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## Homer takes the Streetcar - The Modernist Appropriation of the Epic and Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*

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“I’m not a Greek, I’m a Berliner” (Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* 36). In these words, one of the numerous characters of Alfred Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) bluntly rejects the veneration for Greek antiquity, which was part and parcel of the humanistic heritage so dominant in German culture. Influenced by Futurism and Dada, Döblin shared the anti-traditional attitude of the avant-garde. Yet, throughout the 1920s he calls for the revival of one of the quintessential forms of Greek antiquity, the epic. Analysing *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as the best exemplification of Döblin’s quest for a modern epic and taking his poetological reflections into account, this paper inquires into Döblin’s modernist fascination with the antique literary genre. Although it would be worthwhile to engage in a detailed discussion of all differences between the modernist and the antique epic, due to a lack of space, I will concentrate on two main features of Döblin’s longing for the epic.<sup>1</sup> As I will show, Döblin is on the one hand captivated by the extensiveness of the traditional epic—a quality, which Hegel in his *Lectures on Fine Arts*, highlights and which is often terminologically expressed as ‘epic breadth’.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Döblin is fascinated by the oral character of the antique genre. However, both qualities are fundamentally altered in Döblin’s modernist appropriation. Since the heroic deeds, which the antique epic extensively addresses, are at odds with modern sensibilities, Döblin transforms the epic into a modernist encyclopaedia of ordinary practices. The ordinary also transforms the oral characteristics of the epic; however, whereas the antique genre is based on formulaic language, which stems from an oral

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<sup>1</sup> For the oral character of the antique epic see: Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995). Some major differences between epic and novel is outlined in: Mikhail Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992). For the narratological significance of the hero in the epic: D. C. Feeney, "Epic Hero and Epic Fable," *Comparative Literature* 38.2 (1986).

<sup>2</sup> In his *Lectures on Fine Art*, Hegel vindicates the extensiveness of epic narration. The various rituals, practices, family relations and everyday activities of the heroes which are narrated with great accurateness in Homer’s epics, are not superfluous, Hegel argues, but are at the core of the epic as genre. According to Hegel, „the epic, having what is as its topic, acquires as its object the occurrence of an action which in the whole *breadth* of its circumstances and relations must gain access to our contemplation as a rich event connected with the total world of a nation and epoch (my emphasis—CS).“ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, vol. 2, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975). 1044.

tradition, the modern epic capitulates in face of the prose of the world and, thus, is invaded by the vernacular. Döblin's epic style expresses the urban cacophony.

In a review of Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Walter Benjamin differentiates between the novel and the epic along the lines of an emphasis on individual experience on the one hand and of a collective orientation on the other:

Life in the sense of the epic is the sea. There is nothing more epic than the sea. To be sure, it is possible to relate very differently to the sea. For example, to lie down at the beach, listen to the breakers and collect the shells that are washed ashore. This is what the epic poet does. It is also possible to sail the sea. ... This is what the novelist does. He is really lonely and mute. In the epic, the people rest after their workday—listening, dreaming and collecting (“Krisis des Romans” 230).

Benjamin's image captures Döblin's critique of the novelistic genre in a nutshell. Döblin finds fault with the novel, since it focuses on individual characters or in its classic form of the *Bildungsroman* even recounts the education of the one protagonist. In his critique of the novel as genre, Döblin echoes considerations of both the literary discourse in Germany, which reflects on what has been called the ‘crisis of narration’, and the philosophical debate on the vanishing subject.<sup>3</sup> After the scattering of Enlightenment hopes in the trenches of the First World War, Siegfried Kracauer stresses the anachronistic quality of biographies (“*Die Biographie als neubürgerliche Kunstform*” 78), Walter Benjamin claims that experience as such is at a loss (“*Der Erzähler*” 438f), and Martin Heidegger suggests in *Sein und Zeit* an ontology which refrains from the subject-object paradigm altogether. Also novelists like Thomas Mann and Robert Musil take into account that the unprecedented horror of the WWI and the advent of a pluralistic mass-society challenge the literary form of modernity, the novel, and its politics of representation. However, the specificities of Döblin's response to this crisis differs significantly from that of his literary colleagues.<sup>4</sup> In the German context, Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and Musil's *The Man without Qualities* are good examples of the plot-less narratives of high modernism. Here, intellectual reflections and philosophical speculations substitute action. Döblin, on the contrary, refuses to

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<sup>3</sup> For poetological considerations of the novel as genre in Germany see: Dietrich Scheunemann, *Romankrise. Zur Entstehungsgeschichte der modernen Romanpoetik in Deutschland* (Heidelberg: Quelle und Meyer, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> In the context of European literature, Joyce needs to be mentioned. Franco Moretti claims in *The Modern Epic* that Joyce's *Ulysses* may generically best be addressed as a modern epic. Moretti develops a notion of world-texts in his seminal study. While I agree with Moretti in many points, my investigation is based on Döblin's own poetological reflections (See: Franco Moretti, *The Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez* (London ; New York: Verso, 1996).).

follow disoriented bourgeois protagonists into Swiss retreats or Viennese salons. He draws fundamentally different conclusions from the genre crisis and detects the opportunity for the return of the epic. Before turning to the dominance of the auditory in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, I will outline Döblin's modernist version of 'epic breadth'.

