series: Marthe Müller, a young art student from Cologne who is moving to Berlin to take classes at the Kunstakademie, and Kurt Severing, a middle-aged journalist who works for *Die Weltbühne* under the editorship of Carl von Ossietzky. These are the main characters, though it would be hard to call them the protagonists; much of the novel's storyline doesn't involve them at all. We can't even really speak of a storyline but rather, to borrow Lukas Etter's phrase, a "multitude of fragments" that offer in Christian Möller's estimation a "Gesellschaftspanorama Berlins in all seiner Widersprüchlichkeit – zwischen sexueller Befreiung und bitterer Armut, schwarzem Jazz und brauner Gesinnung."

The narration of this graphic novel is dominated by its gaze, and this will shift from one character to another at the drop of a hat. Lutes has pointed out that his storytelling approach was inspired by Alexander Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (Lorah), and this adoption of the "innovations of literary modernism" (Kavaloski) has been duly noted by others.

Some commentators argue that the polyphonic approach to the story applies equally to the novel's rendering of history. Joshua Kavaloski contends that the novel supports Foucault's distrust of "unified, comprehensive approaches to the past" (158) and Anthony Enns goes so far as to claim that the novel challenges the historical narrative (52).

I think these claims are overblown. The novel doesn't subvert the historical record; if anything, it is dependent on it for providing plot touchstones, referencing events like the *Blutmai* confrontations of 1929 and historical figures like Hindenburg and Goebbels. Even the occasional flashbacks that occur are historically predicated, usually to remind the reader of the influence of the Great War's horrors on the lives of the novel's characters. And although Lutes removes most evidence of the swastika (drawing the Nazi flag with a big empty circle in the middle), this doesn't subvert history so much as make an attempt, futile though it may be, to distract the reader from the inevitable: the Weimar Republic will not survive the chaos that is being depicted in the graphic novel's panels. The novel is framed by Marthe and Kurt, and at the beginning and the end, the topic of discussion is the same: what the political upheaval is doing to Berlin.

Although Michael Brake suggests that Lutes' polyphonic portrayal of the period can have an arbitrary feel, like a tourist checking off must-sees on a trip, he admits it leads one to think that perhaps the Weimar Republic really was an especially condensed - and intense - moment in time when all facets of society were undergoing radical change. Certainly all the turbulence and vitality we expect to see in Weimar Berlin is here: political violence, gender fluidity, anti-Semitism, jazz, neue Sachlichkeit – the list goes on.

Bringing so many impulses under the umbrella of a unified plot would be Herculean task, so Lutes does what Weimar artists did, and what comic book artists often do: he creates a montage. Or maybe archive is a better word: Enns argues that comics generally, and Lutes' work in particular, is especially well suited for taking up Walter Benjamin's suggestion that image and text can be brought together in order to archive the past and make it known in the present. Quoting Benjamin's essay about *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Sarah Boxer comments that "'the texture of this montage is so dense that we have difficulty hearing the author's voice.' In fact, *Berlin* has no authorial voice, no narration, no overarching perspective. Instead it has an atmosphere of aloofness." Boxer claims that the characters we thought would be the protagonists, Marthe and Kurt, remain unaffected by the tsunamis swirling around them, but that is hardly the case: Marthe discovers her bisexuality, and Kurt, though ever bitter and cynical, refuses to give in to the rising tide of fascism, though he is disappointed that it has the upper hand.

Babylon Berlin is a German television series created by Tom Tykwer, Achim von Borries, and Hendrik Handloegten. Produced by X-Filme Creative Pool, it premiered in 2017 and has produced 28 episodes over three seasons, with a fourth season on the way. The show is based on the Gereon Rath novels of German historical crime writer Volker

Kutscher. We can be grateful to Tykwer and his team for changing the name to Babylon Berlin, otherwise the series might be known as the *Der nasse Fisch (The Wet Fish),* the title of Kutscher's first Gereon Rath novel.

The tv series shares some affinities with its graphic novel counterpart. It brings a wide swath of Berlin life to the screen, and it is not afraid of intermediality and intertextuality. Whereas Lutes' *Berlin* relies on the author's knowledge of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, going so far as to imitate paintings by Conrad Felixmüller, Franz Lenk, and Hans Kralik, *Babylon Berlin* opts instead to pay homage to Weimar's cinema (by quoting films and cinematic techniques) and graphic design (seen most noticeably in the award-winning title credit sequence).

Alessandra Stanley says that *Babylon Berlin* provides a "contrapuntal portrait of Berlin," but it's not nearly as fragmented as the graphic novel. The various plots all converge on the two protagonists of the series: police inspector Gereon Rath, newly arrived from Cologne, and his young Berlin-born assistant Charlotte Ritter. Their investigations and their own lives form the spine of the series, and it's mainly through them that we get to see all that Weimar Berlin has to offer: dance clubs, cafes, seedy districts, tenement housing, cinemas, trains, protests, beggars, drug addicts, transgender people, wounded veterans, and the like. As Hanno Hochmuth points out, it puts the era's *Schattenseite* on display, not just its *Glanz.*

But even the *Glanz*, empty though it may be, is tainted. This is *Babylon* Berlin, after all, described by Jens Balkenborg as "ein Moloch; Sünde, Korruption und Gewalt lauern, wie im Mythos um die biblische Stadt, hinter jeder Ecke" (Balkenburg). The effects of violence are visible everywhere (Daub); the First World War still looms large 10 years later. And there is nary a character who isn't broken, hiding a secret, or both. Their individual stories seem to leave little room for hope, and coupled with the setting of the city and the time we're in - the series opens in April, 1929 - the viewer knows that the "future is bleak" (Stanley).

