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The Plots of Alexanderplatz: A Study of the Space that Shaped Weimar Berlin

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**THE PLOTS OF ALEXANDERPLATZ: A STUDY OF THE SPACE THAT
SHAPED WEIMAR BERLIN**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR MARC KATZ
PROFESSOR DAVID ROSELLI**

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Introduction

“The city is redundant: it repeats itself so that something will stick in the mind. [...]

Memory is redundant: it repeats signs so that the city can begin to exist.”

– Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (Calvino 19)

In the words of Italo Calvino, a twentieth-century Italian novelist, the city is a common experience. Different from any other human community, cities function as complex centers for interaction between business, politics, and the common collective. However, Richard Sennett, a scholar who studies the social experience in cities, states, “there are probably as many different ways of conceiving what a city is as there are cities. A simple definition therefore has its attractions. The simplest is that a city is a human settlement where strangers are likely to meet” (Sennett 39). Sennett believes cities are infinitely unique because cities are constantly evolving social experiments. New replaces old through architecture, technology and population growth, and cities therefore must embrace change on a day-to-day basis. This circulation of new and old occurs in an organic flow, adapting to the narrative imposed by the structure of both the city and the nation.

Berlin, Germany is a city that embraces its ever-evolving identity. Berlin has suffered the structural devastation of two World Wars, multiple extreme, divisive political sanctions, and periods when it was considered an international pariah. Just one of these hardships could have been enough to hinder Berlin’s success as a city. However, during the Weimar Period in the early twentieth century, a time defined by a sophisticated culture of creative expression through the press and cinema accompanied

by a focus on built spaces and housing for the masses, Berlin became the poster child for the booming modern metropolis.

One space in Berlin exemplified the values and transformations of the Weimar Period. Alexanderplatz, a large public square in the center of the city, functioned as the center of Berlin not only because of its geographical situation in the city and function as its main transport hub, but also its ability to support the constant flow and gathering of individuals. Alexanderplatz's unique nature interested many theorists, scholars and urban planners during the years of 1919 to 1933. Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse, are among the thinkers of the time that examined Berlin and the effect of the public sphere on the individual. These theorists were featured in *Metropolis Berlin: 1890-1940*, an anthology of over two hundred contemporary texts, in which many of these essays focus on Alexanderplatz as a node and fluid transit space due to its architecture and urban planning. In the following three chapters, I argue Berlin's Alexanderplatz not only a major modern public transit hub of mechanized transportation, but also a major transit space for the exchange of ideas and information.

The first chapter will explore Alexanderplatz as a space, by looking at the way it's design embraced both its function as a central transit hub of modern transportation and as a transit space for ideas and information. It is clear from an in-depth historical analysis of the variety of urban plans, both spatial and architectural that Alexanderplatz experienced between 1900 and 1937, that the fluidity of transformation in the space supported the great visionaries of the future. Mobility became the defining principle of the Weimar era and Alexanderplatz is its prime example.

In the second chapter, Alexanderplatz is re-imagined through the words of Alfred Döblin's novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz: The Story of Franz Biberkopf* as a place where the individual and landscape are integrated together. Through Döblin's story of Franz Biberkopf, Alexanderplatz comes alive through a creative literary context. The symbiotic relationship between the protagonist Franz Biberkopf and the city of Berlin displays the connection between an individual's story and the common collective experience in the public sphere. Alexanderplatz is a space that thousands of people pass through daily, making it a constantly different environment filled with different characters. Maintained through the flow and gather of Alexanderplatz, Biberkopf is haunted by his past trauma, but inspired by the constant fluidity of the transit of Alexanderplatz with the hope to move forward with his life.

In the final chapter, Alexanderplatz is explored through another creative medium. Rainer Werner Fassbinder's film adaptation of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* revolutionarily depicts Alexanderplatz visually through the point of view of Döblin's characters. In the film, Fassbinder is able to expose Franz Biberkopf's deep-seated traumatic past to the viewer by internalizing the city within Biberkopf. He offers Biberkopf as a confession of the common human experience in Berlin during the 1920s, as well as in the 1970s. Through juxtaposing the Weimar Period with the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Fassbinder clarifies how Germany has been dealing with its traumatic past, through the lens of Franz's Biberkopf traumatic history and experience in Berlin Alexanderplatz.

Alexanderplatz is a culturally significant space from all these perspectives: the historical urban plan, the novel, and the film. In these three different representations of Alexanderplatz, all facets of Weimar-period Berlin culture are encompassed.

Alexanderplatz is a landscape where structure meets organic disorganization. The balance between its dual functions as a specialized transit hub as well as a gathering center for the thinkers of the Weimar Period, allows Berlin's Alexanderplatz to serve a multi-dimensional purpose. Alexanderplatz functioned as both a major transit space for the movement of transportation and pedestrians, but also the transit space for the movement of ideas and information.

Chapter 1

Berlin Alexanderplatz: The Making of the Central Transit Hub

The physical and creative influence of Alexanderplatz during the Weimer Period was successful due to the fluid, adaptive role it played in Berlin. Alexanderplatz held different amounts of significance throughout its existence, but reached its height of importance during the early twentieth century. During these fifteen years it was the “Mitte” of Berlin, the setting for the famous 1920s novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and its haunting film adaptation by Rainer Fassbinder. Prior to that, Alexanderplatz was an ordinary square, which during the middle ages was a cattle market. It was later transformed into a military parade square and an exercise ground for the nearby barracks until the mid 19th century (Jelavich 5). Not until the construction of the Central Market Hall in 1886 and Tietz department store between 1904 and 1911, did Alexanderplatz fully embrace its central role as the main shopping center of Berlin. Alexanderplatz began gaining centrality starting in 1886 with the addition of a separate stop on the streetcar line. Additionally, an elevated railway was added, which increased traffic through the square, making Alexanderplatz the main transit center as well. Alexanderplatz’s physical situation within Berlin added the increased visitation and popularity by being located in the center, close to the river Spree and Museum Island, which both functioned as cultural centers in Berlin. Berlin, as a metropolis, a cultured and modern city, thrived between the years of 1880 to 1930. Within those years, Weimar culture embraced Berlin and the presence of theorists, artists, and critics. It was a time of intellectual and cultural growth, which stimulated Berlin as a central transit space of ideas and information, as well as

people and goods. “Mobility” became the defining principle of the era. And Berlin Alexanderplatz was its three-dimensional correlative (Germany Senate Department).

Even though the Weimar Republic appears in history to have developed quickly with the Industrial Revolution and the international recognition of Berlin as a metropolis, Alexanderplatz as a central Platz was in the making for some time. In 1895, Alexanderplatz was gifted a 7.5 meter statue of the city’s symbolic goddess, Berolina. Made of bronze, she occupied a small-grassed area on the northwestern edge of Alexanderplatz, which would later be located in front of 1904 department store Kaufhaus Hermann Tietz. By the end of the 19th century, the Platz was divided into two distinct sections. The northern section developed as a traffic hub where several lines of the horse-drawn tramcars criss-cross. The southern portion of the Platz developed into an ornamental square with gardens. A significant number of buildings also legitimized Alexanderplatz as a nodal point in Berlin. The Grand Hotel was built in 1883, and later, in 1886, both police headquarters and the local court building found home in Alexanderplatz (Germany Senate Department).



Aerial picture, 1912. View from south onto Alexanderplatz with the statue "Berolina" in front of the department store "Tietz"

Source: Germany Senate Department for Urban Development and the Environment

Alexanderplatz popularity didn’t happen upon Berlin by accident. It was designed for maximum capacity and commercial capital, as well designed to function as the main

transport hub and central gathering space. Able to accommodate more cars and pedestrians on ground level while simultaneously supporting a railway system, Alexanderplatz became the central *node* in Berlin through this strategic urban planning. The term “node”, introduced by Kevin Lynch in his book *The Image of the City* (1960), describes the essential features for creating a successful city form. This, he argues “must be somewhat noncommittal, plastic to the purposes and perceptions of its citizens” (Lynch 91). This node must be malleable to change and the city must embrace a constant shift of dominance between particular neighborhoods and squares. If the environment is “visibly organized and sharply identified, then the citizen can inform it with his own meanings and connections. Then it will become a true *place*, remarkable and unmistakable” (Lynch 92). Lynch uses the word “place” strategically here, which highlights its distinction from mere “space”. As describe by geographer, John Agnew, “place is the setting for social rootedness and landscape continuity;” where space is synonymous with the physical location and functions as an organic, shifting definition (Agnew 8). Kevin Lynch’s definition of a “node” is a place that follows a specific architectural structure by defining the place as a “sharp, closed boundary, which does not trail off uncertainly on every side; more remarkable if provided with one or two objects which are foci of attention” (Lynch 102). Node, or points, are the strategic spots in a city into which an observer can enter, and which are the intensive foci to and from which traveling begins and end. This was true of Alexanderplatz, as an essential place in the greater framework of Berlin.

