

*Babylon Berlin: Weimar Gender Crises as a Modern Warning*

by

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*Certificate of Approval*

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Alexandra Evalita Moore has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in German Studies.

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## Abstract

The Weimar Republic was a particularly vibrant period of social and cultural progressiveness in German history, though it is often overshadowed by the economic collapse of 1929 and the outbreak of World War II and rise of fascism that shortly followed. This period saw a radical change from the traditional roles of women in society and home towards the idea of the “Neue Frau”. New women exercised more personal and sexual freedom as well as began to enter into the workplace. While women were experiencing this movement towards gender emancipation, Weimar men were facing turmoil and a crisis of masculinity due to the traumas of WWI. This crisis, however, was also greatly because of the destabilization of traditional gender and sexual identity which they returned to after the war, leaving them lost in their identity. The Netflix original German television series, *Babylon Berlin*, is a captivating fictional portrayal of life in Berlin at the cusp of the fall of the Weimar Republic. As the most expensive to produce non-English series ever to be made, *Babylon Berlin*, captivately depicts Weimar life, the pretty and the ugly. Themes of the changing gender role of women and the traumatized masculinity are a large part of the plot, giving modern viewers a more in-depth experience of this often-overlooked part of German history that was so unique for its short-lived progressiveness but also for its buildup to the fall into fascism and barbarity. In this thesis I focus on two of the main characters, Charlotte Ritter and Gereon Rath, to show that the lack of mental health treatment and the societal collective forgetting of the atrocities of war not only lead to widescale political instability and male hysteria, but also tragically hindered the female attempt to fully become a New Woman. I argue that *Babylon Berlin* consciously uses its themes and characters to establish eerie parallels between the 1920s and the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in which toxic masculinity continues to persist and lead to general societal turmoil and the oppression of minorities.

## Introduction

Es geht im ganz großen Bogen über mehrere Staffeln  
gedacht um die große deutsche Katastrophe-- wie ist die  
möglich gewesen und wie sind leute da rein geschlittern?<sup>1</sup>

-Achim von Borries, Regisseur

In 2017, audiences from Germany and the world over were introduced to the exciting world of *Babylon Berlin*, “the first German TV series where viewers can emotionally experience the story of the political developments leading from the Weimar Republic to the spread of National Socialism” (*babylon-berlin.de*). Record-breaking for being the most expensive non-English TV drama to ever be produced, *Babylon Berlin* shows viewers the cultural nuances of a period of German history that is often overshadowed by its lead-up Nazism and World War II. It is successful in showing what Weimar culture was like beyond the glamorous roaring twenties aspects, which are often fondly retroactively portrayed in film. The series instead conveys more of the wary view of Weimar Außenminister<sup>2</sup> Gustav Stresemann, who said in a speech in 1929 shortly before his death, “The economic position is only flourishing on the surface. Germany is in fact dancing on a volcano” (Ryder, 246).

Although it has its moments of flappers dancing under gold confetti in nightclubs, the show also authentically and consciously incorporates real aspects of Weimar life: the art, architecture, music, theater, fashion, gender roles, queer culture, technological and industrial advances. *Babylon Berlin* allows Germany to unapologetically show the culture

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<sup>1</sup> “[The series] goes in big arcs over many seasons about the great German catastrophe-- how was it possible and how did people slide into it?”

<sup>2</sup> Foreign minister

and history of this period in many of its aspects, not just the glamour or the turmoil. Co-writer Henk Hendelton acknowledged this cognizant outlook: “Usually in movies, Nazis just fall from the sky, and they are there...How could it have happened that such an advanced society fell into barbarism? No one was telling this story” (Davies). A fall into barbarism is indeed what *Babylon Berlin* feels and looks like. The chaotic atmosphere of Berlin is not only captured by scenes of uproar and anger, such as the bloody May Day communist riots of 1929, but also by the frenzied-feeling musical score, pulsating lighting sequences, and kaleidoscopic opening credits. The series captures the palpable, almost hysterical energy of Berlin in the Weimar era, so combustible that the viewer would not be surprised it only took the final spark of National Socialism to obliterate this attempt at modern democracy into barbarity.

The themes and messages of *Babylon Berlin* are important comments on how this part of history is frighteningly similar to modern-day circumstances. For the purpose of understanding these arguments in my paper, it is first key to understand the storyline of the show itself.

The series is set in Berlin beginning in the year 1929 when the Weimar Republic was at the brink of economic collapse and fascism was on the rise. Yet this was also the height of the Weimar culture that had developed over the decade. The plot of *Babylon Berlin* follows police commissioner Gereon Rath as he starts his new assignment as a special investigator with the Berlin police’s vice squad. He is on a secret personal mission to track down an extortion organization that could have a large effect on his father’s reputation. Since he comes from the relatively quieter and more traditional city of Köln, the viewer sees all the new modernity and allure of the German capital at the same

time he does. In the process, he becomes acquainted with Charlotte Ritter, a clerk at the police headquarters who comes from the slums of Wedding and wishes to become the unit's first female homicide detective. Together Gereon and Lotte begin to uncover a long trail of crimes that have to do with Soviet spies and anti-Stalinist movements, an old Russian fortune of gold, and a plot to illegally rebuild a German military and reclaim German power. Every episode shows how rampant poverty, unemployment, disability, and mental illness were established parts of Weimar life. The effects of the war are everywhere yet rarely verbally acknowledged by the characters.

In my thesis, I will focus on these two characters, Charlotte and Gereon, each who are used by the creators to depict themes that have historical and modern relevance. Charlotte is the quintessential idea of the New Woman (*die Neue Frau*), who seems to be revolutionizing the ideas of gender and pushing the boundaries of predisposed female limitation. However, she is tragically hindered in her striving to fully become a new, modern woman by the men around her, who are struggling with their own feelings of emasculation. Gereon, having fought in WWI and dealing with his own traumas from that experience, represents one such of these men. He is afflicted with involuntary convulsions as part of his PTSD and self-medicates with morphine. Gereon does complicate the typical male personality shown in the series because he is one of the only characters who truly supports Lotte's endeavor to have a career. I argue that *Babylon Berlin* strongly shows how the neglect of mental health treatment and addressing of the traumatic experiences that veteran German soldiers received not only led to the deterioration of their own mental health and their dependence on violence to restore their masculinity, but also led to political instability and the oppression of women who were

striving to become new women. This theme is historically relevant to the rise of fascism in the interwar period but also has strong ties to the modern day in our Brexit and Trump-era world, in which feminism and gender equality are very much hindered by male insecurity in masculinity and dependence on hate and violence for identity.

