

# Rethinking Montage: *Berlin Alexanderplatz*'s Paper Trails

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**Abstract** This article takes up the concept of montage that has defined scholarship on Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz: Die Geschichte von Franz Biberkopf* (1929) since its publication. Against interpretations that understand the novel's technique of montage as related to film and the avant-garde, I show that the novel is more strongly tied to paper objects and practices, above all the nineteenth-century serial novel and its medial environment in the newspaper. Approaching the novel from this perspective directs attention – in opposition to the scholarship that has emphasized the experience of disruption produced by montage – to the significance of the plot and its highly gendered violence.

## Montage neu denken: Papierspuren in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*

**Zusammenfassung** Seit seiner Erstveröffentlichung wird Alfred Döblins *Berlin Alexanderplatz: Die Geschichte von Franz Biberkopf* (1929) durchweg unter dem Begriff der Montage verhandelt. Entgegen dieser Lektüre, die die Ästhetik des Montageschnitts mit Praktiken des Films und der Avantgarde verbindet, zeige ich, dass der Roman in einer Geschichte von Papierobjekten und Papierpraktiken zu verorten ist, zu der vor allem der Feuilletonroman des 19. Jahrhunderts mitsamt dessen medialem Umfeld gehört. Im Gegensatz zum Forschungskonsens, der die Erfahrung der Diskontinuität hervorhebt, lenkt eine Annäherung an den Roman aus der Perspektive von Papierpraktiken unsere Aufmerksamkeit auf die Bedeutung der Romanhandlung und die genderspezifische Gewalt, die sie kennzeichnet.

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Alongside James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and John Don Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), to which it is frequently compared, *Berlin Alexanderplatz: Die Geschichte von Franz Biberkopf* (1929) is considered one of the foremost examples of literary montage. The frequent characterizations of Alfred Döblin's first commercial success as a work of montage can be traced to Walter Benjamin's very warm review of the novel, entitled »Krisis des Romans«. In the review, published a year after the novel's appearance, Benjamin lauds Döblin for having overcome the crisis of the novel by restituting epic storytelling. The review thereby foreshadows such Benjaminian themes as the modern demise of storytelling diagnosed in his essay »Der Erzähler« (1936) and the aesthetic possibilities of film discussed in »Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit« (1935–1939). In the review, Benjamin already explicitly identifies a style of montage as a specifically modern possibility for the restitution of the epic. »Stilprinzip dieses Buches«, writes Benjamin, »ist die Montage«.<sup>1</sup>

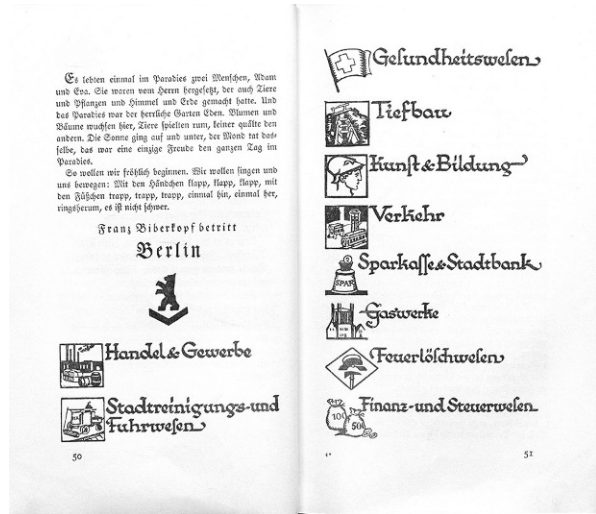
The characterization of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as a work of montage persists to this day. In the following, however, I intend to put pressure on the term as an adequate description of the work and also to ask what readings of the novel are eclipsed from view by our persistent use of this term. To that end, it helps to clarify what the term »style of montage« intends to capture. Following Patrizia McBride's recent illuminating book on the subject, I understand Benjamin's use of *montage* not to refer specifically to a set of filmic editing techniques relying on cuts; it rather functions as »an umbrella term for practices of disarticulation and recombination«.<sup>2</sup> As employed in readings of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, the notion of an aesthetics of montage specifically aims to describe the cacophonous language seemingly cut or removed from its original source and reassembled in the text such that it disrupts the narrative fluidity that Benjamin and others associate with the nineteenth-century realist novel. The text is a montage of excerpts removed from their original sense-giving context, fragments that shatter the continuity, harmony, and unity of the text. They cut into or across chronologically and causally organized narrative and thus undermine the project of mimetic storytelling. The beginning of the second of the nine books that make up *Berlin Alexanderplatz* offers an illustrative example (see fig. 1). Following a summarizing chapter heading, the main body of text begins:

Es lebten einmal im Paradies zwei Menschen, Adam und Eva. Sie waren vom Herrn hergesetzt, der auch Tiere und Pflanzen und Himmel und Erde gemacht hatte. Und das Paradies war der herrliche Garten Eden. Blumen und Bäume

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, »Krisis des Romans. Zu Döblins ›Berlin Alexanderplatz‹«, in: Benjamin, *Kritiken und Rezensionen*, ed. Heinrich Kaulen, vol. 13.1 of *Werke und Nachlaß. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Christoph Gödde, Henri Lonitz, Berlin 2011, 248–254, here: 250.

<sup>2</sup> Patrizia C. McBride, *The Chatter of the Visible. Montage and Narrative in Weimar Germany*, Ann Arbor 2016, 3. On Benjamin's use of the term, McBride specifies that »[u]nlike the Russian filmmakers, however, Benjamin was not interested in exploring the operations of montage as a principle of film poetics, that is, as a technique or set of practices that allow us to describe the features of specific films. Rather he treated montage as a primarily aesthetic category that resonated closely with contemporary forms of experience and modes of labor and thus encapsulated film's perceptual and cognitive surplus vis-à-vis other media« (67).

**Figure 1** Beginning of book 2 from the original 1929 book edition. While the page is the only use of icons in the novel, it depicts the typical paragraph breaks and headings used to distinguish parts of the text from one another. Alfred Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz. Die Geschichte von Franz Biberkopf*, Berlin 1929, 61



wuchsen hier, Tiere spielten rum, keiner quälte den andern. Die Sonne ging auf und unter, der Mond tat dasselbe, das war eine einzige Freude den ganzen Tag im Paradies.

So wollen wir fröhlich beginnen. Wir wollen singen und uns bewegen: mit den Händchen klapp, klapp, klapp, mit den Füßchen trapp, trapp, trapp, einmal hin, einmal her, ringsherum, es ist nicht schwer.

Franz Biberkopf betritt Berlin.<sup>3</sup>

In the following ten pages, the reader encounters the ten icons and names of Berlin's city services, three paragraphs cited from the »Amtsblatt der Stadt Berlin«, a smattering of newspaper items from the years 1927 and 1928 including weather reports and advertisements, excerpts from transportation schedules and telephone books, and popular window-display advertisements. The text shifts, in other words, between syntagmatically unrelated parts taken from a wide range of colloquial, literary, commercial, and bureaucratic sources. Only after these initial ten pages does Franz Biberkopf, the novel's protagonist, make an appearance in a body of text typographically set off with the heading, »*Franz Biberkopf geht auf die Suche, man muß Geld verdienen, ohne Geld kann der Mensch nicht leben. Vom Frankfurter Topfmarkt*«. <sup>4</sup>

Benjamin's characterization of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as a work of montage, which I have just elaborated, has been affirmatively reiterated in an endless number of works of criticism and scholarship on the novel since 1930. To be sure, the argument is both varied and often insightful. Recently, for example, Devin Fore has

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz. Die Geschichte von Franz Biberkopf*, ed. Walter Stauffacher, unnumbered vol. of *Ausgewählte Werke*, ed. Walter Muschg, Anthony W. Riley, Christina Althen, Olten 1996, 49.