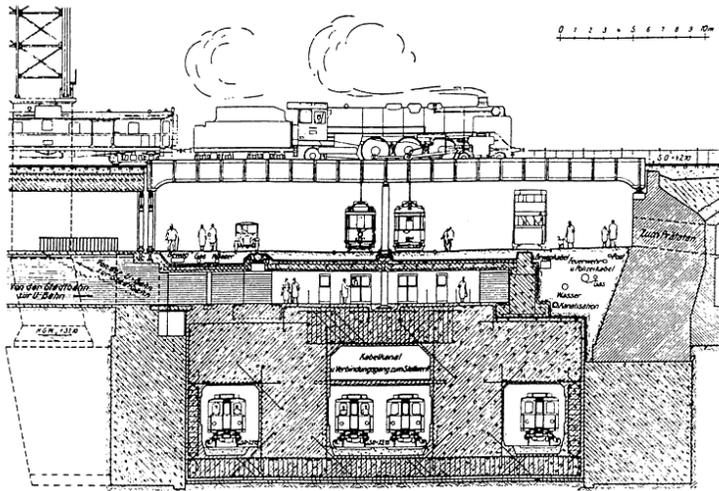
The city square has historically been defined as a freer space than the rural town square because it is designed to accommodate the masses of widely diverse backgrounds,

temperaments, occupations and class. In order to accomplish this marriage between the particular and diverse interests, many different facets of public life must play a role in developing this place. The central square in any city is built, primarily, for the flow of movement and, secondly, for an inviting atmosphere. It is not in the architects or planners purview to build this feeling of a place since it develops through the social interactions that fill the square. However, the architects of a square can shape and direct the way these interactions arise or happen through structuring the flow of walking and gathering spaces. Alexanderplatz flow of movement aided in it becoming a hub for consumerism as well as a hub for transit.

Throughout the 19th century, Alexanderplatz continued to grow to where in the 1920s everything and everyone in Berlin revolved around the Platz. The hotels, restaurants, cafes, theaters, cinemas, and departments stores allowed Alexanderplatz to shape its own individual identity. This focus on Alexanderplatz, however, wasn't random. Practically all lines of the transit system led here. At its point of transfer, hundreds and thousands of people bustled past each other off to their next destination only entering each other's life for a moment. There exists a distinct union between path and node that occurs in Alexanderplatz so "the traveler must see how he enters the node, where the break occurs, and how he goes outward" (Lynch 103). The many paths, "of habitual or potential lines of movement through the urban complex, [or] most potent means which the whole can be ordered," led the masses to Alexanderplatz (Lynch 96). This is where visual hierarchy of the streets and ways meet the functional hierarchy, highlighting their unity as continuous perceptual elements. Lynch argues that a street is perceived, in fact, as a thing, which goes toward something, but the Berliner would have been convinced at

this time that every road led to Alexanderplatz. Based on the increase number of vehicles crossing Alexanderplatz as a product of Berlin's rapid industrialization before and after World War I, the traffic increased from about 1,200 vehicles daily in 1918 to approximately 229,000 in 1939. Due to this exponential increase, the functionality and flow of the square was essential for day-to-day usage (Germany Senate Department).

The Design behind Alexanderplatz



Cutaway view onto the numerous levels for public and private transport at Alexanderplatz, drawing from 1930

Source: Germany Senate Department for Urban Development and the Environment

Plans for the multilevel public transport hub were drawn up by J. Bousset in 1913 and designed by Alfred Grenander (Germany Senate Department). Due to the increasing traffic problems in Berlin at the end of the 19th century, Berlin searched for a solution and drew inspiration from the designs of Werner Von Siemens in New York and his elevated railway. The first U-Bahn line, the U2, entered service on 1 July 1913. Many claimed it was “the most beautiful and modern subway in the world” with its “[...] variety of brightly lit stores amid the profusion of shiny blue tiles covering the underground corridors” (Jelavich 5). The original route started at Warschauer Brücke on the eastern side of the city, and ended at Zoologischer Garten on the western side, stopping at the

major hubs: Nollendorfplatz, Potsdamer Platz and Oranienstraße. The U2 was not the only railway line that was installed. Alexanderplatz was designed to have mainline and suburban railways routed on elevated tracks, three underground railway lines that ran on three different levels below ground, and, at ground level, omnibuses and trams that ran alongside private traffic (which, at the time, still included the broadest range of vehicles – both motorized and non-motorized). By having all lines of new transportation convene at Alexanderplatz, there became a need for multiple options of subterranean and street level transportation (Germany Senate Department).

Bousset and Grenander were not the only ones analyzing this central space for redesign. In 1926, Martin Wagner became the director of Berlin's department of urban planning and "immediately singled out the Alexanderplatz for a major overhaul; [...] he contended that it would have to be rebuilt completely every twenty-five years" (Jelavich 5). During this time, Berlin was expanding its boundaries through the Great Berlin Act, which incorporated many neighboring towns and expanded Berlin's population from two to nearly four million inhabitants nearly overnight. Accommodating a larger population and denser traffic flow led Berlin to reevaluate many of its public transit and gathering centers, not only Alexanderplatz. Outlined in "The Design Problem of a City Square for a Metropolis" Martin Wagner goes through seven steps to make Alexanderplatz designed so that "function and form, plan and elevation, ground surface and street front fuse together into an *organic unity*" (Wagner 349). The steps discussed in his outline encompassed traffic capacity, the consumer's role, and the architecture that would support the idea that a "metropolitan square is at one and the same time a stopping place and a sluice gate: a stopping place for consumer wealth, and a sluice gate for flowing

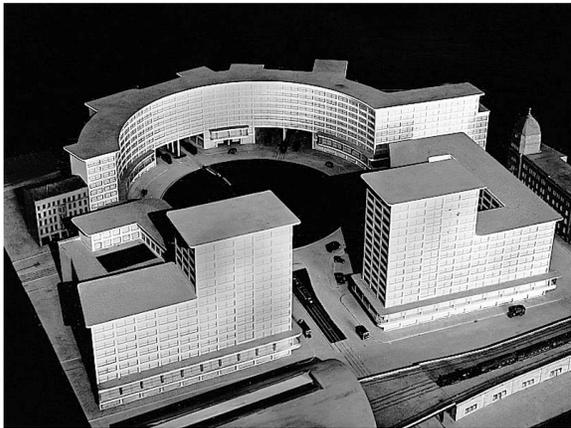
traffic” (Wagner 350). Wagner’s focus on consumerism is evident when reading through his seven points highlighting the untapped potential that businesses were to capitalize on. Firstly, the metropolitan square is designed to entice the individual with consumerist stimuli that surrounds the periphery of the square, allowing the center to function strictly as a transit zone. Wagner outlines the requirements for designing Alexanderplatz as an “organism[s] of formally distinctive visual appearance” which proves to be slightly hypocritical in his plan for indiscreet architecture (Wagner 350). In point three and five, Wagner states:

“3. Traffic must be able to cross the square with the maximum achievable dispatch, smoothness, and clarity. A metropolitan square therefore requires separation of the paths used by railed vehicles (streetcars), wheeled vehicles (motorcars), and pedestrian traffic. The ideal of a square used as a traffic intersection is a design that permits each of the three categories of traffic to pass through the intersection without same-level crossings. (Traffic circulating at different levels.)

5. The effect of these requirements is to make the metropolitan square a highly sophisticated and expensive piece of engineering, the costs of which have to be wholly or partly recouped via the buildings surrounding the square. The circulating traffic on the square has to be balanced by what may be termed ‘standing traffic,’ which taps the consumer wealth of the crowds passing through the square (shops, restaurants and cafes, department stores, business premises, and so on). This results in a concentration of buildings the facades of which need to be aligned along the circulation paths of pedestrians—that is, of the consumers” (Wagner 351).

In dissecting these two points, Wagner’s design aims for the seamless integration of the consumer in a modern architectural landscape. The pairing of the pedestrian and consumer to where they are seen as one person in the Alexanderplatz highlights Wagner’s desire for quick development which in turn produced high economic yields. In order to successfully achieve this integration of pedestrian and consumer, modern transport had to combine both speed and leisure simultaneously. However, to achieve this

balance, every type of transportation had to be accommodated in Alexanderplatz, which ultimately lead to a forming of a transport hierarchy. This hierarchy would depend on and change due to how many people traveled in each type of transport and what class they were a part of. Cars were designated to the upper class, subway to the lower class, but everyone congregated in the middle at street level. However, the pedestrian at street level became a pawn to be moved about by architects and engineers designing these spaces, due to the intense focus on modernity and mechanical mass transit, making it essential the pedestrian learn how to pass through this machine-focused space. Only when pedestrians developed the role as consumer as well, did they gain their significant role and power on the street. Wagner worked toward balancing the “standing traffic” with the circulating traffic within his plan, and hoped to find harmony between the machine and the human. With all the facades facing the center, the pedestrian was focused on the outside of the square, scanning the windows, and turning their back to the hum of motorized movement. The architecture and displays provided at eye level in the metropolitan square are specifically designed to reach out to the individual in hopes they stop and become “standing traffic”. During this time, an emphasis on design and display of products was a way of individualizing the mass-produced world.



