



The (Trans)national Appeal within *Babylon Berlin*?

COLLECTION:
WATCHING THE
TRANSNATIONAL
DETECTIVES

ARTICLES –
COMPARATIVE
LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Sky Atlantic's *Babylon Berlin* (Tom Tykwer, Henk Handloegten, Achim von Borries, 2017–), exploring national and transnational constructions in order to understand the series' international appeal from the British perspective, in what Tim Bergfelder identifies as an “imaginary idea of the foreign”. This article analyses the series by applying Lawrence Venuti's hermeneutic approach, adapted from translation studies. It treats the novels by Volker Kutscher on which the series is based as a source text, and the TV series as a target text, examining the discrepancies and interspaces between them, revealing an interplay between the national and the transnational. However, this is not immediately apparent to the viewer as notions of the transnational are buried and reframed in constructions of the national. It is this approach which enables the series to travel. *Babylon Berlin* both plays into and profits from the universal appeal of the national.

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Babylon Berlin (Tom Tykwer, Henk Handloegten, Achim von Borries, 2017–) is a Sky Atlantic crime series set in Berlin in the latter stages of the Weimar Republic (1919–33). The main character, Gereon Rath, is a maverick detective with a complicated private life. Initially seconded from Cologne, he chooses to remain in the capital. Together with the lead female character, Charlotte Ritter, a stenographer in the murder squad by day and a sadomasochistic prostitute by night, he unravels a series of crimes taking them into the depths of the Berlin underworld and mafia gangs, the porn industry, political espionage, and an attempted coup. *Babylon Berlin* is the most expensive German-language series to date: the first sixteen episodes cost €38 million (Connolly n.pag.). It has been a commercial success, not only in Germany but interestingly on the international stage as well. Distribution rights have been sold to more than thirty-five countries (Meza n.pag.). This is intriguing given that, as Halle notes, German-language series do not always do well on the international market (2006, 256).

Stephan Brockmann notes that *Babylon Berlin* has proven particularly popular in the Anglophone sphere (2020, 641). The purpose of this article is to explain this transnational appeal, in terms of the series' commercial success and its ability to "travel" across borders, asking what is it about this series that appeals to audiences outside of Germany. It is beyond the scope of this article to focus on all the countries that purchased distribution rights, and it therefore takes the UK as a case study. Using Joseph Straubhaar's theory of cultural proximity (2015), that is a preference for cultural products most relevant to our own or a similar nearby culture, goes some way to explaining the series' appeal, but this theory alone does not suffice when trends in German TV series' reception in the UK are taken into consideration (Halle 256). To understand this series' appeal, it is necessary to first consider the background to *Babylon Berlin* and the novels on which it is based and then analyse the series, applying Lawrence Venuti's hermeneutic approach (2007). This article concludes that notions of the transnational are buried in and reframed in constructions of the national, there is the appeal of the foreign (Bergfelder), yet the foreign is simultaneously familiar and therein lies the series' ability to traverse national borders, particularly in the UK.

BABYLON BERLIN IN CONTEXT

The TV series is based on the Gereon Rath novels of Volker Kutscher, starting with *Der Nasse Fisch*, first published in the German domestic market in 2007. To date there are eight novels, and several spin-off publications. Although Kutscher's novels quickly became bestsellers in Germany, they were little known internationally prior to the Sky Atlantic adaptation. However, they are now widely available in English translation, marketed alongside the TV series (Kutscher, 2016). Consequently, the market for the novels and the series has grown (French n.pag.). The TV series diverges considerably from the novels, and as such the latter can be seen as separate, albeit linked, cultural productions; this is certainly how viewers/readers in the UK appear to see the two. Nevertheless, an analysis of the ways in which the TV series departs from the novels is insightful, providing the basis for an approach through which to understand how the TV series has been successful in traversing borders.