I will first present the idea of femininity in the Weimar Republic, looking at scenes in which Charlotte interacts and assess the achievability of the concept of die Neue Frau when considering the resistance against it by men. I argue that becoming a new woman is unobtainable because of persistent male social and physical power over their success, opportunities, and bodies. Then I will address the state of masculinity after the war, arguing that there was massive male hysteria surrounding the traumas of war and the feelings of emasculation due to changing gender roles and women. Hysteria and mental illness were not properly treated, nor openly discussed or acknowledged which was highly problematic.

Though the series was created almost 100 years after the Weimar Republic existed, *Babylon Berlin* uses the similarities between the cultural and political dynamics of today to the interwar period portrayed in the series to develop a modern warning to viewers. Although I will delineate the aspects of this modern warning throughout this paper, the general comment the series makes is that the escalation to fascism happens when male mental health issues and anxieties go untreated and instead are coped with through violence, anger, and the oppression of women. These themes pointedly address the fall into barbarism of Nazism and the atrocities of WWII, but also to show us that this is a recipe that will lead to a fall to barbarism time and time again. Germany is using the

platform of film plus their historical experience to subtly but convincingly send this warning message to the world.

### **1. *Die Neue Frau***

The idea of “modernism” that we so often attribute to the early 20th century largely includes the change of the position of women within society. It is characterized by unprecedented female sexual and social autonomy. For the first time in German history, the Weimar constitution had established legal equality to women. Women finally gained the right to vote in 1918. They also experienced a new kind of freedom, one that came with the war. During and after WWI, many women had stepped up to fulfill workplace, national aid, and manufacturing responsibilities, in addition to the duties they already had in the home. This created a stir in feminism because women were proving themselves capable of doing what men were doing, as well as achieving a new kind of independence and self-sustainment. After the war, many of these women did not want to return to their traditional role as housewives, but rather to keep progressing feminism (Silva, 37-44). These sentiments were felt in Weimar Germany and indeed across many places in Europe. The terms “career girls” and “flappers” were used to describe women who wanted to have jobs in the male-dominated, white-collar workforce and who wanted to exercise feminine independence and sexual freedom in the night-life and cabaret scenes of the roaring twenties (Sutton, *Masculine Woman in Weimar*, 18).

One such new woman of the time, psychologist Alice Rühle-Gerste, wrote in 1933 about “die Neue Frau”, which she herself had observed developing throughout the previous decade:

Women began to cut an entirely new figure. A new economic figure who went out into public economic life as an independent worker or wage-earner entering the free market that had up until then been free only for men. A new political figure who appeared in the parties and parliaments, at demonstrations and gatherings. A new physical figure who not only cut her hair and shortened her skirts but began to emancipate herself altogether from the physical limitations of being female. Finally, a new intellectual-psychological figure who fought her way out of the fog of sentimental ideologies and strove toward a clear, objective knowledge of the world and the self (Facing History and Ourselves).

Tackling this idea of die Neue Frau is a large focus of *Babylon Berlin* in its portrayal of the culture of gender in the Weimar Republic. Some female characters embody all these aspects that Rühle-Gerste lists, while others only some, and others none at all. Not every woman in the Weimar Republic was, wanted to be, or even could be this new type of woman.

Literature or art that emulates or brings into question the idea of the Neue Frau is not novel. In fact, it was being depicted in the 1920s and 30s themselves. Movie-going Weimar audiences watched cabaret dancer Lola Lola in *Der Blaue Engel* captivate a professor who actually (humiliatingly for him) becomes financially dependent on her. Neue Sachlichkeit<sup>3</sup> painter Otto Dix, the German artist perhaps most responsible for shaping the public idea of Weimar culture, showcased men and women alike in Germany's unique post-war society. Relevant works include "Metropolis" and "To Beauty," showing fashionable male and female dancers interacting on the same plane and enjoying Weimar nightlife. Perhaps most famously, however, is Irmgard Keun's *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*<sup>4</sup> whose main character, Doris, shows the complexity of the idea of die Neue Frau and how it was practically unattainable for her. Indeed, *Der Blaue Engel*,

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<sup>3</sup> New Objectivity

<sup>4</sup> The Artificial Silk Girl

Dix's paintings, and *Das kunstseidende Mädchen* implicitly or explicitly assign sexual undercurrents to the women representing the idea of die Neue Frau. Does a new woman then achieve her "freedom" at the expense of being sexualized or needing to use sex? Doesn't this inherently contradict the idea of truly being a new woman? Perhaps our modern gaze on what it truly meant to be a new woman brings us to call into question if these "free women" were truly autonomous and progressive or if they were still held back by strong institutionalized misogyny and patriarchy. *Babylon Berlin* brings such a modern lens to the idea of die Neue Frau through its female characters, especially that of Charlotte Ritter.

#### *Scene 1: An Attempt at Breaking into a Male-Dominated Space*

The character of Charlotte shows us that although women might have personally had the attitude and aspirations to be a new kind of woman in the modern, post-war era men were not ready to accept or support this change. Without this support, it was very difficult for women to make any real progressive steps for themselves. Early in the series, we see that Charlotte has modern and progressive ideas of what she can do with her life as a woman. She believes she can insert herself in male-dominated spaces, earn her own money, and strive to have a career. We will analyze a scene that establishes this dynamic well.

At her secretary job at the police headquarters, Charlotte has a temporary assignment to work for Kommissar Böhm, a disagreeable inspector in the homicide unit of the Berlin police. She accompanies him to take notes at an autopsy of a corpse which was recently pulled out of the river. Gereon and Bruno show up to the inspection as well,

although they don't have a real reason to be there. At this point, Lotte has already met Gereon through her previous work assignments at the station, but she also encountered him when he was overcome by his shaking convulsions on the floor of one of the men's bathrooms and helped administer his drugs to him. She promised to keep her knowledge of his illness a secret. As Lotte and Kommissar Böhm come into the morgue, Bruno remarks, "Wieso bringst du 'ne Frauenzimmer in die Obduktion?"<sup>5</sup> Lotte does not react to this comment. She and Gereon make eye contact in knowing recognition. They all go over and stand around an examination table to inspect the "canal swimmer." Gereon immediately recognized him as the Russian man who broke into his apartment and then was pulled into a car, despite the man's desperate attempts to escape.

