Babylon Berlin’s bifocal gaze

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There is a curious sequence towards the end of the first episode of Babylon Berlin (Sky1, Das Erste, 2017– ), when Detective Gereon Rath (Volker Bruch) exits his office at the Police Headquarters, Rote Burg, Alexanderplatz.1 On the street, the low chatter of pedestrians and thrum of traffic reflect Berlin’s vibrant nightlife. Employing film noir’s iconography, street lamps partially illuminate the scene, leaving the pockets between them in deep shadow.2 Gereon’s appearance – as he dons a fedora and matching camel trench coat – recalls Philip Marlowe and Sam Spade, the classic noir detectives played by Humphrey Bogart, although Gereon’s demeanour is decidedly less hardboiled. Suddenly something just left of the frame attracts his attention. Slowly the camera pans left in an eyeline match, to reveal nothing more than an innocuous tourism poster pasted to a Morris column, reading ‘Jeder einmal in Berlin’ – ‘Everyone should visit Berlin at least once’. The camera pans back to Gereon, who for some reason pauses to read the slogan aloud, to no-one but himself. He smiles and continues towards his hotel lodgings. Focusing intently on a tourism poster for a city in which the series is already clearly set is certainly intriguing, and not just because Gereon’s reaction delivers the incongruous image of a cheerful noir detective. The oddest aspect of this sequence is that it serves no clear narrative purpose. The cinematographic and editing strategies, coupled with Gereon’s vocalization of its slogan to no-one within the diegesis, indicates that the viewer should pay acute attention to this detail. Such a poster should, ordinarily, constitute an important piece of narrative information;3 yet it is not the missing piece in any unsolved mystery plot, nor does it divulge any hitherto unknown aspects of Gereon’s traits or motivations. What, then, is its function?

1 Excerpted speech from Babylon Berlin has been translated into English. All translations in this essay are mine, unless otherwise specified.
2 Patrick Keating, ‘Film noir and the culture of electric light’, Film History, vol. 27, no. 1 (2015), pp. 58–84.
3 Monika Bednarek, Language and Television Series: A Linguistic Approach to TV Dialogue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018), pp. 35–53.
Babylon Berlin is Germany’s most globally successful – and most expensive – television series to date.\(^4\) Much of its international acclaim has been attributed to the lavish and detailed construction of its Weimar Berlin setting,\(^5\) so perhaps the most obvious function of the poster is to provide period authenticity. As Claire Colomb details in her book on Berlin’s city marketing strategies, ‘Jeder einmal in Berlin’ was the city’s first strategic, large-scale, publicly-funded city marketing campaign [... it] made use of the latest communication technologies at the time – radio, gramophone, print and film media – to promote the city to potential visitors and tourists.\(^6\)

Thus the poster could simply be a historically anchored prop. After all, given the campaign’s scale it is quite likely that such posters would have been seen in public spaces throughout Berlin in 1929, the year in which Babylon Berlin’s first season is set. However, given the conscious way that this campaign is employed, both visually and vocally, it undoubtedly exceeds this sort of setting-specificity. The ‘Jeder einmal in Berlin’ campaign poster is a clue, but not one that will unravel the season’s mystery plots. Instead it reflexively hints at Babylon Berlin’s deployment of what John Urry and Jonas Larsen term the ‘tourist gaze’: an organizing principle that structures encounters between tourists and sites of tourism, predicated on the centrality of the visual in the development of western tourism since the end of the 18th century. Urry and Larsen identify a variety of discursively authored gazes related to different styles of tourism, each underpinned by the notion that tourism is associated with consuming goods and services which are in some sense unnecessary. They are consumed because they supposedly generate pleasurable experiences which are different from those typically encountered in everyday life [...] When we ‘go away’ we look at the environment with interest and curiosity [...] we gaze at what we encounter.\(^7\)

Babylon Berlin elicits a variety of tourist gazes: the adult pleasures of Weimar Berlin nightlife call upon the ‘ludic’ tourism of the ‘pleasure and play’ gaze, the frequent allusions to Weimar cinema evoke the so-called movie-induced tourism of the ‘mediatized gaze’, while the period setting and storyline overtly invoke the ‘heritage and memory’ gaze.\(^8\) These various gazes, however, do not emerge as discrete or static instances of visual pleasure authored by specific discourses, but are organized in service of what I identify as the series’ overarching aesthetic and thematic strategy – the bifocal gaze. This scopic regime incorporates, and often spectacularly showcases, the legacies of two distinct pasts within one period setting, and in this essay I analyse Babylon Berlin’s bifocal gaze as it is established through the series’ first season.

Through its embrace of the mythic conception of the ‘Roaring Twenties’ as a unique period of cultural and technological progression, Babylon Berlin enables Bohemianism, new conceptions of gender and

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\(^4\) Sheena Scott, “Babylon Berlin”: the brilliant and captivating German series celebrated at the European Film Awards 2019’, Forbes, 11 December 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sheenascott/2019/12/11/babylon-berlin-the-brilliant-and-captivating-german-series-celebrated-at-the-european-film-awards-2019/> accessed 10 March 2023.

\(^5\) Claire Colomb, Staging the New Berlin: Place Marketing and the Politics of Urban Reinvention Post-1989 (Abingdon: Routledge 2012), p. 43.

\(^6\) John Urry and Jonas Larsen, The Tourist Gaze 3.0 (Los Angeles: Sage, 2011), p. 1.

\(^7\) Ibid., pp. 18–20.
sexuality, jazz, cabaret, theatre and the burgeoning film industry to feature as a set of images to be projected as spectacle, presumably in contrast to the audience’s quotidian experience. Indeed the television audience is encouraged to imaginatively visit Weimar Berlin as a culture of excess via the glittering Moka Efti club and its decadent and elaborate cabaret performances: the extraordinary, titillating and curious sights of lithe female bodies writhing in beaded flapper dresses, ramshackle groups of young men athletically dancing to ragtime tunes in smoke-stained bars, incidental appearances of famous artists and intellectuals cavorting in cafes and clubs, and indulgent portrayals of uninhibited sex and recreational drug-use. And yet, as Babylon Berlin’s Weimar era is haunted both by its traumatic past and the genocide looming in its near future, the series frequently punctures this nostalgic period reconstruction with a different set of images that complicate the pleasures of such celebratory touristic gazing. Through the bifocal gaze, Babylon Berlin partakes, often simultaneously, in the two seemingly divergent iterations of Berlin’s heritage – the celebrated legacy of the Weimar era and the dark history of Nazism. The image repertoire generated by this bifocal gaze ultimately dramatizes Siegfried Kracauer’s famous thesis in From Caligari to Hitler, not only portraying the rise of fascism but facilitating its promotion.