<sup>4</sup> Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (note 3), 59.

described the text's »montage structure« as producing a surplus of language that does not mimetically refer to the real but rather itself belongs to it. In his words: »I read *Berlin Alexanderplatz* not as a piece of fiction, not as ›The Story of Franz Biberkopf,‹ but as an innovative documentary that collapsed the distance between artistic work and extratextual experience«. <sup>5</sup> Fore thereby invokes a long-standing tradition of pitting the book's title and subtitle against one another. Does this book deliver a shock-filled experience of urbanity (*Berlin Alexanderplatz*) or tell a more traditional story of its fictional protagonist (*Die Geschichte von Franz Biberkopf*)? Montage, as Fore and others conceive of it, is thought to have »largely substituted for linear narrative«. <sup>6</sup> Fore too points to Döblin's retrospective assertion that he would have preferred simply *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as the title for the book but yielded to the publisher's demands for a clarifying subtitle. <sup>7</sup>

To my mind, however, the recurrent characterization of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as a work of literary montage has perpetuated egregious misreadings in at least two ways. At stake in uncovering these misreadings, I would argue, is not merely how we understand this work of literature but also the legacy of an aesthetics of montage. It is a question, in other words, of what is obscured by repeated affirmations of a montage principle and the transgressive energies we associate with that style. But why egregious? Egregious, in the first place, because the eagerness to celebrate *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as an avant-garde, scissor-driven attack on the mimetic realism of the nineteenth-century novel has motivated scholarship to overlook or neglect its clearly structured plot revolving around a coherent protagonist. <sup>8</sup> Forgetting the plot to the advantage of the formal cut seems particularly problematic because the plot is fundamentally driven by cuts, by brutal violence inflicted upon thousands of animals that are stunned, sliced, and prepared for purchase in the novel's famous slaughterhouse scenes (and to whom the lead characters are incessantly compared); by violence inflicted upon the body of the protagonist, whose arm is amputated with a saw following a car »accident«; and most brutally of all, by the assaulted and murdered bodies of the leading female characters – a pattern of misogynistic violence. The scope of this violence has been best described by Maria Tatar, who points out that a »seemingly endless supply of female bodies is made available to the protagonist, who [...] builds to those bodies a relationship both monetary and murderous«. <sup>9</sup> After all, the novel famously begins when Franz Biberkopf is released from prison, where he was interred for murdering his previous partner Ida, an act for

<sup>5</sup> In this reading, Franz Biberkopf constitutes a »compositional device« rather than a protagonist. Devin Fore, »Döblin's Epic. Sense, Document, and the Verbal World Picture«, *New German Critique* 33/3 (Fall 2006), 171–207, here: 175, 199.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Jennings, »Walter Benjamin and the European Avant-Garde«, in: David Ferris (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, Cambridge 2004, 18–34, here: 18.

<sup>7</sup> Fore (note 5), 199. In my view, Döblin's recollection of this disagreement with Fischer Verlag should be taken with a grain of salt, not least because it stems from an »Epilog« written in 1948, at which point *Berlin Alexanderplatz*'s reputation as a work of literary montage had already begun to solidify.

<sup>8</sup> For a full account of my reading of the plot structure, see Malika Maskarinec, *The Forces of Form in German Modernism*, Evanston 2018, 129–155.

<sup>9</sup> Maria Tatar, »Wie süß ist es, sich zu opfern«. Gender, Violence, and Agency in Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*«, *DVjs* 66 (1992), 491–518, here: 513.

which he feels no responsibility or remorse. Upon release, he returns to Ida's sister's apartment, the same place he had previously assaulted Ida, and this time rapes her sister. The final events of the novel, designed to mirror those of the beginning, are set in motion when Reinhard, Biberkopf's jealous partner in crime, murders the prostitute Mieke, who is both the current object of Biberkopf's affection and a source of his income. The novel only ends when Biberkopf accepts responsibility for Ida's and Mieke's deaths and is then miraculously reborn. As I will argue at the conclusion of this article, within the tragic logic of the plot, Mieke's mutilated body serves as a sacrificial victim that frees Franz Biberkopf from his accursed state and permits his miraculous regeneration. My point for the moment is that the claim that *Berlin Alexanderplatz* does away with a mimetic narrative or with a traditional protagonist by means of an aesthetics of montage turns a blind eye to its highly gendered violence. The eager acclaim given to an aesthetics of the cut on the level of the textual fabric asks us to overlook or forget the cuts to the flesh that drive the cathartic structure of the diegesis.

The description of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as a work of montage perpetuates a second misreading as well. As Peter Bürger's classic *Theorie der Avantgarde* makes clear, by 1930 the label montage served as an authenticating nomenclature for an art of disruption whose originality was typically underwritten by a comparison to the relatively new medium of film.<sup>10</sup> Benjamin, for one, specifically credits *Berlin Alexanderplatz* with having adapted both Dadaism and filmic techniques (without specifying what film) to the genre of the epic. These associations would have been more than welcome to Döblin, whose 1917 »Berliner Programm« calls for a new »Kinostil« to revive the defunct genre of the novel.<sup>11</sup> But Döblin's »Kinostil« is not intended to invoke an art of montage; it more likely recalls nickelodeons that projected an assemblage of largely nonnarrative short films.<sup>12</sup> Despite this fact, the reading of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* that insists on the work's transgressive originality by comparing it to practices of film (or, for that matter, to those of Dada), if only through loose association, has come at the cost of one that looks backward. A reading of the novel willing to put to rest overwhelming claims to its modernism reveals that this book is less an anticipation or adaption of contemporaneous practices from either film or the visual arts and instead very much a »paper object« that formally and thematically explores the materiality of paper and specific paper media.<sup>13</sup> To look backward means to demonstrate how *Berlin Alexanderplatz* relies on and emerges from much more long-standing media practices.

<sup>10</sup> See Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, new ed., Göttingen 2017, 96–107.

<sup>11</sup> Alfred Döblin, »An Romanautoren und ihre Kritiker. Berliner Programm«, in: Döblin, *Schriften zu Ästhetik, Poetik und Literatur*, ed. Erich Kleinschmidt, unnumbered vol. of *Ausgewählte Werke*, Olten 1989, 119–123, here: 121.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Jelavich explains: »Döblin's sense of a *Kinostil* was based on the aesthetics of the nickelodeons, venues that were disappearing rapidly when he wrote the essay in 1913. Two years earlier, narrative feature films had begun to conquer the cinemas, often using popular novels as bases for screenplays; hence it was highly paradoxical that Döblin told his fellow authors to develop a self-consciously antiliterary style based on a type of cinema that was already passé.« Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Alexanderplatz. Radio, Film, and the Death of Weimar Culture*, Berkeley 2006, 14.

<sup>13</sup> See Anke te Heesen, *Der Zeitungsausschnitt. Ein Papierobjekt der Moderne*, Frankfurt a. M. 2006.



A wealth of recent scholarship on the late nineteenth century has amply shown the importance of situating its literature in the media environment of the era.<sup>14</sup> As Petra McGillen cautions us, although we read realist texts in book form, authors and readers of nineteenth-century fiction were familiar with a variety of print formats and were adept at switching between them. My objective, in part, is to apply that awareness regarding the diversity of print formats in the nineteenth century to a work of literary modernism that strived to leave behind the realist tradition and was celebrated for doing so. Pursuing this objective entails tracing *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in its different formats, as manuscript and as a serial novel, and considering how these texts took shape within specific paper-based practices. Taking these formats seriously demonstrates that *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, rather than implementing a new cinematic style, returns to a much older debate concerning the relationship between literature and the newspaper – which Döblin (in his 1928 review of *Ulysses*) acknowledged as »das wichtigste, verbreitetste Schrifterzeugnis, [...] das tägliche Brot aller Menschen«. <sup>15</sup> In effect we should expect nothing other than an interpolation of these relationships from a book so often compared to *Ulysses*. Although often associated as works of literary montage, a second obvious similarity has gone overlooked: Franz Biberkopf and Leopold Bloom are newspaper men, albeit at different stages of the production and supply process. And both texts concern, furthermore, the consequences of journalistic narration for the novel. Lothar Müller's observation that »bei Joyce, nimmt der Roman die Entfaltung der Zeitung zum Massenmedium nicht nur als Stoff in sich auf, sondern als formbildende Kraft« is equally true of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.<sup>16</sup>