As he tells this story to them, Lotte listens keenly and writes notes about the details. He remarks that the man's hands are badly mangled now and the medical examiner says it looks like they have sustained massive contusions, as if they were under a car wheel. Lotte tilts her head and furrows her brow as she looks at the man's hands, then says, "Sieht aber nicht nach 'nem Unfall aus."<sup>6</sup> All the men simultaneously turn their heads from looking at the corpse to looking at her as she stands at the foot of the table, all with looks of puzzlement on their faces. They seem to have forgotten she was even there and are shocked that she has spoken. A picture is created, focusing on the four men, two on either side of the table, looking straight at Lotte, the blurred backside of her head in the middle of the frame. The men are completely silent. The shot changes to see the front of Lotte's face and she too seems to realize that she has spoken out of turn and blinks and nods her head a little and apologizes. The same shot of the men around the table returns

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<sup>5</sup> "Why are you bringing a broad to an autopsy?"

<sup>6</sup> "Doesn't look like an accident though."

and all the men but Gereon turn their focus immediately back to the corpse after she apologized. Gereon, however, keeps looking at Lotte and interrupts as the discussion between the men resumes to ask her to clarify what she meant. She turns her gaze to him and shrugs her shoulder as she says, “Na ja, die Verletzungen wirken doch gleichmäßig, oder?”<sup>7</sup> Gereon looks back at the corpse to consider her observation but Böhm says, “Sag mal Mädchen, hast du gestern sprechen gelernt oder warum quatscht du die ganze Zeit? Raus hier.”<sup>8</sup>

Lotte slowly leaves the room but continues to look over her shoulder and listen to the conversation as she walks away. Bohm sees her and yells, “Raus hab ich gesagt!”<sup>9</sup> She inhales sharply, half smiles and walks away. However, she stays hiding around the corner and continues to take notes until she hears Böhm leaving. Gereon is concerned that the rest of the group is okay with letting the matter of this man’s death rest without further investigation because he was a Russian, even though there are obvious signs of torture. When Gereon runs into Lotte later that day, he asks her to continue to help him investigate the situation and use her position in the homicide unit to find out more information. She agrees and promises to keep their side investigation a secret, making a sign of turning a key in a lock over her lips.

This scene shows the viewer how modern and progressive Charlotte thinks her role as a woman is. Women were limited to largely mute secretarial tasks. However, they obviously had their own thoughts and ideas to contribute but were rarely asked to share them or attempted to on their own accord. Therefore, for Lotte to assert her opinion on

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<sup>7</sup> “Well, the injuries look even, don’t they?”

<sup>8</sup> “Tell me girl, did you learn to speak yesterday or are why are you blabbering the whole time? Get out.”

<sup>9</sup> “I said get out of here!”

something she did not have the qualifications for or was supposed to do, shows how much she believed her opinions to be valuable and shows her embodiment of the idea of the new woman. She does not let the structural misogyny against her stop her from doing what she knows she is good at—solving crime, shown by the fact that Lotte stays around the corner and still listens to the details of the autopsy even after she was rudely yelled at. Lotte continues to navigate her way around the patriarchal police system and her lack of official detective status throughout the series to cleverly investigate crimes that others are dismissing.

The men's reactions to her indicate how unused to female assertiveness they were in a professional setting and how unwilling they were to consider female opinions. The picture that is created of the four men staring at her is the film's way of showing how singled out she was in this situation. It is also evident by Bohm's escalation of anger just how threatened he felt by her contributing to the conversation, especially because Lotte was trying to contradict their opinion that this corpse's injuries were not accidental, but instead that this might be a homicide case. It was not an issue to have Lotte in the examination room as long as she stayed quiet and took notes, but once she increased her visibility and seemed more masculine to them, their own masculinity was immediately threatened. The issue was not necessarily the increased presence of women in the workforce during the Weimar era, but rather the danger of them becoming increasingly visible (Sutton, *Masculine Woman in Weimar*, 5).

Gereon's response to Lotte is promising yet half-supportive. He respects her opinion and insightful ability enough to ask her further about what she means. He is also brave enough to go against the status quo and do this in front of his male colleagues, who

might think less of him for doing so. However, he does not fully support her. When Böhm yells at her, he does not continue to stand up to him and try to include Lotte in the narrative; he only breaks the status quo so far outright. Gereon's clandestine support of Lotte and belief in her abilities is important because it allows her opportunity to exercise her talents and gain experience in at least some way. This does show, however, that she can only gain these things because a man within the patriarchal system invites her to.

I believe that this scene is part of the series' comment on the modern day. Many females today would likely empathize with the situation Charlotte in this scene. They could attest to the experience of speaking up in a meeting and being shut down or overlooked by coworkers, (particularly male ones). Women are often thought of as chatty, or, as Charlotte is in this scene, called out as such, which results in them being disregarded by men. The series points out how difficult it was for women to bring fresh opinions to male-dominated spaces. One is left to think how differently the police department would have been if women like Lotte were listened to. Maybe some of the corruption that had been in place for so long could have been dismantled. Maybe having more females in governmental bodies today could do the same. The vehement rejection of female contribution to important matters was a part of the fall into barbarism. *Babylon Berlin* shows viewers how problematic the dynamic in this scene is and how important it is for women to keep asserting their opinions and what they believe to be true as well as how important it is for men to listen to, believe, and respect women.

*Scene 2: Assertions of Male Dominance Ruin Chances for Fully Becoming eine Neue Frau*

The previous scene establishes that Lotte's belief in her abilities as a woman and pursuing a male-dominated career. She seems to be the embodiment of the idea of becoming a new woman. However, we already see that the backlash from men at her attempt to do this could hinder her ability to succeed in fully becoming a new woman. This next scene shows viewers how dishearteningly unobtainable the idea of the new woman actually was because of the structural, fiscal, and social power of men over women. We will analyze what choices Charlotte had, especially as a poor woman, in her own life and what consequences this has for her and the people around her.

