



**The *new* Berlin-Roman as paradoxical genre:
Tim Staffel's *Terrordrom* and Tanja Dücker's *Spielzone***

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ISSN 1470 – 9570

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The Berlin-hype that followed reunification has not gone unnoticed in the literary world. In the late 1990s, critics increasingly identified so-called 'Berlin-Romane'. The term raises great expectations because it reminds readers of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Alfred Döblin's 1929 novel dealing with urban life under modern conditions as it could be experienced at the time in several big cities all over the world. In relation to the *new* Berlin-Roman, despite keeping the genre-term, critics demanded something more than Berlin as mere setting, looking as well for depictions of Berlin as the site and symbol of 'something German'. Their expectations, I argue, were therefore paradoxical: it is difficult on the one hand to write a Berlin-Roman in which Berlin is a site of a urbanism as it can be found in many cities, and on the other hand becomes the symbol of an exclusively German condition (whatever that may be). So the quest for the exemplary *new* Berlin-Roman was bound to be frustrated. Looking at two novels from the late 1990s that were hailed as Berlin-Romane when they were published, it becomes obvious that – despite their merits – neither of them meets these paradoxical expectations, thus suggesting that the *new* Berlin-Roman is a paradoxical genre in itself.

German critics in search of a new 'Berlin-Roman'

Reunification, the debate on the future German capital and the hype that followed the decision in favour of Berlin have far from gone unnoticed in the German literary world. Poetry slams, the Berliner Lyriknacht, the 'Open Mike'-contest and other events are only some examples of the 'literarische Hauptstadthysterie', as Markus Deggerich condescendingly called the fact that Berlin has become an extremely fashionable site of and inspiration for writing (Deggerich 1999: 8). The Berlin-hype has also influenced German critics. In the late 1990s they increasingly identified so-called 'Berlin-Romane'. Works that had little in common like Ulrich Peltzer's *Alle oder keiner* (Hage 1999: 250) and Cees Nooteboom's *Allerseelen* (Anonymous 1999: 206f.) were regarded as belonging to the genre, and Matthias Schreiber considered Peter Schneider's novel *Eduards Heimkehr* as the author's 'neuen Berlin-Roman' (Schreiber 1999: 240), thus implying that Schneider's earlier novel *Paarungen* (1992) had been an example of the genre as well.

The declaration that a novel is a Berlin-Roman raises great expectations. It reminds readers of Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, which is generally regarded as not only the most accomplished of all novels in German dealing with Berlin, but also the best of all novels in German dealing with a city in general.¹ In the 1990s, though, it was not enough to write about the city of Berlin. Thus Volker Hage remained unimpressed by what he described as Ulrich Peltzers 'sehr präzises, geradezu detailverliebtes Porträt von Berlin' (Hage 1999: 250). In order to impress critics, a *new* Berlin-Roman was obliged to transcend the theme of 'Berlin'. This becomes obvious in Matthias Schreiber's rave review of Peter Schneider's novel *Eduards Heimkehr*: 'Die Hauptstadt [...] verkörpert geradezu ideal das Sehnsuchts thema Heimat, die Vereinigung des Getrennten, die Mitte zwischen den Generationen und Geschlechtern' (Schreiber 1999: 240). It is in remarks like this that a paradox inherent in the expectations becomes obvious. The Berlin-Roman of the early twentieth century dealt with Berlin as a contemporary metropolis. It described experiences common to people in cities like London, Paris, New York or Berlin. Its recurrent theme was the human condition under modernism. The expectations that guide the quest for *new* Berlin-Romane are different in that they demand novels in which Berlin becomes the site as well as the symbol of 'something German'.²

My hypothesis is that it is possible to write either a 'Großstadtroman' in the 1920s tradition, a novel in which the city is used as a metaphor of the human condition, or to deal with Berlin as the site and symbol of 'something German', but that it is very difficult to do both. The *new* Berlin-Roman, as critics would like to define it, is, I would argue, a paradoxical genre. I will demonstrate this by looking at two novels that were hailed as Berlin-Romane in the late 1990s. Tim Staffel's *Terrordrom* (Zürich 1998) and Tanja Dücker's *Spielzone* (Berlin 1999) both offer dystopian / utopian visions of the city as metaphors of the human condition. Nevertheless, I would like to argue that while Tim Staffel's novel may be

¹ Two years before the wall came down and the Berlin-hype started, Volker Klotz began his comments on *Berlin Alexanderplatz* with a bold statement: '*Berlin Alexanderplatz* ist der erste und bis heute einzig belangvolle Roman in deutscher Sprache, der vorbehaltlos die deutsche Großstadt zu seiner Sache macht' (Klotz 1987: 372).