#### Döblin's Modernist Encyclopedia of Ordinary Behavior

In *Berlin Alexanderplatz* action abounds. The urban world is constantly on the move and the narrative rarely comes to rest. In contrast to the *Bildungsroman*, in which the actions and reactions of the protagonist guarantee narrative coherence, the events in Döblin's epic have lost their individual centre. Döblin concatenates a plethora of stories from unknown people whose lives attract the reader's attention only tentatively. In these instances, a quantitative criteria distinguishes the modern epic from the novel: Döblin searches for a genre which allows for an encyclopaedic enterprise. He longs to represent the "enormous amount of shaped material" ("Berliner Programm" 121). It is as if Döblin wishes that the novel—this literary form of domestic life—explodes from the sheer amount of represented material: "Extensive use is to be made of sentences which allow to quickly summarize both what happens successively and simultaneously in complex phenomena" ("Berliner Programm" 122). Longing for epic breath, in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* Döblin introduces statistical data, telephone directories, lists of streetcar stops and many other summarizing devices into his work. In regard to the depiction of individual agents, he follows what he had outlined 15 years early in his *Berlin Program*:

Learn from psychiatry!—the only science which covers the whole soul of the human being; psychiatry has long recognized the naivety of psychology and confines itself to the notation of procedures and movements—shaking the head, ignoring everything else, questions concerning the "why" and "how" ("Berliner Programm" 120).

Döblin's rejection of psychological introspection is a blow to narrative coherence since no psychological traits of the protagonist can advance the plot in a linear way. Instead, Döblin's protagonists stumble from one situation into the other. Based on episodes, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* resembles the episodic structure of the antique epic. Brecht, whose epic theatre is likewise based on episodes, referred enthusiastically to Döblin's dictum that "if the novel cannot be cut like the earthworm into ten pieces which all move by themselves, then it is of no value." ("Bemerkungen zum Roman" 126).

While Döblin's longing for epic breath transcends the focus on a single individual, it cannot pass unmentioned that *Berlin Alexanderplatz* has a main protagonist. A characteristic anecdote concerning the publishing process of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* captures the tension between individual and collective in Döblin's modern epic. Döblin wanted the title of his epic to be simply *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Yet, due to reasoning of his publisher, who might have feared that a book named after a city square might not sell, the protagonist of the book had to be mentioned and, thus, the subtitle: *The Story of Franz Biberkopf* was added. The anecdote briefly highlights the tension between a social perspective—favoured by the author—and an individual perspective championed by a more conservative publisher. Döblin's emphasis on the social indicates that in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* individual singularity as such is at stake. The novel reveals next to nothing of the protagonist's biography. For, it is the very lack of individual traits that makes Franz Biberkopf the perfect 'hero' for a modern epic. Rather than distinguishing the protagonist from his environment, it makes him comparable to all the others who populate the same place. As the narrator emphasizes, Franz Biberkopf is a modernist version of the 'everyman'. Summarizing the plot at the beginning of the book, the narrator points to the common features which Biberkopf shares with the reader: "To listen and to see this will be of benefit to many who, like Franz Biberkopf, live in a human skin, and, like this Franz Biberkopf, ask more of life than a piece of bread and butter" (2, translation slightly modified –CS). This primitive commonality is clearly designed to achieve a modernist kind of universality. Further, the absence of individual traits moves the focus away from the reasons and motivations of human conduct and draws attention to the sheer facticity of human behaviour. In other words, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* achieves epic breath inasmuch as it offers an encyclopaedia of ordinary behaviour.

Given that the ancient epic is often qualified as an encyclopaedic genre, which, according to Hegel, represents the whole breadth of a culture, Döblin's attempt to break through the narrow confines of novelistic prose and acquire epic extensiveness may justly be called epic. However, while the subject of the antique epic was to be found in the culturally valorised myths, Döblin's modern epic finds its subject in the ordinary. In *Berlin Alexanderplatz* the ordinary gains momentum, since it is the least common denominator in a fragmented social order, which has lost a unified centre of culture. Henri Lefebvre adumbrates the historical situation as follows: "The everyday, established and consolidated, remains a sole surviving common sense referent and point

of reference” (9). Lefebvre points in this sentence to the sheer facticity of the ordinary which as foundation of human life is disengaged from conscious agency. While moral, political, and religious reference systems crumble, the merely practical orientation inherent in the quotidian remains stable. This explains the typical modernist characteristic of Döblin’s encyclopaedia: the absence of definitional attempts. Döblin represents his collected material in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, but he does not classify his findings.