Model of the Alexanderplatz –
Plan by Martin Wagner, 1929

Source: Germany Senate
Department for Urban Development
and the Environment

Wagner's visionary schemes for Alexanderplatz allowed for social place and traffic space to function together in a single spot. Due to Wagner's continued interest in redesigning Alexanderplatz, along with other architects, the city of Berlin called a urban design competition for the Platz in February 1929. Peter Behrens, Hans and Wassily Luckhardt along with Alfons Anker, Paul Mebes, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Johann Emil Schaudt and Müller-Erkelenz from Cologne were invited to take part in the competition. Luckhardt & Anker were awarded first prize. But the design of Peter Behrens, the second prizewinner, was appointed. His design would better cope with the preexisting three levels of underground railway lines (Germany Senate Department). It required a large sum of money, 20 million Reichsmark to be exact, which Berlin was not in possession of at that time. Germany was struggling at this point with large reparation sums from the demands of the Treaty of Versailles. Hyperinflation was accelerating towards a tragic climax, which occurred in November 1923, when one American dollar was worth 14 billion marks. The struggle for daily existence was a more pressing matter in Berlin than large-scale building project. Architects were dreaming of the buildings and monuments that could be built, taking inspiration from America and the "advanced building technologies, steel frames, skyscrapers, and growing skyline" (Whyte and Frisby 316). Peter Behrens' plan followed Wagner's original idea of the horseshoe-shaped perimeter block development, incorporating the preexisting modern eight-story steel-framed buildings, Alexanderhaus and Berolinahaus. Due to the contrast to Martin Wagner's original plan and spatial design layout, the square ultimately could not be built as a classical roundabout, i.e. a circle, but instead was built as an oval, thereby losing the relationship to the axes of the main roads as once intended by Wagner. With

Landsberger Straße, Königstraße, Neue Königstraße, and the two sections of Alexanderstraße, a total of five streams of traffic converged into the square (Germany Senate Department). The grassy area in the center of the traffic island was exclusively reserved for the tram traffic (see image below). This integration of natural and built space in the center of the square, untouchable by the pedestrian, creates a boundary that makes pedestrians feel disconnected and excluded from the public space. The external world has the ability to evoke a sense of isolation among individuals.



Alexanderplatz in 1935, aerial picture from southeast showing the new design of the square by Peter Behrens

Source: Germany Senate Department for Urban Development and the Environment

Not only does the public sphere create this feeling of isolation, but the architectural design of the public sphere also creates a feeling of isolation with its obvious favoritism towards accommodating the mass transit system. Wagner's lack of interest in creative architectural design lead him to focus more on functional form. The attention to the architecture or lack there of with "implies that the buildings surrounding the square do not possess permanent economic or architectural value" (Wagner 351). A modern, sleek, financially efficient design dictated the decisions that were made during the process of building. The architect's focus wasn't on the building any longer, since the public was "possessed by a sense of haste that allows [them] no leisure to become engrossed in detail. Dashing in [their] speedy conveyances through the streets of the great cities, [they] can no longer take in the details of the buildings [they] pass" (Behrens 127).

Instead, the buildings sole purpose was to present the commodity that was being sold in a pleasing display at ground level. The individual buildings that made up the urban landscape no longer had a voice of their own.

The Spaces of Alexanderplatz

Alexanderplatz firstly functions as a physical, working transit space, but also as a symbolic transit space, one where ideas and capital circulate among individuals, groups, and masses. One of the essential spaces in Alexanderplatz that aids the dialogue of ideas was the café. Its emergence and importance in cultivating ideas and conversation blossomed in the early 20th century. Not only did the café multiply as fast as the population of Berlin, but Berliners themselves became increasingly accustomed to café culture. Walter Benjamin, in his essay “Berlin Chronicle”, describes the function of the café as an “elementary and indispensable diversion[s] of the citizen of a great metropolis, [it offered entrance] into another world, the more exotic the better” and supported the “gentrification” of this niche (Benjamin 23). Varying groups, ranging from the bourgeoisie to the artists, occupied the dark, smoky corners until the early morning discussing current issues over beer and coffee. A hierarchy began to form in the café as “the ‘artists’ withdrew into the background, to become more and more a part of the furniture, while the bourgeois, [...], began to occupy the place—as a place of relaxation” (Benjamin 23). Working against the internal hierarchy, the café was open for many hours and sometimes “in the early morning, between eight and ten, the air is infernal: cold smoke, rancid powder, floor polish and dust” criminals and dignitaries came within close encounter with each other. The café community created a microcosm of the metropolis

where the exchange of ideas occurs in a public space can feel surprisingly private and personal. Dark corners, comfortable chairs, and a drink ease the individual into deep thought and cause them to stay “from five in the afternoon to one in the morning” (Quinz 527). The Romanische Café, located at the end of Kurfürstendamm, with regulars including Alfred Döblin, George Grosz, and Alfred Kerr, could be described as “a huge public bath, divided into a large pool for swimmers and a smaller pool for nonswimmers. Visitors to these two sections have little in common with one another” (Quinz 527). The café was the melting pot of the metropolis, which consequently made it a conflicting environment where various circles from different cultural, political, and class groups gathered.

The Weimar Republic stood for freedom of expression and growth both creatively and industrially, which was furthered through the café culture and the discussions that arose of embedded emotions surrounding national identity and public persona. These discussions encouraged circulation, which is an essential feature of the metropolis: the circulation of money, of traffic, and of ideas. Through film, these concepts were expressed visually to the viewers and integrated into the public dialogue and café discussions. The interior architecture of the cinema bridged the gap between the past and future, which was a common theme of the Weimar years, finding a union of “solutions that respects modernity in the organization of the building and ornamental tradition in its décor” (Poelzig 529). The cinema is defined and designed around the inevitable absence of light and the way the individual as a result interacts with the space. The cinema aims to be architecturally stimulating, while not distracting the audience from the main purpose of the cinema, to showcase film. The theater also “should represent to the less favored of

its patrons, something finer and more desirable than their ordinary surroundings; and to the better class, it should never present itself as inferior to the environment to which such persons are accustomed” in order to cater to all classes of people (Valentine 21). Adorned in “plush red velvet seats, bronzed fixtures, brass railings, and murals of historical or allegorical scenes,” the theater’s color schemes and fixtures came directly from the opera house and concert hall (Valentine 21). The films being shown in this space, such as *Metropolis* and *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis* depicted the modernity of the German city and its effect on the public ranging from changing class structure to the role of the individual. Not only was the content of the film revolutionary in addressing the difficult topics facing society, but the film style and scale of space that was shown on screen helped change the public’s perspective.

This concept of the display and objectified view carried over from film unto the display window. The storefront and in particular the display window became a priority of architects and designers. At the beginning of the 20th century, Alexanderplatz defined itself as a “temple of consumerism”. Three major department stores - Hahn, Wertheim, and Tietz - all positioned themselves around Alexanderplatz. The Tietz department store was by far the most modern and dominant, with its 250 meter long window frontage on Alexanderstraße making it one of the longest facades of any department store in the world. Creating a desirable fantasy of consumption for the consumer helped the urban environment function as both a public and private sphere. A fleeting glance was all the department store required to pull the consumer in and allow its products to produce a personal relationship with the consumer. In Karl Ernst Osthaus’s essay, “The Display Window”, he provides a true image of a Berliner and their role as a consumer. The

window “wants to captivate the passers-by, to tempt them, to stop them in their tracks; [...] everyman should feel that the item that has caught his attention is specifically there for him” (Osthaus 102). Throughout the essay, he describes the display window as synonymous with a quasi-religious experience: “Anything displayed thus has the magnificence of a king with jewels glittering in his crown [...]. Here the passer-by stands spellbound; silken apparel rustles around him, and before him the lips part that he—shod in these boots—will kiss” (Osthaus 103). At the end of the essay, the reader realizes Osthaus was simply describing a pair of black leather boots, the most essential item of clothing for every Berliner. This creative, poetic essay was originally published in the *Deutscher Werkbund*, an interest group that brought together designers, educators, and industrialists with the stated goal of ennobling industrial production through good design. The yearbooks, the *Deutscher Werkbunds*, published before the outbreak of World War I coupled radical polemics with images of contemporary technology – airships, cars, airplanes, ocean liners, and the like—which had a profound and lasting impact on the visual language of modernist design. Continually throughout this period, technology is mixed with creative expression, which becomes a seamless pairing, which eventually turns into a situation where one cannot not exist without the other.

Weimar Berlin Alexanderplatz stimulated and supported political dialogue and demonstration through providing a space to gather. Rebuilding from the destruction of World War I and trying to harness the new hope and potential economic boom that arose from the ashes, Berlin made economic, political, and cultural changes in the following thirty years. These changes make Berlin a city that is at the center of people’s attention: in writing, in film, in stories. Before 1933, when the National Socialist Party took power,

Berlin and generally Germany as a whole were struggling with their identity. At the end of World War I, monarchy and aristocracy was overthrown and new republic was born: the Weimar Republic. Berlin remained the capital and location of various political uprisings including the November Revolution. In late 1918, the communist party of Germany led a coup that ultimately failed in overthrowing the government. While this instilled a greater sense of identity, it was at the price of dividing Berlin into dueling identities. This stimulated more Berliners to gathered in the streets and squares to discuss what is happening in the political sphere since they realized the direct effect it played in their lives. In particular, Alexanderplatz was home to these demonstrations and conversations because the presence of newspapers and literature everywhere lining the walls and kiosks of public spaces. The conversations were spilling out of the cafes onto the streets, where critics and theorists started listening and incorporating into their analysis of the Weimar Period. From this, a large amount of work flowed out of Weimar Berlin about the public sphere and its interaction with the individual identity, including Alfred Döblin's revolutionary novel, *Berlin Alexanderplatz: The Story of Franz Biberkopf*. This novel encompassed all aspects of the Weimar period through the complicated relationship of its two main characters, Berlin Alexanderplatz and Franz Biberkopf.