Across the first season the name ‘Hitler’ is uttered just once, and yet the Holocaust haunts Babylon Berlin’s narrative from the outset. With a sensibility akin to the ominous hindsight that lingers over the Weimar Berlin-set film Cabaret (Bob Fosse, 1972), the series draws pathos from the fact that while its vast array of characters cannot know the full horror of their near future, its audience presumably cannot forget it. As the series progresses, the larger mystery plots reveal increasingly widespread right-wing conspiracies, which establish that the march towards authoritarianism and genocide are historically inevitable. Germany’s history of violence and oppression have long been staple settings for both domestic and international period dramas. As Eric Rentschler writes, since the 1990s German cinema saw a ‘profusion of popular “retro films”’ such as Das Leben der Anderen/The Lives of Others (Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006), Max Färberböck’s Aimée & Jaguar (1999) and Anonyma – Eine Frau in Berlin/A Woman in Berlin (2008), Der Untergang/Downfall (Oliver Hirschbiegel, 2004) and Sophie Scholl – Die letzten Tage/Sophie Scholl – The Last Days (Marc Rothemund, 2005), which ‘[transformed] the key German traumas of the 20th century into the equivalent of historical theme parks’. These films and television series, whose narratives are situated within the nation’s traumatic history, have typically been understood as part of Germany’s internationally successful tradition of ‘dark heritage’.

In his examination of German-Jewish heritage narratives and the Holocaust, Lutz Koepnick writes that in the 1990s, through a broad series of sweeping melodramas, historical epics, and political thrillers, German filmmakers suddenly returned to the Nazi period not
only in order to pay respect to those who had given their lives to German history, but also to explore this past as a commercially viable showcase of spectatorial attractions — as a heritage value bestowing German cinema with a sense of high quality craft, with international visibility, profitable marketing tie-ins, and consumable star images.\(^\text{12}\)

As the significant international acclaim of films such as *Downfall* demonstrates, German ‘dark heritage’ productions travel well,\(^\text{13}\) reflected in Rentschler’s provocation that it has ‘become a truism that only German films about Nazis and [following the success of *The Lives of Others*] members of the Stasi ever get nominated for Academy Awards’.\(^\text{14}\) The wave of German high-end quality television dramas that employ the nation’s sinister past as their setting — including *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter/Generation War* (ZDF, 2013), *Deutschland 83* (RTL, 2015) and *Weissensee* (ARD, 2010–18), as well as *Babylon Berlin* — indicates that interest in these dark heritage productions has certainly not waned.\(^\text{15}\)

Babylon figures prominently in these recent television period dramas, as Susanne Eichner and Lothar Mikos explain, for two interrelated reasons: the city’s unique role within Germany’s tumultuous history, and its status as a historically important site of film and television production.\(^\text{16}\)

Eichner writes that these Berlin-set series employ and participate in ‘a filmic and televusual cityscape in which the entire history of the 20th century is part of the contemporary mediated imaginary city. The different historical sediments have condensed into brand images of Berlin.’\(^\text{17}\) *Babylon Berlin* undoubtedly employs and reiterates the conceptualization of Weimar Berlin as a mediated imaginary city, as seen through prominent depictions in Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (WDR, Bavaria Film, RAI, 1980) and Fosse’s *Cabaret*, as well as the era’s own rich cinematic legacy. Yet I contend that not only does *Babylon Berlin* condense Weimar history into a ‘vibrant 1920s’ brand value (although its vision of the era is certainly that) it also frequently infiltrates and doubles its mediatized gaze of Weimar (in Urry and Larsen’s terms) with the more readily recognizable brand image associated with dark heritage productions.

*Babylon Berlin*’s narrative reflects and informs the doubled image of its bifocal gaze. Loosely based on Volker Kutscher’s ‘Gereon Rath’ historical crime novels, the plot focuses on the eponymous detective who, at the request of his senior police official father, is transferred from Cologne to Berlin with the clandestine mission of dismantling an underworld pornography ring that is allegedly blackmailing the Lord Mayor of Cologne, Dr Konrad Adenauer, in the run-up to an election. Once in Berlin, Gereon quickly becomes embroiled in an international conspiracy that involves a coveted Russian freight train apparently transporting both poison gas and Imperial gold stolen by the Bolsheviks, a Trotskyite coup to overthrow Stalin, clashes between the Communist Party and the Berlin police, and the rise of the Black Reichswehr, an
illegal paramilitary organization financed by rich industrialists that is plotting to dismantle the republic and reinstate the exiled Kaiser. He also spends time in a cabaret club/underground brothel run by an Armenian gangster, who is involved with a mysterious experimental psychoanalyst. The latter is practising the mass hypnotism of shell-shocked veterans through radio broadcasts, has strong connections to the criminal underworld, and is also treating Gereon himself for trauma. Gereon is a World War II veteran who suppresses bouts of uncontrollable trembling with the frequent but secret use of morphine. By the time the credits roll on the season two finale, characters who had protested police corruption and the inequities of the German Reich’s socio-political system under communist red flags have (seemingly) aligned with fascist brownshirt mobs, the naive and vulnerable have been manipulated into committing ethnically motivated murder, and authority has been abused at every level. With an escalating and portentous atmosphere, the ascent of Nazism comes terrifyingly into focus.

As this cursory plot outline indicates, *Babylon Berlin* employs the common conception of the Weimar era as ‘a dance on a volcano’ ahead of Nazism. Comprehending the Weimar era in this way is inherently bifocal, as viewers are asked to keep one eye on the horizon as the atrocities committed under Nazism draw ever nearer, while also being encouraged to luxuriate in the excesses firmly rooted in the ‘present’ period of Weimar Berlin. It is precisely this conception of the Weimar Republic as a ‘precarious glory’ that Peter Gay identifies as the era’s legend:

>[The Weimar Republic’s] tormented brief life with its memorable artifacts, and its tragic death – part murder, part wasting sickness, part suicide – have left their imprint on men’s minds, often vague perhaps, but always splendid. When we think of Weimar, we think of modernity in art, literature, and thought; we think of the rebellion of sons against fathers, Dadaists against art, Berliners against beefy philistinism, libertines against old-fashioned moralists; we think of *The Threepenny Opera*, *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, *The Magic Mountain*, the Bauhaus, Marlene Dietrich. And we think, above all, of the exiles who exported Weimar Culture all over the world.  

