

Babylon Berlin: Bargaining with Shadows

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Abstract: Working within cognitive television and media studies, this essay explores social cognition and emotion regulation involved in watching the popular German television series *Babylon Berlin*.

Keywords: *Babylon Berlin*, social cognition, cognitive literary theory, cognitive television and media studies, serial television, emotion regulation, theory of mind, cognitive narratology, behavioral economics

Watching the first three seasons of the German television series *Babylon Berlin* (2017-20) can induce a peculiar sense of split time. The series itself is set in 1929, and it is meant to portray the Weimar Republic as a space of cultural and political possibility and not just as “the breeding ground of the Nazi dictatorship.”¹ In fact, as Volker Kutscher, the author of the book series on which *Babylon Berlin* is based, has put it, “the most important thing to me is that the reader should view Weimar Berlin through the eyes of contemporary characters, people who don’t know what the future holds.”² Still, even as one enjoys being immersed in the rich sensory and emotional contexts of the show’s here and now, it is not easy to turn off one’s awareness of “what the future holds.” For instance, I regularly find myself calculating how old this or that

character will be in 1933, 1939, or 1943, and what their age, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation may mean for them in terms of their chances of survival and/or their complicity with the Nazi regime.

Thus, when I see Moritz Rath, the adolescent nephew of the main protagonist, hitting the bullseye, first, with a firearm and, then, later, with a bow and arrow, I wonder where his talent for sharpshooting will land him as an adult. Vague visions of Moritz as a doomed sniper, somewhere amidst the ruins of Stalingrad, and of his mother, Helga, devastated by the death of her only son (having previously lost her husband, Moritz's father, in World War I), become part of my internal narrative about the Rath family.

Similarly, as I learn the identity of Reinhold Gräf's secret crush, Fred Jacoby, and then see the two men, a police photographer and a journalist, happy together, I find myself in negotiation with some powers-that-be about whether there is any chance for either or both of them surviving Hitler's persecution of homosexuals. (And isn't Jacoby a Jewish surname, too?) Perhaps they will emigrate to America?—a hopeful voice in my head pipes up. Yet how?—a sober rejoinder arises. It is not that they can get a joint visa as a married couple. But let them escape anyway, I plead, especially if Moritz is destined to perish.

Have I just thrown Moritz to the wolves? Not quite. For, even as I seem to be offering him up, in exchange for Gräf and Jacoby's safe passage, another story begins to take shape. Perhaps after all, there is still a way to save Moritz, too. I see that his mother is getting together with a rich industrialist. What if they use that man's political connections to get Moritz out of active military duty and find him a safer perch, somewhere in Berlin?

Yet even as I imagine this possible scenario for Moritz, a part of me already dislikes it. If I have thought of it, then it is already predictable, and I want the producers of *Babylon Berlin* to do better than this and to surprise me with their vision of Moritz's future.

Putting such shadow scenarios and negotiations into words gives them more substance and stability than they really have. But faint and ever-shifting as their content may be, the *process* of constructing them and negotiating about them remains relatively constant. It is an integral part of my experience of the series, even though I am not likely to bring it up if someone asks me for plot details of a particular episode.

And, now that I have spelled out some of my shadow scenarios, I think I understand why I may not be too eager to share them with others. There is something incoherent about my emotional response to *Babylon Berlin*. At any given point, I seem to both want and not want certain outcomes. Were this negotiation to take place in real life, it would be a disaster. I would be passionately asking for too many different things at once, while also quietly insisting that I don't really want any of them.

As a cognitive literary critic, I am, of course, fascinated by this incoherence. I want to understand what features of our social cognition may underlie this response to the series, and, conversely, if there is something about this series that triggers certain features of our social cognition. What follows is my attempt to think through these issues by bringing together research in cognitive science and history as well as film, television, and media studies. I use as my starting point the work of cognitive literary theorists, H. Porter Abbott and William Flesch, who focus, respectively, on how readers/viewers construct shadow stories and how they bargain about their outcomes. (In fact, the phrase "bargaining with shadows" is itself an homage to these essays, because it draws on their titles as it brings them in dialogue with each other.) I then turn

to recent scholarship in German studies, which centers on *Babylon Berlin*'s experimentation with genres and historical references. Here I suggest that this experimentation refocuses the audience on the directors' intentions, and that the interplay between our implicit and explicit constructions of intentionality is central to how we make sense of the series. I also build on the film and media scholar Jason Mittell's recent exploration of "complex television" (18), to show how the serial forms of screen storytelling offer new opportunities for the viewers engaging in such constructions.