Chapter 2

Creative Space: The Influence of Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*

The preceding chapter explains the rise of Alexanderplatz as the center of the Weimar Republic through the early twentieth century. Through a modern, functional plan that supported a flow of creative capital, 1920s Alexanderplatz as a space spatially and culturally, has held a lasting influence throughout history. Many writers and artists were influenced by the graceful industrial power Alexanderplatz exuded and as a result, the Alexanderplatz was the focus of many essays, films, and novels during this time period. One of these inspired authors included, Alfred Döblin, who published his novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz: The Story of Franz Biberkopf* in 1929. However, before his publication of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, the public knew the man, but not his work. Born in 1878, Bruno Alfred Döblin was the fourth of five children. He attended Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin; known today as Humboldt University, where he studied general medicine. He focused his education on neurology and psychiatry, eventually opening his own medical practice on the edge of Alexanderplatz, near Scheuenviertel (the shed quarter). Towards the end of the 19th century, this quarter became home to thousands of Jews fleeing from Russia and was given the name “the ghetto of Berlin” (Jelavich 7). This identity shaped Alexanderplatz’s surrounding population and the industry that later developed, by being “signified by poorer sectors of the population” and the “the process of modernization brought with them massive and economic change, which offered employment to some but made other jobs redundant” (Jelavich 8). This dynamic mixture of pure industrial capitalism and bourgeois creative playground inspired Döblin to leave his career in medicine and write a novel based on Alexanderplatz and what it represented

during the Weimar Republic. This chapter will explore, the historical structure of Alexanderplatz through the context of Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. The seamless symbiotic relationship between the protagonist Franz Biberkopf and the setting Berlin Alexanderplatz, illustrates the influential role of public space, specifically Alexanderplatz, had in shaping the movement of the people and ideas of the Weimar Republic.

Berlin Alexanderplatz covers eighteen months in the life of Franz Biberkopf, beginning with his release from Tegel Prison and ending with his release from the Buch Insane Asylum. In the middle, Biberkopf experiences Berlin through numerous lovers, jobs, and hardships. In the beginning "Franz Biberkopf leaves Tegel Prison which a former foolish life had led him. It is difficult to gain a foothold in Berlin again, but he finally does. This makes him happy, now he vows to lead a decent life" (Döblin 3). Biberkopf, a pimp, had been sentenced to Tegel for murdering his lover and employee, Ida. His journey can be divided into three "hammer blows" of punishment. Each of these "blows" represents a different event where Biberkopf is punished for his naïve trust in others. His first blow comes after he becomes unknowingly involved in illegal business with Luders, his girlfriend's uncle. This causes him to question his ability to lead an honest life and proceeds to disappear into the landscape of Berlin to the point where "Meck and Lina can't find Franz Biberkopf. They run all around, through half of Berlin but they don't find him" (Döblin 151). Eventually he reemerges to experience his second blow. Once again, Biberkopf becomes involved with criminal business and in a car chase is thrown out a car and ran over. As a result, he loses his right arm completely. A discouraged Biberkopf is met with his final blow when his friend, Reinhold, kills his

lover, Mieze. At this point, Biberkopf's "earthly journey is ended. It is now time for him to be crushed outright" (Döblin 573).

Döblin sets out in hopes of producing a novel that connects the reader with the daily hardship of living in the metropolis. Prior to writing the novel, Döblin published other periodicals and books; but when *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was released it was an instant success, selling more copies in the first weeks than all of his previous books combined (Koepke 126). Between 1931 and 1936, it appeared in nine languages, including Dutch, English, Italian, Spanish, French and Russian. After its release in 1929, 50,000 copies had been printed and were distributed worldwide. The success of his novel was revolutionary because of the novel's modernist montage style, a writing technique that entails pulling parts of the surrounding environment, i.e. advertisements or newspaper headlines, and inserting them into the dialogue. The topic, "the Berlin underworld" was also essential to the novel's rise, which glorified the unglamorous aspects of Weimar Berlin.

Another way Döblin's novel differed from other creative pieces produced at this time about Berlin was his attention to how the city and character affect each other in a specific structured public transit space. Between the years of 1926 and 1928, for example, the films *Metropolis*, and *Berlin: Die Symphonie einer Großstadt* (Symphony of the Metropolis) premiered with great success, along with multiple English novels by authors Stephen Spender and Christopher Isherwood, who set their novels and plays in Berlin. Compared to these plays and essays, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, integrated the city into every element of the story, whereas the other works superficially showcased Berlin. It strove to embrace every facet of the city, using Alexanderplatz as a microcosm to examine the city

as a whole. The novel revolves around this totality of chaos that was Alexanderplatz, while highlighting the implicit cooperation with the engrained capitalist framework it functioned within. This integration of the capitalist, modern framework into the physical structure of the city was seen through emphasis on the design of window shops and department stores. Consequently this makes Biberkopf a passive object in time searching for order in a city filled with sensory bombardment and brutalization. Convinced the struggles he faces are fate, Biberkopf imitates the classic Greek tragedy hero doomed by his fatal flaw: to see everything as a result of his own actions. Through the nine books that make up *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Biberkopf's journeys through Berlin's dark by-ways, filled with diverse populations. Before he reaches a point of self-understanding, he enters the story lost and bewildered by the city that surrounds him. For Biberkopf, Alexanderplatz functions as a home and battleground simultaneously, with both memories of trauma and the promise of release guiding him through the narrative.

All-Consuming Trauma

Even though Biberkopf has been living physically in the city of Berlin for the past four years, within Tegel Prison, once he steps out of the boundary of the prison and enters the city proper, "he shook himself, gulped. He stepped on his own foot. Then he made a run and was sitting in the streetcar. In the midst of people. Start. At first it was as if one was a dentist, who was grabbed a root with the forceps and pulled, the pain grows, one's head wants to burst" (Döblin 4). He grows comfortable with the limitations prison had placed on him in the past four years and now the freedom of the frantic city becomes overwhelming. He is reluctant to be discharged because to him he is reentering the prison

of Berlin and there is nowhere else to escape to once he steps over the threshold. His first moments in the city are raw and disjointed. Pausing at corners, disoriented, Biberkopf screams out for help, but receives judgmental looks in return. When “the gateman walked past him several times, showed him his car-line; he did not move. [...] He was standing at the car stop. The punishment begins” (Döblin 4). In this moment, memories come flooding back from his previous life, and he realizes the control the city has over him. This control it possesses is the ability to influence and test Biberkopf’s morality. Biberkopf finds happiness in being a moral individual, even though the city continually sucks him in to dark alleys to test his strength against the demons of his past. Berlin tests his morals and somehow they keep pulling him into the underworld’s violence and corruption.

Biberkopf’s first reactions to the city’s architecture and facades produce visceral illusions mirroring his traumatic past. During his initial outing in Berlin, when he begins making his way home, the reader is unsure if Biberkopf is moving in a specific direction or just wandering. This is a product of Döblin’s montage writing style; which entails pulling parts of the surrounding environment, (for example, advertisements or newspaper headlines) and inserting them into the dialogue. In using this technique, Döblin intertwines the environment and individual. Many times during the novel, the reader sees “Biberkopf make his way through Berlin, often resembling ‘a dog who has lost the scent of his trail,’ and the story takes its course through the impersonal fabric of associations, which irritate, divert, and delay,” the actual issues he is afraid to address (Jähner 146). The scene surrounding him disturbs Biberkopf, and, “terror struck him as he walked down Rosenthaler Straße and saw a man and woman sitting in a little beer shop right at

the window” (Döblin 6). Suddenly, he looks up toward the skyline and imagines the roofs sliding off. Biberkopf searches for stability as, “the cars roared and jangled on, house-front were rolling along one after the other without stopping. And there were roofs on the houses, they soared atop of houses, his eyes wandered straight upward: if only the roofs don’t slide off, but the houses stood upright” (Döblin 7). Until this point, the concrete city structure was one of the few stable aspects of his life. However, this quickly changes due to Biberkopf’s disjointed perception of the buildings around him.

In Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard describes the structures of the city as internalized to represent the home as a body, where the roof/attic functions as the brain. By seeing the roofs sliding off, Biberkopf sees the traditional role of “home” falling apart around him, which creates a lack of mental security. Mental stability is mirrored in the disillusioned environment Biberkopf creates around him. Biberkopf has no one waiting for him when he returns home from prison, and this lack of a family support system is expressed through his disjointed perception. The only comfort he finds is realizing, “he is back in Berlin. He breathes Berlin again” (Döblin 302). Unable to control the surrounding area and stop it from crumbling, Biberkopf panics and doesn’t know whether to crumble along with it or keeping going. This struggle also arises as a result of an individual trying to find home in a public plaza that was designed for the masses, i.e. an aggregate. Alexanderplatz is a place where “people hurry over the ground like bees. They hustle and bustle around here day and night, by the hundreds. The street-cars roll past with a screech and a scrunch, yellow ones with trailers, away they go across the planked-over Alexanderplatz, it’s dangerous to jump off” (Döblin 217).