Kutscher's novels are notable for their attention to historical detail, their richly complex narrative plots, and morally ambiguous characters who straddle the criminal-legal divide, albeit not always by choice. In addition, they not only illuminate ideas and prejudices of the Weimar Republic, but in so doing allow Kutscher to poke fun at and subvert prejudices, particularly those around gender and sexual equality and those around nationalism and pride in the nation. As Katharina Hall has observed, he "uses police inspector Gereon Rath's cases to undertake an in-depth investigation into the complexities of the Weimar period and National Socialism's rise" (Crime Fiction 117). The TV series provides a marked contrast to the novels. This observation is not intended to suggest that the novels are somehow better than the TV series, or vice versa, but to provide context for the analysis that follows.

ADAPTING THE NOVELS FOR THE TRANSNATIONAL SMALL SCREEN

Kutscher gave the three directors Tykwer, Handloegten, and von Borries relative creative freedom in how the works were adapted (Beier n.pag.). It was always their intention to create a transnational series to be exported, rather than one focused on the German domestic market. *Babylon Berlin* is understood as a transnational TV production on the basis of its production processes, its financing, as well as its intended transmission beyond national borders, its

distribution, and reception (Assmann 66). The creative freedom Kutscher allowed the directors enabled them to write a series which falls in line with strategies that Denise Bielby and Lee Harrington (89) identify as making a series viable for export, including a decentring away from the nation and culture of origin. This decentring, focusing on tropes, imagery, and ideas that will appeal to both the local domestic audience and multiple audiences around the world, is inscribed within the plot line of *Babylon Berlin*, even though this process is not necessarily apparent on the surface; rather it is coded within the narrative arc. It is this very approach that makes a transnational TV production a financially viable export (Buonanno, cited in Jenner 220).

Mareike Jenner (208) argues that transnational series activate different meanings as each audience interprets them according to its own normative national frameworks. These frameworks draw on shared national values, on a shared sense of heritage, of collective memories mediated through the generations in various cultural outputs from history, literature, film, politics, and television. Jenner argues that television plays a central role in constructing national identities precisely because “it connects with the political and democratic concerns of a country as well as responding to specific social anxieties”, because it reinforces “an ideology of the nation” (205). The nation-focused centrality of television makes apparent the challenges and the potential to fail involved in making a series that is exportable and yet television is also written to appeal, prioritising revenue rather than artistic merit. It follows that to be commercially viable, transnational television must appeal to its target audience(s) and do so by appealing to their values and ideologies, which in turn points to trends and tendencies within societies.

Rendering German history exportable, albeit through intricate crime stories, was a challenge the *Babylon Berlin* directors faced in making the Weimar era—with all the period’s complexities, its highs and lows, its cultural life, associated in particular with innovation, hedonism, and an overthrowing of traditional conservative norms, but also with social, political, and economic turmoil—accessible and appealing on an international scale. It may be a fascinating period in its own right but that is no guarantee of commercial success either within or beyond Germany’s borders. Randall Halle (259) argues that a German TV series is more likely to succeed internationally if the historical backdrop is a period of rapid change, and additionally a period that does not require any special knowledge of Germany or German history. For *Babylon Berlin* to succeed, Achim von Borries stated that it had to have a contemporary resonance, whilst Tykwer stated that they drew parallels with the present with the intention of engendering audience empathy with the characters, albeit without suggesting the Republic’s downfall to fascism was foreseeable, or that Weimar was merely just the prehistory to the Third Reich (Beier n.pag.).

Babylon Berlin first aired in the UK on Sky Atlantic in 2017. Randall Halle (256) notes that reviews of German productions in the UK are shaped by cultural barriers, with critical response refracted through national clichés, prejudices, and stereotypes. This observation certainly holds for press reviews of *Babylon Berlin*, although viewer comments proved more differentiated and were notable for the comparative lack of clichés, a broader depth of cultural knowledge in relation to both German TV and film and to literature than the reviews themselves. Viewers’ comments also included engagement with historiographical debates, which parallels Katharina Hall’s finding that crime fiction is appreciated for its educative dimension as well as entertainment and can play an important cultural role by providing viewers with valuable access to historical materials and debates (2011). Statistics indicate that the series has a 93.2 percentile rank, meaning there is a higher demand for the series than 93.2 per cent of all drama titles in the UK (“United Kingdom TV Audience” n.pag., statistics valid at time of writing in July 2021), whilst Amazon UK’s website has a viewer rating of 4.5 stars (*Babylon Berlin* n.pag. statistics valid at time of writing in July 2021), suggesting the series has succeeded in travelling to the UK. But what these figures do not illustrate is why.