This passage reads as a checklist for *Babylon Berlin*’s era construction, as almost without exception each of these features appears as a period marker. At times this list is directly woven into the series’ narrative, with the revelation of a right-wing plot to assassinate German foreign minister Gustav Stresemann during a performance of Bertolt Brecht’s *The Threepenny Opera*, or when Gereon’s investigations lead him to the Geyer Werke film studios, where he barges in on Carl Meyer and Josef von Sternberg reviewing Marlene Dietrich’s screen test for her breakthrough film, *Der blaue Engel/The Blue Angel* (1930).
Gereon’s status as a new arrival to the city facilitates the showcasing of these iconographic Weimar Berlin markers. He is a stranger, in Georg Simmel’s conception:

the man who comes today and stays tomorrow […] fixed within a certain spatial circle […] but his position within it is fundamentally affected by the fact that he does not belong in it initially and that he brings qualities into it that are not, and cannot be, indigenous to it.\textsuperscript{19}

Throughout the series Gereon’s colleagues often refer to him as ‘der Kölnner’, the man from Cologne. That Gereon hails from a wealthy family in this decidedly Catholic city is a cause for derision, as his religiosity and formal demeanour, often taken for conservatism or prudishness, sit in stark contrast to the casual and atheistic hedonism of Berlin. The repeated use of this moniker and the references to Cologne do not simply assert that Gereon is foreign but imply that newcomers to the capital are viewed as provincial until they learn the lie of the land, in every sense of that phrase. That Gereon does not ‘belong’ in the city accounts for his acute attention to minutiae as he strives to understand and master its inner workings. Furthermore he is a detective, and in his line of work paying acute attention to one’s surroundings is essential.\textsuperscript{20} As Charlotte Brunsdon observes:

The detective is recognised as a privileged investigator of the city […] The man who walks alone (and it usually is a man), observing, noticing, and following up clues has proved an attractive guide to dark places of the city for readers and viewers over many years.\textsuperscript{21}

Gereon’s dual role as both detective and stranger enables him to function as a doubled proxy for the audience, both in the attempt to solve the puzzles presented and as fellow tourists ‘along for the ride’, as he navigates the Babylonian metropolis. In the sequence at the Geyer Werke studios, his doubled status as detective and stranger is exploited as a mechanism to facilitate exposition, and thereby affirmation, of the city’s cultural richness through its initial projection via a reverential mediatized gaze. Storming into the screening room, blustering with case-related questions, Gereon is pulled up short, captivated by a close-up of a young Dietrich. The rest of the sequence expands to allow for audience recognition, as Gereon enquires ‘Who is the lady?’; ‘Dietrich’, comes the response. ‘Dietrich’, repeats Gereon, his unblinking gaze absorbing her image as she issues a quickfire take-down of an off-screen male player. ‘Marlene Dietrich, you cretin!’, replies the fictional von Sternberg, ensuring there can be no doubt that Gereon, and the audience, have married the name to the face. Of course the exchange functions, as Sara F. Hall notes, to ‘explain to today’s audiences the significance of who and what they see in the room’.\textsuperscript{22} Yet the sequence does more than this. It encourages the audience, like Gereon, to revere this chance encounter as a particular affordance of the experience of Weimar Berlin. Unlike television audience members who are familiar with the history of

\textsuperscript{19} Georg Simmel, \textit{On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings} (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 143.

\textsuperscript{20} Charlotte Brunsdon, \textit{Television Cities: Paris, London, Baltimore} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 26.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p. 12.

\textsuperscript{22} Sara F. Hall, ‘Babylon Berlin: pastiching Weimar cinema’, \textit{Communications}, vol. 44, no. 3 (2019), pp. 312–13.
Dietrich and von Sternberg, Gereon cannot know he is bearing witness to a star at the exact moment of her ascent, yet he is apparently overcome by her inherent star quality. Inserting Dietrich into the series diegesis via film projection concretizes her image as a star through a moment of television spectacle. The black-and-white close-up on Dietrich’s face stands out from the banality of the men’s minimalist exchange. It is a television spectacle that requests the spectator to stop and stare at the image – to gaze, like Gereon – and in so doing to register the act of looking. 23 What is displayed is a conjured nostalgia: a star of a bygone era made present once more in immortal youth, pace Roland Barthes and André Bazin. Dietrich, a celebrated image of what was ‘there’ in Weimar Berlin, is projected as ‘being-there’ once more, almost a century later, eliciting perhaps a sense of ‘future’ nostalgia. 24

The nostalgic spectacle of Dietrich can thus be viewed as an example of the series’ use of the Weimar legend as Berlin’s idealized cultural identity: a city from which stars of all sorts arise. A similar instance occurs in season three, episode five, albeit to different effect, when as a ruse, Samuel Katelbach (a journalist reminiscent of Kurt Tucholsky) narrates a fictitious scene to Gereon at the Romanisches Cafe, a famous meeting place for the Berlin intelligentsia during the Weimar era. Katelbach claims that Thomas Mann, Mann’s wife and his brother Heinrich, Marlene Dietrich and Albert Einstein have entered the cafe, but as social mores dictate it would be too wide-eyed and impolite to turn and stare. Although Katelbach’s claims are played in part for comedic effect, this scene, like the one in the screening room, is premised on the notion that at this time in Berlin such encounters could have occurred. As Gay ecstatically explains, Weimar Berlin was ‘irresistible’ to creative workers:

To go to Berlin was the aspiration of the composer, the journalist, the actor; with its superb orchestras, its hundred and twenty newspapers, its forty theatres, Berlin was the place for the ambitious, the energetic, the talented. Wherever they started, it was in Berlin that they became, and Berlin that made them, famous. 25

And yet the appearance, or suggestion, of Dietrich, Mann and Einstein as denizens of Berlin also serves as an acute reminder of their imminent absence and departure from the city, and from the German state. Each would go on to become a vocal opponent of Nazism from outside Germany; indeed, they are the Weimar exiles to which Gay alludes. Their international prominence overtly recalls the dominant narrative of Weimar as an era that is defined by the global export of cultural and intellectual figures. Prominently highlighting these future Weimar exiles, however, also raises the spectre of those artists who stayed and sold their souls, like Mann’s Doctor Faustus, to the devil.

Babylon Berlin’s tourism of a bygone era through the promotion of Weimar Berlin as a vibrant intellectual and artistic site replete with famous figures from history can be neither innocent nor self-deluding.

23 Helen Wheatley, Spectacular Television: Exploring Televisual Pleasure (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 26.
24 Roland Barthes, ‘Rhetoric of the image’ (1964), in Image-Music-Text, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 44–45; André Bazin, ‘The ontology of the photographic image’ (1945), in What is Cinema? Volume I, trans. Hugh Gray (Los Angeles, CA: California University Press, 1967), pp. 9–10.
25 Gay, Weimar Culture, p. 143.
Dietrich’s take-down is directed at not just any off-screen male player but most likely at her Der blaue Engel co-star Emil Jannings. Although Jannings was Germany’s most renowned and celebrated stage and film actor, unlike Dietrich he cannot be viewed as a Weimar cultural exporter in Gay’s formulation, as despite his significant Hollywood presence (in 1929 he became the first actor to receive an Academy Award), Jannings was not a Weimar exile. Rather he would be named an ‘Artist of the State’ by Joseph Goebbels for his importance to Nazi propaganda cinema.

Just as the choreography of tourist consumption selects and records sights in accordance with specific narratives (like the photograph of a pristine beach that omits to show the construction site on the esplanade), Jannings is cropped from the frame. Recognizing his omission transforms the sequence from one of nostalgic, star-struck reverence to a compromised bifocal vision. Under the bifocal gaze, what appears to be a touristic perception of Weimar Berlin reveals itself as a reflexive engagement with Weimar mythology as a historical imaginary: a poetic comprehension that partakes of its deep metaphorical and constructed nature, and the troubled and complex legacy of its era that is nonetheless projected as spectacle.