### From the Visual to the Auditory

While Döblin’s use of the term epic may be justified along the lines suggested above, his endeavour certainly does not simply return to an outdated genre. In a typically modernist fashion, tradition itself has become the side of deconstruction for Döblin. Similar to Joyce’s treatment of the occidental tradition, he transforms Greek myths and religious narratives into profane events.<sup>5</sup> Reversing the Homeric epics, Döblin, as I have shown, turns away from representation of human excellence and focuses on ordinary behavior. Another characteristic of Döblin’s modernist appropriation of the antique genre concerns his shift from the visual paradigm inherent in the Greek epic to a focus on the auditory.

Discussing the Homeric style, Erich Auerbach describes the world presented in the antique epic as “clearly outlined, brightly and uniformly illuminated, men and things stand out in a realm where everything is visible” (3). According to Auerbach’s visual paradigm, the epic conceals nothing. Being entirely unambiguous in its message, it speaks for itself and forecloses every need for interpretation. Auerbach expresses what has become a commonplace in the discussion of the antique epic: ‘epic objectivity’. In *On Epic and Dramatic Poetry*, one of the earliest texts of German narratology, Friedrich Schiller and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe draw attention to what ‘epic objectivity’ implies for the standing of the epic narrator:

As a higher being, the rhapsodist should not appear himself in the poem. It would be best for him to recite behind a curtain so that his audience will not associate any particular individuality with what they hear and will imagine that they are only listening to the muses themselves (194, translation slightly altered—CS).

The epic singer, in other words, simply functions as a mouthpiece of the muses, who guarantee a higher kind of objectivity. Goethe and Schiller insist that subjectivity is to

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<sup>5</sup> For a comparison of Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz* see: Andrew M. McLean, "Joyce's 'Ulysses' and Döblin's 'Alexanderplatz Berlin'," *Comparative Literature* 25.2 (1973):(97-113).

be banned from the epic poem and exiled behind a curtain. In his essay *The Construction of the Epic Work* written shortly after *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Döblin alludes to this classic text and suggests to draw the curtain (“Der Baus des epischen Werks” 225). Contradicting his former claims that the epic should stick to the ‘report form’, Döblin now demands that the epic author should descend into the world of his characters. And so he does in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. As one amidst many voices, the narrator loses his aesthetic distance from the depicted world, which guaranteed his Olympic perspective. In contrast to Auerbach’s, Goethe’s and Schiller’s claim that the epic possesses no blind-spot and transcends any subjective perspective, Döblin’s modernist epic presents a cacophony which contradicts the referential illusion of the ancient poet. Franco Moretti has referred to this characteristic of the ‘modern epic’ as its ‘world effect’ that is caused by “devices that give the reader the impression of being truly in the presence of the world; that make the *text* look like the world—open, heterogeneous, incomplete” (59).

Döblin’s modern epic collects the voices of the city: weather-reports, popular songs, songs of the salvation army, political propaganda, news headlines, poems, the chatter of Berlin’s pubs and advertisement slogans. Working with scissors and glue, Döblin pastes whole newspaper articles into the manuscript. Even though the diverse urban material is not typographically highlighted in the published book, the montage technique was immediately recognized as the decisive poetic device of Döblin’s modern epic.

Döblin’s refusal to gauge the narrative into a coherent style is based on general reconsiderations of the authorial position. In several articles Döblin demands to break the hegemony of the author. Meditating on the process of writing itself, he contests: “one assumes to write but one is being spoken”(“Der Baus des epischen Werks” 244), that is like an actor on stage, the author only pins down what has been prompted to him. This dominance of spoken language over the once so celebrated artistic genius, is crucial for Döblin:

Only the layman believes that there is only one German language in which one can think without constrains...Concerning the form giving potential of language, I actually... have to call it a force of production in formal as well as content matters... As winner remains – not the good author – but always language itself (“Der Baus des epischen Werks” 244).

As a consequence, in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, language does not function within a visual paradigm. Being a productive force of its own, the medium itself becomes palpable and destroys any illusions of its allegedly mirroring function.

### A Sense of Presence

The Homeric epics belong to an oral tradition. Their formulaic nature helped to hand them down to the next generation by mere memorization. In this sense, the antique epic helped to establish a commonly shared tradition (Ong “Orality and Literacy” 31-76). Obviously, this is not the case with the modern epic, which reacts to a situation where values are precisely at a loss. Nevertheless, Döblin is eager to re-establish the link between epic narrator and audience. According to Döblin, orality is the key:

The disaster of book printing harms the contemporary author. (...) how should we speak, who is regulating our voice – suddenly we are without a voice, one takes the voice away in exchange of sad printing fonts. (...) And what should the contemporary author write, for whom does he write in the first place? ("Der Baus des epischen Werks" 229).