APPROACH

Tykwer, Handloegten, and von Borries scripted the series with a view to appealing to multiple audiences around the globe, writing within the conventions of transnational TV productions. Fans of the novels were quick to point out the discrepancies in the TV series, whilst others suggested that the two ought to be seen as separate cultural productions. This article, however, examines precisely those discrepancies to understand how this series has managed to become a commercial success. Understanding how this was achieved can be illustrated through a comparative analysis of the

novels and the series. In so doing, this article borrows from and adapts approaches from translation studies, recognising that adaptations are driven not solely by creative impulse but also by aesthetic and market-driven choices, which in turn can have political ramifications (Patterson 131). Moreover, these choices can also be used “to get at the truths to which they point” (Dudley 37).

To answer why *Babylon Berlin* traverses national boundaries, it is necessary to borrow and adapt Venuti’s hermeneutic approach. Following this theory, a text is coded in the receiving (audience) situation. For our purposes, we can understand a TV series to be a text, one derived from another, namely the novels, and it is in comparing the two, looking at the space in between, as a third space, that we can find answers to our question by exploring the changes and their implications. Venuti argues that focusing on the omissions, amendments, and creations from the one “text” to the other reveals the values and ideologies, including shared morals and cultural tastes which are used to appeal to a particular audience, in this case the UK (2007). Understanding the way in which these adaptation choices make *Babylon Berlin* a viable international export illustrates what appeals to different national audiences, which in turn points towards broader societal trends. This provides an explanation of how and why this particular series appeals internationally at a time of sociopolitical instability, widespread right-wing populism, inward-facing nationalism, and what Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg identify as a sense of “future foreboding” in the public imaginary (356).

This article applies Venuti’s theory, focusing on three key figures and their respective storylines, as adapted from their novel alter egos. Applying the hermeneutic approach, this article considers what the omissions, amendments, and creations indicate. It focuses first on Gereon Rath’s backstory as traumatised First World War veteran and former POW and then on an analysis of the way Weimar-era myths, prejudices, and stereotypes around the *Neue Frau* or New Woman are appropriated and displaced in the characters Svetlana Sorokina and Charlotte Ritter. In examining *Babylon Berlin* the series in comparison with the novels, this article demonstrates how the transnational is buried within the national and the national is displaced onto the imaginary “other”, the “foreigner” within the series.

TRANSNATIONAL REIMAGING IN *BABYLON BERLIN*

Babylon Berlin’s main plot line takes place in 1929. However, in a departure from the novels, there are frequent flashbacks to the First World War, to muddied, bloodied soldiers, the Western Front, barbed wire, and bomb craters. Tykwer, Handloegten, and von Borries created a new backstory for lead character Gereon Rath, turning him into a First World War veteran and former POW. This may initially seem an anachronous choice as a means of giving a series a widespread, international appeal—memories of war, the stories that are told, are, after all, as nation-specific as they are political. This Gereon, we note, diverges from his novel alter ego, who only ever completed basic training by the war’s end, never seeing action. Remembering, and indeed representing, the First World War in Germany is complex, not simply because it was the defeated nation but also because of everything that followed in the ensuing decades—from the failure of democracy to National Socialism, the Holocaust, and the Second World War. Even though depicting a First World War veteran empathetically may thus appear comparatively unproblematic, untainted by the Nazism to follow, it is nevertheless fraught with implied meaning and connotations. Yet the series could hardly ignore the conflict and its legacy. A German perspective on the First World War is nevertheless potentially difficult to market internationally, but through the backstory that the directors created for Gereon, they rendered him a simultaneously complex character on a personal level, yet a recognisable and sympathetic figure for audiences around the world, lending him a universal appeal.