² A similar definition of the Berlin-Roman of the 1990s is given by Ursula Reinhold: 'Als Berlin-Romane fasse ich Darstellungen, in denen der spezifische Stadtraum, die historischen und gegenwärtigen Konstellationen der Stadt einen handlungs- und deutungsbestimmenden Charakter besitzen' (Reinhold 2000: 57).

considered a ‘Großstadtroman’, Tanja Dücker’s work is a novel about Berlin, in which – despite its alleged postmodernism – the ‘German condition’ is a theme. Neither of the novels, though, meets the expectations contained in the definition of the *new* Berlin-Roman. I will show this by focusing on themes *Terrordrom* and *Spielzone* have in common: both novels deal with the characters’ confused desires, their inability to communicate, their violence and their metamorphoses; and both novels use Berlin as their setting.

Tim Staffel’s *Terrordrom*

Confused desire in *Terrordrom*

In *Terrordrom*, Tim Staffel describes Berlin at the millennium. The novel starts in November 1999, when Berlin is hit by unprecedented cold. The weather tears down the trees and, in futile attempts to escape, panicking passers-by scream at each other (Staffel 2000: 9).³ The description of the situation, part of the main character Lars’s thoughts, captures an important aspect of life in *Terrordrom*: the human condition is unbearable because human relations are ‘too cold’. People can neither cope with this nor are they capable of adequate communication, so they vent their frustration in outbursts of aggression.

At the heart of the cold lies an obscure desire that cannot be satisfied. This becomes apparent when Lars thinks of his love for the good-looking law student Hakan. Much to Lars’s chagrin, Hakan insists on his heterosexuality for the larger part of the novel. However, although the suffering to which Lars is subjected as a result of his unrequited love has an authentic effect on him, his own approach to his feelings could be considered genuinely postmodern. Evaluating Hakan’s significance for him, Lars concludes: ‘Hakan steht auch nur für den Rest. Was ich nicht kriegen kann. Und das ist nicht nur Hakan. Das ist alles. Und kein Mensch weiß, was das ist’ (Staffel 2000: 8). In this assessment, Hakan becomes a sign for the objects of desire that escape signification as well as a sign for the painfully enigmatic process of desire itself.

³ I am quoting from the second edition of *Terrordrom*.

Lack of communication in *Terrordrom*

The very fact that desire and its objects cannot be adequately represented accounts for Lars's frustration. Nevertheless, he is one of the few characters in *Terrordrom* who realizes that his desire and his suffering are not a purely personal matter but are part of an apparently unalterable human condition. So Lars decides to write a first manifesto which he then copies and delivers to mailboxes in his Kreuzberg neighbourhood. The manifesto reads:

DIE GESELLSCHAFT IST WIE EIN MANN, DER AUS DEM 58. STOCK EINES HOCHHAUSES FÄLLT UND UNTERWEGS, NUR UM SICH ZU BERUHIGEN, IMMER WIEDER DENKT, BIS JETZT LIEF'S NOCH GANZ GUT; BIS JETZT LIEF'S NOCH GANZ GUT, BIS JETZT LIEF'S NOCH GANZ GUT. ABER ENTSCHIEDEND IST NICHT DER FALL, ENTSCHIEDEND IST DIE LANDUNG. V. (Staffel 2000: 8)

As a call to action Lars's manifesto remains cryptic, failing to specify what its recipient is meant to do, and it does not reveal who V is.⁴ Later on in the novel, Lars will explain his initial motives for writing his messages as equally obscure: 'Ich meine, die ganze Sache mit V [...] war nie ein Plan [...] Haß, Wut, was weiß ich [...]. Ich habe damit angefangen, und es war okay. Es war mein Ding, und vielleicht habe ich sogar irgendwas gehofft, keine Ahnung' (Staffel 2000: 184).

The failure of communication leaves the recipients of Lars's missive in the dark, a state shared by most of the inhabitants of Berlin. Tom, the novel's arch villain, is a pay-TV-presenter and thus supposedly an expert on communication. He has received V's manifesto and considers himself and domestic security to be threatened by the aspiring terrorist. However, this fear does not lead to investigative journalism on Tom's part, the attempt to discover V's identity for instance, instead, he broadcasts discussions on preventive measures, thus fuelling a mood of suspicion in the city. In his private life, Tom makes no attempt to understand those around him either. When he thinks of his wife and son, he is full of contempt for Anna's depression and the longings that drive the actions of his 'Schwächlingssohn' Felix. He sees himself fully justified in restricting his communication with his family to the occasional beating.