What is at stake in thinking about a television series in the context of social cognition, and what *is* social cognition? As a subject of study, it arises at the intersection of multiple fields within cognitive science, including social psychology, cognitive neuroscience, and developmental psychology. Social cognition concerns "the various psychological processes that enable individuals to take advantage of being part of a social group," with a particular emphasis on "the various social signals that enable us to learn about the world." Such signals include "social stimuli (e.g., reading facial expressions), social decisions (Should I trust this person?), and social responses (making facial expressions)."³ Moreover, what gives meaning to social stimuli—and thus leads to social decisions—is our attribution of mental states, both to ourselves and to other people. We attribute mental states, such as thoughts, desires, feelings, and intentions, without necessarily being aware of it, and, crucially, not because those mental states really *are* there, but because sensing that there *must* be a mental state, for instance, an intention, behind a behavior is an important feature of our evolved cognitive makeup.⁴ (Cognitive scientists refer to this feature as "theory of mind" aka "mindreading.") Social cognition thus builds on events in the real world (e.g., someone's observable behavior, such as a facial expression) and imbues them with significance (e.g., "he is smiling like that because he's concealing something;

I should not trust this person”). It underwrites every aspect of our daily social interactions, but also, inevitably, leaves plenty of room for misconstruction and misinterpretation.

A television series stimulates social cognition in multiple ways, some more obvious than others. Most immediately, viewers avidly read mental states into characters based on their actions (without necessarily being aware of doing so). They may also read intentions of the creators of the series, speculating about what they may have “really” meant by this or that choice. But to get a fuller picture of how a complex cultural artifact such as television drama is enmeshed with social cognition, we may want to look beyond what actually happens in the story and thus beyond the (presumed) mental states of characters and writers/directors as they make it happen. We must also inquire into the mental states of viewers as they respond to what does not quite happen, which is to say, to their projections of what may happen or their reconstructions of what may have happened. Such projections and reconstructions build on the viewers’ genre expectations, background historical knowledge, and personal memories, and, while ephemeral, are, nevertheless, essential to the process of engaging with events on the screen. While numerous studies have looked at mindreading involved in reading fiction and watching film, social cognition underwriting these “shadow stories” is only beginning to get critical attention.

We now turn to the essays by H. Porter Abbott and William Flesch, whose work provides us with an entry point and vocabulary for thinking about these issues.

1. Shadow Stories

Abbott’s and Flesch’s essays exemplify two different approaches within cognitive literary studies, a rapidly growing interdisciplinary field, the key feature of which is its exploratory

engagement with a wide variety of paradigms in cognitive science (as opposed, that is, to adherence to just one or several dominant theories or modes of inquiry).⁵ Abbott's "How Do We Read What Isn't There to Be Read? Shadow Stories and Permanent Gaps," represents the cognitive-narratological wing of cognitive literary studies. Abbott suggests that narratology needs cognitive science if it wants to come to terms with the full "eventfulness of mind, a cognitive busyness, often full of transient event structures." He specifically focuses on shadow stories emerging in response to "narrative gaps," i.e., the "openings that at one and the same time do and do not contain story material." Such stories are an "active part of the narrative experience" (104), yet they do not rise to the level of events that we recognize as narratives and, as such, tend to fall through the cracks of our theoretical reckoning.