Tykwer, Handloegten, and von Borries circumvented the potentially difficult international marketability of their lead character by flattening out the national, drawing instead on universalised images and tropes, from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to survivor guilt through to a decentralised POW narrative, one far removed from the specificities of the German POW experience, discussed below, constructing a backstory for Gereon that is, as the following analysis demonstrates, far more transnational, far more European, than it is national, even though it is presented to the viewer as “German” and may play into nationalist sentiments nevertheless. This approach of flattening out the national ties in with broader trends in the history of German crime film, centred on what Tim Bergfelder calls the “transnational imaginary”

(59), and with particular reference to creating a sense of European identity. Arguably, it is this construction of the transnational buried within the national that makes the series exportable.

Gereon's story is told through a series of flashback sequences. The viewer learns of his First World War experiences and the resulting inner turmoil that both plagues and motivates him more than a decade after the end of the conflict. Gereon suffers from a combination of survivor guilt, at what the viewer is initially led to believe is the loss of his brother Anno, his parents' favourite son, on the Western Front. As the backstory unfolds, the viewer learns that Gereon, traumatised and suffering from shell shock, was unable to come to his injured brother's aid and is haunted by the experience—his last memory of his brother is of him lying injured in a shell hole; it is assumed that Anno died as a result. It is this trauma that leaves Gereon suffering convulsions, which he treats secretly with morphine, to which he is addicted. His trauma is complicated further by the guilt of his love for, and illicit relationship with, Anno's wife, Helga.

However, it transpires that Anno did in fact survive, unbeknownst to Gereon and his family. Anno was horribly disfigured, which gives him a way of hiding his true identity and assuming a new one, training as a psychologist, specialising in treating veterans via a range of therapies, from the Freudian through to electric shock therapy. He is a somewhat sinister character, with links to the Berlin underworld. He treats Gereon, only revealing his true identity at the end of series two, after he has made Gereon face the root causes of his trauma, namely what Anno sees as Gereon's failings as a German soldier coupled with his affair with Helga.

Leaving the brotherly plot line aside, Anno's failure to recognise Gereon's battlefield trauma, and Gereon's inability to save Anno at the front, is reminiscent of the German military ideology that German soldiers fought to the death but never surrendered, never showed weakness, as this would be both un-masculine and un-German (Feltman; Jones 2011). Yet, as the viewer learns, Gereon did not abandon Anno of his own volition; rather, in trying to come to his rescue, Gereon was taken prisoner by the French. We learn nothing of his experiences as a POW, but the inclusion of this plot line is significant, particularly in elucidating the transnational constructions within the national. Gereon's experience is reimagined in parallel with that of all soldiers—but repackaged as national. Here, then, is a German soldier whose experiences viewers may recognise from their own normative frames of national reference, and therein lies the appeal—the plot offers recognition and similarity rather than otherness. Applying Venuti's hermeneutic approach, the alterations to the character's backstory here reveal the values of the production, namely an uncritical representation of suffering for the nation, one which feeds into nationalist values and ideas in the present, in stark contrast to the novels, which critique those notions, thereby eliding a complex aspect of German history in the process.

German prisoners of the First World War have tended to be overlooked in historiography as in cultural representation. In recent years work has been undertaken to address this, revealing how being a German POW was bound up with traditional notions of masculinity together with the complicated psychology the POWs were faced with, in what Brian Feltman has termed "the stigma of surrender". As both his and Heather Jones's studies highlight, German First World War POWs were variously seen and saw themselves as traitors. Treason, from the point of view of military ideology, included being taken prisoner by the enemy—it was seen as an act of surrender. German POWs' psychological torment, their attempts to assert a sense of identity, of Germanness, are also reflected in POW memoirs of the time (Sachsee and Cossmann; Buckley). It was not only their experiences of captivity that differed from prisoners of other nations, but also their eventual return. German POW repatriation was a curious, elaborate story of political wrangling in the early days of the Weimar Republic. Used as the "bargaining chips" of their day to ensure that Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles, German POWs were only finally repatriated from late 1919 onwards. They were initially greeted with sympathy. However, they then largely fell into obscurity before being vilified by the far-right and ultimately the Nazis as traitors to Germany (Jones); many remained affected by their experiences long after their repatriation.