In 1831, Honoré de Balzac already opines that no work of literature could possibly compete with the compact brilliance of the new genre of the *fait divers* – a conclusion he not incidentally comes to after recalling the grizzly story of a young woman's suicide.<sup>17</sup> A century later, building on his reading of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Benjamin similarly attributes the demise of storytelling to the press (with the difference that

<sup>14</sup> Exemplary for situating the making of realist literature in its diverse paper media are Petra McGillen, *The Fontane Workshop. Manufacturing Realism in the Industrial Age of Print*, New York 2019; Claudia Stöckinger, *An den Ursprüngen populärer Serialität. Das Familienblatt »Die Gartenlaube«*, Göttingen 2018; and Manuela Günter, *Im Vorhof der Kunst. Mediengeschichten der Literatur im 19. Jahrhundert*, Bielefeld 2008. These studies follow up on Rudolf Helmstetter's earlier critique of a scholarly »Medienblindheit« that refuses to take preprints into consideration in readings of literature. Helmstetter, *Die Geburt des Realismus aus dem Dunst des Familienblattes. Fontane und die öffentlichkeitsgeschichtlichen Rahmenbedingungen des Poetischen Realismus*, München 1998, 66.

<sup>15</sup> Alfred Döblin, »Ulysses« von Joyce«, in: *Aufsätze zur Literatur*, unnumbered vol. of *Ausgewählte Werke*, Olten 1963, 287–290, here: 288.

<sup>16</sup> Müller continues, »Er nimmt die Herausforderung an, eignet sich die Energien, die durch das Zeitungspapier zirkulieren, an.« Lothar Müller, *Weisse Magie. Die Epoche des Papiers*, München 2012, 326–327. Sara Danius also very helpfully situates *Ulysses* within the competing ambitions of literature and journalism in »Joyce's Scissors. Modernism and the Dissolution of the Event«, *New Literary History* 39 (2008), 989–1016.

<sup>17</sup> In *La peau de chagrin*, Balzac describes the world of the *faits divers* as a challenge to literature: »Wo findet man im Ozean der Literatur ein oben schwimmendes Buch, das sich an Genie mit folgender Zeitungsnotiz messen könnte: ›Gestern um vier Uhr hat sich eine junge Frau vom Point-des-Arts in die Seine gestürzt.‹ Von diesem Pariser Lakonismus erleben die Dramen, die Romane und schlechthin alles...«. Quoted from Müller (note 16), 272.

he blames the mass dissemination of information and not the brilliance of the *fait divers*).<sup>18</sup> Throughout his programmatic writings, Döblin too positions himself along these battle lines. Both the novel and the newspaper, he argues, share the same basic form (»Grundform«) of a report (»Bericht«) and hence use the imperfect.<sup>19</sup> Döblin speaks of the novel, but close attention to the attacks suggest that he is specifically targeting the serialized novel, which he holds accountable for what he describes as the simplification of plotlines and the public's consequent illiteracy: »Die Vereinfachung des Romans auf jene fortschreitende eine Handlung hin hängt mit der zunehmenden, raffiniert gezüchteten Lesunfähigkeit des Publikums zusammen. Zeit ist genug da, aber sie werden völlig ruiniert durch die Zeitungen«. <sup>20</sup> Yet *Berlin Alexanderplatz* does much more than rehearse these prejudices against the roman-feuilleton as being a simplistic, low-brow, and commercialized form of literature or the well-worn criticisms against journalism as possessing merely informational value and robbing the public of its interest in and time for books. *Berlin Alexanderplatz* aspires to nothing less than recovering the task of poetic truth-telling, which Döblin took to be the achievement of the greatest epics of the past, but with the difference that this truth is necessarily mediated by forms of popular print media.<sup>21</sup> This emphatically understood poetic truthfulness is not one that reveals itself in between the cracks of different fragmented documents but only within culturally inherited practices of narration and their paper media.

## I.

The description of the novel as a work of montage is initially borne out by a look at the handwritten manuscripts now held at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach. The manuscript famously includes newspaper clippings pasted onto handwritten pages.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> »Auf der anderen Seite erkennen wir, wie mit der durchgebildeten Herrschaft des Bürgertums, zu deren wichtigsten Instrumenten im Hochkapitalismus die Presse gehört, eine Form der Mitteilung auf den Plan tritt, die, soweit ihr Ursprung auch zurückliegen mag, die epischen Form nie vordem auf bestimmende Weise beeinflusst hat. Nun aber tut sie das. Und es zeigt sich, dass sie der Erzählung nicht weniger fremd aber viel bedrohlicher als der Roman gegenübertritt, den sie übrigens ihrerseits einer Krise zuführt. Diese neue Form der Mitteilung ist die Information.« Walter Benjamin, »Der Erzähler: Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows«, in: Benjamin, *Aufsätze, Essays, Vorträge*, vol. 2.2 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt a. M. 1980, 438–465, here: 444.

<sup>19</sup> Alfred Döblin. »Der Bau des epischen Werks«, in: Döblin, *Schriften zu Ästhetik, Poetik und Literatur* (note 11), 215–245, here: 215, 216.

<sup>20</sup> Alfred Döblin. »Bemerkungen zum Roman«, in: Döblin, *Schriften zu Ästhetik, Poetik und Literatur* (note 11), 123–127, here: 124. Döblin specifically speaks of the serial novel printed on the same page and in the same verb form as a news report, but he calls the news report true and the novel fiction.

<sup>21</sup> »Sie sehen aber jetzt klar das Verhältnis der beiden Kunstspären, die im Epischen mit der Berichtform zusammenhängen, wie ich eben zeigte: die phantastische und Fabuliersphäre, das ist nur die Negation der realen Sphäre und garantiert ein Spiel mit der Realität – die überreale Sphäre, das ist die Sphäre einer neuen Wahrheit und einer ganz besonderen Realität«. Döblin, »Der Bau des epischen Werks« (note 19), 223.

<sup>22</sup> I hereby refer to the 1200 pages that Werner Stauffacher designates the »Haupthandschrift« of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Werner Stauffacher, »Nachwort des Herausgebers«, in: Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (note 3), 837–851.





These clippings are in all likelihood taken from Döblin's personal collection of newspaper excerpts, whose disordered remnants are likewise archived at Marbach. The jagged edges of these clippings, the fact that they are not mounted, and the disordered status of the few remaining cartons of Döblin's collection suggest that Döblin or his family members cut the clippings themselves and did not make use of a professional clipping office akin to those Anke te Heesen has described.<sup>23</sup> As a list of Döblin's sources for *Berlin Alexanderplatz* compiled by Gabriele Sander attests, the clippings and citations employed in the novel are taken from an incredibly wide range of newspaper publications that appeared during his work on the manuscript between 1927 and 1928. Their variety demonstrates his avid and broad consumption of newspapers from throughout the Weimar Republic and from across the political spectrum.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to these newspaper clippings, the folded pages on which this early draft is written are supplemented with further paper scraps including loose sheets, postcards, advertisements, and pages torn from Döblin's prescription pads. All of these paper items, it should be noted, stem from types of media produced on small paper formats that are typically intended to be quickly discarded after use. On account of their small formats and differing paper types, these inserts easily distinguish themselves from the main body of the manuscript. *Berlin Alexanderplatz* of course contains a wealth of citations from the more permanent medium of the book as well, yet these are copied (and often paraphrased) from their original sources in Döblin's handwriting rather than directly cut and pasted. To my knowledge, there is no evidence that Döblin ever took a pair scissors to a book.