One can argue that, because of its fraught historical setting, *Babylon Berlin* is particularly receptive to narrative gaps which "open on a vast arena of virtual events that are never realized but rather exist like a kind of dark, weightless energy, hidden under the words and images that actualize a story" (Abbott 104). For instance, when, in the series' first season, a head of cabbage is blown to juicy smithereens, and viewers realize, to their surprise, that the impressive long-range shot was fired not by the seasoned cop, Bruno Wolter, but by the thirteen-year-old Moritz, what I see are grey remnants of a bombed-out building, in Stalingrad, in 1943—a shadow story which, in my particular case (having grown up in the former Soviet Union) has an extra sensory component. I hear soldiers shouting to each other, in Russian, as they figure out the best way to take out the vicious German sniper burrowed in the ruins. (Of course, this vision is itself shaped by the countless Soviet movies about the Eastern Front of World War II, that I was made to watch as a child.)

The “dark, weightless energy” of this “virtual event” shapes my emotional response to what is actually taking place on screen. This is ironic, because I think that what I am supposed to feel is relief, for, a minute ago, the show has led us to fear that Bruno would harm Moritz, something that, as we now see, he had no intention of doing. And I *am* relieved, yet I am also mourning—in response to my “Stalingrad sniper” vision—though it is almost hard to say for whom, for, my heart is both with the boy played so well by Ivo Pietzcker *and* with the victims of the regime that Moritz is growing up to fight and die for.

But will this actually happen to Moritz? My Stalingrad shadow story is strengthened when, in the third season, Moritz, again, demonstrates his talent for marksmanship—only this time with a bow and arrow borrowed from another boy, a member of the Hitler Youth. Yet this is *still* a shadow story, a story-in-waiting, which may never coalesce into anything real. As Abbott puts it:

[Shadow stories] are sensed possibilities of what *might* be the case. Some are borne out by the narrative and thus come out of the shadows to become parts of the story, but unless and until that happens over the course of reading or viewing a narrative, they lack sufficient explicit or implicit textual evidence to allow one to say with confidence: *This* is part of the story. As these virtual event sequences occur solely in the consciousness of the reader, and as no two readers can be counted on to read in the same way, shadow stories fall into a great range of shape, content, and credibility. But, as long as one can only say *This is likely to be* what happened, rather than *This is* what happened, then whatever *This is likely to be* lies in the shadows of a gap. (105)

How do the “virtual event sequences” get anchored in the consciousness of the reader or viewer? To begin to think through this question, I turn to William Flesch’s “Reading and Bargaining,” which represents a different approach within cognitive literary studies, one that draws on decision theory and evolutionary game theory to explore emotions.

2. Emotions and Probabilities

Flesch’s focus is on the “dynamic negotiation with the emotions” that literature and film arouse in their audiences (371). For instance, when an innocent bystander in a crime thriller faces mortal danger, we are relieved when he escapes it, yet we “understand (even if we don’t know we understand) that we are radically lowering the odds of a good outcome in whatever climactic scene this incident is setting up. In the reverse-Bayesean wonderland of fiction, past outcomes do affect the future odds of independent events” (369).⁶

One paradoxical feature of our emotional response to fictional events is that, even as we thus “accept the risk of a likely worse outcome later, to forestall a bad outcome now,” we also know that “our desires and concessions are irrelevant.” The deal that we seem to make with those in control (e.g., the film directors) is no deal at all: the “events are already written, and our bargaining can’t affect the outcome. . . . And yet it feels as though we’re actively bargaining with the narrative” (370), offering up the intensity of our emotions as a bargaining chip.⁷

After all, this is something that we do in real life, and it works, sometimes. For, in real life, emotions *communicate*:

They are purposeful signals to others that we are genuinely having the experience [these emotions] express. . . . The general communicative force of an emotion is not simply: *this is how I feel*; but rather: *look how this state of affairs makes me act—makes me make myself feel, so that I plead with you to interact with me accordingly*. In this way an emotion offers to bargain, and it offers itself as its part of the bargain. A positive emotion is my expression of an offer to continue to feel this way; a negative emotion is a promise or at least a hope that I won't. What am I bargaining for from you? Various, depending on the emotions, such things as comfort, nourishment, freedom, love, apology, shame about what you've done; indulgence, even hate. I want you to act in such a way as to offer me some return for my emotion. (370; in-text references omitted)