Yet Gereon's backstory is entirely devoid of the complexities of being a German POW, and places emphasis instead on his inability to rescue Anno, and the associated PTSD he suffers. His period in captivity is not explored. As a consequence, the viewer may simply assume the German POW experience varied little from that of any other soldier of any of the belligerent nations. In this way the national aspect has been flattened, universalised so as to traverse international borders through the storytelling, reflecting back on trauma and loss, generating sympathy but also recognition on the part of the viewer who has an array of images and frames of reference

on which to draw. The hermeneutic approach indicates that the decision to alter Gereon's backstory was influenced by ideas around national pride and heroism, feeding off of and into these ideas which were also prominent in the public imaginary. This is particularly the case in the Anglophone sphere at the time of the series' launch in 2017, where cultural, historical, and public discourses were heavily invested in remembering the First World War over the conflict's centenary. This in turn played into notions of anniversary capital, namely the way in which such commemorations are utilised historically, politically, and commercially (Saunders 358). Although remembrance of the conflict varies considerably between nations, there are shared tropes and imagery around the conflict that *Babylon Berlin* utilises, albeit obliquely. In short, the transnational construction of the narrative is embedded in the national character construction, whilst the national is written out without the audience ever noticing. Gereon's backstory is almost predictable in its emotional appeal, drawing parallels between German soldiers and their counterparts, ordinary men used as pawns in a game they have been forced to play. This imagery is easily recognisable internationally, positing Gereon as a victim of an unjust war with whom the viewer is invited to empathise. The national is seemingly elided; the national traits, the heterogenous war experiences, are flattened out, even though they are presented as "German", but they appeal because they are seemingly familiar.

Gereon's POW backstory becomes all the more curious over the course of the series. Invited to a gathering at his boss Bruno Wolter's home one evening, Gereon finds himself amongst Wolter's former army comrades. As it transpires, they, along with Wolter, are members of the illegal military group the proto-fascist Black Reichswehr. Moreover, they are planning a military coup in an attempt to reinstate the monarchy, returning Germany, in their view, to a greatness the war and democracy has robbed them of. Following the logic of imperial military ideology, these Black Reichswehr members would have seen a POW as a traitor, if not complicit with Germany's defeat. At Wolter's, the comrades begin to reminisce. Some knew Gereon's brother Anno. As they recount tales of his heroism, lamenting his loss, Gereon tells his own story, of the shock, the trauma rendering him unable either to save Anno or evade capture. Silence envelops the room as he talks. These coup-planning, proto-fascist, staunch military men greet his story with an almost paternalistic understanding and sympathy, patting him reassuringly on the shoulder, listening in sorrowful silence. This reaction is as incompatible with their characterisation as it is with the history of German POWs. Yet it also feeds into the broader trends already identified in *Babylon Berlin*, seemingly eliding all that is unique about the national whilst simultaneously presenting it as part of the national.

This decontextualising of the German soldier and specifically the German POW not only loses the rich, complex psychology that played itself out over the course of the Weimar Republic, up to and including the trend of First World War POWs finding their spiritual home amongst the Nazis in an attempt to prove both their masculinity and their Germanness, it also fails to critique the very nationalism with which the novels, by contrast, take issue—ranging from the war itself, through to the attitudes within society that then continued to revolve around notions of German honour and militarism. The adaptation choices become all the more significant when we consider that in the novels Gereon's backstory is very different: he was never a POW; in fact, he never served at the front, having only completed basic training by the war's end. In the novels, Gereon is hounded out of his native Cologne following the fatal shooting of a well-connected suspect and the ensuing media debacle, which he only escapes through a transfer—arranged by his chief-of-police father—to Berlin. The backstories diverge further in regard to the First World War and nationalism. In the novels there are three brothers—Gereon, Anno, and Severin. Anno was killed. Severin has been disowned by all of his family, except for Gereon, after refusing to fight for the Fatherland, and emigrating to America in a rejection of his homeland.