⁴ The signature V for Lars's manifestos is generally regarded as an allusion to Thomas Pynchon's V, in which the elusive V remains obscure throughout the whole novel.

Tom is not the only one who avoids communication. Hakan pretends not to understand Lars's desire for him, considers Lars's presence in his flat a nuisance and asks him to give back the keys. When Lars's eyes start watering, Hakan does not ask him why, but wonders instead whether the cocaine Lars has taken accounts for the effect. It is no wonder that in response Lars makes every effort to purge himself of his belief in and need for communication. For a short while he considers giving his manifestos a more coherent structure, but then he decides: 'Die Worte haben keinen Wert mehr für mich. Es gibt keinen Grund, die Sache zu organisieren. Es ist ein Selbstläufer. Ich bin ein Selbstläufer. Ein großangelegter Fake' (Staffel 2000: 44).

Violence in *Terrordrom*

The unenlightened state of Berlin's inhabitants is reflected in the deteriorating condition of the city. Under the constant strain of the cold the street lighting fails, sewage pipes burst and the city plunges into stench, darkness and violence.

The darkness breeds monsters. When Lars helps friends to steal a painting from the Gropius-Bau by cutting it out of its frame, he seizes the opportunity to spray a V onto the framed wall. This and a pile of manifestos dropped at the site of a shooting spree for which Lars is not responsible, make V an infamous terrorist. Lars enjoys the twist his story is taking. He expands his activities and distributes several thousands of his manifestos per week. The second part of *Terrordrom*, 'Explosionen', starts with a new one:

DIE ZEIT IST ABGELAUFEN. BEENDEN SIE IHREN MITTAGSSCHLAF. DIE KÄLTE UND DER STURM SIND KEIN HINDERNIS. REDEN SIE SICH NICHT HERAUS: DAS BLUT FLIESST TROTZDEM. DIE ZEIT IST ABGELAUFEN. KEINE FRAGEN MEHR. DER ANGRIFF LÄUFT. GEGEN DAS FUNDAMENT. GEGEN UNS SELBST. BEWEGEN SIE SICH JETZT. AUFBRUCH. NIEMAND SIEHT HIN. WEIL WIR BESCHÄFTIGT SIND. ICH BESCHÄFTIGE MICH MIT IHNEN. SEIEN SIE VERSICHERT. AUFBRUCH. ES IST SOWEIT. (Staffel 2000: 107)

This manifesto differs substantially from Lars's earlier messages. While the initial warning that society resembled a man attempting to reassure himself as he fell from a skyscraper may have been understood as a call for increased self-scrutiny, this new manifesto is clearly influenced by V's reputation for violence. Lars fails to estimate the consequences of the

change. On a Sunday when regular mail is not delivered, he opens his letterbox and finds a letter from V. It says: ‘V LEBT ÜBERALL. V’ (Staffel 2000: 108). Others are taking over the role of V and the violence that has become associated with it. Soon the first building is attacked. A bomb explodes in the employment office, the building catches fire, not everybody can escape. In the media, the incident is presented as resulting from burst sewage pipes and short circuits, but Lars does not believe in the attempt to downplay what is going on in Berlin. He knows that ‘V’ is becoming a sign for a movement that rejects internal structures, a political stance or organized protest. It is restricted to random outbursts of violence that result from the inability to communicate social unease in any other terms.

The inability to communicate extends to the higher echelons of society, right up to the Berlin government. Berlin’s secretary of the interior, here called Lemmer,⁵ refuses to acknowledge the threat the outbursts of violence pose or to consider what motivates them. In an interview he maintains that nobody could effectively threaten the state because such a threat would not be supported by the majority. In his view, the ‘gesunde Volksempfinden’ is stronger than any attempt to challenge the state (Staffel 2000: 144). However, in what can be regarded as another example of failed communication, the reassurance his words are meant to offer cannot have the desired effect upon the viewers. For in the icy desert of Berlin, the feelings of the public are no longer healthy. In the streets barricades of burning cars block the roads and street gangs rule the quarters forcing passers-by to pay for freedom of movement.