Two things are remarkable about the critical reception of the series: the sense that the show really does portray what Berlin must have been like during the Weimar Republic, and the conviction that the series "wants to make broader points about democracy and its institutions, how they survive staggering inequality and a general loss of faith in them" (Daub). Reviewing the series for *The Guardian*, Sarah Hughes writes that "like all the best dramas, *Babylon Berlin* creates a world so believable that you feel almost as if you are stepping into it rather than simply watching it. This experience is only exacerbated by the show's ability to convince you that this is the way Germany must have felt at that time – that feverish sense that everything was moving slowly out of control and that the only response was to dance harder, faster and more fervidly as the end of the world drew nigh." Alessandra Stanley is convinced that the series' immersive quality is such that it even lets you forget about Weimar's doomed fate "and experience Weimar as it was lived then."

Although Tom Tykwer has suggested that "culturally, everything that came later in the 20th century was already present back then [in Weimar] somehow" (Weisbrod), this does not prevent him and the *Babylon Berlin* creative team from playing with the Weimar imaginary. Unlike Lutes, whose graphic novel never moves beyond the Weimar imaginary, Tykwer et al have experimented with ways of bridging the gap between 1920s Berlin and today.

This is most noticeable in "Zu Asche, zu Staub," a song written by Tykwer and collaborators that is performed by Nikoros, the drag alter ego of Svetlana, a Russian character in the show. The song hints of coming destruction that is best ignored, but the performance is anything but defeatist: it is energetic and defiant, and it brings the entire club to the dance floor in a scene that would be at home at any night club or rock concert today. The audience performs steps ordained by Nikoros and sings along with him/her - a far cry from the kind of dancing you might expect to see in a period piece such as this. The one element of the sequence that is firmly placed within the Weimar imaginary are the backup dancers, all dressed in Josephine Baker's banana costume. They perform Charleston-like steps and look both at home and out of place. It is exhilarating madness.

In lieu of a conclusion, let me quote from Walter Benjamin's famous ninth thesis in his *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* about the angel of history:

. . . looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. . . . His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

I can't help but think of Lutes and Tykwer et al as that angel. They are undoubtedly forward-thinking innovators in their respective artistic domains, but their gaze remains fixed on a status quo of Weimar culture, a Weimar of political and social upheaval that also resonates with our own age (and partially explains the fixation). Thanks to these creative angels, we, the readers and viewers of these stories, remain entangled in their - and our own - Weimar imaginaries.

References and Citations

Babylon Berlin. X Filme Creative Pool, 2017-.

Balkenborg, Jens. *Babylon Berlin: Tanz auf dem Vulkan | epd Film*. https://www.epd-film.de/themen/babylon-berlin-tanz-auf-dem-vulkan.

Benjamin, Walter. *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*. 1940. https://www.textlog.de/benjamin-begriff-geschichte.html.

Enns, Anthony. "The City as Archive in Jason Lutes' Berlin." *Comics and the City: Urban Space in Print, Picture and Sequence*, edited by Jörn Ahrens and Arno Meteling, Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2010, pp. 45–62.

Etter, Lukas. "'The "Big Picture" as a Multitude of Fragments: Jason Lutes's Depiction of Weimar Republic Berlin.' | Lukas Etter - Academia.Edu." *Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives: Comics at the Crossroads*, edited by Shane Denson et al., Bloomsbury, 2013, 229-41.

Hall, Sara F. "Babylon Berlin: Pastiching Weimar Cinema." *Communications*, vol. 44, no. 3, De Gruyter, Sept. 2019, pp. 304–22.

Hochmuth, Hanno. "Mythos Babylon Berlin. Weimar in der Populärkultur." *Weimars Wirkung: das Nachleben der ersten deutschen Republik*, edited by Hanno Hochmuth et al., Wallenstein Verlag, 2020, pp. 111–25.

Hughes, Sarah. "Life's No Cabaret: Why Gritty Weimar Noir Babylon Berlin Is Wholly Compelling TV." *The Guardian*, 10 Apr. 2020, http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/apr/10/lifes-no-cabaret-why-gritty-weimar-noir-babylon-berlin-is-wholly-compelling-tv.

Kavaloski, Joshua. "The Weimar Republic Redux: Multiperspectival History in Jason Lutes' Berlin City of Stones." *Teaching Comics and Graphic Narratives: Essays on Theory, Strategy and Practice*, McFarland, 2014, pp. 145–60.

Lorah, Michael C. "INTERVIEW: Jason Lutes Talks the Final Days of 'Berlin.'" *CBR*, 28 July 2015, https://www.cbr.com/interview-jason-lutes-talks-the-final-days-of-berlin/.

Lutes, Jason. *Berlin*. Drawn and Quarterly, 2020.

Möller, Christian. "Berlin in vielen Strichen." *Die Zeit*, 29 Jan. 2009, https://www.zeit.de/online/2009/06/jason-lutes?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F.

Stanley, Alessandra. "Lotte in Weimar." *The New York Review of Books*. www.nybooks.com, 24 May 2018, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2018/05/24/babylon-berlin-lotte-weimar/.

Weisbrod, Lars. "How Babylon Berlin Turned 1920s Germany Into a Wild, Historical-Fiction Fantasy." *Vulture*, 12 Feb. 2018, https://www.vulture.com/2018/02/babylon-berlin-netflix-tom-tykwer-interview.html.