Here then the values and ideologies, following the hermeneutic approach, become visible. The creation of the POW story, retold along non-specific national lines, engenders empathy for the lead character, allowing a narrative which valorises the men fighting even in an unjust war, but is not anti-military per se. Rather it points to military honour, drawing on anniversary capital, on public interest in the process. In Kutscher's novels, there is no POW narrative. Moreover, they are underpinned by anti-nationalist sentiment. Kutscher uses Severin's exile from the family as a way of critiquing the militaristic nationalism of the war and its legacy. Yet the exclusion of Severin from the TV narrative, and the creation of a POW narrative for Gereon, highlights a significant shift in the values and ideas projected through the series from those of the novels of a decade earlier. The national may have been flattened out, but that flattening is not overt and thus the series may appeal to the nationalist sentiments and notions that the novels critique.

Babylon Berlin's commercial success, its ability to traverse borders and appeal to multiple audiences, indicates the extent to which such sentiments and notions appeal, particularly at the present time. The Weimar Republic appears to resonate and to do so beyond Germany's borders because of its centenary, but more so because of current sociopolitical and economic climate globally, and in the UK in particular. *Babylon Berlin* plays off of and feeds into this.

APPROPRIATING AND DISPLACING THE MYTHS, PREJUDICES, AND STEREOTYPES OF THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

Although *Babylon Berlin* flattens out the national, this is not to suggest that Weimar-era myths, stereotypes, and prejudices are absent from the series. Similar to the flattening of the national that typifies Gereon's backstory, the Weimar-era myths, prejudices, and stereotypes around women, and specifically around the notion of the *Neue Frau* or New Woman, are decentralised, deterritorialised, and projected onto the series' other, the exiled Russian aristocrat Svetlana, whilst the German character Charlotte is more of an amalgamation of universalised tropes, a 1920s flapper who would not be out of place elsewhere.

WHO WAS THE NEW WOMAN?

The *Neue Frau* is one of the iconic images associated with the Weimar Republic. She was, typically, unmarried, sexually liberated, a professional in either office work or the arts; she had a wide (international) friendship group, had relationships with men and women, was physically strong yet lithe; she wore short skirts and sported the *Bubikopf*, a short bobbed haircut; she smoked, drank, and partied, believed in equality and strove for self-reliance. The New Woman was more associated with the upper and middle classes, but her aims and ideas did permeate down through the class structures and out from urban to rural settings. Yet the idealised image was far from the reality; a third of working women were in low-paying factory jobs, for example (Hermann 207). Yet, as Eric D. Weitz notes, of all the points of contention in the new democratic Germany, "none aroused so much deeply felt passion, so much debate, so much hostility, as the issues of sex and the family, and of women—what they did, and how they looked in particular" (298).

The New Woman aroused such impassioned responses not simply because she overthrew previously accepted gender norms and conventions but precisely because she was symbolic of the new world order, which in turn was associated with Germany's defeat. As both Ingrid Sharp and Barbara Hales highlight, the myths surrounding the New Woman were bound up with the fragile state of post-war masculinity. They became symbolic of the state of the nation, being either its saviour or its ruin, depending on their willingness and ability to revert to the conservative Christian pre-war patriarchal order. "Modern women were seen as the antithesis of the kind needed to regenerate the nation. The New Woman of the post-war era was cast as highly urban, androgynous rather than womanly, highly sexed but generally sterile" (Sharp 208).

The perceived failings of the New Woman were not merely linked to her inability or unwillingness to procreate and conform to the patriarchy, rather they were also twinned with criminality, they were *femmes fatales* (Hales 208–9). It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a survey of criminality in this period. To summarise, the perception of the republic as a hotbed of crime, in real-life, in fiction, and through its cultural productions, has been widely accepted, even if this does not entirely correlate with the actual lived reality (Herzog 2). Statistics demonstrate that crime levels peaked in 1922–3 and were higher than at any previous time in Germany, with drug and prostitution rings, serial killers, and gangster organisations known as *Ringvereine*, being prominent features, but once economic stability was achieved, crime rates dropped and were no higher than elsewhere in Europe (Herzog 2–3). Criminologists argued that women, or rather sexually liberated women, were particularly responsible for crimes in this era in which the *femme fatale* was a threat to traditional bourgeois values, the kind of vamp figure who used sexual prowess to draw men into moral disaster (Hales 208–9). Criminologist Erich Wulffen (1862–1936) linked women's sexuality directly to criminality, arguing that it was her primal instinct: that at heart, the woman was a whore. Linking this to women's increased role in public life, in the world of work, he went on to argue, her appropriation of the traditional male role had skewed her sense of morality, making her naturally more susceptible to criminal behaviour (Hales 210–11). Similarly, Hans Schneickert claimed that women were not only responsible for the crimes they committed but also those that they motivated (in Hales 229). Thus, the image of the New Woman and criminality are twinned.