And so we communicate, as it were, with a novel we read or with a television series we watch, expecting some return on our emotions while also knowing that no such return is forthcoming. Our "emotions are sometimes complex bargains we make with the literature we read." This is to say that literature (and film) "isn't only the depiction of emotion," or even excitation of emotion: "it's a dynamic *negotiation* with the emotions it arouses in its audience" (371; emphasis added).⁸

Let us take a closer look at one particular aspect of this negotiation, which involves our ongoing assessment of both probabilities of certain outcomes and our preferences for those outcomes.⁹ By the end of the third season of *Babylon Berlin* (which closes with the stock market crash of 1929), my shadowy projection of Moritz's future begins to branch. The "Stalingrad sniper" story is still there, but its probability is weakened by the episode in which Moritz finds

himself incapable of shooting a doe during his weekend wilderness adventure with his new friends from the Hitler Youth. It now occurs to me that the previous demonstrations of Moritz's superior marksmanship may have been building up to this scene. The doe is an easy target for Moritz, and he knows it. That he chooses to miss it—even knowing that this will incur contempt and anger of his brown-shirted buddies—signals a possibility that his future political allegiances may diverge from theirs.

Of course, Moritz may still end up as a sniper in Stalingrad, even if despising Hitler's regime rather than enthused about it. Unless, that is, something indeed comes out of his mother's involvement with Alfred Nyssen, the heir to the steel manufacturing fortune. If Helga Rath ends up staying with Nyssen for the next decade, wouldn't they try to use his family's political influence to keep Moritz away from, say, the Eastern Front?

Tenuous as this scenario appears to be, I, nevertheless, now begin to form other, subsidiary scenarios that may bring it about, while also keeping some kind of a running tally of their own relative probabilities. To give you some sense of these subsidiary shadow stories, one of them has to do with my estimation of the likelihood that Alfred Nyssen's fate will follow closely that of Fritz Thyssen, the actual historical figure on whom Nyssen is based. Like the fictional Nyssen, Thyssen started out by actively supporting the Nazi Party, but then he broke with Hitler in 1939, and spent the war as a prisoner in a concentration camp, along with his wife. If this is the future that the *Babylon Berlin* directors have in store for Alfred Nyssen, then there is clearly no hope for Moritz's escaping the worst of the war through his mother's connections.

I notice, however, that there seems to be some kind of a pattern in the series' handling of historical personages. My current hypothesis is that when *Babylon Berlin* retains the names of the historical figures (e.g., Hans Litten, Ernst Gennat, Karl Zörgiebel), those characters share the

actual fates of those people, but when their names are changed, as it is in the case of August Benda (who is based on Bernhard Weiss, the Vice President of the Berlin Police in the late 1920s), their life stories are changed, as well. Since Alfred Nyssen gets his own name, his future may not be determined by what happened to Fritz Thyssen, so there is still hope (so to speak) that he will remain closely affiliated with the highest political echelons of the Nazi party and thus will be able to keep Moritz away from Stalingrad.

Or he won't. Yet more subsidiary shadow stories swim into view, the probabilities of which keep getting smaller but never reach zero. I figure, for instance, that even if Nyssen will be in a position to pull strings for the boy, Moritz himself, for whatever reason, may not want to take advantage of his stepfather's political clout. Keeping my eyes open for the present seeds of those possible future reasons thus becomes yet something else that I do as I watch *Babylon Berlin*.

And so it goes. Shadow stories keep branching out and merging into other shadow stories,¹⁰ whose relative probabilities get reweighed as more information—about the historical contexts of the series, about the directors' stated or perceived intentions, and about the characters' motivations—becomes available. There seems to be no end to this process, no cessation to what Abbott calls the “eventfulness of mind, a cognitive busyness, often full of transient event structures” (104).

3. Mental Conflict

But here is another emotional paradox. It may appear, given all the cognitive effort that goes into constructing my shadow stories and their subsidiaries and into evaluating their relative

probabilities, that I should be quite invested in those stories panning out. Having some of them come true should make me feel happy for Moritz, while having others come true—even if they are bad for Moritz—should make me feel good about my powers of discernment. Yet, a part of me knows that I do not actually want those shadow stories to become real stories, no matter how emotionally rewarding their realization may currently seem to me.