Biberkopf becomes a member of the masses as he reintroduces himself to Alexanderplatz by taking a stream of jobs that allow him spend a majority of his day there. He sells tie clips on the street outside the entrance to the subway station and then moves on to sell newspapers in the subterranean subway level. Being involved in the everyday hustle and bustle of the rushing commuters reconnects Biberkopf to the city, but only on the most ephemeral level. This relationship with the space through his labor keeps him from connecting personally with the environment and the people that pass through it. These relationships he makes are based of a supply and demand structure.

Döblin, himself, had a similar experience in living and working close to Alexanderplatz. As a doctor he treated different vagabonds of Berlin Mitte and Alexanderplatz. Since Döblin lived close to Alexanderplatz, and presumably interacted with it on a daily basis, his description is raw and honest. His personal knowledge makes the novel approachable for the local reader because it places him or her in a familiar place. By choosing a nondescript, busy transport hub as the central location of his novel, Döblin connects with every Berlin reader, since on average, the “number of vehicles crossing Alexanderplatz increased from about 1,200 vehicles daily in 1918 to approximately 229,000 in 1939,” making Alexanderplatz a familiar location for the majority of people in Berlin (German Senate Department). When he later switched his career focus to writing, he was asked if Berlin inhibits or impairs artistic creation and he responded by saying, “the city as a whole has an intensely inspiring energizing power; this agitation of the streets, shops, and vehicles provides the heat [he] must have in order to work, at all times. It is the fuel that makes [his] motor run” (Jähner 142). The fuel of over stimulus and running around the city, in and out of crowds, is translated into the character of Biberkopf.

The frenzy that follows him is due to his incapacity to process the traumatic history of his past. Normally, the environment plays a supportive role in narratives, but for Döblin's novel, Biberkopf and Alexanderplatz have a different relationship. Berlin is such a powerful of a city with modernity and industrial strength that Biberkopf must adapt his movements to the structures of traffic. There is an element of freedom that comes from being able to go anywhere in the city via public transportation, but also entrapment in having to function within the set schedule.

Biberkopf's Relationship with the Built Environment

It is through this give and take relationship with Berlin that Biberkopf slowly begins to be affected by the city. Instead of the city changing Biberkopf completely, the modern city awakens his passionate hopes and deep anxieties that he has had all along. For Biberkopf, his hope is to be a better person and his anxiety is of losing his morals again. He refuses the assistance offered from various friends, believing only in his own brute strength and ability to endure. He rants, "because you do not know me. Because you do not know who I am. Who Franz Biberkopf is. He's not afraid of anything. I have my fists! Just look at what muscles I have" to his lover Lina during an argument (Döblin 213). When he meets Lina, "he has sworn to all the world and to himself to remain respectable" (Döblin 47). However, in this moment he will begin to realize it is not the city, but the social interactions and people Biberkopf surrounds himself with that challenge him to remain respectable.

Through a diverse range of social interactions, Biberkopf is slowly affected and begins losing himself and ultimately comes to the brink of his sanity at the end of the

novel after his love has been killed, desperate and lost. This collapse from sanity, after his days in a space with extreme stimulus overload leads to, “constant shifts in one’s attention to sounds, images, movement. [...] so the means for narrating the chosen elements shift, as the interest of an alter big-city resident may shift without losing himself as focal point.” (Fassbinder 50). As mentioned earlier, Döblin writes in the style of “montage”, which creates a disjointed story line for the reader, but also a more raw and sensory one. Combining elements of Biberkopf’s past, present, and future, with the elements of the public sphere, these interactions and relationships break Biberkopf down by constantly jumping from past to present, mixed with, “the city itself—a gigantic, in its true dimensions, unfathomable, constantly growing, rampant, endlessly changing being” (Benjamin 26). Alexanderplatz functions as the backdrop for the main scene where the city takes control of Biberkopf, emulating, “a dark force that devours the ‘little man’ and in the end leaves behind only the indigestible” (Steinfeld 56). What is left of Biberkopf after Alexanderplatz has chewed him up and spit him out is someone utterly alienated and desperate for direction. He searches for a break from this maddening hyper-stimulation within the puzzling complex of the public sphere. Biberkopf loses his moral direction the deeper he retreats into the subterranean public transit landscape. Only when he leaves the city behind, in the suburbs of Berlin, does Biberkopf feel happy and safe with his lover Mieke.

He doesn’t learn the city’s not to blame until long after he leaves prison. Until then he blames his struggles on the city. As a result, Berlin becomes something he needs to conquer. Biberkopf thereby makes his forthcoming journey harder by pitting himself against the metropolis. Instead of adapting his movements to the structures of the built

environment and traffic, he clashes and struggles with it. A common occurrence for while Biberkopf is “walking leisurely along the rattling trolley line, look out, don’t get off while the car is in motion! Wait till the car stops!” (Döblin 167). Alexanderplatz was designed for organized flow of traffic and pedestrians, but Biberkopf manages to do the opposite. Through clashing with his environment and initiating questionable relationships, (especially with Reinhold,) Biberkopf becomes the only person responsible for the “blows” to follow. His lack of human insight prevents him from developing friendships and leads to his repeated disappointments in his surrounding environment.

Döblin’s Literary Metropolis

The concept of time is absent from *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. The reader never knows what time of day Biberkopf frequents his regular spaces (such as the bar, apartment or street). Döblin makes a conscious decision to be descriptive about particular aspects of both Berlin and Biberkopf, like the structural space and current events, but when it comes to time, he is strikingly vague. This vagueness is normal to Döblin because for Berliners the metropolis functions on a twenty-four hour schedule. Berlin was a “the city that never sleeps”. The public transit system functions under the structure of this twenty-four hour schedule, with no closing time on the weekends. This made public transportation readily available at any given hour of the day. Alexanderplatz, similar to other major transit hubs around the world like Penn Station and Gare du Nord, is the busiest location in Berlin. These three transit hubs, even though located in different countries and cultures, support high traffic flow daily, while still creating a space where people congregate. However, Alexanderplatz differs, in that it supports a creative,

organic atmosphere of thought. When people interact and gather in Alexanderplatz, they exchange cultural capital along with economic capital. This transforms Alexanderplatz, as primarily a transit space, into a space that is always moving and growing into something new with every sunrise. The cafes and bars stay open until the early morning, full of conversations and ideas. They become second homes for the night owls and wanderers. For Biberkopf, his bar, Löwenbrau Patzenhofer, is where his friends congregate, where he learns about current events, and where he goes after he has his fight with Mieze, his girlfriend. There he finds his friend, Georgie, the bartender, who will comfort and distract him with a beer and a listening ear (Döblin 115).

Berlin is highly organized through a complex network of trains, streetcars, cars, and buses. Döblin illustrates the complexity through long-winded passages as follows:

“Car No. 68 runs across Rosenthaler Platz, Wittenau, Nordbahnhof, Heilanstalt, Weddingplatz, Stettiner Station, Rosenthaler Platz, Alexanderplatz, Straussberger Platz, Frankfurter Allee Station, Lichtenberg, Herzberge Insane Asylum. The three Berlin transport companies—street-car, elevated and underground, omnibus—form a tariff-union” (Döblin 53).

Sometimes these routes are confusing because they overlap and loop above and below ground. Public transit in Berlin invaded all spaces and levels of the metropolis. This network becomes part of every Berliner’s mental map of the city from childhood.

Because it is second nature to the local Berliner to know which train or bus to take, Döblin’s montage technique focuses on accommodating the local reader.

Illustrated as in the passage above, Döblin writes *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as a montage instead of as a strictly linear narrative. This reinforces Biberkopf’s role as a lost soul wandering around Berlin aimlessly. Döblin has a unique ability to evoke the essence

of a city on paper. Harald Jähner, a Döblin scholar, describes the author's style of montage as follows:

“the intricate web of the city: by listing the stations of a streetcar line; by fleeting observations ranging from the open spaces of large squares to the glandular functions of some random passersby; by describing the unfolding network of streets [...]. The listing of street names, intersections, and streetcar lines forms a cartographic textual structure, which Döblin develops further by means of literary montage” (Jähner 146).

Döblin paints the diverse scene of Berlin Alexanderplatz for the reader by listing a jumble of street names in a single long-winded passage to create a makeshift map. For example, “in the northeast part of the city, from Eldenaer Strasse across Thaerstrasse across Landsberger Allee as far as Cotheniusstrasse along the Belt Line Railway” highlights Döblin's montage (Döblin 142).

This “map” will function very differently for the two groups that read *Berlin Alexanderplatz* – the local and the foreign. Knowing where the novel is situated in Berlin, the foreigner assumes that Biberkopf is in and around Alexanderplatz the entire time. But to the local audience, his movement is actually citywide; Berlin Alexanderplatz is just the central node of the story. For example, in the passage above, the location described actually is miles away from Alexanderplatz. This will alter their experience with the novel by not associating Biberkopf with Alexanderplatz or projecting his or her own past experience on where Biberkopf's story takes him.