Transformations in *Terrordrom*

Lemmer’s attempt to calm fears is contrasted with various efforts to exploit V. While Tom’s boss, Paul Mehnert, orders his crew to invent news of more attacks and keeps track of the rocketing ratings, Tom’s secretary, Annette, dreams of ‘organizing’ V’s actions in order to make him or her a proper media star. Even Hakan, supposedly a friend of Lars, makes an attempt to sell his knowledge of V’s identity to the media.

⁵ This may be an allusion to West Berlin’s Heinrich Lummer, famed for his rigid policing of the city in the 1980s.

The transformations the central characters undergo as their willingness to exploit one another is given free rein are a symptom of a social decay which is as brutal as the violence on the streets and while the latter will eventually be contained within the 'Terrordrom', the former will continue to permeate and distort human relationships. Hence Lars's disillusionment with himself and the world around him, which he expresses in a final comment on exploitation. He decides to exploit himself by selling the concept of V. He arranges a meeting with Annette and Hakan and confronts them with a new story of V, one that differs substantially from the earlier tale of his anarchic and unintentional game of manifesto-writing. For Hakan and Annette, Lars re-designs V as a man with a mission:

V hat sich geirrt. Bis jetzt. Er wollte was. Das ist ein Fehler. Es ändert nichts. Es sieht nur so aus. Es läuft immer in die falsche Richtung. Also klinge ich mich ein und nutze das aus [...]. Man schreibt ein paar Briefe, ein paar Autos und öffentliche Gebäude fliegen in die Luft, und schon kriechen sie aus ihren Löchern, brennen sich das entsprechende Zeichen ein und glauben, sich zu bewegen. Aber jede Bewegung, die man macht, wird ausgenutzt. Von der angeblich anderen Seite. Die macht sich stark daran [...]. Und wenn man wirklich was tun will, dann muß man das klar machen. Die ganze absurde Scheiße aufdecken. (Staffel 2000: 186)

However, what may sound like an – albeit confused – attempt at enlightening the masses, is in fact a rather cynical justification of Lars's plan for the 'Terrordrom'. The 'Terrordrom' is the dystopian opposite of any remotely enlightened society. The basic idea is that in order to re-establish order in Berlin, chaos has to be restricted to designated areas. Lars explains that the people will continue to attack each other as they currently do, but civil war will henceforth be waged within the 'Terrordrom', a gigantic theme park for tourists of violence. Lars also has a plan for Hakan, Annette and himself. They will make it their business to organise the terror and see to its marketing, including advertising, training camps, weapon distribution and media coverage. Lars has not misjudged the degree to which Annette and Hakan are driven by more refined versions of violence, greed and ambition. Far from recognising the irony involved in Lars's commodification of the formerly anarchist and thus unexploitable V, Annette and Hakan are delighted by Lars's plans and immediately assure him of their cooperation. Annette establishes contact with her bosses Mehnert and Tom, Hakan negotiates with them and designs the contracts for daily media coverage of V's manifestos. Mehnert wins over the German government, which considers the 'Terrordrom' an ideal measure to re-establish order without annoying the

masses of a leisure society by forbidding them their favourite pastime of killing one another. The new face of the capital becomes something very different from the original concept. The ‘Terrordrom’ is installed in the middle of the city, covering the entire space designated for the new German capital’s government buildings and embassies, from the Siegessäule in the West up to Invaliden- and Torstraße in the North, Alexanderplatz in the East and Moritzplatz, Oranienstraße and Kochstraße in the South. Like Berlin in earlier days, the ‘Terrordrom’ is surrounded by an impenetrable wall. On the opening day, the Reichstag is blown up in a celebratory act. After six days the entrances are sealed and from this moment onwards the only aim of the ‘Terrordrom’’s inhabitants is to avoid the final transformation of death.

Now that money comes rolling in Lars is less happy. He is keenly aware of the fact that transforming himself from V, the anarchist author of manifestos, into V, the established organiser of hatred and violence, is an act of treason which results in the loss of a sense of self. On his way home from the meeting with Hakan and Annette, he thinks: ‘Es ist beschlossene Sache. Ich finde nicht mehr statt. Aus der Welt raus ins Meer der Toten’ (Staffel 2000: 190). Ironically enough, now that Lars considers himself dead, Hakan regards him as finally ‘reasonable’ and consents to becoming his lover. What the organizers of the ‘Terrordrom’ practice constitutes a wholesale selling out: Lars sells himself to the media, Hakan succumbs to Lars’s desire which was of no interest until it came with a nice profit. The only people who maintain their integrity are the teenagers Felix and his lover Sinan. Felix took V’s message literally, shooting a man to avenge Sinan’s sister, while Sinan repeatedly protected Felix with a gun. At the end of the novel, they make a new start and leave the city of the ‘Terrordrom’.