As scholars familiar with the manuscript have noted – primarily in the interests of arguing for or against the influence of Joyce's *Ulysses* on Döblin – the newspaper clippings, further citations, and interior monologues seem to have been subsequently added to the manuscript. This is especially evident in the first seventy pages. In the case of book 2, for example, which I cited at the beginning of this article, the ten pages citing the city services, newspapers, schedules, and advertisements were subsequently added to the manuscript by means of loose sheets that Döblin and scholars refer to as »Beiblätter« or addenda.<sup>25</sup> These addenda were subsequently used

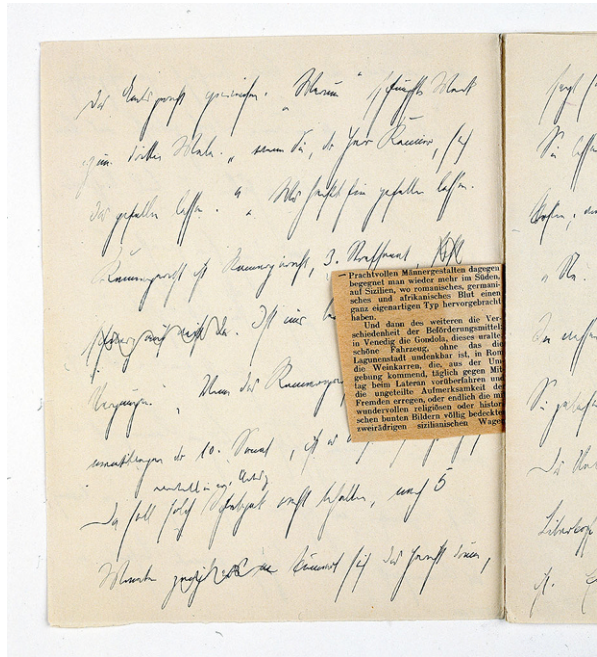
<sup>23</sup> See te Heesen (note 13). From 1983 to 2001, the family did make use of a professional clipping service to collect mentions of Alfred Döblin. These are likewise now held in Marbach. My thanks to Andreas Kozlik at the Literaturarchiv Marbach for this information.

<sup>24</sup> See Gabriele Sander, »Alfred Döblins *Berlin Alexanderplatz* – ein multimediales Schreibprojekt«, in: Wolfgang Lukas, Rüdiger Nutt-Kofoth, Madleen Podewski (eds.), *Text – Material – Medium. Zur Relevanz editorischer Dokumentationen für die literaturwissenschaftliche Interpretation*, Berlin 2014, 123–133, here: 129.

<sup>25</sup> The subsequent addition of these citations to book 2 is discussed at length in Breon Mitchell, »Joyce and Döblin. At the crossroads of ›Berlin Alexanderplatz‹«, *Contemporary Literature* 12/2 (1971), 173–187. On the initial ten pages of book 2, which I described at the beginning of this article, Mitchell writes, »It is [...] particularly interesting that the entire section was added at a later date. The first draft of the manuscript continues directly from the end of Book One (skipping the pages just described) to the bottom of p. 54 in Book Two« (180). Klaus Müller-Salget and Sander (note 24) share Mitchell's observation that the clippings were added at a subsequent point to the manuscript but do not believe this timeline suggests that Döblin attempted to imitate *Ulysses*. Döblin himself insisted that he had completed the first fourth of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* before reading Joyce's work. See Klaus Müller-Salget, »Zur Entstehung von Döblins *Berlin Alexanderplatz*«, in: Matthias Prangel (ed.), *Materialien zu Alfred Döblin, »Berlin Alexanderplatz«*, Frankfurt a. M. 1975, 117–135.



**Figure 2** Page of the manuscript of book 2 with an unaffixed newspaper clipping. The text contained on this newspaper clipping is not included in the book edition. Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, Bestand A: Döblin, Berlin Alexanderplatz, Inv.-Nr. 97.7

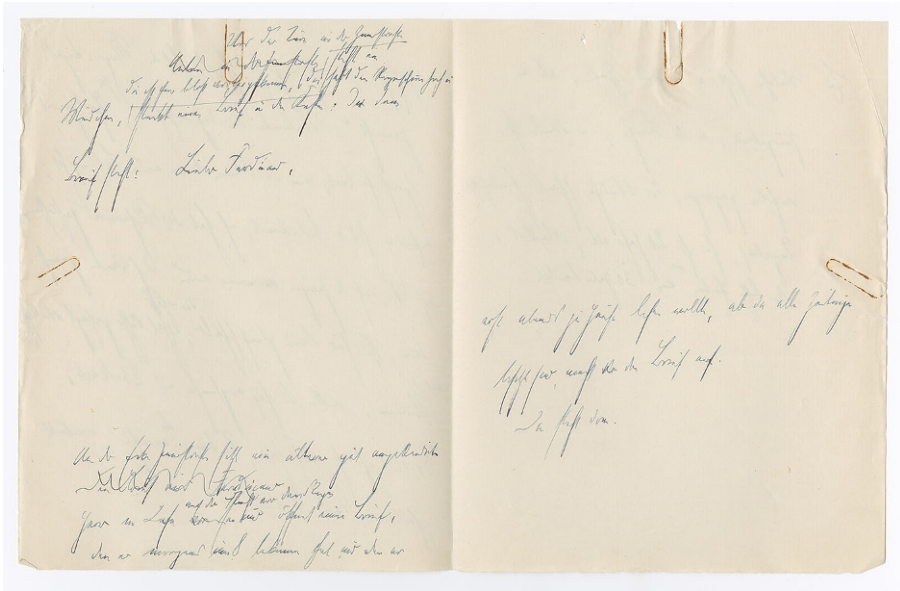


for additions and revisions to the manuscript. Although comparing the manuscript and book edition is made difficult by the fact that critical intermediary steps are missing (including the typewritten version likely produced by Erna Döblin and the proofs set by Fischer Verlag), it is clear that most of these supplementary paper clippings were discarded at later stages.<sup>26</sup> While the temporality of these addenda has been discussed at length, what has received less attention is the ways in which they were appended to the manuscript. In some cases the fragmented addenda and newspaper clippings were pasted directly into the manuscript, yet Döblin often made use of methods more temporary and fragile than glue.<sup>27</sup> Many newspaper clippings and other small addenda were simply placed in between manuscript pages (see fig. 2) or folded along its edges, occasionally with lines drawn to mark where the text should be inserted. Döblin also made copious use of paper clips to heft paper cuttings onto the manuscript, and their rusty traces are still visible throughout (see fig. 3). Döblin similarly used these methods – the fold and the paper clip – to append handwritten additions and revisions to the manuscript recorded on slips of cut paper.

The specific techniques beyond that of glue for appending these paper fragments to the main pages of the manuscript – the fold, paper clip, and simply being placed

<sup>26</sup> On Erna Döblin's role in the preparation of Döblin's manuscripts, see Sander (note 24), 126. The best reconstructions of the history of Döblin's work on the manuscript are Müller-Salget's (note 25) and Stauffacher's (note 22).

<sup>27</sup> Sander provides a systematic overview of the different ways in which clippings were integrated into the manuscript. She too notes that the use of loose paper pages and scraps (»Beiblätter«), folds, and paper clips suggests that these clippings were subsequently added to the handwritten manuscript. Sander (note 24), 127.



**Figure 3** Manuscript from book 7 with traces of four paper clips that presumably affixed the letter to »Ferdinand« to the main sheets. Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, Bestand A: Döblin, Berlin Alexanderplatz, Inv.-Nr. 97.7.125

between manuscript pages – are significant because they preserve the mobility of the paper fragment and text. They are, in other words, mobile media, in the sense that they can be moved at will as well as removed and disposed of.<sup>28</sup> Their mobility was further enhanced by the fact that they could be easily distinguished from the main body of the manuscript both in terms of their paper quality and their smaller size as clippings or scraps. To make the point again, when not permanently affixed, the newspaper clippings and paper fragments recording handwritten revisions could not only be easily identified but also added, moved, combined, or omitted (and, for that matter, easily displaced or misplaced) throughout the writing process. By contrast, the text handwritten on the blank and folded sheets that constitute the main body of the manuscript sustained revisions by being crossed out; larger portions of the text could also be moved by rearranging the pages. These pages could be reordered but did not possess the same degree of mobility of the textual elements recorded on smaller scraps of paper.