The only point in the novel where a direct plan of travel and destination is executed is the day when Biberkopf and Mieze, leave the city and go to Freienwalde. Freienwalde is a park on the outskirts of the city surrounded by lush forest and home to a beer garden. The silence of nature functions as a safe space needed in order for Biberkopf and Mieze mend the broken pieces of their struggling relationship, which lacks trust and

safety. However, inevitably they will have to reenter the destructive environment of Berlin at the end of the day. Biberkopf and Mieze get in a fight about one of her clients and to whom she owes her loyalty, which turns into a heated argument quickly, and, “she runs after him, but Biberkopf turns around at once and strikes her in the face, so that she reels back and he pummels her shoulder and she falls” (Döblin 462). Freienwalde doesn’t heal every time someone in the novel visits it however. The next time Mieze leaves the city, she goes without Biberkopf, but meets with Reinhold through a set up arranged by Max, Biberkopf’s friend. What Mieze doesn’t know when she arrives is that she will never return to Berlin. During a heated argument in the forest, Reinhold loses his temper and kills her in a rage. The stark contrast between these two visits, which both occur removed from Alexanderplatz, ultimately bring Biberkopf to the breaking point. It is only for a brief moment in the novel that Biberkopf finds sanity because he is utterly happy “kissing her wildly in the car” on the way to Freienwalde (Döblin 467). But, unfortunately, Biberkopf repeats the past and falls in love with Mieze. He once again tangles business and pleasure and ultimately leads him to succumb to a similar fate as the one he had previously experienced before going to jail. Döblin scolds his protagonist when he notices, “You’re sitting on the same old spot. Ida’s name is Mieze, and one of your arms is gone, but look out, you’ll take to boozing, too, and everything will start all over again, only much worse this time, and that’ll be the end of you” (Döblin 363). This foreshadows the end of the novel, when Biberkopf finds himself released from an insane asylum and lives the rest of his days as a gatekeeper at a factory.

Biberkopf, for his part, has no control over language; language runs through the city and past him. The seemingly random texts that Döblin inserts into the narrative, like

the newspaper clippings and radio voices, the reader gains an understanding of the ways in which the city operates apart from its individual inhabitants, and how its lines of communication flow through the entire collective body of the city. Presenting the landscape of Berlin through Biberkopf's stream of consciousness, Döblin utilizes the language of the city to explore memory as a theater stage, by incorporating the noise of the construction sites, the shouts of the street vendors, the screeching of the streetcars into the scene. These noises consume Biberkopf, until his only choice is to scream out himself in song and add to the language of the city as, "the echo resounded from the walls. That was fine. His voice filled his ears. [...] And then: 'Tra-la-la-la-la-la-la,' a bit from a song. Nobody paid any attention to him" (Döblin 9). As Biberkopf wanders through "written environment" of the streets, he rediscovers parts of himself. Biberkopf "must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil" (Benjamin 26). What Benjamin describes in this passage as the "fruitless searching" is crucial to the growth of Biberkopf as an individual, separate from the chaos of the city.

As mentioned previously, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is a text constructed from a montage of other texts. Within the text, Biberkopf's has a close relationship with the newspaper and other political texts. These affect his conversations and his relationships. Döblin novel had this affect on other writers, seen by the well over 100 reviews and essays published in German and foreign periodicals (Sander 145). Many authors gained inspiration from *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, including Weimar theorist and literary analysts like Walter Benjamin. Benjamin published volumes of essays about texts, authors and cities, known most commonly for essays on the Flâneur, Franz Kafka, and Marcel Proust.

Associated with the Frankfurt School, a school of neo-Marxist interdisciplinary social theory, Benjamin focused his writings on educational and cultural change. Published posthumously, “A Berlin Chronicle” illustrates Benjamin’s relationship to Berlin spatially through the memory perspective of a child.

According to Benjamin, strong sensory elements, like smell and touch, can create strong memories. A child’s memory of a space can be built by these different senses, and can alter the importance it holds for the child. For Benjamin, his grade school holds vivid visual memory. He distinctly remembers the, “unspeakable gray-green ornaments adorning the wall of the hall, and the absurd bosses and scrolls of the cast-iron balustrades” (Benjamin 51). Along with visual reconciliation of memory, Benjamin describes the importance of language in memory, declaring, “language shows clearly that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theater” (Benjamin 26).

And yet, after a person experiences a traumatic event, like Biberkopf murdering Ida, many will re-experience the trauma mentally and physically or will turn to psychoactive substances to try to escape the desperate feelings of irrevocable loss (“What is Trauma?”). These are both symptoms that the mind and body are actively struggling to cope with the traumatic experience. Döblin makes it clear that Biberkopf’s experience with the city was a struggle to address the past, which was a cyclical and repetitive event accessed through the style of montage writing. Döblin describes Biberkopf’s repetitive traumatic experience with Berlin via a series of repeated “conquests.” Halfway through the novel, Döblin says,

“Biberkopf has come to Berlin for the third time. The first time the roofs were about to slide off, then the Jews came and he was saved. The second time Lüders cheated but he swigged his way through. Now, the third time, his arm is gone, but

he ventures courageously into the city. The man's got courage, two- and threefold courage" (Döblin 324).

Biberkopf is constantly venturing back into the city. Why does he never give up and let the city win?

While this repetitive trauma is obvious in Döblin's novel, but even more apparent in the 1980 film adaption of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, directed by Werner Rainer Fassbinder. Fassbinder's attention to the raw emotion depicted throughout the novel allowed him to create a dynamic film, which stays relevant and influential still today.

Chapter 3

Alexanderplatz Exposed: Rainer Werner Fassbinder's Film

Friedrich Nietzsche said, “every great philosophy has been the confession of its maker, as if it were his involuntary and unconscious autobiography” (Benjamin 31). Alfred Döblin’s novel, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, illustrates his, as the author, relationship and understanding of Berlin through Biberkopf’s scattered emotional journey. Döblin’s novel allows the reader to form personal connections with Berlin and Franz Biberkopf. One of those readers was fourteen-year-old Rainer Werner Fassbinder. He first read the novel and discover later he, “wasn’t reading any more, but rather, living, suffering, despairing, fearing,” *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (Schütte 100). When Fassbinder was asked to direct the film adaptation of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, he immediately accepted. Not only was this a prestigious offer from the Bavaria Film Studios, but also Döblin’s 1929 novel was important in shaping Fassbinder’s life. The book turned into a lifeline, that “helped [him] to admit [his] tormenting fear, which almost crippled [him], the fear of acknowledging [his] homosexual desires, or realizing [his] repressed need; this book helped [him] to keep from becoming totally sick, mendaciously desperate” (Schütte 100). Years later he realized he strongly identified with the protagonist Franz Biberkopf. His film was a beautiful, intense portrayal of Döblin’s novel, which incorporated both his own autobiographical connection and confession and Germany’s national narrative of the 1970s.

The combination of personal and national connection allowed him to represent the landscape of Alexanderplatz differently than it was originally written in the novel. By internalizing the physical representation and allowing the subconscious tensions

associated with the metropolis to surface, Fassbinder encourages the viewer to dive into the gritty underworld with Biberkopf. Unlike a previous 1931 feature film production that was unable able to include all characters in its two-hour time allotment, Fassbinder was able to thoroughly and honestly depict the novel through a film, a mini-series, of fifteen hour-long episodes, airing every Sunday night. Thus, Fassbinder's film adaptation of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* allows the landscape to be brought to life. Fassbinder accomplishes an honest depiction of the 1920s story by internalizing the landscape of Berlin. He redirects the flow of the novel's narrative through Alexanderplatz in a different way than Döblin had. The city experience is interpreted through his reactions and shot through his point of view. Through this, Fassbinder provides a new depiction of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.

Rainer Werner Fassbinder was a key figure of the New German Cinema movement as both a film director and screenwriter from 1965 to his death in 1982. Influenced by the French New Wave, New German Cinema produced a number of explorative films on low budgets through the creative work of young new directors. When Fassbinder was asked to direct the TV series of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, he was 35, at which at that point he was already a veteran in the film industry, having started when he was 24. It was going to be one of the last films he ever produced, due to his sudden death in 1982 at the age of 37. In an interview before the release of the TV series, Fassbinder stated in a press conference, "I am Biberkopf" (Shattuc 134). In a literal sense, this is true because he personally narrated the excerpts of the novel inserted between scenes in the film. Fassbinder's intensely personal interpretation of the story of Franz Biberkopf has been critiqued for being too autobiographical, with a heightened focus on

the relationship between Reinhold and Biberkopf, and a diminished role of the city (Shattuc 137). The city's role, however, is not diminished, but instead has been internalized within Biberkopf.

Berlin from Biberkopf's Perspective

When Fassbinder agreed to take on *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, he committed himself to depicting a city of the past, one in which different political and cultural circumstances controlled. The Alexanderplatz of Fassbinder's time was in no way similar to the Platz of the Weimar Period. Physically, Alexanderplatz, and, "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" (Buruma 2008). However, Fassbinder's focus was not on a literal depiction of 1920s Berlin, but what he termed the true depiction of 1920s Berlin (Thomsen 235). Fassbinder felt that, "you could tell how it really would look out on the streets better from the kind of refuges people created for themselves, what kinds of bars they went to, how they lived in their apartments, and so on" (Buruma 2008). This focus on interior space was a stylistic decision by Fassbinder, but also stemmed from his belief Berlin was better seen through the interior spaces (Buruma 2008). With the set built and filmed in a Munich movie studio, panoramic views or long shots were impossible, so he focused on details, close-ups, window frames, blinking neon signs, bar tables, and stoops. Therefore, Franz Biberkopf's personal internalized experience of Berlin becomes the visual focus of the film.