In casting Weimar culture as spectacle, Babylon Berlin literalizes Stefan Zweig’s description of 1920s Berlin in his memoir, The World of Yesterday:

Berlin was transformed into the Babylon of the world. Bars, amusement parks, honky-tongs sprang up like mushrooms [...] the Germans introduced all their vehemence and methodical organization into the perversion. Along the entire Kurfürstendamm powdered and rouged young men sauntered and they were not all professionals; every high school boy wanted to earn some money and in the dimly lit bars one might see government officials and men of the world of finance tenderly courting drunken sailors without any shame. Even the Rome of Suetonius had never known such orgies as the pervert balls of Berlin, where hundreds of men costumed as women and hundreds of women as men danced under the benevolent eyes of the police. In the collapse of all values a kind of madness gained hold particularly in the bourgeois circles which until then had been unshakeable in their probity.

Babylon Berlin renders the decadence lamented by Zweig as a collection of audiovisual spectacles, with extended song-and-dance sequences in both cabaret clubs and underground bars, glamorous images of high-end prostitution, as well as non-monetized libidinous freedoms and eroticized nudity. In concert with the tourist gaze’s distinguishing criteria – experiences distinct from those of ‘home’ – such exotic visions sit in contrast to both the mundanity of daily routine and mainstream notions of social regulation and propriety. These sights are consonant with and inform the dreamwork of Berlin as both a hedonistic playground and site of artistic experimentation – a ‘place that gives you the liberty to be who

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26 This decision was made after the Academy rejected the initial vote, which came out in favour of Janning’s canine co-star, Rin Tin Tin. The Academy stated that only humans should be eligible for the award. See Susan Orlean, Rin Tin Tin: The Life and the Legend (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2011).

27 David Welch, Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933–1945 (London: IB Tauris, 2001), pp. 84, 117.

28 Urry and Larsen, The Tourist Gaze 3.0, pp. 201–04.

29 Stefan Zweig, The World of Yesterday: Memories of a European (1943) (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p. 313.

30 Urry and Larsen, The Tourist Gaze 3.0, p. 4.
you want to be, to try out, to reinvent yourself, to make new experiences that might not be possible in other places’, as the city guide platform, iHeartBerlin rapturously puts it.

Gereon’s hopeful vision of Berlin is predicated on such liberating permissiveness. Here he is untethered from the filial and religious obligations of his hometown, and free to live according to his own doctrines or to join the chorus of freewheeling decadent Berliners. Yet the freedoms he seeks are not bound to the scintillating nightlife so seemingly deplored by Zweig, or the creative opportunities lauded by Gay or iHeartBerlin, but those afforded to the stranger through his relative anonymity. Berlin presents him with an opportunity to live openly in a heterosexual relationship with Helga (Hannah Herzsprung), his sister-in-law and secret lover of 10 years. For Gereon and Helga, the motto ‘Jeder einmal in Berlin’ symbolizes romantic reverie. The two utter the phrase as a means of escaping into fantasy whenever the hopelessness of their situation impinges on their futurity. The slogan shakes off reality in favour of a touristic dream in line with official marketing strategies, where the two enjoy ‘two glasses of beer in the Tiergarten, dancing in the evening at the Resi, and breakfast at Krumme Lanke’. The nature of this fantasy marks Gereon and Helga out as outsiders, whose idea of Berlin’s enticements are based on those famed beyond the city limits, such as the luxurious Residenz-Casino ‘Resi’ dancehall, known for its pneumatic tube ordering system, table-fixed telephones, glass dance floor and carousel. Their conception of what constitutes an exciting Berlin life is a counterpoint to the series’ portrayal of Zweig’s Berlin – a city of cabaret, recreational drug use, music, art, cinema and uninhibited sex. It is precisely Gereon’s view as a stranger to whom the city’s licentiousness is strange that throws the city’s dangerous underbelly into sharp relief. Debauched touristic spectacles of the city’s true nightlife culture are paradoxically proffered as open to all and yet are accessible only to the initiated – those who experience Berlin like ‘locals’.

Babylon Berlin’s touristic character is a deliberate choice. In fact the city’s official marketing organization, visitBerlin, features on the series’ list of funding contributors and is included under ‘supporters’ on the Babylon Berlin franchise’s official website. In October 2017 visitBerlin posted an article, ‘New series Babylon Berlin puts the German capital in a starring role’, that outlined the financial contributions made and the expected positive effects the production would have on the city. visitBerlin also hosts a page dedicated to the series, with links to production details, the novels and locations, as well as historical information on 1920s Berlin. Babylon Berlin’s relationship with official tourism bodies is not unusual, particularly in the context of heritage productions. Indeed, in the original heritage debates, Andrew Higson specifically took aim at British heritage cinema – typified by Merchant Ivory productions such as A Room with a View (1985) and Howards End (1992) – for nostalgically projecting a conservative English culture...
masquerading as national identity as spectacle. It was a commodity that he saw being eagerly and easily sold to an international market in concert with the touristic imperatives of the heritage industry.\(^{36}\)

The symbiotic association of film and television with tourism industries is neither new nor particularly surprising, given that the process of selecting potential sites for tourism is a product of anticipation largely generated by media-informed fantasy and daydreaming, as Urry and Larsen (among others) explain.\(^{37}\) Similarly to visitBerlin’s Babylon Berlin page, visitBelfast includes a comprehensive page dedicated to Game of Thrones (HBO, 2011–19), while visitScotland provides a 12-day itinerary for an Outlander (Starz, 2014– ) tour of the country.\(^{38}\)

However, unlike Game of Thrones or Outlander, Babylon Berlin’s tourist gaze is tied less to a commodified topography than a projection of its vibrant cultural life, particularly in terms of its alternative and underground cultural scenes. As visitBerlin puts it, Babylon Berlin provides a ‘picture of the twenties with the nefarious nightlife of the time, intoxicating celebrations, and hedonistic pleasure. [The] series portrays an unfiltered image of the city of Berlin.’\(^{39}\) The site also includes links to burlesque and cabaret clubs, and ‘secret’ jazz and cocktail bars, which it presents as contemporary iterations of Weimar-era pleasures.\(^{40}\)