Building on the work of psychologists and behavioral economists, Flesch explains why I may feel that way, that is, why instead of single-mindedly wishing for an outcome that would guarantee me “happy or positive emotions” (380), I instead hope for one that would *surprise* me, even if that would mean suffering and death of characters in whom I am now emotionally invested.¹¹ I cannot, in the limited space that I have here, do justice to his complex argument (with both Abbott and Flesch, my readers would do well to go to the original essays), so I will focus on his concept of mental conflict, which is directly relevant to what I have earlier characterized as incoherence at the heart of my emotional response to *Babylon Berlin*.

Our daily decisions, big and small, often involve implicit calculations of the relationship between the value we place on our desires and the probability of their coming true. Negotiating among our “hierarchy of desires; a hierarchy of probabilities” that these desires can be fulfilled; and “a hierarchy of values” that we set on the “success or failure” of fulfilling them, is not all smooth sailing. As Flesch explains,

We have desires and second- and third- and nth-order desires. [For example,] I have a long drive tomorrow and for safety’s sake it’s important to get a good night’s sleep. It’s already late and I would like to go right to bed, but I have a second-order desire never to yield to my frequent desires to go to sleep without bothering to brush my teeth, and a

third-order desire *for once* to put aside my puritanical inability ever to allow myself a moral holiday from brushing. [. . .] Mental conflict affects not only my inner experiences but my own reactions to those experiences and my interactions with them, yielding still further experiences for me to react to and interact with. (372; in-text references omitted)

Literature and film can induce a prolonged and elaborate state of mental conflict in their audiences, in part because they are temporal arts, which is to say that they can shift “emotional investments in events and characters” over the course of a narrative. “A good story intertwines trajectories of desire and fulfillment with different temporal profiles, different durations of arousal and different refractory periods after fulfillment before arousal returns” (379).

Having had various forms of temporal arts all around us for the whole of our lives, we learn to anticipate that our desires may change as we follow a story. What we don’t know (except when we deal with the most formulaic genre fictions) is *how* they will change. The unpredictable trajectory of delayed fulfillment is a source of pleasure in its own right (grounded in our species’ “appetite for novelty”¹²). As Flesch puts it,

Narrative (or any temporal art that awakens your desires but doesn’t meet them immediately and easily) gives novel satisfactions. By definition, novel satisfaction is not in your own control. A writer’s expertise consists in satisfying you in a surprising way (think of the punch line of a joke or riddle), and so not in the stale way you would have thought to prefer before. Any interesting narrative changes your preferences for how satisfaction will come. (383)¹³

So, I want Moritz to escape the Eastern Front by using Helga's relationship with Alfred Nyssen, and I have some idea of what sequence of events may actually result in this outcome. Specifically, Helga should stay with Nyssen; Nyssen's life trajectory should not follow too closely that of Fritz Thyssen; and Moritz should not end up completely brainwashed by Nazi propaganda. And, yes, I *am* bargaining for the realization of this particular sequence of shadow stories—because, by attaching positive emotions to them, I am communicating with the powers-that-be, trying to browbeat them, as it were, into satisfying my present self. Yet even as I am thus communicating, offering my emotions as “bargaining chips” (Flesch 370), part of me already devalues the outcomes that I am pleading for. I seem to be aware that my later self will not thank my current self if my current emotions will appear to have swayed the course of events.¹⁴

To put it differently, I am certainly negotiating (that is, attaching certain emotions to certain outcomes), but I also want my negotiations to fail. To quote Flesch:

We bargain with our later selves, and our later selves bargain with us. We yield some control to the fictionist in return for some gratifications we could not have managed for ourselves. Those gratifications always involve some change in our preferences, and in our preferences about what preferences we want. We have no control over those changes (except to stop reading). I prefer the fan-fiction outcome in which Dumbledore lives, but the rules of the game require me to accept J. K. Rowling's story—picking among fan-fiction outcomes is only sophisticated daydreaming. I want Rowling to make me want the outcome she offers, make me see it as a maximized combination of both knowledge and

surprise, both immediate and delayed gratification, both confirmation of my own insight and a conjuror's trick that completely blindsides me. (383)

Is there something special about shadow stories that makes them particularly good to bargain with? The answer to this question seems to be yes. Because an essential feature of shadow stories is their potentiality (“*This is likely to be* what happened, rather than *This is* what happened”), the cognitive work of assessing their probability and desirability never quite ceases. Emotions associated with (certain types of) literature and film are dynamic negotiations because their shadow stories are dynamic: in progress, branching out, reevaluated in regards to their shifting probability, and devalued-even-as-proffered—which is to say, devalued *because* proffered.