Fassbinder's career can be divided into three distinct stylistic phases. His first ten movies, from 1969 to 1971, were an extension of his work in the theater, using a static camera and deliberate, unnaturalistic dialogue. The second phase was trademarked by films that explored the ingrained prejudices about race, sex, sexual orientation, and politics, which led to Fassbinder's rise in international attention. The final fourteen films were more varied, featuring international actors along with collaborative work with famous artists, such as Andy Warhol for his film *Querelle*. *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was in the Fassbinder's phase, with the use of international actors, Günter Lamprecht and Hanna Schygulla. Fassbinder's impression on the film industry helped define the German film industry as experimental and raw that exposed deep-seated human truth (Ruffell 2002).

The interior spaces of the film shape the viewer's connection with the character of Franz Biberkopf. Fassbinder removes Biberkopf from the street and places him in more intimate settings, such as his apartment and local corner bar. These locations are a more consistent setting for his long monologues about life and recitations of the current events from the newspaper. In these extended close-ups, Fassbinder's intense focus - bordering on obsession - with the character of Biberkopf is clear.

Fassbinder's personal connection to the novel translates to the film as an example of the concept of the auteur theory. In film criticism, the auteur theory is when the director's personal creative vision is expressed as if they were the primary character and viewer. The most common examples of auteur theory are in art films, where the script and story are unique, the director is chosen for his or her unique voice, and allowed more creative freedom. Fassbinder, for example, removes Biberkopf from the street and places him in the private sphere, which strips the character down to his bare existence. Through

this intimate point-of-view, the viewer is encouraged to connect with Biberkopf's mediocre, day-to-day universal existence. Alexanderplatz, Biberkopf's home, is firstly a public space, automatically making Biberkopf's experience public.

Fassbinder's focus on the domestic, private sphere instead of the novel's emphasis on the public sphere allows the city to play a different role in the film. As previously discussed, Alexanderplatz's transportation hubs became Biberkopf's second home in the novel, full of different social interactions and visual stimuli. The Alexanderplatz subway station is where Biberkopf worked, talked with friends, and kept up on current events. Fassbinder's representation of the subway station is dark, with low ceilings with a constant flow of pedestrian traffic and the rare pause to glance at the newspaper or grab a coffee. It is so dark that the people rushing past fade into the darkness and become apart of the background. The symbolism of descending down under the city into the subway system connects with the architecture of the city touched upon in the Fritz Lang film, *Metropolis*. In *Metropolis*, the city is organized in vertical, hierarchal levels, in which the workers live under the city and the upper class lives elevated in tall skyscrapers. The two spheres rarely interact; only when two people from different spheres fall in love does one become aware of the other (*Metropolis*). Interactions between different spheres, whether that is the public and private spheres, or the bourgeois and lower class interact, both occur in public transport hubs. When public transportation became a normal everyday action across all class levels, all of Berlin inherently descended into the "underworld" everyday (Jelavich 9). It is in this congested, dark space where momentous events of the Döblin novel occur, including Biberkopf's confession of his love for Cilly and an argument ending the friendship between Meck and Biberkopf. All of Biberkopf's jobs,

beside selling shoelaces door-to-door, are based in the subway station. From selling neckties and homosexual pornographic magazines and finally a politically fascist newspaper, Biberkopf connects to diverse groups who would need those products and pass through the space daily. Alexanderplatz has the ability to function simultaneously as a place of work and a home. Through the design's focus on providing an organic flow through a node, Alexanderplatz is able to hold spatial importance for all classes of society.

In Fassbinder's film, not only does the subway station replace street as a setting for scenes, but the private, individualized spaces such as the bar and Biberkopf's apartment function as the main backdrop for Biberkopf's story instead of the city streets. Within his apartment, Biberkopf can be the person he wants to be, where as outside, the city forces him to make quick decisions about his morals. Overwhelmed and brash, he normally makes the wrong decisions and experiences the consequences later. However, when secluded in his apartment and surrounded by the people that support him, Biberkopf is able to make moral decisions and grow into the person he strives to be. Throughout the story, he is tested about whether he can stay out of trouble; somehow he surrounds himself with people that tempt him back in the dark underworld of criminals. When he does give into temptation, he disappears into the city away from his loved ones, only later to be found in a random hotel room with empty beer bottles strewed around him. Fassbinder shows that "the ever present threat of the street intrudes on Biberkopf's interior world through the use of expressionistic neon lights and thunderstorms that cast their blinking, garish light into the domestic arena" naggingly reminding Biberkopf the outside world is lingering (Shattuc 144). Fassbinder reverses "Döblin's celebration of the

city by using the closed studio space to create a womblike world that parallels the unstable psychological needs of his protagonist” (Shattuc 144).

Every Sunday night, when the new episode of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* began with the same opening credits montage sequence. The credits are set against a backdrop of quintessential Weimar Berlin and modern metropolis images including masses of workers, advertisements, and other cultural monuments of 1920s Berlin, which were overlaid with train wheels driving forward repetitively. The juxtaposition of these two images, one of the past memory of the Weimar Alexanderplatz that no longer existed, and the modern machine literally running over history situates the viewer in the context of pre-existing memories of industrialization. Döblin is frequently recognized by critics for his successful use of montage to bridge the gap between the public and private sphere, as well as the individual and collective psyche (Sander 147). In the opening credits, Fassbinder also tackles montage and its positive effect for the reader’s relationship with the story and protagonist by combining the still and the moving. In these opening credits, the viewer is introduced to one of the main characters of Biberkopf’s story: Berlin. The dominant presence of transportation situates the reader in the public sphere. However, the repetitive images of capitalist day-to-day life are misleading. Biberkopf is a citizen of the Berlin “underworld,” and not someone who participates in the nine-to-five factory lifestyle. However, with the story being based in the main transport hub of Berlin, Biberkopf is inherently integrated into the fast paced environment of the industrialized city. The massive amount of cars that pass through the Platz is an accurate depiction of the frenzy that was Alexanderplatz. Biberkopf moves through the square as intended by

the architects and engineers who designed Alexanderplatz, stopping to interact as a consumer and pedestrian.

Fassbinder mirrors the 1927 film, *Berlin: Symphony of the Metropolis* in his opening to *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Both films open with barreling train wheels spinning quickly. Although in Fassbinder's opening, the train wheels are barreling over the memories of Weimar Berlin and the new modern city, in *Berlin: Symphony of the Metropolis*, the train is violently flashing through the countryside heading towards the metropolis. The train approaches the city, speeding past the suburbs and eventually reaching the train station, where the clanging iron finds its home among the modern industrial architecture. There exists a continuing notion that the city can only be understood from an internalized familiar perspective, for instance the beauty found in the power of the train is only realized when surrounded by a complimentary architecture of steel and iron (*Berlin: Symphony of the Metropolis*).

The film balances two different genres: the melodramatic television adaptation and the confessional art film. Film holds a responsibility of not creating "the liquidation of traditional value in the cultural heritage" (Benjamin 221). Film has the ability to appeal to a variety of classes, races, and genders. The balance between low and high culture in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* allows the film accessible to many different types of viewers. For example, the constant domestic disputes give the film an amount of tension, which keeps the viewer looking towards the next episode. But, the gritty, intense, five-minute monologues, force the viewer to consider stylistic choices and how that affects Biberkopf's story. Fassbinder reaches out to the individual viewer to make an individual connection by representing the common human experience through the three main

characters: Franz, Reinhold, and Mieke. In this trio, Franz does everything in his power to prevent true self-knowledge, while Mieke is a pure spirit and Reinhold has given himself over to an evil psychotic misogyny. Through these three characters, the collective population of Berlin is represented. Fassbinder represents the collective and the individual role in *Alexanderplatz* simultaneously, by shooting scenes both on the street, as well in the interior spaces of Berlin, such as the apartment and bar. These spaces function differently, however, with the street bringing physical pain to Biberkopf, like his arm being run over and other encounters, while the interior spaces bring emotional pain of past trauma.

Through his emphasis on the interior of the city, Fassbinder accomplishes his own version of montage through film methods. He uses montage to show the extent of the trauma affecting Biberkopf. At the same point in every episode, Biberkopf will be living his daily life and suddenly the scene flashes back to when he killed Ida. Fassbinder represents the cyclical relationship with the city visually by inserting the scene of Biberkopf murdering Ida repeatedly throughout the film at moments when Biberkopf is scared or lost about how to continue in his life. Music or mindless narration will play over this reoccurring scene, instilling a feeling of confusion and fear, similar to what Biberkopf feels, in every viewer (*Berlin Alexanderplatz*). Döblin's montages integrate the language of the city in Biberkopf's stream of consciousness. Fassbinder's montages begin with close-up shots of Biberkopf reading a newspaper clipping, which then pans out and captures the surrounding bustling environment. In that moment the viewer is aware of how important the setting of Berlin is to the journey of Biberkopf. The Platz functions as

an incubator for many lost souls questioning their role in a society that appears to be more focused on advancing its machines, than its population's creative capabilities.