These operations with mobile paper fragments suggest that in many cases what a reader of a book edition of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* experiences as literary montage is, in the original manuscript, the result of subsequently inserted mobile elements that

<sup>28</sup> I borrow the term »mobile elements« from Markus Krajewski's account of the affordances of notecards. Their qualities, including portability and combinability, derive, in part, from their small format. The small formats and distinct paper quality of the paper clippings and fragments likewise meant that they could be easily identified and handled. Markus Krajewski, »Spiel. Visite. Wissen. Die Macht der kleinen Karten«, in: Irmgard M. Wirtz, Magnus Wieland (eds.), *Paperworks. Literarische und kulturelle Praktiken mit Schere, Leim, Papier*, Göttingen 2017, 49–71.

move among a much more continuous body of text originally devoted largely to the main protagonist. *Berlin Alexanderplatz* thereby confirms that literary montage relies on the specific affordances of paper to be folded, cut, glued, and moved, and the fact that it itself is of little value and can be discarded without a loss. The case of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* more surprisingly also suggests that the montage of cut and pasted newspaper clippings, if that is the correct term, does not simply undermine authorial intention and the author's voice, as some of Döblin's contemporaries had hoped.<sup>29</sup> To the extent that the text cites extraneous textual sources, intentionality is instead displaced from the act of writing to the placement and removal of these mobile paper media. Finally, fully appreciating these mobile paper media as such entails situating *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in a longer history of portable paper media – whether they be notecards, paper scraps, or newspaper clippings – and the important roles they have played in crafting literary texts.<sup>30</sup>

## II.

While the manuscript of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* has, as a consequence of being archived at Marbach and regularly exhibited there, received sustained attention, the same cannot be said of the novel's serial preprint. This oversight stems, in all likelihood, from traditional prejudices against serialized novels as a form of lowbrow writing and a felt need to distance this now canonical work from that past.<sup>31</sup> For Döblin, however, it was as a matter of course that the novel would be preprinted. After being turned down by at least one, perhaps two Berlin papers, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was first published under that title in the highbrow and left-leaning *Frankfurter Zeitung* in twenty-nine installments between 8 September and 11 October 1929.<sup>32</sup> Shorter preprints appeared in a variety of publications, including *Die neue Rundschau*, *Die literarische Welt*, the *Berliner Tageblatt*, and *Vorwärts*, such that in total three-fifths of the manuscript appeared in periodical publications before being published as a book by Fischer. It is precisely the serial that generated the first flood of critical responses and acclaim – a flood substantial enough that

<sup>29</sup> See Juliane Vogel, »Kampfplatz spitzer Gegenstände. Schneiden und Schreiben nach 1900«, in: Helmut Lethen, Annegret Pelz, Michael Rohrwasser (eds.), *Konstellationen – Versuchsanordnungen des Schreibens*, Göttingen 2013, 67–82.

<sup>30</sup> For the outlines of such a history, see the contributions to Wirtz, Wieland (eds.) (note 28).

<sup>31</sup> I take Fore's »Döblin's Epic« to be representative of a traditional dismissal of the serial print of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as unrelated to the book edition. Fore argues that »the different versions of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* – the preprints in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, the alternate versions in the Döblin archive in Marbach, or the text published by Samuel Fischer in 1929 – all tell different stories. This was because each time Döblin wrote the text, he wrote it anew.« Fore (note 5), 196. Hannah Sullivan's *The Work of Revision*, Cambridge 2013, makes a compelling case, in contrast, for looking specifically at processes of revision for aiding textual understanding.

<sup>32</sup> »Dies Buch, von den beiden liberalen Hauptzeitungen Berlins für den Vorabdruck abgelehnt, wurde von der alten »Frankfurter Zeitung« vorabgedruckt und erregte schon damals einiges Aufsehen.« Alfred Döblin, »Nachwort«, in: *Schriften zu Leben und Werk*, ed. Erich Kleinschmidt, unnumbered vol. of *Ausgewählte Werke*, Olten 1986, 463–465, here: 464. While Döblin's letters record being turned down by the *Vossischen Zeitung*, it's unclear if and from where the second rejection came.



the *Frankfurter Zeitung* felt compelled to publish a summary and response to the letters it had received.<sup>33</sup> To the serial's readers likely also belonged the newspaper's impressive roster of contributing literary and artistic heavyweights, including Benjamin himself.<sup>34</sup> If we put our habitual preference for the book edition aside and attend to the novel's original print, it becomes dramatically apparent how practices of serialization were of defining significance to *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. This is to say that Döblin's novel was not simply also printed and read as a serial but rather that the text inherited much from the genre.

Among the immediate affinities to the serialized novel belong the use of popular dialect, the focus on a socially deviant protagonist whose aberrances from social norms serve to prolong the plot, and an absurdly sensationalist storyline: a story of thievery, betrayal, prostitution, and murder that ensures that each potential installment of the novel will not be without suspense and action.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the very narrative rhythm established in the novel's preface, which foretells that Biberkopf will suffer three fatal blows, easily synchronizes with the rhythmical periodicity of a newspaper publication. The ambition to cater to the expectations of periodical readers is also very much on display in an initial advertisement for the book edition printed by Fischer. The advertisement promises an action-packed, suspenseful story of the shadowy urban underworld: »Ein erschütterndes Menschenschicksal / Ein atemraubender Kriminalroman / Ein Sittenbild der Berliner Unterwelt / Ein Ereignis in der heutigen Erzählungskunst / IST BERLIN ALEXANDERPLATZ«. <sup>36</sup> While it may be tempting to dismiss these characterizations of the novel as a mere marketing strategy, they also provide a compelling account of the novel that ultimately does appeal to its readers by means of its pulp qualities. Placing the emphasis on this thematic focus of the novel suggests that *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, rather than marking the culmination of the German literary avant-garde, might instead be open to well-worn attacks against the serial as a form of low-brow, commodified writing, that is, the antithesis of true literature, as famously voiced by its most vehement critic, Karl Kraus. Like the *fait divers*, in which Balzac and Kraus suspected the end of

<sup>33</sup> The *Frankfurter Zeitung* printed a first anonymous and critical response on 24 October 1929 and then responded to a flood of letters on 1 November 1929. Excerpts from these letters were compiled and cited by the editors. These are also reprinted in Stauffacher (note 22), 853–854.

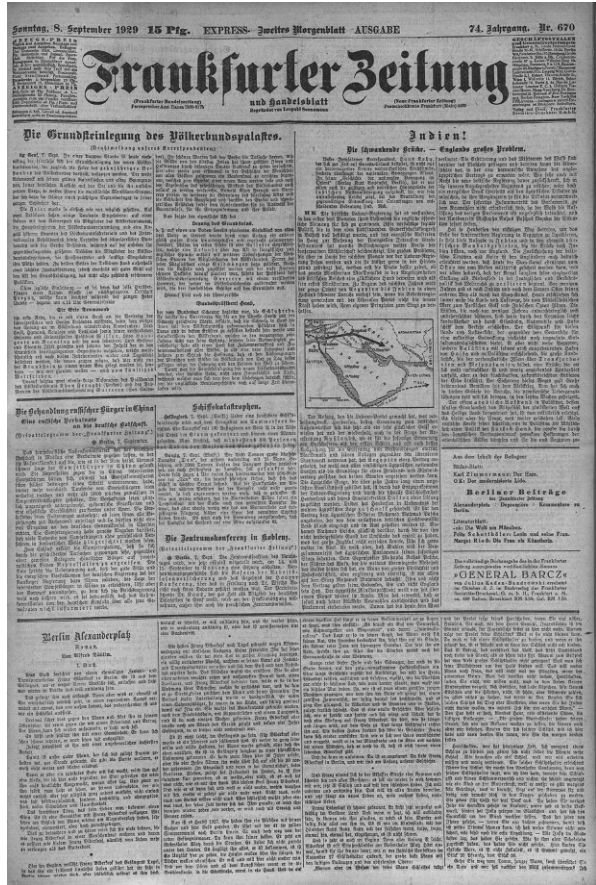
<sup>34</sup> On the *Frankfurter Zeitung*'s celebrated circles of readers and writers, see Almut Todorow, *Das Feuilleton der »Frankfurter Zeitung« in der Weimarer Republik. Zur Grundlegung einer rhetorischen Medienforschung*, Tübingen 1996.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Brooks has persuasively argued that serial novels often starred criminal or otherwise aberrant protagonists to a significant degree because the protagonist's aberrations served as a means of prolonging the twists and turns of the plot. »Deviance as a question in social pathology offers an opportunity for tracing its arabesque figure as plot. That »arabesque« [...] represents the opposite of the straight line: it is the longest possible line between two points, or rather, the maintenance of the greatest possible deviance and detour between beginning and end, depending on the play of retardation, repetition, and return in the postponement and progressive unveiling of the end.« Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot. Design and Intention in Narrative*, Cambridge, MA 1992, 155–156.