4. Genres, Clichés, Intentions

Genre awareness, once triggered, is central to our bargaining. To paraphrase Flesch, recognizing that a work of fiction belongs to a certain genre, influences a “running sense of the changing odds” of our shadow scenarios. “Those odds affect what we’ll do, which in literary experience mainly means a particular kind of action: what emotions we’ll feel” (371).

Babylon Berlin presents a particularly interesting case for a study of shadow stories and their attendant emotions because of its “mash-up” treatment of genre. The series is a “mix, in which hard-boiled crime meets Spielberg-style action movie (the showdown between Rath and Wolter on the top of the train in the final episode [of the second season]), and serialized melodrama meets expressionist nightmare” (Jill Suzanne Smith, “Forum,” 845).¹⁵

Having written extensively on the history of detective stories from a cognitive perspective, I will only point out here that, traditionally, the genre of police procedural and romantic melodrama have not played well together.¹⁶ That they do, in *Babylon Berlin*, gives rise to conflicting sets of expectations. For instance, we are not sure (perhaps, at least until the end of the second season) if Charlotte Ritter will be treated as a homicide investigator in her own right—and, as such, will survive every harrowing adventure—or if her role will be limited to that of the main male protagonist’s love interest. If the latter is the case, Charlotte can be killed off, thus deepening further Gereon Rath’s already-tragic sensibility, but also allowing him to get on with the real business of crime solving.¹⁷

Online discussion forums offer a fascinating glimpse into our genre-inflected emotional bargaining. At one point, gripped by fear about Charlotte’s imminent demise, I found myself typing into Google, “does Charlotte Ritter . . .” only to have the program autocomplete my search with “die,” for, apparently, there are quite a lot of us out there, desperately wanting Charlotte to survive. Our emotions run high—our bargaining intensifies—as we realize that the probability of the outcome that we wish for is decreasing rapidly. Yet, at the same time, we also want the directors to disregard our emotional intensity. As one anonymous web user in this thread put it, Charlotte’s survival would be “completely bonkers.” Another reported being “upset” by Charlotte’s “death,” yet promised in the same sentence that “if they go back on this” (i.e., if the directors would let Charlotte live), he/she would “lose respect for the show’s commitment to realism.”¹⁸ Behold mental conflict in action: we cajole yet also threaten to punish if our cajoling is successful.

And when the cajoling *is* successful, we adjust our genre expectations. We know that detectives tend to survive heavy beatings and other forms of physical stress that would finish off a mere mortal, realism be damned. So, our Charlotte is a detective, after all.

Yet more mental conflict is fomented by the presence of another genre jostling with police procedural in *Babylon Berlin*. Given the setting of the series, we expect that we are in for a story about a “city on the edge of an abyss”—a “*Cabaret on Cocaine*,” as one early reviewer has put it.¹⁹ Indeed, my visions of various tragic futures for Reinhold Gräf, Moritz Rath, Helga Rath, and other characters, seem to be directly shaped by this generic assessment. But “a city on the edge of the abyss” turns out to be yet another genre that the show resists, although it may take some time and extra work for us to realize it.

Here is how that realization may come to pass. If you are like me—that is, a lay viewer, as opposed to a scholar of the Weimar era²⁰—part of the joy of watching *Babylon Berlin* is the feeling of immersion in the meticulously reconstructed reality of the period. The show is teeming with surprising details that attest to its makers’ historical expertise: from the wall timer mandating the length of one’s stay in a private room of the public bath to the use of lab mice to determine if a woman is pregnant. The impression that we can trust the series’ historical accuracy is further bolstered by interviews with the directorial triumvirate of Tom Tykwer, Achim von Borries, and Henk Handloegten, who have commented on their obsession with period details.