Tanja Dückers’s *Spielzone*

Confused desire in *Spielzone*

In *Spielzone*, Tanja Dückers paints a much more friendly image of Berlin and its inhabitants. Her novel is set in the city during the early 1990s and is divided into two parts. The first is set in Neukölln, a quarter in the former West of the city that borders the hip

Kreuzberg. Kreuzberg is the site of fashionable clubs and home to celebrities like Wim Wenders. Unlike Kreuzberg, the somewhat shabby and impoverished Neukölln cannot compete with the fashionable East opening up behind the former border. It is on a downward slide and seems almost forgotten by history. Neukölln has nothing much to hold the interest of its residents. So it is small wonder that the inhabitants of Thomasstraße, in making the most of the locality, choose the Thomasfriedhof as their favourite spot. At the Thomasfriedhof, Rosemarie Minzlin pays daily visits to her husband, spending hours on a bench next to his grave. 15-year old Laura and her friends cherish the Thomasfriedhof as an 'abgefahrene Party-Location' where they can meet at night for joints and pizza. Even dog-fights take place at the Thomasfriedhof. The cemetery's keenest visitor, though, is Herr Lämmle. As his Swabian name suggests,⁶ Lämmle is the archetypal bourgeois, the director of a sewage treatment plant, who has to deal with Berlin's waste but who dreams of beauty. Lämmle's favourite spot at the Thomasfriedhof is the top of the Peters family grave. From there he can observe the actions of Elida and Jason, a young couple who live in an imaginatively decorated flat and wear extravagant vintage clothing and plateau boots creating a complementary 'partner look'. Lämmle secretly calls them 'die Neptunier', a term that carries many meanings. For Lämmle, Elida and Jason are messengers from another world:

Die schlanke Frau in einem Nixenkleid, hautenges türkisfarbenes Nylon mit Schuppenmuster, und einer wie ein Fischeschwanz aufgefächerten Schlaghose [...]. Der Junge mit langem blauschwarzen Haar [...] zupft spaßhaft an einem an Algen erinnernden, seltsamen Geflecht in ihrem hochgesteckten Haar. Dann setzen sie sich auf den Kühlschrank [...] meerblaues PVC unter ihren baumelnden Füßen [...] ihre Augen haben die Farbe des stillen Ozeans auf den Globen von Karstadt. (Dückers 1999: 9-11)

In their beauty and self-sufficiency, as well as with their affinity for the colour blue, the Neptunians are a metaphor for longing. What makes their lives so desirable is their ability

⁶ The antithesis of Berlin cosmopolitanism seems to be the image of the Swabian or south German bourgeois. In her story 'Eigentlich sind wir nett', Monika Maron (1999: 2-6), for instance, confronts a traveller from Berlin with a man from Stuttgart. The Swabian cannot resist voicing prejudices about Berlin and its inhabitants, while the narrator, a native of Berlin, shows superior worldliness by keeping a stiff upper lip. This contrasting of the metropolis Berlin with the provincial German South goes back to an anti-intellectual movement after World War I. Berlin was regularly depicted as cause and effect of the horrifying consequences of modernism, whereas the German south supposedly preserved the 'good old ways'. See: Schütz 1992: 163-191.

to constantly reinvent themselves. They choose new names on a weekly basis, sew fancy clothes and arrange each other's hair in fantastic styles. These activities reflect their love for one another as well as their narcissism.

Lack of communication in *Spielzone*

Confused desire and longing like that of Herr Lämmle for the 'Neptunier' unites the inhabitants of Neukölln. All of them possess blue things they especially love, gifts from lost loves and other mementos. Like Tim Staffel's heroes, they are unable to communicate their desires. Elke, who suffers from the loss of her lover, does not even know where he has gone, so she sits at home and wears the blue jacket he gave her as often as she can. Rosemarie Milzlin, who misses her husband, daily talks to him at his grave without ever being heard, and poor Lämmle tries to overcome his silence by writing and reading aloud poetry in an evening class on creative writing. His wife Gisela, far from leaving her husband to his dreams, also takes part in the group and does not refrain from voicing her scathing criticism of her husband's poetry. An incident typifying the sorry state of communication in Neukölln involves a man who has reduced his confused desire to an alcohol addiction. Once the main protagonist, Katharina, encountered him in the hall rubbing a carnivorous plant against peoples' sleeves, giving it the order: 'Faß, Hasso, faß' (Dückers 1999: 96).