<sup>36</sup> The advertisement is reprinted in Prangel (note 25), 87.



Figure 4 The first installment of the serialized Berlin Alexanderplatz. The serial is located on the bottom of the page under the thick so-called »Feuilletonstrich«. Front Page of the Frankfurter Zeitung, 8 September 1929



literature, Döblin's novel too attempts to hook its readers with stories of the violent deaths of lovesick women.<sup>37</sup>

Reading *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in the tradition of the serialized novel might even prompt an alternative, albeit ungenerous, explanation for the presence of the textual elements typically described as montage elements. Since the roman-feuilleton was consistently under pressure to prolong storylines so as to provide a maximal number of installments and so secure a long-term readership, one might be led to think that

<sup>37</sup> Karl Kraus's essay »Die chinesische Mauer«, which Kraus selected to introduce himself to a broader public and was published in *Die Fackel* in 1909, begins by citing a popular *fait divers* item concerning the murder of New York's Elsie Siegel. It is certainly worth noting that both Balzac and Kraus voice their fascination for and critique of the *fait divers* by citing two examples of gruesome violence against women. While Kraus's essay may be easily contextualized within the contemporaneous fascination for violence committed against female bodies, about which Tatar has written extensively, the two critiques together suggest a certain affinity between the genre of the *fait divers* and a thematic focus on misogynist violence. For a discussion of this Weimar fascination, see Maria Tatar, *Lustmord. Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany*, Princeton 1995. For a discussion of Kraus's essay in the context of his critique of journalism, see Bernd Witte, »Feuilletonismus. Benjamin, Kraus, Heine«, *German Quarterly* 87/2 (Spring 2014), 171–195.



Döblin made use of newspaper clippings and other cited sources as filler. Closer comparison of the serial and book editions suggests this is not the case. While it is impossible to know which text (serial or book edition) was completed first, when compared, the serial consists of a heavily redacted version of the book, from which the citations are almost entirely excised. Ultimately only two-fifths of the book edition appeared in serialized edition in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*.<sup>38</sup> For example, the ten pages of heterogeneous text with which book 2 of the book edition begins are entirely absent from the serial.

In the pages of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is almost entirely stripped to its plot-related elements (as is also true of the radio-play version Döblin helped prepare in the year following the book edition). The presence of citations and paraphrases from external sources in the original manuscript as mobile media would have eased the task of producing different versions of the text, one with and one without these citations. The fact, in other words, that they were materially set apart from the body of the manuscript would have facilitated the process of producing a version stripped down to the sensationalist plotline and more suitable to the format of a newspaper serial and the associated expectations of its readers. While the individual installments in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* are largely reduced to the plot-related elements of the story of Biberkopf, they are also supplemented with transitions intended to tie them together and enhance their comprehensibility. The beginning of the serialized novel well illustrates these adaptations to the print medium. Like the book edition, it begins with Biberkopf's release from prison, but rather than describing his journey into Berlin, the serial first recounts Ida's murder: »Sie haben Franz Biberkopf nach Tegel gebracht wegen Körperverletzung mit tödlichem Ausgang«. It then continues with an unambiguous and vivid description of Ida's death.<sup>39</sup> The reader is thereby initiated into the novel with the backstory needed to understand both why Biberkopf was imprisoned and why he, over the course of the plot, must be redeemed.

While one might be eager to dismiss or disregard the serial as a popular or uncreative version of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, attending to the context of this edition also provides an alternative perspective on the so-called style of montage. After all, the serial has no need for the heterogeneous fragments in large part sourced from newspapers because they are inevitably supplied by the surrounding print in which the serial appeared. When printed in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, each brief installment of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was located on the »ground floor« (in German: *unter dem Feuilletonstrich*) of a spread of thematically unrelated texts juxtaposed by the page layout. The first installment, for example, from Sunday, 8 September 1929, was printed on a page below two lead articles on »Die Grundsteinlegung des Völker-

<sup>38</sup> Stauffacher (note 22), 468.

<sup>39</sup> *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 8 September 1929. In the book edition, in contrast, Ida's death is only recounted at the end of book 2. For comparison, Mieke's death is excised from the serial and replaced with a »Zwischenbemerkung der Redaktion«: »Wir lassen hier einen grösseren Abschnitt aus Döblins Roman fort. Er enthält die Ermordung der Freundin des Franz Biberkopfs«. *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 1 October 1929. Whether the lacuna was intended to protect the sensibilities of newspaper readers or to ensure that they purchase the book edition is unclear. But the description of Mieke's mutilated body following the note mostly makes up for the absence.



bundspalastes« and »Indien! Die schwankende Brück. – Englands großes Problem« as well as a number of smaller items (see fig. 4).<sup>40</sup> This is to say that on the recto and verso of the first page of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, Biberkopf's story was framed, formally within the layout and with regard to a reader's experience, by a selection of reports on local and world events, not to mention illustrations and advertisements. Within its print context, the serialized edition of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* thus already belongs to a nonlinear experience of immediacy and presence, the here and now of the newsworthy event. It is an experience of simultaneity made possible by the temporal and spatial norms of this particular print format rather than by means of a scissor-driven attack on narrative conventions.

Returning to the first book edition that appeared at the conclusion of the serial in October 1929, what we might characterize as a style of montage reads not so much as the realization of a cinematic style but as a simulation of the reading experience of a serialized novel. By incorporating a large variety of citations tangential to Biberkopf's story and largely drawn from current newspapers, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* replicates the spread of texts from which a newspaper is composed. What's more, the first book edition (unlike the serial, but in a manner similar to *Ulysses*) makes selective use of headings to divide the novel not only into nine books but also into smaller subsections, some of which explicitly mimic newspaper headlines and taglines.<sup>41</sup> An example of such a headline is illustrated in figure 1: »Franz Biberkopf betritt Berlin«. The lengthy chapter headings at the beginning of each of the nine books function much like the transitions added to serialized novels, serving to orient the reader in the current installment by recalling past events and predicting the next. Most importantly, by citing from a variety of texts, the book edition of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* ultimately recreates the serial experience of delayed gratification, first guiding readers away from Biberkopf's action-packed story before allowing them to return to it. In effect, reading the novel in either version never entailed following an uninterrupted storyline; in each case the next »installment« of Biberkopf's life was deferred by adjacent texts.

By no means do I wish to suggest that there are not significant differences between the formats and reading experiences of the serialized and book editions. For one thing, the typeset of the book obviously does away with most conventions of layout and typesetting that the newspaper uses to distinguish types of content. It likewise erases the sutures visible both in the manuscript and in the serial. And although the content of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* had a more global focus in comparison to the more local focus on events in Berlin in the book, the novel ultimately cites a broader spectrum of texts and genres than does the typical daily. My point is that taking into account the serialized edition in a history of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* suggests that the book edition not only borrows from the press through direct citation or paraphrase but also belongs thematically and formally to the tradition of the serialized novel.

<sup>40</sup> *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 9 September 1929.

<sup>41</sup> In contrast, the newspaper installments omit these headings and instead, as to be expected from the roman-feuilleton, are furnished with a title, in this case »Berlin Alexanderplatz. Roman. Von Alfred Döblin«, and the installment number and concluded with »Fortsetzung folgt«. Breaks in the body of the text are marked with asterisks.



Placing it in this tradition also provides an alternative account of the style too quickly labeled as literary montage.