As with Gereon, both Svetlana and Charlotte have been substantially reimagined from their novel alter egos. In Svetlana's case, this serves the purpose of recycling and displacing ideas about the *Neue Frau*, ones which Kutscher challenges in his novels, but which the TV series embraces, playing into well-worn images and ideas about Germany in the 1920s and iconography reminiscent of cultural representations of Weimar including Bob Fosse's *Cabaret* (Bergfelder 64–5). Charlotte, by contrast, whom Kutscher uses as a means of poking fun at the Weimar-era prejudices around the *Neue Frau*, prejudices which disdained women as anything from sexually deviant to criminal, is transformed in the TV series to a plucky, down-at-heel heroine, forced by her impoverished circumstances into a double life of prostitution and police work. Whilst the Weimar-era prejudices about sexually promiscuous women are written into the series, these are focused principally on Svetlana rather than Charlotte.

In the TV series Svetlana Sorokina is a singer at the Moka Efti nightclub, albeit performing as her male alter ego, which she uses to disguise her identity as an exiled Russian aristocrat plotting to smuggle the family gold out of Soviet Russia. Visually, she is the very depiction of the *Neue Frau*. In the Weimar era the notion of the New Woman was as contentious as it was prejudicial. In *Babylon Berlin* Svetlana epitomises these prejudices. Moreover, she is also violent and criminally inclined. All of the stereotypes of Weimar are recycled here, but rather than depicting these as German, as part of the national characteristic, the prejudices around the *Neue Frau* are displaced, deterritorialised, and projected onto and through the “foreign” character, the Russian aristocrat who, it transpires, may not even be an aristocrat, but rather the daughter of servants who has no claim on the gold smuggled out of the Soviet Union, further implicating her character as duplicitous and criminal in line with prejudices around the *Neue Frau*.

Svetlana's appearance is highly reminiscent of Otto Dix's *Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden* from 1926, with her angular, sharp face and extremely short hair cropped close to the scalp in a more masculine than feminine style. Svetlana is sexually promiscuous and uses her prowess as a means of controlling the men in her life. She is also violent. She shoots her lover, prioritising the smuggling operation over his life. Indeed, this triumvirate of sex, violence, and criminality resonates with Weimar-era ideas around the *Neue Frau* and lawbreaking, identified above.

In addition to her sexual prowess, Svetlana utilises the tradition of gender transgression, which is associated with the Weimar era but is part of a longer tradition in Germany. Svetlana dons her male persona in her performances at the Moka Efti and when she goes to the Soviet Embassy to denounce her lover and their revolutionary friends as Trotskyites. Her transgression here ties in with the twin Weimar myths around female sexuality and criminality. Her appearance as a woman could be described as that of a *Mannsweib* [mannish woman] and thus echoes the vilification of the *Neue Frau* in the Weimar press (Hales 234). At the same time, her use of multiple identities further implies her duplicity, her criminal inclinations. Thus, whether appearing as the stereotypical *Neue Frau* or as a gender transgressor, there are enough visual references to identify her with the era. Weimar-era ideas are recycled for an international audience, but simultaneously displaced onto the “other”, the reimagined “foreigner” in Germany. Moreover, the uncritical engagement with Weimar-era myths, prejudices, and stereotypes around women, suggests that such ideas continue to resonate in the present.