Exposing the Subterranean Trauma

Biberkopf's story is complimented by the setting of Berlin, because it permits him to explore the deep psychological levels of the common human experience through the many layers of the city. Dipping into the subterranean epicenter of Alexanderplatz station, pausing on street level and then soaring above to the skyline lined with sliding roofs, Fassbinder's film takes advantage of the wide variety of spaces that makeup Berlin. As a director, he interacts with the physical, literal space of Berlin, but focuses on the internalized representation of the city in small spaces. Through the filmic exploration of the internalized experience of Berlin and German society during Weimar Berlin represented in relation to 1970s Berlin, Fassbinder is able to "pervade the sensation, the sensibility, and the emotions of individuals" that cannot be grasped in the field of political institutions and discourses (Kappelhoff 2006). Fassbinder approaches this internalized representation indirectly through scene placements and character development. He doesn't open the film with the postcard aerial overview of Alexanderplatz, but instead the alleyways and courtyards and the people that fill these spaces. However, in the epilogue, titled "My Dream of Franz Biberkopf's Dream by Alfred Döblin", the suppressed representations come to the surface and fill Biberkopf's head and Berlin's streets.

After thirteen hours, the viewer reaches the epilogue and discovers a radical aesthetic break from the previous episodes, consisting of a fragmentary montage of

dreamlike incidents, imaginings, and visions that reflect Biberkopf's devastated mental landscape following Reinhold's murder of Mieke. The epilogue functions as a healing process for Biberkopf, as well as a stage for Fassbinder to address society's influence on mental processes. Fassbinder related to Biberkopf's story so much that he crafted his own two-hour epilogue because he felt that the Döblin's ending was inconclusive. In response, Fassbinder produces a revolutionary filmic depiction of the preexisting national trauma: Germany's past crimes of fascism and lack of healing after World War I when the public did not look to the past. When World War I ended in 1918 in Germany, the nation immediately plunged into the Weimar years full of inflation, culture and modernism. As the Weimar Period started to fade, the attention shifted to Germany's new chancellor, Adolf Hitler, who rose to power in January 1933. In the short fifteen years, between 1918 and 1933, Germany ignored its wounds of the war and moved on by focusing on creating modernist cities rising to the international stage with culture and design (German Senate Department). Fassbinder's depiction of Alexanderplatz through memory in the epilogue and the novel by internalizing the city through Biberkopf's experience and point of view incorporates themes of lost German culture during the Third Reich and German Democratic Republic years. Through this *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is reawakened into a late twentieth century context of German identity. Public space in a city exists for the masses, as a gathering space and a transit space. With time, history writes itself upon the space through architectural expression or the fluctuating use the space receives. Alexanderplatz, for Germany, was a site of demonstrations, revolts, as well as, peaceful conversations between friends. In Fassbinder's epilogue, Alexanderplatz functions as all three for Biberkopf.

As Biberkopf awakes into “My Dream of Franz Biberkopf’s Dream by Alfred Döblin” he finds himself standing in the candle-covered streets of Berlin surrounded by the faces of his past. Two angels guide him through this space and badger him with questions about his past choices and remaining emotions that linger around Mieke’s sudden death. In the first few minutes, Biberkopf asks with puzzlement “What city is this? What enormous city is this?” In this moment, the viewer realizes Biberkopf has not *seen* Berlin before this point. Previously, Fassbinder internalized this landscape of Berlin in order for Biberkopf to address his existing trauma. The subterranean landscape, devious friendships, and hardships of lost love have stolen Biberkopf’s attention until this point. In this moment in the epilogue, he wakes up in this dream and the *real* city is brought to the surface and seen with all its imperfections, i.e. the past scorned relationships. The epilogue functions as an ending to Biberkopf’s journey, Fassbinder’s journey, and the viewer’s journey. Biberkopf is reborn into the Alexanderplatz and learns how the space functions for the masses of Berlin through the new way it appears to him. New and old faces brush past by him and spaces that use to fade into the background become physical and mental barriers to his desire flow through the Platz. He becomes a citizen of the metropolis. With becoming a citizen of the metropolis, Biberkopf becomes a citizen who carries the burdens of personal and national history (*Berlin Alexanderplatz*).

The burdens of history lay heavily upon Western Germany during the middle of the twentieth century. This is not without reason, “no nation in the world has committed greater crimes [...] the atrocities of the Third Reich have come to define the outer limits of state-sponsored brutality and human cruelty” (Berger 35). The war ended, the Reich fell, and Germany was left to pick up the pieces of their national identity and move on.

As Thomas Berger outlines in his book, *War, Guilt, and World Politics after World War II*, Germany adopted a penitent official narrative. This narrative was structured by the historical influence as well the cultural influence. People who align with historical determinism, believe “historical narratives – both on the official level and as embedded in the broader society – are an integral part of the overall cultural system that conditions the kind of official narrative that can be adopted by the state” (Berger 23). The historical narrative of Berlin during the 1970s, during the production of Fassbinder’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, was one that reflected upon and addressed the horrors of World War II and was still making great efforts to apologize. The world responded by rewarding Germany for expressing guilt and allowed it to reintegrate back into the community of nations. Through its expression of remorse and the world’s acceptance, Germany began to rebuild its national pride through involvement from all sectors of society, including political, cultural, and societal. For example, through the representation of Nazism in television and film between 1963 and 1978, the programs featuring Nazi and World War II images “offered audience members the opportunity to reshape their own memories or imagine their parents’ experiences in terms of clearly designated types and historical actors and stereotypical situations” (Kansteiner 140).

However, Fassbinder strove to upset this habit of addressing the historical past superficially, by bringing the public the harrowing representation of Biberkopf’s story. By psychologizing the urban landscape, he pushes the limits of comfort that normally surrounds media representation of World War II. By responding to the social stresses of the 1970s with his interpretation of Döblin’s 1920’s Berlin Weimar landscape, Fassbinder combines the past and present in a montage. He feared that with acceptance of the past

would come acceptance with current 1970s situation. The situation at the time for Germany was a division between the East Soviet Block and the West Federal Republic, which had no sign of changing in the near future. Instead, the Federal Republic was focused on maintaining their international respect separate from their eastern counterpart, by being “one of the most resolute supports of the policy of confrontation and containment of the Soviet Union” (Berger 61). Döblin’s story provides the stage for Fassbinder to raise these issues with Germany during the mid twentieth century, by forcing the viewer to see him or herself in Biberkopf.

Conclusion

Throughout the last three chapters, Alexanderplatz was looked at from three different perspectives: the urban planner, the novelist, and the filmmaker. Each of these perspectives allowed Alexanderplatz to take on a new identity because each beholder of the space emphasized the structural elements of Alexanderplatz from different points of view. Alexanderplatz also inspired them in different ways emotionally and mentally to illustrate a space that would hold importance through the decades. By incorporating these three different perspectives into one study of Alexanderplatz, new insight about the space is revealed.

Not only did Alexanderplatz command dominance as the center of Berlin transport, but it also accomplished it with organic fluidity. This fluidity came from an optimistic view of what the designers thought was possible during the booming modern Weimar Period. From this viewpoint, Berlin's Alexanderplatz underwent multiple transformations, but ultimately stuck to its main function as a transit space of transportation and pedestrians, while simultaneously a transit space for the movement of ideas and information. The architects and designers strove to integrate the commercial and individual social experience into one space that was Alexanderplatz. They were successful in this integration because it inspired Alfred Döblin to write his historically influential novel, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in 1929, when Alexanderplatz was undergoing yet another transformation.

The protagonist of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Franz Biberkopf, provides a creative example of how the public urban space can affect an individual's psyche. The give and take relationship with Alexanderplatz unforgiving landscape drives Biberkopf to the

brink of sanity. Alexanderplatz comes alive through a creative literary context, one that Döblin provides through the use of montage. The seamless integration of sounds from the city into the conversations and thoughts of Biberkopf, make the individual and the environment he or she lives in one. The symbiotic relationship between Alexanderplatz and Biberkopf allows the reader to connect on a personal level.

One of these people that connected on a personal level was filmmaker, Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Through his film adaptation, released in 1980, Alexanderplatz was reawakened into a new decade through a new perspective. Fassbinder exposes Biberkopf's deep-seated traumatic past to the viewer and provides a way to heal by internalizing the city within Biberkopf. Fassbinder's film builds a bridge between the visual and written depiction of Alexanderplatz and explores the ideas of 1920s Weimar Berlin in a 1970s political context.

All three of these different perspectives allow Alexanderplatz to embrace its multidimensional role as a public space. Designed to support the ebb and flow of the industrialized transit system as well the creative transit of ideas and information, Alexanderplatz is able to encompass all of 1920s Weimar society. Alexanderplatz was able to accomplish this by creating a space that the masses felt was theirs and defined what they stood for during Weimar Berlin. The ability a public space has to define a metropolis and its population demonstrates why in city planning today there should continue to be an emphasis on the city square.

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