### III.

To the tradition of the roman-feuilleton belongs its placement in the ground floor of the leading page where it was set off from news reports by a thick line (as depicted in fig. 4). As a formalized gesture, this line was meant to sequester the realms of fact and fiction from one another. But an abundance of recent research on nineteenth-century serials has demonstrated the varied ways in which both reporting and serialized literature challenged the rigidity of this line by playing off of neighboring texts.<sup>42</sup> Not only did serialized fiction frequently invoke or rely on factual information printed above the line, its own reality effect depended on referring to the facticity promised by the publication venue and on employing the narrative styles of reportage used elsewhere in the same publication. It is not least for this reason that Döblin observes, as I noted earlier, that the realist novel shares the form of the report (»Bericht«) with the newspaper. In »Der Bau des epischen Werks«, Döblin even introduces the lead question »Ist der Bericht die Grundform des Epischen?« in the figure of a newspaper reader, »ein vernünftiger ruhiger Mann«, who hesitates »unter dem Strich zu lesen« because he knows what follows is, in contrast to what he has just read above the line, a lie.<sup>43</sup>

At issue in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* too is the affinity or difference between a newspaper's fact and a fiction's lie. This question is embodied most poignantly in the character of Biberkopf, who is a hawker and a reader of newspapers.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Biberkopf is so avid a consumer that he imagines newspapers to have oracular powers. He trusts the paper (he's not picky about which one) to tell and foretell the truth, and he subsequently searches among them trying to find what has happened and what will happen. In the subchapter titled »Sonntag, den 8. April 1928«, the same day he will undertake his first burglary with Pum's gang and will lose his arm, he seemingly rouses from a dream thinking that something has gone wrong: »Was ist denn heute los [...]?«<sup>45</sup> Desperate for an interpreter of his dream, he looks in the morning newspaper: »Er suchte in der Morgenzeitung, sah auf die Überschriften«,

<sup>42</sup> For example, Norbert Bachleitner draws attention to multiple ways in which serialized novels play off of their publication context in *Fiktive Nachrichten. Die Anfänge des fiktiven Feuilletonromans*, Würzburg 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Döblin, »Der Bau des epischen Werks« (note 19), 217.

<sup>44</sup> At repeated points the narrator mentions that Biberkopf is hawking newspapers, including the notorious *Völkischer Beobachter*, the party paper of the NSDAP. Mentions of Biberkopf selling newspapers often precede cited news events, giving the impression either that Biberkopf is reading the papers he sells or that the excerpts belong to that issue. For example, the statement »Franz handelt nun völkische Zeitungen« is followed by text taken from three newspaper clippings. Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (note 3), 82. In an alternative ending to the novel, Biberkopf also again becomes a newspaper hawker. See Hans-Peter Bayerdörfer, »Der Wissende und die Gewalt. Alfred Döblins Theorie des epischen Werkes und der Schluss von »Berlin Alexanderplatz«, *DVjs* 44 (1970), 318–353, here: 321.

<sup>45</sup> Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (note 3), 199. The selection of events I discuss in this section are largely identical in the serial and book editions.

but when he only finds »lauter Kleinigkeiten« and no explanation of his premonitions, he leaves to find the afternoon editions. Cilly, the woman he is currently living with, refuses to believe that something has happened and jokes that nothing of significance can be found in the pages of the newspaper anyway. When Biberkopf first asks her for the paper, she replies »Wird drinstehen: een Müllwagen hat ne Panne gehabt am Prenzlauer Tor, und der ganze Müll ist runtergelaufen. Oder, warte mal: ein Zeitungshändler hat Geld zu wechseln gehabt und hat aus Versehen richtig rausgegeben«. <sup>46</sup> Her statement is revealing and points to the central terms in which the newspaper is thematized throughout the novel. Because the paper on which the newspaper is printed and the publication itself possess little monetary value, any reporting on the transportation of garbage will itself soon belong to that refuse. Moreover, the worthlessness of the newspaper in mere monetary terms rubs off both on the truth value of the reporting and the integrity of newspaper hawkers (presumably including Biberkopf). Buried in Cilly's flippant remarks is a question key to the novel in its entirety, namely, how it is possible for an itself expendable medium to be the bearer of valuable truth? A second passage presses this strange disjuncture between the value of the paper and the (truth) value of its reporting: »Was macht es aus, wenn zwei Berliner Paddler in der Donau ertrunken sind, oder Nungesser ist abgestürzt mit seinem ›Weißen Vogel‹ bei Irland. Was schreien die auf der Straße aus, für 10 Pfennig kauft man es, schmeißt es weg, läßt es wo liegen«. <sup>47</sup> The meagre material value of the newspaper colors its content so as to reduce it to mere information; with that comes the risk that its worthlessness carries over onto the lives lost. The text nearly anticipates future readers who lose sight of the novel's obvious tragic thematics with their focus on its medium, form, and disparate discourses.

When Biberkopf finally finds the afternoon editions, they too, true to Cilly's predictions, fail Biberkopf as an oracle and he finds no interpretation of his dream. »Wo ist denn nu bloß mein Unglück passiert?« he asks himself while leafing through one of the very publications that featured a preprint of the novel. »Er trat in eine kleine Kneipe, nahm einen Kümmel, blätterte im Vorwärts, Lokalanzeiger. Steht ooch nich mehr drin als in der Mottenpost, gibt da ein großes Rennen in England, Paris auch«. <sup>48</sup> The incommensurability between his intuition that something has happened and the fact that the newspapers do not report on any relevant event remains inexplicable to him. One could say that Döblin endows his protagonist with the premonition that he is nothing but a character in a newspaper serial, to whom nothing happens until it is published in the newspaper pages. What Biberkopf fails to realize, unfortunately, is that he, along with the novel's other readers, must wait for the next installment to find out that his dream was the foreboding omen he took it to be. In a twist of tragic irony, it is in searching for the newspaper that he chances to meet Pum's gang and arranges to participate in the thievery recounted two chapters later under the heading »Sonntag Nacht, Montag den 9. April«. While the newspapers fail to reveal his future, in searching for them he realizes the future he searched for. Thus, within Biberkopf's unfolding tragic fate, the newspaper sheds

<sup>46</sup> Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (note 3), 199.

<sup>47</sup> Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (note 3), 361.

<sup>48</sup> Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (note 3), 203–204.



the arbitrariness and dubious truthfulness of its content so as to become the catalyst of its own truthfulness.

While Biberkopf could not read ahead to learn his own fate, he does retrospectively learn of Mieke's death from the *Berliner Morgenpost*. Knowledge of Mieke's murder is mediated at each step of the story by unnamed newspapers: the police identify Reinhold as a suspect after two gardeners read a report of the murder in the paper and remember seeing him in the forest at that time, while the reader too learns that Reinhold has been imprisoned from a newspaper report.<sup>49</sup> After spending days with no word from Mieke, Biberkopf encounters a police-issued advertisement in the paper declaring him and Reinhold suspects for her murder. As the reader well knows, Biberkopf is innocent of this particular crime and the police's suspicion is unjust; the advertisement contains a serious falsity.

At the same time, the encounter with the newspaper is staged as the turning point when Biberkopf realizes that he murdered Ida and also shares responsibility for Mieke's death. This is a scene of anagnorisis. The surface falsity of the advertisement triggers a more profound truth: it is the moment when the tragic hero recognizes the truth of who he is and what he has done. Biberkopf is thereby comfortably situated among the ranks of his contemporaries who confirmed their selfhood by means of being mentioned in the paper.<sup>50</sup> The scene begins by again drawing attention to the fact that the moment of revelation is mediated by the newspaper. It also overtly draws attention to the expendable quality of the paper on which the advertisement is printed, though in this case it will nonetheless deliver on its promise of truth-telling.

[...] Eva bibbert und holt ein zerknautschtes Papier aus der Tasche, die sind wohl ganz übergefahren, machen die mit mir Theater oder nicht, wat steht denn in der Zeitung, vielleicht von unsere Sache in der Stralauer Straße, Franz steht auf, brüllt, det sind dämliche Weiber. »Affen ihr. Macht mit mir keen Theater, ihr haltet mir für euren Affen.« [...] Da reißt Franz über den Tisch der Dicken die Zeitung weg.

