

# *Berlin Alexanderplatz*: A new film version of Alfred Döblin's 1929 novel

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*Directed by Burhan Qurbani; co-written by Qurbani and Martin Behnke; based on the novel by Alfred Döblin*

Burhan Qurbani has directed a new film adaptation of Alfred Döblin's remarkable novel, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, first published in 1929. The German filmmaker, whose family comes from Afghanistan, has relocated the action from Weimar Germany to the present day. The story of Franz Biberkopf, former cement and transport worker, just out of prison for manslaughter, has become the story of Francis, a refugee from west Africa, who narrowly escaped drowning and finds himself stranded and alone in Berlin.

Döblin's novel has been filmed twice before in Germany. By Phil (or Piel) Jutzi in 1931 with Heinrich George, and then, in 1980, when R.W. Fassbinder directed a 15½ hour television series based on the book, with Günter Lamprecht, Barbara Sukowa, Gottfried John and Hanna Schygulla.

For the benefit of the English-speaking reader we should point out that there are two translations of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, one published in 1931 by Eugene Jolas, a friend of James Joyce and promoter of his work, and a recent rendition by Michael Hofmann (2018), published by New York Review Books. Other major works by Döblin have only recently become available in English, including *The Three Leaps of Wang Lun* (1915-1916), *Wadzek's Struggle with the Steam Turbine* (1918) and *Mountains, Seas and Giants* (1924).

As noted, Qurbani's adaptation seeks to bring the crisis in Germany in the 1920s up to date. Francis (later Franz, played by Welket Bungué), the refugee from Bissau, is the only one to have survived a hazardous boat trip across the Mediterranean, losing his wife in the process (for which he blames himself). Thanking God, he vows to become a good person, but fails because of his circumstances. "Franz wanted to be decent," as the narrator explains, "but life didn't like him that way."

Without a passport, Francis has little chance in Berlin. Forced to work without a legal permit in construction, he loses his job after he calls an ambulance for a colleague who has had an accident. Bringing in the authorities in this manner threatens all those involved in the illicit work.

The criminal Reinhold (Albrecht Schuch) eventually recruits Francis-Franz as a drug dealer. The latter rapidly proves his value and becomes his boss's new right-hand man. Soon he is selecting new recruits for dealing from among the other African refugees.

Franz's relationship with Reinhold is at the center of the novel and the film. The latter is something of an Iago. His endless eagerness to do Franz wrong, while pretending to be his friend, is never fully explained. He is fascinated and attracted to Franz in some fashion, although not necessarily a sexual one. Reinhold envies Franz and anyone who finds a moment of happiness. His life's work is devoted to smashing other people's happiness.

In one of the film's pivotal moments, Reinhold pushes Franz out of a moving car. Franz's arm is run over by a car and he loses it. But even that doesn't break him from Reinhold. He convinces himself, or tries to, that the episode was only an accident or an aberration. Losing his arm is an

immense blow, but Franz is resilient. Then he finds Mieke, his true love. That too is unbearable for Reinhold, it almost drives him mad. Something terrible must be done about it ...

In an important scene late in the film, Franz, by now convinced that everyone is the architect of his own destiny, urges sceptical, reluctant refugees—as part of pressuring them into selling drugs—to take life into their own hands. He says it's about building a future, not just securing daily bread, food and a bed. He speaks from his and to their heart when he explains that they are not refugees but immigrants, "We want to stay here." "I am Germany," he shouts euphorically, sweeping the others along.

This scene offers a scathing critique of the German government's half-hearted endorsement of the "right to stay" (which includes the "right" to be deported) and the nationwide ad campaign that was supposed to encourage companies to hire refugees, featuring migrants proclaiming: "I am a team player," "I am resilient." Following the scene, this *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, unfortunately, loses much of its bite.

Jutzi's 1931 version shows a world in flux that is socially out of balance. Technical progress and prosperity are contrasted with abject poverty. Alexanderplatz in central Berlin is the home for all those fighting to survive every day by any means necessary, up to and including prostitution. Franz (George) takes in Mieke, a young woman who sings in backyards and takes off with anyone who gives her a roof over her head. One scene features a street brawl in which a cellar window is accidentally broken. The wretched cellar turns out to be a "flat." It is the same Berlin milieu that Jutzi featured in his 1929 silent film *Mother Krausen's Journey to Happiness*, featuring many documentary shots. (Fassbinder played on the title of this film in his 1975 *Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven*.)

Fassbinder's 1980 television production charts Franz's career against the unstable backdrop of political crisis, clashes between Communists and Nazis and widespread discontent with the Weimar Republic. Unemployment is high and Franz (Lamprecht) briefly sells a Nazi newspaper to earn money (as he does in the novel). He is no Nazi, but following his release from prison, Franz—who was brought up to be loyal to the Kaiser—sees only chaos and yearns for a normality secured by a social force that guarantees order. The militant young men from the German Communist Party (KPD) who fight with the Nazis fail to win the trust of Biberkopf, who has experienced the unimaginable misery of the world war.

It is perfectly legitimate for Qurbani to turn Franz Biberkopf into the homeless and lawless fugitive Francis, a pariah like Biberkopf. After all, in the Döblin novel, following his term in prison (he has killed his wife in the heat of the moment), Franz is banned from residing in Berlin, a widespread action of the time shamelessly exploited by landlords and employers against the many "illegals" who were not even allowed to see a doctor.

The current adaptation of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, however, comes across

as somewhat artificial and limited. There is hardly any trace of today's social and political crisis and no sense of the threat from the far right—only conflicts in the relatively isolated world of refugees, illegal labour, drugs and prostitution. The rest of society does not exist, including the bulk of the German working class. Every now and then, the police—the sole alternative social element here—show up in the park to hunt down the dealers. Qurbani's film is relentlessly grim, in keeping with the contemporary film industry's lack of interest in the daily life, resilience and often brash, gallows humour of the working class, which feature so prominently in Döblin's original work.