Violence and transformation in *Spielzone*

In contrast to Tim Staffel's heroes, the confused desires of Dücker's characters do not lead to their assaulting or destroying each other. The people from Neukölln kill only themselves. Thus a man who dreams of walking through fire sets roofs ablaze and ends up in an inferno, while Elida and Jason, who in their loving self-sufficiency fail to pay attention to the outside world, die in a car crash. Neukölln is a place that seems less spectacular but equally as sad as the world of *Terrordrom*: a place where real transformation can only be achieved through death. The alternative to death is an equally undesirable stasis. Lämmle,

Neukölln's saddest inhabitant, gives expression to the way many of the people who live there feel: 'Ich bin der Anti-Narziß. Fasziniert von meiner Hässlichkeit. Ich werde meinen Blick nicht mehr von mir wenden [...]. Ich bin ganz bei mir, zu keiner Verwandlung mehr fähig' (Dückers 1999: 93).

In gloomy Neukölln, nothing keeps the student Katharina from moving. As a woman she has often been the target of verbal abuse, so in the evenings she occasionally wears men's clothing and a moustache. This metamorphosis is not like the happy self-inventions of Elida and Jason, but a disguise forced upon Katharina for her own protection. What is more, interesting things do not happen in Neukölln, if Katharina wants to see a film or go clubbing, she has to take a bus to Kreuzberg. So Katharina decides to effect her own transformation by leaving Neukölln behind and heading for the undiscovered territory in the East of the city. She moves from Thomasstraße to Sonnenburger Straße in Prenzlauer Berg. There she finds another world, a space in the midst of its own metamorphosis:

Drinne die Wohnung noch unfertig und draußen die neue Stadt. Das Brachland mit den illegalen Clubs und dem Bier für drei Mark [...] die Sonnenburger, die Schönhauser, die Kastanienallee, eine wunderbare Grauzone, nicht mehr Osten, noch nicht Westen, genau richtig, um sich auszutesten. (Dückers 1999: 107-8)

Identity experiments are the main activity of Katharina's new neighbours. On the other side of the street live Ada, Nils and Moritz. Katharina thinks of them as her three super cool, extremely disenchanting, bisexual 'party kid' neighbours. This assessment, though, is only partly correct. 19-year-old Ada, who has changed her supposedly bourgeois name Adele into a more acceptable version and ended contact with her parents, turns the urban space itself into her family and into the site of her experiments with her identity. Her favourite spot is a house that had been partly destroyed during World War II. The first two floors of this building are still inhabited but the stairs further up lead nowhere. There somebody has painted the image of a man onto one of the walls. He wears a red cape, so Ada calls him 'the Czar'. She visits him daily to tell him her sorrows and stories and when she leaves she kisses the painting goodnight, saying: 'Schlaf gut, Daddy' (Dückers 1999: 149). In the playful act of choosing a father – a choice children cannot make in natural families – as well as in making a figure as unreal as a painting on a wall the object of her choice, Ada shows that the concept of fatherhood is a fiction to her. Her 'father' does not provide her

with a family history, he cannot take on responsibilities, he cannot even talk. So ‘having a father’ is not a reality for Ada, it is a game she plays in order to explore its consequences for her sense of identity.

Like the traditional conception of family ties, the categories of gender do not appeal to the young inhabitants of Prenzlauer Berg. Ada is the third part of a love triangle involving the couple Moritz and Nils. Neither Moritz nor Nils consider Ada to be one too many or of the wrong gender. In fact, Ada and her friends seem to have given up gender altogether. Kiki explains:

ich glaube auch, daß man die Frauen vollständig abschaffen wird. Die jetzige Mode macht aus den Männern Jungen, aber aus Frauen keine Mädchen, sondern auch junge Männer, das ist gut so, sieht einfach besser aus [...]. Ich glaube nicht, dass da was ungerecht dran ist [...] nachdem man die Männer mehr oder weniger abgeschafft hat [...] hat man eben auch die Frauen abgeschafft. (Dückers 1999: 134)

Though it remains doubtful, whether Kiki’s statement is a correct assessment of gender relations in contemporary Germany, it shows her refusal to be defined by others, or to be defined in terms of gender at all.