Despite appearing on Berlin’s official tourism site, the enticing vision projected is framed as a deviation from an officially sanctioned tourist city. Its wonders are not available via the ‘spectatorial gaze’ of guided tours, in which sights and signs are collected along mapped-out routes associated with the official cultural sector, or from tourist bus windows.\(^{41}\) Berlin’s distinctive cultural offerings involve a form of embodied gaze, a physical experience of salaciousness and intoxication afforded by the city’s unique permissiveness. Unable to provide such corporeal experiences itself, Babylon Berlin reformulates this embodied gaze as spectacles of excess informed by texts such as Curt Moreck’s 1931 Führer durch das ‘lasterhafte’ Berlin (a guide through a ‘depraved’ Berlin), which ‘paradoxically both glamorized and defamed Berlin as the city of sexual exploits’.\(^{42}\) Moreck’s guide to post-war Berlin presented the city in large part through its nightlife, featuring dives (Eckkniepen), dance-halls and bars, with specific attention paid to gay and lesbian nightspots, and an ambiguous portrayal of female prostitution in both its text and the accompanying images by artists such as George Grosz, Jeanne Mammen, Christian Schad and Paul Kamm. Indeed, across the first two seasons of the television series, the female protagonist, the division clerk by day and flapper-cum-prostitute by night, and it is her participation in Berlin’s cabaret nightlife that often provides the series’ touristic spectacle. The haunts that Lotte frequents are overflowing with dance, music, recreational drug-use and sex of all flavours. Indeed it is
Lotte’s role as a prostitute that facilitates the glamorized depiction of both sex acts and nudity, illustrated in a scene in which she is summoned for sexual services at the club. Lotte guides her customer, and the viewer, through the corridors of the underground brothel past a series of flapper and businessman pairings that become more explicit the deeper they wander into the labyrinth. At the entrance-way couples kiss passionately and flappers gently caress their suited partners, yet just past the threshold a bare-breasted woman in a leather corset grinds against a man pinned with his face to the wall. The camera follows Lotte from behind, mirroring the titillated curiosity of her customer as he glances at these copulating couples, and sneaks a look into a side room where a man is seen performing cunnilingus. Lotte’s sex act is shot from the position of the male customer (figure 1), the low angle aligning the viewer with the man as he looks up at Lotte, who, naked but for a BDSM chain collar and leather body harness, straddles him and, it is implied, guides him to climax.

Throughout the series Lotte serves as a guide to what is commonly projected as the real Berlin in city guides. That is, paradoxically, Lotte provides the promise of experiencing the city as a true local, thereby rebuffing the spectatorial gaze associated with conventionally sanctioned tourist activities, while simultaneously providing intimate access to Weimar Berlin culture – the mythic origins of the contemporary city’s reputation – to be experienced as a televisual spectacle of excess. The use of televisual spectacle as a touristic impulse was introduced in Babylon Berlin’s promotional trailer, which consisted largely of a spectacular cabaret song-and-dance number intercut with images of BDSM prostitution and drug-consumption; violent criminality and police activity were shown only in glimpses, despite the series’ engagement with the detective drama genre. The sequence from which the cabaret footage for the trailer was taken is a crystallization of the manner in which Babylon Berlin fashions Weimar culture as a tourist spectacle. Under closer examination, however, it becomes clear that the sequence
evinces the series’ bifocal gaze, as the televisual spectacle is not, or not only, an approximation of the mythic glamour of Weimar Berlin nightlife but is infiltrated by allusions to the autocratic regime to come.

Nikoros (Severija Janušauskaitė) is a cabaret performer in dandy male drag cast in the mould of Claire Waldoff, or – perhaps more recognizably to an international audience – of Dietrich’s cabaret characters, Amy Jolly from Morocco (Josef von Sternberg, 1930) and Helen Jones from Blonde Venus (von Sternberg, 1932). She takes the stage at the Moka Efti, flanked by backing dancers in Josephine Baker-style banana skirts. Nikoros’s performance, ‘Zu Asche, zu Staub’, is presented as a self-contained music video, a televisual spectacle that halts the series’ police procedural narrative and replaces it with a largely non-narrative form of visual and aural pleasure. The song, played in full, dominates the audio-track, while visuals cut between Nikoros’s stage performance, shadow play on the club’s art deco interiors, reaction shots of her captivated male admirers, and the ecstatic young crowd, as their dancing shifts from joyful frenzied writhing to rehearsed choreography at Nikoros’s command (figure 2).

To borrow a phrase from Christopher Isherwood’s Sally Bowles, this vibrant, energetic, and erotic sequence portrays Weimar Berlin as a site of ‘divine decadence’ — a culture of excess that naturally lends itself to a touristic aesthetic of attractions — yet its epic scale and the decidedly anti-picturesque socio-political history that underpins it continually threaten to burst forth from that framework. After all, the spectacular is not solely the domain of the liberal and licentious excess of the Weimar republic, but rather an aesthetic regime exploited in concert with the ideological framework of Nazism — from glamorous uniforms designed by Hugo Boss, to the aesthetic staging of mass public events, and Leni Riefenstahl’s technological innovations in the cinema. On closer inspection, Nikoros does not don Dietrich’s iconic tuxedo or an ‘Eton boy’ uniform like Waldoff, but rather a leather military trenchcoat and combat boots, which render the performer’s right-handed salute as an insidious rather than a benign gesture within a

Fig. 2. Ecstatic dance as autocracy, with Nikoros (Severija Janušauskaitė) on stage.

\footnote{Wheatley, Spectacular Television, pp. 14–15.}
repertoire of stage theatrics. The lyrics – ‘to ashes to dust / the light robbed / but not yet / miracles wait until the end’ – are haunted by the impending Holocaust, making explicit the tension between the exhilaration of the present revelry and the foreboding or foreshadowing of the future past. The sequence not only encapsulates the decadence and exuberance of Berlin cabaret but is an enactment of Kracauer’s ‘mass ornament’. Like the geometric exactitude of The Tiller Girls’ routines, the ease with which the carousers can be conducted by Nikoros into a uniformity of action illustrates their function not as individuals but as a mass witness to the spectacle. Viewed at a distance, the enticing spectacle of Weimar revelry doubles inevitably and unnervingly in the bifocal gaze as a theatrical performance of autocracy.