Identity politics also raises its head. The director, the son of Afghan immigrants, clearly wants to address the issue of racism in his film. But apparently for him it is not a question of social inequality and the political interests of the ruling elite, but rather the oppression of minorities by the majority. In interviews on his film, Qurbani describes racism as a "structural" problem and applauds the fact that the work's crucial image of a Pietà was also adopted by the Black Lives Matter movement.

Qurbani's Mieke (Jella Haase) is not a downtrodden woman in social need, but, in what seems to be a concession to contemporary feminism, a mature, self-confident (even a bit smug) high-class escort. She chooses Francis/Franz, not the other way around. Mieke's tragic fate, one of the defining moments of the novel and the Fassbinder series, loses a good deal of strength in the process.

Numerous personalities and situations, each perfectly legitimate in itself, combine to lend the work a contrived character beholden to current petty bourgeois moods and trends. The presence of Eva (Annabelle Mandeng), a German-African club owner in a lesbian relationship, does little to advance the drama. In response to Franz's cry "I am Germany," the transgender Berta (Nils Verkooijen) asserts "We are the new Germans!" The boxes have been ticked, but where is the wider reality of Döblin's *Alexanderplatz*? "Diversity" here too tends to result in an actual social narrowing, in exclusivity.

For his part, Reinhold is an egotistical, sex-addicted monster who attends a costume ball as a big-game hunter accompanied by Franz in a humiliating ape costume. The attention paid to Reinhold's sometimes childish, "devilish" antics distracts from the fact that he is more than just a psychopath. He represents the dregs of society, selfish, narrow-minded, cold-hearted and unconscionable. In reality, but not in the film, these are the characteristics of right-wing thugs, assassins—and undercover intelligence agents.

The new *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is worth seeing and at times is moving. The director clearly wants to encourage social debate. But the film squanders opportunities and fails to place its finger on the wound. This also applies to the director's last film, *We Are Young. We Are Strong* (2014, reviewed by the WSWS in German), about the anti-immigrant arson attack in Rostock in August 1992 that horrified world public opinion. The director explained that he wanted to investigate how "normal" citizens could take part in a racist mob. This ambivalent film does not seriously answer the question. The most vicious of the "normal" youth, who calls every Vietnamese a "Fiji," is portrayed like a little Reinhold.

*We Are Young. We Are Strong* ignores the wider social context, including the role of Germany's political leadership, which encouraged far-right forces at the time to drastically alter the country's asylum laws. Unfortunately, references to such facts are only to be found on the film's homepage.

Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is a book that should be widely read. The author was born into a Jewish family in Stettin, now in Poland. After his father, the owner of a tailor shop, ran off to America with a seamstress, his mother moved the family to Berlin. He studied medicine, first practicing psychiatry and then internal medicine in a working class district. As an artist, he participated in Expressionist circles. His first

published novel appeared in 1915.

In *The Berlin Novels of Alfred Döblin*, David B. Dollenmayer argues that from the time of the November 1918 German revolution onward, "Döblin considered himself a progressive writer on the side of the working class. His basic political sympathies lay with the workers' and soldiers' councils that were formed early in the German revolution of 1918–19 and then bypassed and suppressed by the majority Social-Democratic government under Friedrich Ebert."

Flirting with anarchism at times, Döblin, in a series of articles for the journal *Die Neue Rundschau* in 1919–1920, "attacks the Weimar state and its Social-Democratic leadership as a thin veneer beneath which the old power structure of officers and *junkers* [landowning aristocrats] remains: 'Germany, the Imperial Republic.'" In 1925, he joined the *Gruppe 1925*, "an informal gathering of left-liberal and Communist writers that discussed politics and art between 1925 and 1928," writes Dollenmayer. Other members included Bertolt Brecht, Robert Musil, Ernst Toller, Joseph Roth and Johannes Becher. Döblin remained aloof, however, from party politics.

*Berlin Alexanderplatz* was a great artistic and popular success. It needs to be read to be appreciated. It is many things, including the evocation of a huge modern city. In a 1930 review, left-wing critic Walter Benjamin noted that the "stylistic principle governing this book is that of montage. Petty-bourgeois printed matter, scandalmongering, stories of accidents, the sensational indictments of 1928, folk songs, and advertisements rain down in this text. The montage explodes the framework of the novel, bursts its limits both stylistically and structurally, and clears the way for new, epic possibilities. Formally, above all."

Fassbinder suggested the novel's language "is certainly shaped by such things—mostly the noises of the big city, the specific rhythms, the constant madness of an unceasing back-and-forth. And ... a very specific alertness to everything that living in the city means, certainly provides the source of the montage technique Döblin uses."

The Stalinist literary press attacked Döblin's novel as a "reactionary and counterrevolutionary attack on the thesis of organized class struggle." This was very stupid and repressive, but it doesn't mean there are no problematic features of the novel. They are hinted at by Benjamin's somewhat barbed concluding comment in his generally friendly review that *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was "the most extreme and vertiginous, the last and most advanced stage of the old bourgeois *Bildungsroman*," i.e., a novel of individual "spiritual education."

There are unquestionably signs in the novel that the betrayals of Social Democracy and the Stalinization of the Communist Party have politically discouraged Döblin. He imagines Franz Biberkopf only opening his eyes to reality, maturing, through a series of calamities, during the course of which he discards his arrogance, hubris and illusion of "strength" and becomes "clear-headed," a type of extreme program of psychotherapy.

Nevertheless, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is an immense artistic achievement. If the new film serves no other purpose than focusing attention on the novel, it will have performed a valuable service.



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