At her night of work at the Moka Efti Club, Lotte is told a client has requested her and is waiting for her. She goes to the room and unexpectedly finds Detective Chief Inspector Bruno Wolter there waiting. She says she is unavailable to police detectives and that she is no whore. However, as she turns to leave Bruno calmly says he would hate to report her and the other women working there to the vice squad if they do not settle their situation here. The scene cuts to Lotte pulling a black stocking back on her foot. She asks, "War's das,"<sup>10</sup> as the shot pans over her shoulder to focus on the naked form of Bruno behind her, reclining on a chaise lounge with one hand behind his head while the other holds a lit cigarette. It is obvious that they have had sex. The room is shadowy but lavishly decorated in golds, dark blues, and purple. He replies nonchalantly, "Nicht ganz."<sup>11</sup> He proceeds to point out that he has noticed her already flirting with the new cop, Gereon. Lotte briefly pauses in the midst of redressing. While he speaks, Bruno

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<sup>10</sup> "Was that it?"

<sup>11</sup> "Not quite."

stares off into space and smokes his cigarette, maintaining a palpable power dynamic over her. He then comments on how Gereon is too curious for his taste. The camera focus leaves Bruno and shifts to Lotte as if to prompt the fact that she is expected to reply. Lotte says, “Was hab ick damit zu tun?”<sup>12</sup>, to which Bruno replies, “Find aus was er hier sucht.”<sup>13</sup> As he says this, he finally looks at her. She looks over her shoulder back at him and we get a clear view of her face: her brows are furrowed, black makeup is a little bit smudged around her eyes, and the hair around her face seems to be damp from sweat. She says, “Warum soll ick det tun?”<sup>14</sup> Bruno says that if she does not do this for him, her sex work at the Moka Efti will go on her certificate of conduct for the job she is trying to get with the homicide unit. She scoffs and continues dressing, saying about her certificate of conduct, “Det is sowieso nich sauber.”<sup>15</sup> From his relaxed position, Bruno says that it must be clean if she wants to continue with the police. Lotte quickly turns her head to look at him and breathes in sharply, asking him if he could indeed do something about that. The camera finally pulls away to show the full scene of the two of them on the chaise lounge. Lotte’s tense, upright posture in her red slip is juxtaposed with Bruno’s reclining form. He flicks his hand and says, “Wir können da mal reinschauen.”<sup>16</sup> She nods curtly and turns her back on him once more.

The scene continues with Gereon picking up the telephone at his apartment. Lotte greets him with their code-like salutation of “Ich bin’s”<sup>17</sup>. The shot returns to show Lotte still in the basement of the Moka Efti, outside of the room. Bruno can be seen moving

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<sup>12</sup> “What’s that got to do with me?”

<sup>13</sup> “Find out what he’s looking for here.”

<sup>14</sup> “Why should I do that?”

<sup>15</sup> “That’s not clean anyway”

<sup>16</sup> “We could have a look.”

<sup>17</sup> “It’s me.”

around in the room behind her but is out of focus. She explains that she is calling to see if they investigated more details on the previous tenant of his room, Alexei Kardakov, who is involved with the Russian communist uprising movement in Berlin. He is puzzled that she would call him just to speak about this, but she lies and says she wanted to take advantage of the office phone. She offers to help if there is anything for her to do. Gereon does have a task for her having to do with their unofficial investigation into the Russian matter. Lotte immediately smiles and her eyes brighten at this prospect. They agree to meet the next morning and hang up. She turns back to Bruno who has his back towards her as he finishes getting dressed. Her face is now stony and solemn, with shadows again cast upon it. A melancholy musical score starts to play. Bruno now has a leather gun holster over his dress shirt. Lotte stays standing in her red slip to the side of the doorway. She reports her conversation with Gereon and tells him that they are planning to meet tomorrow. She asks Bruno where they will meet tomorrow so she can update him and he gestures to the room and says, “Na hier.”<sup>18</sup> Lotte purses her lips slightly and audibly exhales, shifting her gaze down and away from him. Bruno holds out a wad of cash out to her and she stares at him, making no move to take it. He lifts his hand, gesturing for her to take it and says, “Na komm schon.”<sup>19</sup> She quickly walks forward and snatches it out of his hand, not looking at him, and continues to walk past him into the room. At this moment, the musical score crescendos to a long, deep note on the horn.

The most important part of this scene is the power dynamic of Bruno over Charlotte. Bruno is able to maintain this power over her even though she has proven herself to generally not be submissive or scared. He demonstrates dominance over Lotte’s

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<sup>18</sup> “Well here, of course.”

<sup>19</sup> “Come now.”

sexual freedom, pay, and job opportunity while also blackmailing her about Gereon and their secret. His reclining pose and calm demeanor show his absolute power and male dominance-- he knows he can get most anything he wants from her.

At the end of the scene, rape undertones become evident from the uncomfortable look on Lotte's face when Bruno designates that they will meet here again to follow up. Lotte obviously does not want to have sex with Bruno again, but she must if she wants to get what he is offering her or to keep him from ruining her chances at having the job she wants. Sex is one of her only commodities. In fact, it was one of the only commodities many women of the time had in general. We can also see how financially dependent Lotte is on her sex work, because she cannot refuse his money, even though it is apparent she wants to. Female success was dependent on male favors, as we also saw in the previous scene when Lotte's first chance within the police department only came when Gereon requested to include her in the case he was investigating.

However, through this sexualization and feminization, women did gain some small power, as Bruno himself subtly acknowledges. He knows women can have charm over men and gain their trust which is why he asks Lotte to find out Gereon's secrets. Yet this request perpetuates the cycle of male anxieties towards women: Gereon trusts Lotte and solicits her help, but she must betray him if she wants to have a good chance of getting her dream job, making her fall into the trope of untrustworthy femininity that men so feared. This sexualization and dominance by Bruno shatters her attempt at fully becoming a New Woman because she must subject herself to the traditional male-female dynamic in order to get the more progressive life she craves, ironically.