Babylon Berlin’s bifocal projection of Weimar merriment and Nazi violence is laid bare in episode six, with the first mention of Adolf Hitler. Tellingly the name is uttered not during a meeting of city officials or senior policemen, but rather as Lotte and her friend Greta (Leonie Benesch) enjoy a day of frivolity among a band of cheerful youths at a Wannsee rowing club (figure 3). The sequence is an incarnation of what Urry and Larsen describe as the ‘family gaze’ – the ‘private’ photographs of holidaymakers that ‘place one’s “loved ones” within an “attraction” in such a way that both are represented aesthetically’ as images of frictionless family or friendly togetherness. Consonant with this image repertoire, the Wannsee sequence unabashedly showcases the most famous location in Berlin’s long-standing bathing culture as a scenic, almost chocolate-box setting for the halcyon days of a gilded youth. The water glitters in the sunlight as nubile, athletic bodies bask in its warmth. Indeed the sequence nostalgically quotes the idyllic scenes of Menschen am Sonntag/People on Sunday (Robert Siodmak and Edgar G. Ulmer, 1930), a film the series twice shows being viewed in a cinema. Any straightforward nostalgia for Siodmak and Ulmer’s lakeside idyll, however, is ruptured by the knowledge that the film’s final line – ‘and then on Monday ... back to work, back to the everyday, back to the grind.'
Four million people wait for the next Sunday’ – has been retrospectively read as tragic irony, as the mundane aspects of daily routine that are now cast in an optimistic glow will soon be obliterated by the horrific events to come. In Babylon Berlin’s curious mixture of foresight and nostalgia, this tragedy is enacted as two men stand thigh-deep in the water. Suddenly, one matter-of-factly quotes Vladimir Lenin: ‘Mass executions are a legitimate tool of the revolution’. His companion’s response, ‘Says who? Hitler?’, further confirms the rupture of the illusion of a pleasant ‘Sunday afternoon’. The scene can be read as a belated performance of Kracauer’s proposition that Weimar cinema not only exuded an ominous sense of Germany’s future through its narratives and iconography, but was part of a cultural climate complicit, knowingly or otherwise, in the establishment of Nazism, for not only is the audience presumably aware that Hitler’s regime would realize Lenin’s statement, but within the series’ narrative these young men are revealed to be among the first to commit mass violence, and to convince others of its necessity. As such, the scene reaches back into the past, apparently resurrecting an innocent moment of joy and hope in Weimar cinema only to irrevocably puncture the illusion with its overt acknowledgement of the coming horror. This sequence can thus be read metonymically against the series’ employment of the bifocal gaze. What began as a touristic spectacle of youthful, carefree enjoyment in a picturesque Berlin setting, immortalized in a Weimar-era film, is abruptly revealed to be already corrupt. In Babylon Berlin, the specificity of German history cannot be entirely obscured via a celebratory or nostalgic touristic image repertoire, and no spectacle can be apolitical when Nazism is inevitably embedded in its very fabric – its vision must be bifocal.

The presence of Nazism, whether referenced overtly in the Wannsee scenes or symbolically enmeshed in the spectacle of cabaret choreography, invokes the phenomenon of ‘dark tourism’, the visiting of sites associated with death, suffering, atrocity, tragedy or crime. In the German context, dark tourism overwhelmingly refers to sites related to the Holocaust, including concentration camps, transit camps and memorials, although interest in sites associated with the German Democratic Republic’s communist regime, particularly in Berlin, has significantly increased since reunification. Derek Dalton suggests that dark tourism practices and German dark heritage productions are intertwined, as Holocaust tourism reflects an ongoing global obsession with Nazism that is fuelled by its frequent depiction in film and television, keeping ‘Nazi crimes at the forefront of our minds’. While neither the impetuses nor the experiences of participating in Holocaust tourism are universal, it undeniably shares with German dark heritage a focus on mass murder, deportation and torture, among other inhumane acts. Sites such as prisons (Sophie Scholl), Holocaust trains (Generation War) and bunkers (Downfall) appear as frequently in German dark heritage productions as they do on Holocaust tourism itineraries. German dark heritage thus suggests a drastic departure from...
Higson’s original concept of heritage cinema, whereby heritage films, against the backdrop of the tumultuous Thatcher years, elicited a nostalgic yearning for a stable ‘Britishness’ (or more precisely Englishness) as a reinstatement of an imagined traditional national identity. And yet it performs a similar social function. As Koepnick explains, German dark heritage ‘by and large pictures political elites (i.e. the Nazis) as the true nemesis of the nation’s (multi-cultural) story’.53 By ‘reviewing the national past’, such films ‘solicit a new kind of German consensus for the emerging Berlin Republic’,54 and thus employ the nation’s traumatic past in an uncontroversial manner as a means of community building and maintaining a shared national identity in the present.

While Babylon Berlin’s Weimar setting predates the Third Reich, and therefore (unlike dark heritage productions) cannot be depicted as synchronous with the sites and acts of its horrendous criminality, the series’ bifocal gaze nevertheless partakes in the imperatives of the dark tourism gaze, which Urry and Larsen characterize as ‘gazing at and collecting places of violent death’ as aberrations to shared understandings of humanity and the everyday operations of western democracy.55 Babylon Berlin embeds the Holocaust and its aftermath within its version of Weimar Berlin. However, in contrast to the diverse sexualities and gender identities showcased in its spectacle of Berlin nightlife, this history is not presented through depictions of the Jewish population and cultural life that Hitler’s regime will seek systematically to annihilate. With the exception of the senior police official, August Benda (Matthias Brandt), Babylon Berlin presents very few noticeably Jewish characters. As Noah Isenberg writes, other than ‘a stray Hasid who traipses into the frame near the Alexanderplatz’, the series provides barely a ‘glimpse of Jewish life’.56 Indeed, the fact that Benda is Jewish is only revealed some time after his introduction, and is presented as a private matter, largely confined to the domestic sphere. Babylon Berlin’s bifocal gaze instead presents its Weimar moment as both a ‘before’ and ‘after’ Nazism, by overlaying allusions to the lauded legacy of Weimar cinema with the stylistic and narratological tropes of film noir – a decidedly American genre popularly conceived as evincing a ‘Germanic touch’ due to the influx of Weimar exile filmmakers in Hollywood.

The most obvious reference to Weimar cinema is Babylon Berlin’s narrative framework, which mimics Robert Wiene’s Das Kabinett des Dr Caligari/The Cabinet of Dr Caligari (1920). Babylon Berlin begins with a prologue: a black screen, a locating title card – ‘Berlin. 1929’ – and a low drumbeat, while the psychoanalyst, Dr Arn Schmidt’s calm voice guides Gereon into hypnosis – ‘I will now take you back. To the source. To the source of your fear. I will guide you. Step by step. Step by step. All the way to the source of your fear. To the truth’ – as a montage of images of trauma and frenzied excess flash in reverse motion. In fact this montage is a flash-forward that functions as a teaser, designed to promote curiosity and interest in the series. In relation to the series’ own narrative,
however, the sequence is a flashback, attributable to Gereon’s memory, that holds the key to understanding his trauma. Across the series it becomes clear through this and other flashbacks that the source of Gereon’s fear is fraternal guilt – not only the fact of his brother’s death in the face of his own survival, but the envy felt towards his brother as their father’s preferred son, and also as Helga’s husband. These involuntary memories and their associated guilt afflict Gereon psychosomatically. As described earlier, like many other veterans in the series Gereon is a *Kriegzitterer* – literally, a ‘war quiverer’ – suffering from shellshock and reliant on vials of morphine to manage his tremors.

A similar montage sequence bookends the series. Following a narrow escape from vengeful communists in episode 16, Dr Schmidt again guides Gereon into a hypnotic state. This time, however, the hypnotism reveals that Gereon’s flashbacks to the battlefield and his brother Anno’s death are false memories. Anno did not die in his arms, or even before his eyes; rather Gereon fled the battlefield, leaving his brother to perish alone. At this revelation, a plot twist takes place. Dr Schmidt removes his glasses and asks if Gereon recognizes him. The older man’s disfigured face fades and Anno’s comes into focus. Recalling the circuitous mystery of identity that shrouds Wiene’s *Dr Caligari* when the Svengali hypnotist is ultimately unveiled as a figment of a patient’s imagination, it is unclear whether Arno is in fact Anno, or if Gereon’s traumatic, hypnotic dreams have been memories, encouraged hallucinations, or implanted false narratives.