How important this refusal is for Ada and her peers becomes obvious when Ada disturbs her lesbian neighbour Alice’s enjoyment of motherhood. Alice reminds Ada of her lost mother, because like her, Alice is a feminist who maintains that being a mother means being a superior woman. This overt insistence on a clear female identity provokes Ada into casting off her own femininity in a rather drastic act: in front of Alice’s eyes she slashes off her left nipple. As soon as Ada’s wound has healed she throws a party and shows her breasts to all her friends. They consider Ada’s change quite cool and Ada herself reflects in the following fashion on her lost nipple: ‘Im Zweifelsfall kann man ja wieder eine neue ranmachen. Aber im Moment ist es doch sehr nett so: Von links beinahe ein Junge, von rechts wie ein Mädchen, und in der Mitte bin ich’ (Dückers 1998: 128).

As this example of self-mutilation suggests, their experiments with selfhood and identity are much less harmless than Ada and her friends pretend. What is at stake for Ada when she is defining the ‘ich’ in the middle is Ada herself. The metamorphosis she undergoes in her fight with Alice involves self-harm. The same holds true for the other protagonists’ definitions of selfhood: Katharina tells Ada and Laura that she once fell so madly in love

that, when she went to a party where the house caught fire, she did not panic and leave but went up the stairs in a fit of passion and stared into the blue flames till her clothes caught fire. She was saved but she can still occasionally feel the scar on her arm.

Nevertheless, the changes that Dückers's protagonists undergo do not usually lead to death or to the sell out of themselves as in *Terrordrom*. Their identity experiments and often painful metamorphoses are vital for their well-being and allow them to define themselves while their stories inscribe themselves on their bodies as scars. At the end of the novel, Katharina embarks on a new experiment: she prepares for a journey to Italy, where she and Moritz will try true love.

Conclusion

In a comparison of *Terrordrom* and *Spielzone*, it becomes obvious that *Terrordrom* does not fit neatly into the category of a new 'Berlin-Roman', one that restricts the novel to depicting Berlin as a site and symbol of 'something German'. Instead, the main theme of *Terrordrom* is, as Staffel himself has made clear, the human inability to communicate without violence. In one of his manifestos Lars maintains: 'KRIEG FÄNGT DA AN, WO ZWEI MENSCHEN AUFEINANDERTREFFEN.' This, Staffel informs his readers, is the main theme of *Terrordrom* (Botzler 1998). In an interview, he explains his definition of violence:

Wir leben nun mal in einer sehr gewaltsamen Gesellschaft. Wir alle sind konfrontiert mit Gewalt, sowohl als Ausübende als auch als Opfer von Gewalt. Gewalt fängt nicht da an, wo die Faust in der Fresse landet, sondern schon viel früher, weshalb wir alle permanent in diesen Prozeß verwickelt sind. (Behrendt 1998: 32)

So *Terrordrom* is a novel about the human condition rather than one about something specifically German. When asked whether *Terrordrom* was a utopian novel or a 'Berlin-Roman', Staffel replied that he was not interested in defining his works in terms of genre but then went on to do so nevertheless. For him, *Terrordrom* is a novel that can be categorized in the terms of the 'Großstadtroman' of the early twentieth century:

Der Bezeichnung 'Großstadtbuch' würde ich noch am ehesten zustimmen. Der ganze andere Kram von wegen 'Vision' und 'Apokalypse' – das interessiert mich alles gar nicht. Natürlich ist es ein Großstadtroman, ganz einfach aufgrund der Lokalität. Und in diesem speziellen Fall

ist es Berlin – wobei ich glaube, dass das trotzdem auf andere Städte übersetzbar ist. (Behrendt 1998: 32)

Staffel goes on to explain that for him Berlin also represents Germany but I would argue that in *Terrordrom* Berlin is first and foremost a representative big city where an outburst of violence can be located most convincingly. The violence of its inhabitants reflects the human condition in a millennial metropolis that transcends national borders. This becomes evident in the novel's system of cinematic reference as well as the use Staffel makes of the Berlin setting. *Terrordrom* begins with Lars exiting a cinema where he has just watched Matthieu Kassowitz's *Hass*. Watching the film serves as a kind of initiation rite for Lars as well as for Felix and his lover Sinan. When Felix and Sinan get to know each other one of the first things they do is see the film together. Felix identifies with the youths in the banlieus of Paris, the violence they suffer at the hands of the police and the fact that they fight back. Alongside *Hass*, reference is also made to *Natural born killers*⁷ and *Menace II Society*⁸, films Felix watches while developing into a young urban partisan himself. Equally, the image of the city Staffel creates does not rely on places typical of Berlin. Despite his use of hip locations in Kreuzberg such as the bar *Ankerklaus* or the *Café am Ufer*, these places are never chosen for their own sake and are never described in full detail.⁹