The aforementioned piece of Weimar literature, *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*, written in 1932 by Irmgard Keun, is one of the most important standing analyses of the idea of die Neue Frau. The main character in the book, Doris, has many similarities to Charlotte Ritter. Doris comes from a poor, abusive household, yet dreams of a better, more glamorous life. She too makes a tragic attempt at becoming a New Woman in the post-war era. She has a job as a stenotypist as well, but her lack of proper education makes type work poor. When her boss makes sexual advances on her and she refuses him, he fires her. She then attempts to make in the big city as an actress but is reliant on men the whole time to provide for her and help her career, often giving them sex in return. By the end of the book, Doris realizes she has limited options: prostitution, marriage, or work. This is drawn on from the idea of the “bürgerliche Doppelmoral” (bourgeois double standard) between men and women in Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany. This concept is specifically from Grete Meisel-Heß in her work *Die sexuelle Krise*: “Die Doppelmoral gibt dem Manne alle sexuellen Rechte, der Frau nur drei Chancen: die Ehe, das Zölibat oder die Prostitution”<sup>20</sup> (60). Doris realizes all of these options are rooted in the societal structure that makes women dependent and are unable to give her the freedom she craves. The difference between *Das Kunstseidene Mädchen* and *Babylon Berlin*, is that Keun does not present a solution for the fact that Doris is hindered from fully becoming a New Woman, whereas I believe *Babylon Berlin* does. Since the film shows us that this hindrance of women was largely due to male insecurity in masculinity and dependence on violence and dominance for male identity, the addressing and treatment of male trauma, anxiety, and mental health issues is the solution for ending

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<sup>20</sup> “The double standard gives men all the sexual rights and women only three chances: marriage, chastity, or prostitution.”

the existing tense gender dynamic. This brings us to the next important commentary *Babylon Berlin* provides: the state of men and masculinity in the Weimar Republic post-WWI.

## ***2. Traumatized Masculinity***

Weimar women and women across the globe were finding new inner strength and re-defining what it meant to be female, while meanwhile, masculinity was in crisis. Even before the outbreak of the war, people had been concerned about the nervousness and fragility of masculinity in the wake of modernism. When the war broke out, it was thought that this was the “cure” for these issues. The men would harden as soldiers and be amply prepared for the changes the new century would bring (Lerner, 245). However, the war did not steel the nation for modernity but rather resulted in more nervousness and hysteria than ever before. This outcome is not too surprising seeing as the experience of fighting in WWI is known to have been highly traumatic and bloody. With advances in technology and weaponry, the war involved never-before-used machine guns and long-range artillery. And with this new kind of weaponry came a new kind of nervousness. Post-war Weimar saw an “epidemic” of hysterical men. Over 600,000 men were treated in military hospitals alone for mental health disorders (Lerner, 125).

Not being able to handle fighting a war, as a man was supposed to be able to do was already very destabilizing to the Weimar man’s sense of masculinity, but to come back home and discover new changes in the role of women that had occurred was especially wrenching. Richard McCormick explains male “‘castration anxiety’ [as the] psychoanalytical explanation for misogyny, the dread of women...There was a fear of the

female, fear of flaccidity, desire for a mythical phallic rigidity [that was] typical of the far-Right during the Weimar Republic” (McCormick, 641-642). This fear is very apparent in *Babylon Berlin* through male behavior, particularly in their interactions with women.

The men in the series are portrayed as broken, angry, traumatized, cowardly, or morally corrupt, with a few exceptions. Their anxiety often leads to instances of sexual dominance, oppression, and misogyny dealing with their own feeling of castration. We see that this eventually leads them to fall into barbarity, and, at the same time, this strips women of all progression and chance at equality. Regardless of more visible movements of female autonomy, the men still had the power to do this to them, and to society in general, despite or maybe even because of their mental weaknesses.

### *Scene 3: Male Dependence on Violence and Collective Forgetting of Trauma*

It is important to look at how trauma and violence intertwined for right-wing attitudes towards war and male identity in the Weimar era. A prime example of this is the right-wing, monarchist group in *Babylon Berlin*, die Schwarze Reichswehr, which worked to illegally circumvent the Treaty of Versailles and build a German military and return the Kaiser to power, even if it meant possibly starting another war in Europe. In the next scene, Bruno hosts many members and ex-commanders at his house for a dinner party which Gereon also attends.

Before dinner begins, all the men at the party go into a room and stand around a large table that has a World War I battle scene figurine replica on it. A young teenage boy loudly and clearly announces the details of the battle’s events. He stands straight with a

stern look on his face like a soldier. It is a battle between the Germans and British troops that occurred on May 5, 1918. The men throw poppers onto the table when it comes to the moment in the battle when the British attack with hand grenades and open fire. Gereon looks a little confused and disturbed. We learn that this reenactment of sorts is to commemorate the men that fell during this battle, who were in the same unit as some of these men around the table. Therefore, some of the men actually were in this battle and are now re-experiencing it. Bruno reads a list of names of the fallen men. Then they all repeat, “Das deutsche Heer: Im Felde unbesiegt. Wer hat uns verraten? Sozialdemokraten.”<sup>21</sup> Gereon does not say it with them. Then the boy proceeds to sing “Ich hatt' einen Kameraden” (“I had a Comrade”), a commemorative song of the German Armed Forces. All join in, including Gereon with a very heavy look on his face.

During this song, Gereon has a flashback to the war. We see men who are scrambling through rubble, bodies strewn about, horses in gas masks, and smoke from explosions. The landscape is gray, bleak, and absolutely desolate. The shot shifts to Gereon hiding in a trench, breathing shakily in a gas mask, with corpses of comrades next to him. A voice yells “Ruckzug”<sup>22</sup> and the remaining soldiers retreat. He sees his brother Anno’s horse then Anno himself lying on the ground covered by other dead bodies. Anno calls out to him weakly and Gereon looks at him with wide, frightened eyes from over the top of the trench.

The scene returns to the group of men at Bruno’s house, but now Gereon has stopped singing. The song ends and the men leave the room to go eat. Bruno praises the young boy on how well he did, and the boy says that his father taught him. Bruno agrees

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<sup>21</sup> “The German Army: undefeated in the field. Who betrayed us? The Social Democrats.”

<sup>22</sup> “Retreat!”

but says that he recited it with dignity and very appropriately for the occasion. The boy stands to attention and salutes like a soldier and the scene ends.