The contrast between Svetlana and Charlotte Ritter, the series' female lead, is stark. The TV version of Charlotte differs considerably from her counterpart in the novels, where she is a fiercely independent, educated, and sexually liberated individual, already established in her work as a stenographer in the murder squad whilst studying at university. Kutscher plays on the myths and stereotypes around the *Neue Frau* in order to subvert them. In the TV series, Charlotte is transformed into a jobbing stenographer by day and a sado-masochistic prostitute working out of the Moka Efti club at night. Thus far, *Babylon Berlin* apes the Weimar stereotype—decadent sex and glamour. Yet, contrasted with Svetlana, the aesthetic alone is different—much softer in appearance, and stylised in the fashions of the roaring twenties but distinctly feminine through her clothing, Charlotte conforms to norms of women's fashion, rather than being androgynous, and is certainly less of a *Neue Frau* than Svetlana. In attitude, too, the differences are stark. Where Svetlana takes matters into her own hands, Charlotte has to be rescued by the male hero.

What is particularly striking with regard to Charlotte is the cross-fertilisation with more universal trends, which illustrates again how the more transnational trends are buried within and repackaged as the national. Charlotte's first appearance on screen locates her in the family's dilapidated home—a run-down, squalid apartment, far too small for the number of occupants, grimy and

lacking in sanitation. The scene would not be out of place in a work of Dickensian fiction. Charlotte's mother, Minna Ritter, is the widowed matriarch barely able to provide a home for her three daughters—of whom Charlotte is the only one to bring in any money. The household also includes Charlotte's abusive, lazy, violent brother-in-law and the sisters' infirm grandfather. Charlotte is the plucky heroine here, naturally intelligent but poorly educated, resented by her brother-in-law because she is the breadwinner and because she strives for a better life which includes ensuring her younger, innocent sister is protected from him and allowed the education she herself was unable to have. Charlotte struggles, goes without, and sacrifices herself for the betterment of her family. It is a struggle that is perhaps more universally recognisable, and thus lends her an appeal to international as well as home audiences in a way the novel's version of Charlotte may not. The construction of Charlotte as a German woman in the 1920s is invested in the transnational.

CONCLUSION

Babylon Berlin has proven itself paradoxical. Marketed internationally as a German crime drama, it is inherently transnational—in commissioning, its funding, its audience reach, but above all in its plot lines and character constructions. It has succeeded commercially with its wide distribution, an accomplishment that was by no means certain, particularly given the fact that German series do not always export well. What is all the more remarkable is that the series' success comes at a time when, paradoxically, many nations are looking inward politically, and nationalist sentiment is prominent; yet *Babylon Berlin* has a broad appeal. That ability to traverse boundaries can be understood when the TV series is analysed against the novels from which it is derived, revealing the values, ideologies, and shared cultural tastes and morals that are coded within and between them, in line with Venuti's hermeneutic approach. This demonstrates that *Babylon Berlin* may appear to embrace the national, but simultaneously rejects it, or rather it embraces the transnational yet repackages it as national in order to lend it a universal appeal, as Gereon's backstory reveals. When the viewer decodes the images on screen and does so within their own normative frames of reference, they see something familiar, recognisable rather than something far removed from their expectations. The audience may be fascinated by the idea of the "other" but what they see is, in fact, not "other" at all.

The transnational may run through *Babylon Berlin*, yet highly stereotyped ideas, myths, and prejudices of the Weimar era are not elided in this series, either. On the contrary, they are also prominent. Yet, whilst the series recycles and embraces them, it simultaneously displaces and deterritorialises them by projecting them onto the "other", the "foreigner" within the series, depicting these myths, prejudices, and stereotypes specific to the Weimar Republic, to the fragile democracy of a defeated nation, as anything other than German.

Arguably, what allowed *Babylon Berlin* to succeed commercially, to traverse borders and appeal internationally, in the UK for example, is its ability to bury the transnational within the national and to export images, ideas and, values that are recognisable to multiple audiences, even whilst they appear to be linked to the nation. Yet, they are not—Weimar Germany has been reimagined along transnational lines. However, the nation and nationalism have a broad appeal in the present, hence the transnational is presented as the national, and *Babylon Berlin* both plays into this and profits from it.

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