In beginning the series with an overt reference to *Caligari* – the film that Thomas Elsaesser describes as ‘the crystallisation point of different historical and imaginary constructions of Weimar cinema’ – *Babylon Berlin* enacts a mediatized tourist gaze. Yet rather than gazing on particular sites famous for their mediated nature, in dialogue with Mikos and Eichner’s notion of ‘hyper-mediatization’, *Babylon Berlin*’s plethora of intertextual references elicits the impression of an embodied interaction with the city apprehended through the rich legacy of Weimar cinema per se. Despite commencing with an extensive *Caligari* quotation, the film that is widely seen as the benchmark of Expressionist cinema, Sara F. Hall points out that *Babylon Berlin*’s intertexts do not reference ‘a single genre but rather [Weimar cinema as a] catalogue of work that has come to be considered a discrete entry in film history’. Echoing the vehement resistance to the conflation of Expressionism and Weimar proffered by scholars such as Christian Rogowski and Elsaesser, Hall draws useful connections between the style of the credit sequence and techniques developed by Ufa in the 1920s, the many detective Stuart Webb-inspired train and automobile chase sequences, and repeated scenes that recall the *Hinterhof*, or courtyard, sub-category of the *Kammerspielfilm* (chamber drama) genre, as well as specific scene and shot quotations that signal the series’ interest in Weimar cinema more broadly. For instance, a scene in which Gereon seeks an audience with the infamous prostitute ‘Mutti von Wedding’ (‘Mummy from Wedding’),

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57 Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany’s Historical Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 62.

58 Eichner and Mikos, ‘Berlin in television drama series’, p. 43.

59 Hall, ‘Babylon Berlin: pastiching Weimar cinema’, p. 304.

60 Germany’s largest and most internationally significant film corporation, which operated from 1917 to the end of the Nazi era. See Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After*, pp. 106–10.

61 Christian Rogowski, *The Many Faces of Weimar Cinema: Rediscovering Germany’s Filmic Legacy* (New York, NY: Camden House, 2010).
and is greeted by a gruff butcher and his dogs, is a direct reference to G. W. Pabst’s *Die freudlose Gasse*/*Joyless Street* (1925), while Dr Schmidt is undoubtedly an overt reference to Lang’s *Dr Mabuse* (1922, 1933). Triangulated telepathic connections that rouse women from slumber brings to mind Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922), and when Gereon places a phone call that will implicate him in illicit activities, the use of a shop-window reflection to symbolically indicate the doubling of victim and perpetrator echoes Peter Lorre’s famous moment of recognition as the murderer in Lang’s *M* (1931). Stylistically *Babylon Berlin*’s frequent use of extreme canted and high angles, deep elongated shadows and chiaroscuro promotes a form of psychologically motivated mise-en-scene, or what Lotte Eisner has described as *Helldunkel*, ‘a sort of twilight of the German soul, expressing itself in shadowy, enigmatic interiors, or in misty, insubstantial landscapes’. This compositional repertoire (re)creates a tone of angst commonly affiliated with Expressionism. Yet *Babylon Berlin*’s bifocality doubles its forbidding Expressionist angst by layering this stylistic repertoire, and by looking to the future and the grim cynicism associated with the iconographic and narratological itinerary of Expressionism’s most frequently cited inheritor, film noir.

This influence is often directly attributed to the extensive involvement of a number of German and Austrian emigres escaping the Nazi regime, such as Lang, Ulmer, Billy Wilder and Otto Preminger. Some commentators, as Andrew Spicer suggests, ‘have gone so far as to see American film noir as a German national cinema in exile, the cinema that “might have been” but for Nazism’. Although these accounts are, as Elsaesser proves, historically inaccurate, they have come to function as an ‘imaginary history’ where film noir is ‘accompanied by, shadowed by, indeed overshadowed by its historical imaginary, which gives it such an aura and energy, such longevity and fascination’. It is precisely this historical imaginary that *Babylon Berlin* mobilizes in its mediatized construction of place, both as a means to revel in the legacy and legend of Weimar cinema (as a vital element of its culture per se) and reflexively, as an embodiment of that historical imaginary’s thematic and stylistic legacy that, in concert with the imperatives of dark tourism, is shaped by Germany’s Nazi past. In doing so, the series’ mediatized gaze ultimately pulls into focus Kracauer’s thesis that Weimar cinema not only exuded an ominous sense of Germany’s future through its narratives and (Expressionist) iconography, but was part of a cultural climate complicit, knowingly or otherwise, in the establishment of Nazism.

Gereon’s status as both a World War I veteran and a noir detective is an embodiment of this idea. Taken from the position of a cinematic cultural imaginary, Gereon is both the traumatized soul reeling from the horrors of the battlefield and the noir detective implicated in the ‘puzzling world of self-conscious mendacity and Nietzschean “justice” that took shape under the pressures of modernity’. This puzzling noir world is referenced through the series’ mystery plots and archetypes. In
line with the ambivalence and culpability of the noir detective, Gereon is far from the noble law enforcer, rather he is a man whose particularly Catholic moral code is tarnished by his professional and personal actions. The revelation in season one that the coveted Sorokin gold, sought by all and sundry, is not in fact being transported by the train introduced in the pilot episode but is built into the train carriage itself, is more than a sly nod at the most famous noir McGuffin, the Maltese Falcon. Indeed, like Sam Spade’s discoveries in Huston’s film, Gereon’s pursuit of truth in the Sorokin gold mystery inevitably spirals inwards, exposing his unwitting connections to, and embeddedness in, a fundamentally corrupt world. Yet through reflexively employing the textures of what Charlotte Brunsdon insightfully terms the ‘television city’, the audience is also implicated in Weimar Berlin’s mendacity. As Brunsdon explains, unlike the cinematic city where the continuous unfolding of metropolitan sights and sounds is often facilitated by the movement of the flâneur, the hallmarks of the television city are repetition, domesticity and familiarity. That is, through Gereon, Babylon Berlin’s television city should over time transition from the touristic – the out of the ordinary – to familiar sites associated with something more like ‘home’.

Indeed Gereon’s inexperience and initial incompatibilities with Berlin enable him to act as a surrogate through whom the city is experienced and thus becomes gradually familiar –through sites that anchor his daily routines (Rote Burg, his lodgings and the Moka Efti), and the repetition of a set of clearly depicted and increasingly familiar Berlin landmarks, most notably the digitally rendered 1920s Alexanderplatz and Berlin’s distinctively tiled U-Bahn subway stations. But repetition is used to problematize this familiarity, and Gereon’s haunts are gradually revealed to be more than they first appear, acting as symbolic, and eventually literal, sites of corruption and culpability. As the spectator is party to Gereon’s journey from a naive tourist to a detective implicated in exposing the city’s corruption, the deceits revealed within the fabric of the mundane and beneath the gloss of ‘extraordinary’ tourist spectacles rupture the stability associated with the audience’s and Gereon’s increasing familiarity with the city, and draw into question the nature of the sites and images initially promoted as pleasurable through a shifting tourist gaze.