In this respect Dückers's *Spielzone* differs markedly from Staffel's novel. While the author of *Terrordrom* describes a dystopian vision and thus does not try to reproduce the city as it

⁷ *Natural Born Killers*, a film directed by Oliver Stone based on a script by Quentin Tarantino, shows its protagonists, Mallory and Mickey, travelling the U.S. on an extended shooting spree that earns them sufficient media coverage to make them famous. When they are finally arrested Mickey gives an interview in prison in which he maintains that he is a natural born killer and thus causes a riot. *Natural Born Killers* is considered to be one of the most controversial films of the 1990s and supposedly inspired youths to commit killings. For further references see Günther H. Jekubziks review at <http://www2.arena.de/FILMtabs/archiv/N/Natural%20Born%20Killers.html> and the synopsis at <http://members.tripod.com/reckzeh/natur.htm>.

⁸ *Menace II Society* (1993) was directed by Allen and Albert Hughes and based on a story they had written. Paula Massood classifies it as a gangsta- or Boyz N the Hood-film. It deals with its protagonist Caine's failure to escape his upbringing into violence. The film starts with Caine's and O-Dog's fatal armed robbery of a Korean market and ends with Caine being riddled with bullets in a drive-by shooting scene. For further references see Massood 1993: 44.

⁹ In installing the 'Terrordrom' in the middle of the city Staffel (or the publishers) have even made a topographical mistake: the 'Hofgartenallee' that marks the western border of the 'Terrordrom' and leads up to the Siegessäule is in fact called Hofjägerallee.

really is, *Spielzone* pays homage to early to mid 1990s Berlin. The metamorphoses that are at the core of the characters' developments are mirrored by the image of the city. Like Ada, Katharina and the others, Berlin is in the making and it is the very fact of its being unfinished that accounts for the beauty of the city:

Abends liefen wir über mehrere Hausdächer in der Tucholskystraße, sahen die goldene Kuppel der Synagoge ganz nah und die Hanfplantagen auf den Balkons. Über uns hing ein Zeppelin, unter uns donnerte eine Trip-Hop-Party, blau leuchtete der Hamburger Bahnhof, gelb-rot die vielen schönen Baustellen in der Nacht [...]. 'Spaßhaus' hatte Penny mit Neonfarben über ein verwittertes Anarchie-Zeichen auf den Schornstein geschrieben. (Dückers 1999: 108)

On closer inspection, though, being in the making seems to have been a temporarily limited condition of Berlin from reunification to the opening of the government buildings and Potsdamer Platz. Joanne Leal has argued that despite the distinctively postmodern abandonment of identity categories by her characters, Dückers's attempts at postmodernism are undercut by her protagonists' nostalgia, reflected in Ada's occasional longing for an ordered life and Katharina's final identity experiment, a rather conventional quest for 'true love' (Leal 2001). I would add that Dückers's depiction of Berlin is equally nostalgic. Like Ada, who sums up her de-gendered identity as 'in der Mitte bin ich', Katharina describes Berlin's East as 'eine wunderbare Grauzone, nicht mehr Osten, noch nicht Westen'. But this was only a transitional condition. Since the time in which the novel was set Prenzlauer Berg has become one of the most expensive inner city quarters. Thus *Spielzone* depicts a certain group of people during a historically specific time. While is not – and to my mind does not have to be – a novel about the human condition in general, it may rightfully be considered a 'Hip-Szene-'Berlin-Roman'' (Ullmair 2001: 208), maybe even a novel which defines a distinctive feature of Germany in the period from reunification to the opening of the government buildings in Berlin: its being in the making.

The fact that it is impossible, or at the very least extremely difficult, to conform to the expectations that have guided critics' search for the new 'Berlin-Roman' has had its effect on the search itself. Critics have lost interest in the subject it seems. In her review of Georg Klein's *Barbar Rosa*, Katharina Döbler recently described the time of the quest wryly as 'Damals, als wir unbedingt den gültigen 'Berlin-Roman' wollten', and informs the readers of critics' frustration with their self-imposed task: 'Mittlerweile haben wir den 'Berlin-

Roman' satt, bevor er wirklich geschrieben wurde' (Döbler 2001).¹⁰ So it seems that the new 'Berlin-Roman' will remain an impossibility, unless one day a novel may convince us to the contrary.

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¹⁰ My thanks go to Dr. Elke Brüns (Berlin) for drawing my attention to this review.

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