To be sure, Döblin knows that the shared language between the epic rhapsodist and his audience is irrevocably lost. Therefore, he searches for a substitute and finds it—as *Berlin Alexanderplatz* demonstrates—in the vernacular. Contrasting the bookish style of Rainer Maria Rilke and Stefan George to popular songs and ads, Döblin affirms the latter as the form of speaking for today and, consequently, calls for a “lowering of the general level of literature” (“Vom alten und neuen Naturalismus“ 270). In this perspective, the montage technique, which brings the urban cacophony to the fore, overcomes the disadvantages of the Gutenberg galaxy. It aims to re-establish the sphere of contact between rhapsodist and audience. However, in terms of temporality the ancient and the modern epic fundamentally differ. Whereas the ancient rhapsodist evokes the mythical past, which according to Bakhtin is valuable as such (15), the modern reader needs to evaluate the different contemporary voices. The function of the Oral, the only means for antique epic singers to hand down tradition before writing was invented, transforms in the modern epic in which the auditory attests to the heightened sense of presence—a defining feature of modernism. In my conclusion, I want to draw attention to this change of temporality that is linked to the dominance of the auditory in the modern epic and which links Döblin to other modernist authors.

Döblin’s cacophony of urban voices conveys a strong sense of simultaneity. Reading *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is, in fact, a disturbing experience. It is as if the various

articles of a newspaper's front page would start speaking. This sense of simultaneity points to the newspaper as medium, since the electronic revolution, as Marshall McLuhan claims, has altered the characteristic of what technically is a print medium:

It is the instantaneous character of the information field today, inseparable from electronic media, that confers the formal auditory character of the new culture. That is to say, for example, that the newspaper page, since the introduction of the telegraph has had a formally auditory character and only incidentally a linear, literary form (291).

In these lines, McLuhan differentiates between the linearity of the book and the simultaneity of the newspaper. The book, he argues, confronts the reader with only one object at a time—offering a unidimensional trajectory. In contrast, the telegraph furnishes the reader with a mass of unconnected information, which share only their temporal coordinate. As a consequence, his argument continues, it creates an auditory space in which the listener is surrounded by sound and information. Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* exemplifies this situation: Franz Biberkopf longs for the linear rhythm of the prison (7) but is subjected to the cacophonous voices and sounds of the city.

Simultaneity of different time strata is—as Erich Auerbach claims—a shared feature of many novels between the wars. In his seminal study of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Auerbach points to the manipulation of the spatio-temporal axis as the distinctive feature of Woolf's modernist style. Internal and external time dissociate in Woolf's description of Ms. Ramsay's measurement of the brown stockings. The external events, narrated briefly, are interrupted by interludes, which take significantly more time to read than the external occurrences. Auerbach concludes: "The important point is that an insignificant exterior occurrence releases ideas and chain of ideas which cut loose from the present of the exterior occurrence and range freely through the depths of time" (540). Auerbach's analysis of Woolf's associative writing style sheds some light on the temporal aspect of Döblin's montage technique. In the same way as the external plot pauses in Woolf, the *Story of Franz Biberkopf*, which is mainly externally focused, is interrupted by distant and ancient voices. Only after listening to these voices may the reader return to the interrupted Biberkopf plot. Hence, with regard to the *Story of Franz Biberkopf*, these voices sound simultaneously. In contrast to Woolf's inner voices though, Döblin gives way to collective data from distant times and spaces. The various texts, which interrupt the Biberkopf plot, are fundamentally public, that is they are directly taken from mass media. As a consequence, narrative coherence breaks down and the resonating voices achieve autonomous status. Collecting the voices of the

city, Döblin's modern epic points to the information explosion of the metropolis. The thematic focus on urban traffic in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*—epitomized by the name of a significant traffic junction in its very title—foregrounds the heightened sense of presence even further. Urban traffic demands the same attention to the present moment as the new mass media. Similar to the signals in the bustling urban traffic, the city dweller has to pay heed to the plethora of data that need to be deciphered. In a crucial scene at the end of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, an enlightened Franz Biberkopf has learned that words migrating through the city are as dangerous as speeding cars in the urban traffic.<sup>6</sup> Both have to be cautiously observed. While Homer listens to the voices of the oral tradition, which convey tales of the heroic past, Döblin takes the streetcar and records the sounds and chatter the present moment delivered to him. The dominance of the vernacular in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* indicates that the epic itself has become ordinary in modernity.

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<sup>6</sup> See: Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz : The Story of Franz Biberkopf.*, 377.

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