Masculinity in this scene is portrayed as stoic and proud. These men are like brick walls, they seem to have no emotion when recounting one of the most traumatic experiences they have gone through (as we see from the reality of the battle in Gereon's flashback). Masculinity here is glorifying traumatic violence and not admitting defeat. Gereon is the only visible exception to the common portrayal of masculinity in this scene. He actually seems to be disturbed by this weird, embellished reenactment and ceremony. He is also not a brick wall like the others-- he is triggered by it and remembers the horrible experience of war, being surrounded by many corpses and seeing his brother dying in the field. He also knows the reality that the Germans retreated and were not "undefeated in the field." Gereon's masculinity is affected by trauma but he hides it; he does not cry or say stop or anything. He still keeps the ostensible face that he is unaffected because that's what was socially acceptable for men to do.

Paul Lerner writes in his book, *Hysterical Men*, "[there was] a process in the interwar years whereby trauma was, in a sense, mastered, as both the individual body and the imaginative, social body were hardened to the consequences of physical and emotional distress and shock...there was a reversal of what was traumatic and what was normal"<sup>23</sup> (Lerner, 244). An emotional hardening sounds like a perfect set up for a hard fall into barbarism. Lerner believes that the hardening to wartime traumas and even developing a nostalgia towards them allowed for a collective forgetting of the true impact

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<sup>23</sup> Lerner acknowledges that he is referring to historian Michael Geyer's theory that trauma was "inverted" between the wars. Psychiatric practices had a hand in giving wartime trauma a positive connotation and allowed society and veterans to forget the impact of WWI.

the war had had on all of their lives and on their country forever. In fact, these men's strong need to recreate an army and military could be spurred by the fact that many saw war as a prescription for soft, emasculated men and as a rescue from the deterioration of male mental health. However, we know now that trauma is not cured by more trauma and emotional hardening, but instead by treatment, counseling, and medication.

When we get a glimpse inside Gereon's mind, we see that he has not forgotten the true harsh reality of what it was like to fight in the war. This signifies that this collective forgetting is not fully complete for Gereon because his memories exist internally even though he does not show it externally. This anecdote that Gereon remembers and exhibits emotions in response to those memories gives him a lot of humanity compared to the almost psychopathic forgetting displayed by the other men. Gereon is the viewers' hope in this disturbing scene and is used by the producers to comment on the fact that collective forgetting is a highly problematic social reaction.

There is something else that is important to address in this scene that its creators decided to include. The plight of the young boy who is describing the events of the battle is particularly upsetting to the modern viewer. This boy is the symbol of the future Hitler Youth, the future Nazi, the epitome of the Aryan race that Hitler wanted to promote. He is who this strange collective forgetting impacts the most because he never had the chance to remember the truth. He is simply instructed by his father and led to believe that what he is being told is true—that the Germans in this battle did fight heroically and triumphed, that the German army was undefeated in the field, and that the Social Democrats did betray them. As Theweleit describes in his volume, *Male Fantasies*: “Although I am not suggesting...any such thing as a ‘predisposition’ to ‘fascist’ behavior,

I do suspect that children have little choice, under the conditions of a particular upbringing, to become ‘fascist,’ or what clinical psychiatrists call manifestly insane” (Theweleit, 211). Such conditions that Theweleit alludes to are in this case, an environment of collective forgetting and only memories of fondness and ultimate manhood being associated with the war. The impressionable young men of the Weimar era almost had no choice but to learn to become fascist, because of the insane societal behaviors around them.

#### *Scene 4: Consequences of Male Hysteria*

The mental traumas of war veterans also were expressed physically. *Kriegszitterer* (war tremblers), *Kriegsneurose* (war neurosis), and *Kriegshysterie* (war hysteria) were all terms to describe what we now understand to be uncontrollable symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, shell shock, or schizophrenia. In her book, *Sex Between Body and Mind*, modern German gender and sexuality researcher Katie Sutton discusses the psychoanalysis and “war tremblers” of post-WWI Germany:

Historians emphasize that shell shock should not be understood simply as a mental illness triggered by violent trauma, but as intricately bound up with culturally and temporally specific influences on subjectivity, including ideas of masculinity, normalcy, and the policing of such categories... Shell shock was also understood in inherently gendered ways, placing its victims outside of the masculine ‘ideal’, yet offering one of the only forms of escape from an uncontrollable reality... (95).

Men were not supposed to complain or have emotions, but in the cases of war neurosis and trembling, their bodies were doing this for them without their control. It was an unconscious protest against the war and against the prescribed masculinity which they were supposed to live up to.

Despite war neurosis being a common neurological and physiological reaction to the traumas of war, veterans who were afflicted were very ostracized and looked down upon by society. There were ideas that these men were less manly for their mental illness, since they were behaving like a “hysterical female.” People believed that these men with neurosis were just lazy and weak, seeking pensions (*Rentengier*) or disability welfare (Sutton, *Sex between Body and Mind*, 94-101). This was a real sociological problem because not only did men try to hide their illness, including self-medicating in dangerous ways, but also, they did not get the actual medical interventions they needed. This contributed to the prevalence of untreated psychopathy in the Weimar era.

In the face of social stigmas, the Weimar Republic still saw a boom in psychological research and therapies. More mental institutes were built including the famous Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute. Researchers and doctors were inventing new treatments as well as reviving old theories, such as Freud’s hypnotic treatment. Treatments included but were not limited to shock, suggestive therapy, medication, and verbal counseling (Lerner 86-90). These treatments were very much in progress though and not very sophisticated, meaning that even those men who received treatment were not always cured.

Throughout the series we see that Gereon is afflicted with PTSD and suffers from war trembles. He hides his illness and treats it by self-medicating with morphine. He is addicted to the morphine at this point and it is the only thing which stops his body from uncontrollably shaking and prevents his psychotic episodes of traumatic flashbacks and paranoia. Gereon’s episodes seem to sometimes just happen organically, when his medicine wears off, or sometimes follow a triggering or emotionally stressful experience.

In the next scene I will analyze, Gereon is finally brought to a doctor's office and receives hypnotic treatment from the psychologist, Dr. Schmidt. This hysterical episode reveals sources of Gereon's trauma and gives the viewer a unique filmic depiction of what it is like in the mind of someone having a mental breakdown.