Gereon’s role as detective is also employed as a mechanism through which Berlin’s corruption can be put on display within its tourist sights. Embracing a trope common to crime and espionage genres, whereby a city’s grandeur or beauty is ‘corrupted’ by criminal activity, Berlin landmarks that would ordinarily feature as stops on official sightseeing tours are reframed as crime scenes. In season one, for instance, episodes three and four both begin with long sequences tracing nefarious activities on the famous River Spree. Episode three opens in the cold light of morning. The camera, shooting from within the river at water level, focuses on a homeless man sleeping on the bank beneath a bridge. The city is silent, save for the distant toll of a church-bell and the rhythmic lap
of water. Suddenly a naked figure breaks the surface of the river and clambers onto the concrete embankment. After a failed attempt to rob the sleeping man of his coat, the figure ascends the stairs and frantically runs around without purpose or direction on the Monbijou Bridge, with the famous Bode museum visible in the background. In a bid to evade the police he leaps from the bridge and escapes on a coal barge. Episode four also opens with the camera positioned in the middle of the Spree. A reflection of the Colonnade Courtyard in the calm water again locates the scene on the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Museum Island. As Dietrich’s homage to the city, ‘Das ist Berlin’, begins to play, the scene cuts to a picture-postcard shot of the Spree flanked by the columns, while the Berlin Cathedral and Friedrich’s Bridge hover just slightly out of focus in the background. The city is still. A corpse floats by (figure 4).

Neither of these sequences is narratively linked to this particularly famous section of the Spree, and could have been set at any point on Berlin’s network of waterways without alteration to the plot. Thus the Museum Island setting has undoubtedly been chosen as an easily recognized Berlin tourist sight, yet at the same time it reveals the taint of malfeasance within the city itself. Babylon Berlin’s city sites may be celebrated but they are equally criminalized. Similarly, while Dietrich’s lyrics project a loving portrait of Berlin, her dusty, anempathetic singing style juxtaposed with the image of a drifting cadaver reflects the characteristic ambivalence of the debauched city, where neither crimes nor their investigations are framed in simple moral terms.

The police, rather than seeking simply to eradicate deviance in the city, derive as much pleasure as the criminals do from transgressions of the laws that they are obliged to enforce. Indeed members of the vice squad often delight in their investigations, as shown in a sequence (season one, episode eight) in which Bruno and Gereon finally view the confiscated pornographic film that prompted Gereon’s visit to Berlin in the first place. Throughout the sequence Bruno chuckles and cheers, exclaiming with glee as he recognizes various politicians in compromising positions.
Within the series’ diegesis, the ways in which law enforcement sanctifies vice-related crime in the city both reinforces and spectacularly showcases Berlin’s reputation as a fundamentally permissive metropolis in which alternative cultures thrive. However, as this same police force will also collude with judicial systems to facilitate the instalment and protection of a fascist regime, the series suggests that their attitude is not simply one of tolerance or permissiveness but more indicative of an insidious corruption. Gereon has two concurrent roles – as a detective within a corrupt police force that will, unbeknownst to him, enable the establishment of a violent autocratic regime, and as a figure that echoes the ‘noir’ detective, a haunted symbol of that (future) regime’s legacy. Thus Babylon Berlin upholds the noir imperative that discovery does not put wrongs right, but rather exposes the dark facts of reality; that the perceived social order is a counterfeit covering for ongoing corruption. In Babylon Berlin, that social order is not a corrupt Los Angeles, Chicago or New York, but the social and political machinations that will eventually lead to the Holocaust.

In fusing these traditions, so often aligned genealogically in film criticism, Babylon Berlin not only frames the city in a mediatized manner through their visual and narratological schemas, but through its bifocal gaze it reflexively engages the thematic preoccupations of psychological trauma, paranoia and corruption ascribed to them. This Berlin is part of both Expressionism’s ‘psychologically disturbed and monstrous world’ and the mendacious, criminalized film noir metropolis. Babylon Berlin enlists film noir’s narrative aporias – and the competing, unresolved, corrupt and corrupting power dynamics beneath the glamorous urban surface they evoke – in service of its construction of Berlin as a city that always threatens to implicate the detective figure who lives and works there. Babylon Berlin depicts a broader and more grotesque aspect to Expressionism that is no longer resolved and terminated within the perverse dynamics of the individual psyche, but rather in those of the social in the rise of fascism. Through its bifocality, this conceptual configuration implies that the haunted figure of Gereon in the series represents film noir’s capacity for self-examination at the socio-political level, a focus that Weimar cinema lacked, despite its fascination with interior states and psychological analysis.

It is intriguing that despite Babylon Berlin’s employment of German dark tourism in its narrative, generic and stylistic strategies, visitBerlin does not include any sites associated with the Holocaust on its page dedicated to the series. Rather than sites where the tourist is expected to pause and consider the historical and ongoing trauma of the Holocaust, the locations listed invite ludic participation – theme parties, jazz bars, burlesque and cabaret shows – as attractions that enable the tourist to experience the ongoing legacy of Weimar culture within contemporary Berlin. Thus, while the site states that the series embodies the legacy of Weimar as ‘a dance on the volcano’, its own focus is squarely on the dance rather than its aftermath. Yet this common conception of Weimar
is precisely what is elicited in Babylon Berlin’s bifocal gaze. By engaging a scopic regime that enables the legacies of two distinct periods in Berlin’s past – the vibrant culture of the Weimar era and the dark history of Nazism – to be projected simultaneously, Babylon Berlin produces a vision of German history in which the Third Reich and the Holocaust are both present in its Weimar past.

Rather than setting the series’ action in concentration camps, or in bunkers or hideouts, Babylon Berlin’s bifocal gaze embeds Germany’s Nazi past in its images of its celebrated Weimar present, while its narrative trajectory ensures that the distance between these focal points is ever narrowing. As such, Babylon Berlin facilitates the possibility of consensus-building through a period not commonly associated with German dark heritage. This, it would seem, was the intention of the creators who have advocated for the series’ educational role in relaying lesser-known aspects of Germany’s violent past. Co-creator Henk Handloegten stated that ‘one of the main reasons to make “Babylon Berlin” was to show how all these Nazis did not just fall from the sky [...] They were human beings who reacted to German society’s changes and made their decisions accordingly’.

Yet even before the first frame we know – as the series presumes the audience knows – what these decisions will, and did, amount to. Babylon Berlin’s bifocal gaze is, like Kracauer’s thesis, ultimately teleological. As evidenced in Nikoros’s elaborate cabaret sequence, Weimar culture may be presented as an exuberant dance on a volcano, but the closer we look the clearer it becomes that the steps are already partly choreographed by Nazism.