Sind da zwei Bilder neben einander, was, was, furchtbarer, furchtbarer gräßlicher Schreck, det bin – ick doch, det bin ick doch, warum denn, wegen de Stralauer Straße, warum denn, gräßlicher Schreck, det bin ick doch und denn Reinhold, Überschrift: Mord, Mord an einer Prostituierten bei Freienwalde, Emilie Parsunke aus Bernau. Mieke! Wat is denn det. Ick.

[...] Was is denn das für ne Zeitung, die Morgenpost. Die Hand geht auf mit dem Papier, die Hand geht runter mit dem Papier.

[...] Er hebt wieder das Blatt, sieht rein. Is mein Bild.<sup>51</sup>

Held up in his one hand that remains after the accident, his printed picture relieves him of the blindness that has plagued him thus far, soliciting the profoundest form

<sup>49</sup> Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (note 3), 376, 418.

<sup>50</sup> Te Heesen writes that subscriptions to newspaper-clipping services were often motivated by the desire to see and collect mentions of oneself. Seeing one's name – or in Biberkopf's case, one's portrait – in print provided a confirmation and affirmation of one's personhood. Te Heesen (note 13), 287–291. As I mentioned in note 23, Döblin's family employed a clipping service for this purpose.

<sup>51</sup> Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (note 3), 382–383.



of knowledge possible: self-knowledge. That knowledge is here encapsulated in the oft-repeated words »det bin Ick«. In this moment, Biberkopf learns of Mieke's end and also sees himself for the murderer he is, two truths invariably bound to one another in this crumpled paper.

By calling attention to its own theatricality, its staging – »Macht mit mir keen Theater«, Biberkopf pleads – the passage insists on being read specifically as a *scene* of anagnorisis. The revelation of this self-knowledge is somewhat anachronistically mediated by the conventions of tragedy, as Theodor Ziolkowski's observations on *Berlin Alexanderplatz* would lead us to expect. Ziolkowski (who incidentally also writes of the novel's »Form der Collage oder Montage«) concludes that *Berlin Alexanderplatz* adopts the rhythm of classic tragedy – a repetitive pattern of hamartia, peripeteia, and catastrophe – though not its meaning.<sup>52</sup> To that pattern come the frequent allusions to diverse tragic figures, in particular Orestes, to whom Biberkopf is often compared, and the portrayal of Biberkopf from the prologue onward as being destined to suffer a terrible fate. The scene described above is the cathartic moment readers of the novel have been waiting for through eight long books, the moment when Biberkopf sees himself for what he is. As in the case of Oedipus, the moment of Biberkopf's epiphanic insight is accompanied by a chorus of wailing women. These women, like the audience of readers, have come to the realization of his guilt much earlier and are waiting, so to speak, for him to catch up. But in this case, unlike for Oedipus, there is neither prophet nor messenger to help relay the truth, only the »zerknautschtes Papier« that Eva holds in her hand. Biberkopf's self-knowledge is a poetic truth mediated equally by the form of tragedy as by conventions of the press. The paper functions as a reminder that Biberkopf's self-knowledge depends on multiple interwoven practices of storytelling: reportage and the serialized novel of the newspaper but also those inherited from antique tragedy. Within this single scene, as for the novel in its entirety, precisely that interweaving is intended to recover the possibility of a poetic truth communicated on the otherwise ephemeral pages of a periodical publication soon destined to become refuse.

In the final pages of the novel, Biberkopf's self-knowledge will initiate an accelerated psychological demise leading to his internment as a psychiatric patient and finally to the scene of his cathartic rebirth. He, like Orestes and unlike Oedipus, will be redeemed from his crimes and released from his fate. In the final chapter of the book, he is visited by the voice of death who compels him to admit his responsibility for Ida's and Mieke's murders. Death's visit is staged as a scene of demontage and reassembly: Biberkopf is first »cut« into pieces by Death's scythe and then reborn free from his curse and free from guilt.

[...] Der Tod ist da.  
Franz schreit.

<sup>52</sup> Theodore Ziolkowski, *Strukturen des modernen Romans. Deutsche Beispiele und europäische Zusammenhänge*, München 1972, 96, 113. Ziolkowski concludes, to my mind unconvincingly, that at the end of the novel, Biberkopf comes to acknowledge reality, namely, the fact that he is living in 1930s Berlin and is not subject to a tragic, predestined fate. »Durch seine ›Tragödie‹ hat Biberkopf gelernt, das Schicksal zu verneinen und die Wirklichkeit anzunehmen« (125).



[...] Schwing fall hack.

Schwing, hack, hack, schwing, schwing hack, hack, hack.

Schwing, hack.

Schreit in den Abend, in den Abend. Die Nacht kommt.

Schreit in die Nacht, Franz in die Nacht.

Sein Körper schiebt sich weiter vor. Es werden auf dem Block geschlagen von seinem Körper Stück um Stück. Sein Körper schiebt sich automatisch vor, muß sich vorschieben, er kann nicht anders. Das Beil wirbelt in der Luft. Es blitzt und fällt. Es wird Zentimeter um Zentimeter zerhackt. Und jenseits, jenseits der Zentimeter, da ist der Körper nicht tot, da schiebt er sich vor, langsam weiter vor, es fällt nichts runter, lebt alles weiter.<sup>53</sup>

The repetitive cuts inflicted on Biberkopf recall both the novel's powerful slaughterhouse scenes and the deaths of Ida and Mieke, with the important difference that unlike the animals and women, he emerges from the ordeal alive. Biberkopf is cut apart, but in contrast to both Ida and Mieke, he is not dead. Like the cuts of montage, these cuts recreate the original trauma to which Biberkopf was subject in the past and display a creative power to fashion the new.<sup>54</sup> He is accordingly given, as the narrator comments, a second chance at life, this time free from his guilt and free from his curse but with the same identity papers: »Der andere hat dieselben Papiere wie Franz«. <sup>55</sup> He also has not been cured of his faith in the oracular powers of the newspaper, and immediately after being released from the psychiatric asylum, the new Franz Karl Biberkopf searches in the papers for news relating to himself or Mieke. And once again, failing to find any news of himself, he is as a loss as to his future: »Nichts«, he concludes, »Wo soll ich hingehn, wo werd ich hingehn?«<sup>56</sup>

Franz Biberkopf is, to push an analogy to its brink, a paper object that can be cut, reassembled, and so given new life. But this possibility is available only to the tragic hero and not to the women, who fatally succumb to wounds inflicted on their bodies. As the voice of death makes explicit, their deaths were precisely the price that needed to be paid for Biberkopf's self-knowledge. »Das überlege dir, ob du nicht selbst schuld bist, wenn sie nicht lebt. Und keine Träne um sie geweint, die für dich gestorben ist, für wen denn«. <sup>57</sup> If the cut possesses a regenerative energy, it is then one from which only the male hero can benefit. And if the bodily dismemberment suffered by the cast of female characters is the price that must be paid for the revelation of truth, the restitution of epic truth-telling, and a recovery from the crisis

<sup>53</sup> Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (note 3), 432.

<sup>54</sup> I here follow Brigid Doherty's argument that the practice of montage reenacts and induces an original traumatic shock. In this case, Franz Biberkopf's miraculous rebirth through cutting reenacts the trauma he presumably suffered as a Wehrmacht soldier and the trauma of Mieke's death. Brigid Doherty, »See: *We Are All Neurasthenics!*« or, The Trauma of Dada Montage«, *Critical Inquiry* 24 (Autumn 1997), 82–132.

<sup>55</sup> Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (note 3), 442.

<sup>56</sup> Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (note 3), 447.

<sup>57</sup> Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (note 3), 434. In his 1948 »Epilog« and the »Nachwort« to the 1955 edition of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Döblin identifies the novel's central theme as sacrifice. »Das innere Thema also lautet: Es heißt opfern, sich selbst zum Opfer bringen.« Döblin, »Nachwort« (note 32), 464.



of the genre of the novel, then at the very least the story of that cost should not be forgotten in the name of celebrating the achievements of literary montage.

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