This brings us to our fourth analysis of an important scene. After being taken from a nightclub where he was having a rowdy night out with Bruno, Gereon ends up in the examination room of Dr. Schmidt. His faint, whispery voice performing his hypnotic treatment can be heard. He says:

... werden wir in den Zustand der Entspannung der durch Ihren ganzen Körper strömt noch einmal verstärken, indem Sie einmal die Augen ganz kurz öffnen. Und wieder schließen. Aber beim Schließen gehen Sie noch tiefer in den Zustand der Entspannung hinein. Öffnen Sie Ihre Augen jetzt.<sup>24</sup>

With the last line we see Gereon lying on an examination table with Dr. Schmidt in the background. On the word "jetzt," his voice becomes less muffled and he taps on Gereon's forehead with one finger. His eyes open and then a blurry shot of Dr. Schmidt's face shows what it looks like from Gereon's perspective. He instructs him to close his eyes, not fighting it. So begins a series of switches between Gereon in reality (in the room with Dr. Schmidt, on the examination bed) and shots that show what is going on inside Gereon's mind during this hysterical episode and Dr. Schmidt's treatment. Gereon closes his eyes again and we see the condition of his mental state. He is walking through what looks like an industrial underground stone tunnel with dim yellow light returns. Slow footsteps can be heard over the suspenseful orchestral music, presumably Gereon's own. We see a

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<sup>24</sup> "...we will go into the state of relaxation that flows through your whole body and intensify once again by opening your eyes very briefly. And closing them again. But when you close them, you will go deeper into the state of relaxation. Open your eyes now."

vertically distorted shot of the memory of Lotte rushing into the bathroom stall to help him. Gereon's echoey voice plays over, asking, "Woher hast du mein Medizin?"<sup>25</sup> to which Bruno's voice replies, "Von deinem Mädel."<sup>26</sup> Then appears the shot of Lotte dropping one of the medicine vials into a crack in the bathroom floor. A shadowy figure of Gereon continues to walk down the tunnel and his voice says, "Du hast mich angelogen,"<sup>27</sup> then a distorted shot of Lotte turning her head around to stare up at him with large innocent and playful eyes while she says, "Hab' ich nicht."<sup>28</sup> All the while Gereon's face is flinching and he looks very pained. We see a final recalled image of Lotte smiling at him and making a motion over her lips of turning a key in a lock. He then quickly opens his eyes. His eyes focus on Dr. Schmidt, but then the image returns to Gereon in the tunnel and quickly zooms in on his face as he squeezes his eyes shut, opens his mouth wide and screams.

Back in the examination room, Gereon assesses his surroundings and grabs his gun from the desk and bewilderedly walks out into the main hall. Dr. Schmidt motions to the Heiligen Josef, the thug bodyguard who brought Gereon to this mental institute, to follow him. Gereon turns around to look behind him, his eyes are wide and anxious, and his face is damp with sweat. His heavy breathing is loud in the background. The scene changes back to him walking down the stone tunnel. He is walking more calmly, straight ahead. The large, black-robed form of Heiligen Josef appears in the shot behind him. In reality, Gereon looks back to see a very blurry form of Josef following him down the stairs. Once on the street, Gereon looks around for where to go then the image switches to

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<sup>25</sup> "Where did you get my medicine?"

<sup>26</sup> "From your girl."

<sup>27</sup> "You lied to me."

<sup>28</sup> "I did not."

the tunnel and there is a slow motion shot of him sprinting, looking over his shoulder and screaming (although there is no audible sound from it). The shot is choppy and flashes, as if in a strobe light, as Gereon runs down the tunnel. A sharp throbbing sound effect matches the jerking stopping and starting patterns of the image. Gereon continues to run away in reality, but the images continue to switch to him in the tunnel. He now is standing in the tunnel instead of running, facing backwards to meet his pursuer head on. He is standing still but the tunnel moves behind him, as though it is a train passing him by. In reality, Gereon runs down a dirt alleyway and is extremely frightened even though Heiligen Josef is non-threateningly following him and probably just wants to take him back to Dr. Schmidt. Gereon falls into a square of wet cement and then the picture goes black, ensuing that he has blacked out. In the next episode we actually learn that Gereon ended up shooting Heiligen Josef in this blackout state with his service weapon and attempted to hide the corpse in a pit of wet cement.

Next, Charlotte's voice is heard saying, "Hey, Herr Rath," and then a blurry image of her bending over him in the morning light appears. We see that they are in the courtyard to the entrance of some apartment buildings. Gereon is slumped over against a wall and covered in dry cement. He finally wakes up and sees her and jumps with a start. She asks him what happened, but he struggles up to go to the door without answering her concerned questions. His hand shakes violently as he tries to put his key in the lock. She asks if she should open it for him and he drops the key. She picks it up and opens the door for him. He finally looks at her and says, "Verschwinde."<sup>29</sup> She asks, "Was ist mit

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<sup>29</sup> "Go away!"

ihm?”<sup>30</sup> and he tells her, “Hau ab!”<sup>31</sup> in a coarse, strained whisper. She offers to go get help, but he says he doesn’t want to see her again then screams directly in her face with his whole body shaking with rage, “Hau ab!”. Her eyes widen with shock and concern and he shuts the door. She looks at it, stunned, then walks back out to the street, pausing and looking around as if she doesn’t know what to do with herself.

First of all, it is important to address the effect of the hypnotic treatment on Gereon. Dr. Schmidt’s instructions do immediately make him think of the source of his current trauma and hysteria, signifying that the methods are at least some-what effective. With the culture of forgetting, denial, and heavy medication that Gereon was living through, we can see that actually letting his brain think about the sources of his trauma is a very hard and painful thing for him to do naturally.

Throughout the series, it is revealed that Gereon has many sources of trauma. In this case it is Lotte’s betrayal of him, but other times we have seen him have hysterical episodes involving envy of his brother, Anno, who married the woman whom he loved, Helga. He has thoughts of the war and not being able to save his injured brother lying in the field, seeing his father in a pornographic film, and his father telling him that he will never be as good as his brother and that the wrong son returned home from the war. The common thread between all Gereon’s traumatic hauntings have to do with his manhood and ego (lust, bravery as a soldier, approval from his father, and relationship to women). The scene that we analyzed before this one showed us that post-war male traumas included Germany’s humiliating defeat and loss of power and the leftist political parties vying for a democracy. These, however, are evidently not Gereon’s concerns. For him,

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<sup>30</sup> “What happened to him?”

<sup>31</sup> “Get lost!”

his traumas are based around his manhood—his issues as a son, brother, and man in the changing modern world. The fact that Gereon and many of the men in the film are lying to themselves about their identity, their traumas, and their fears makes it so they cannot achieve intimacy with others, especially women. Lotte’s betrayal of him and his “shameful” mental issues by giving his medication to Bruno is the ultimate castration for Gereon and leads to his greatest show of aggression towards a woman in the series.

This brings this paper full circle to why male anxiety surrounding masculinity is so problematic for not only overall societal and political stability but also for the ability of women to progress and be able to redefine their gender roles. Even Gereon, who is one of the “good guys” throughout the whole series, when faced with castration anxiety, resorts to violence.

### **3. *What Babylon Berlin Tells Us Today***

The general issues that arise in *Babylon Berlin* tell the tale of the buildup to the fall into barbarism that occurred during the Weimar attempt at democracy. The series shows how this democracy was destined to fail for many reasons. The most prevalent reason was the societal practice of collective forgetting and men’s reliance on violence, war, anger, and oppression of women to cope with their castration anxiety that came with changing gender roles and shame from defeat. These issues went untreated because of the stigma against male emotional and mental “weakness.” It has been evident throughout all the scenes and themes analyzed in this paper that many very real parallels between the situation in 1929 Weimar Germany and countries today exist. Therefore, I argue that the commentary which comes through the storyline of *Babylon Berlin* intentionally implores

the viewer to critically examine the ways in which systematic and social change is needed in our time, particularly in the area of gender equality and as it relates to mental health and political stability.

The castration anxiety of the 21st century man is similar at its root to those of Weimar men. A *Guardian* article entitled “The crisis in modern masculinity” states,

Many straight white men feel besieged by ‘uppity’ Chinese and Indian people, by Muslims and feminists, not to mention gay bodybuilders, butch women and trans people... This fear and insecurity of a male minority has spiraled into a politics of hysteria in the two dominant imperial powers of the modern era [the US and Great Britain] (Misha).

However, Germany itself and much of Europe are not immune to this issue, with far-Right groups and political parties with neo-Nazi roots such as the German “Alternative für Deutschland,” Austria’s Freedom Party, the Swedish Democrats, and Poland’s Law and Justice Party. The swing back to (or shall I say fall into) fascist ideals is becoming a global issue.

Part of this fall is because men in crisis today reject what is threatening to their starkly traditional definition of masculinity and male power, in other words, a rejection of “softness.” This could be a rejection of socialist or liberal economic policy, of a non-muscular physique, or participation in traditionally feminine activities. Instead there is an acceptance of the “do it yourself” capitalist economy, an equating of physical strength to male power, and a focus on participating in only acceptable hypermasculine activities. There is a frantic need to be powerful, impenetrable, and enough of a man.

These 21<sup>st</sup>-century castration anxieties affect women as well. Today men are still threatened by and unsupportive of female visibility and equality. The power dynamic in the scene we analyzed with Bruno and Lotte unfortunately does still exist in instances

today. Men consistently exert power over women's bodies. This can be physical, such as men continuing assault and rape and get off lightly from the legal system, or politically, such as men making policy about a woman's right to make choices about her own body and fertility. When thinking about these modern male actions through the lens of *Babylon Berlin*, it is apparent that this oppression of women is for the same root reasons that men 100 years ago; because of an insecurity in their own masculinity which manifests in a need to exert power.

Many of the stigmas against treatment for mental health issues that existed in the Weimar Republic are reasons for resistance or stigmatization against them today, even though treatment methods have become more sophisticated and effective than in the 1920s. Especially for males, choosing to go to therapy or taking medications is seen as weak and effeminate. Modern phrases such as "man up," "boys don't cry," "don't be a little girl," and "brush it off" teach men and boys to harden themselves, not to express emotion, and not to seek help. As we see time and time again, this leads to the bottling up of emotions and traumas which is too often sadly released through violence, aggression, and hate, instead of healthy coping mechanisms and release of emotion. *Babylon Berlin* shows that this instruction in emotional hardening and expectations of masculinity is largely a patriarchal transaction of fathers teaching sons, men teaching men. The women of the series are primarily sympathetic to the displays of mental instability and emasculation by men.

I would argue that this message is still being conveyed from father to son, boy to boy, or man to man. However, there are now the added images from media, television, video games, etc. of how a "true man" looks and behaves. Encouragingly, there are

efforts today to destabilize these toxic and rigid ideas of masculinity and male sexuality. These include different parenting techniques, organizations and projects geared towards this goal, childhood development research, and laws and regulations such as Title IX. But there is still much work to be done before the thousand years of established unequal gender roles can be dismantled.

But why is mental health treatment specifically so important to ending dismantling this damage? The creators of the series convey the answer loud and clear: because we must solve the problems in ourselves so that we can solve the problems in the world. The aggression towards other people stems for the most part from mishandled personal issues-- shame, insecurity, trauma, pride. In the setting of the Weimar Republic, *Babylon Berlin* shows us that these unaddressed personal issues boiled over into an atrocious and barbaric world war. It shows us, the viewer, how our unaddressed personal issues are keeping us in the same, hostile state. Today, personal issues lead cops to kill innocent civilians, people to sexually harass and assault other people, to spew hate at strangers, and to build physical walls between us and our neighbors. *Babylon Berlin* cautions us that this is a dangerously barbaric way to live and it must radically change through personal and societal action if we are to have hope at peace and civility.

History books and historical accounts can give us statistics and general trends about hysterical men in desperate need of psychological attention, but *Babylon Berlin* lets the viewer experience firsthand what this hysteria was and what the consequences for gender equality and political stability were. Film is also a powerful empathetic tool-- it brings the viewer into the characters' world, whereas historical writing allows the reader to distance themselves. It allows them to think, "Well that was then, this could never

happen to me.” But when the viewer of *Babylon Berlin* relates to Lotte being viewed with indignation by her male colleagues or relates to the visual representation of Gereon’s inner turmoil and trauma, suddenly history does not seem too distant. And this is the moment when the context of the show can be related to our own lives and we realize the important warning embedded in it. That this history can repeat itself if we are not careful. Barbarism is easy to fall into, especially when gender inequality and male hysteria is allowed to continue.

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