What happens then, somewhat ironically, is that fans who can’t get enough of *Babylon Berlin* find an outlet for their devotion in doing some historical digging of their own. And what they begin to discover is that the directors’ real allegiance may not be to history, as such, but to a certain affective style associated with Weimar. To convey that style, which could be described as

a dizzying sense of personal, political, and aesthetic possibility, the directors rearrange historical realities and cultural references. As Mila Ganeva points out,

[*Babylon Berlin*] mixes up in a playfully irreverent postmodernist way myriad themes associated with Weimar Berlin—wartime trauma, corruption, abject poverty, criminal networks, prostitution, drug use, night life, resurrection of right-wing militarism, and Soviet-German relations, to name just a few—often disregarding chronological order. It is then no surprise that there are multiple examples of historical inaccuracies, including the nonexistent border between the German Reich and the Soviet Union in 1929 or the presence on screen of the iconic Alexander House (Berolina), which wasn't completed before 1932, to name just two. Rather than being fastidious about historical correctness, [*Babylon Berlin*] constructs an image of the late Weimar Republic made up completely of the mythologies that the period created about itself. (“Forum,” 838)

To bring these mythologies to life, the makers of *Babylon Berlin* use popular songs as well as movies, such as *People on Sunday* and *The Blue Angel*, which postdate 1929.²¹ In the words of Sara F. Hall, they thus actively “pastiche” the Weimar cinema, facilitating “the series’ divergence from historical accounts in the service of . . . emotional truth or affective power” (319).

What are some effects of realizing that, in *Babylon Berlin*, history is not just a stable background for the main action (i.e., crime detection), but also a moving part in its own right? One such effect is a heightened sensitivity to the directors’ intentions, which may necessitate re-

watching the series and thereby revising both our assessment of its genre and of its satellite shadow stories.²²

Something we may notice right away, while re-watching *Babylon Berlin*, is that the directors may have actually intended it to be seen twice. There are plenty of details, scattered throughout the series, to which we remain blind, upon first viewing, because we do not yet have the contexts which would give them meaning. Perhaps, the most spectacular instance of this kind of perceptual blindness occurs in the beginning of the first episode. People are doing things on the screen—and some of these people will turn out to be the show’s main protagonists, such as Charlotte Ritter—but, because we don’t know, yet, who they are, and don’t have any context for their actions, we end up not seeing them. Re-watching this opening scene was a striking experience for me because I realized that I had no memory whatsoever of having seen it before.

Just so, we do not realize, when we first see Malu Seegers, daughter of General Seegers and assistant to Communist lawyer Hans Litten, that we have already encountered her, in an earlier episode, when a phone call placed to Litten’s office was answered by “Seegers.” Back then, the name didn’t yet mean anything to us, so we didn’t hear it. (Perhaps this is why Netflix didn’t even bother retaining “Seegers” in their English subtitles for that scene.) Similarly, when we first hear Fred Jacoby address Gräf, familiarly, by his first name, “Reinhold,” we neither hear it nor realize its import, because to us he is just another nameless face in the crowd of journalists, and we don’t know yet that he is the man on whom Gräf has a crush.

Discovering instances of our perceptual blindness is, on the whole, a pleasing experience, because it implies picking up cues that (we think) the directors planted for particularly perspicacious viewers, such as ourselves. Reevaluating the show’s genre, on the other hand,

which we may now also be compelled to do, is more unsettling, in part, because of what it can do to our shadow stories.

Specifically, we may realize that the directors are not interested in the familiar teleology implied by the “city on the edge of an abyss” formula. They want us to think of characters’ actions as driven by their feelings about the *past* rather than by the meaning these actions may have in the future. As Paul Lerner observes,

[*Babylon Berlin*] presents a Weimar soaked in nostalgia and loss, a memory landscape saturated with aging photographs, medals, and persistent scars on body and mind from World War I, a shattered Germany coping with its loss of overseas empire and the shrinking of its territory. It presents . . . a culture that is more “post- traumatic” than “pre-fascistic,” a useful corrective to standard representations (“Forum,” 842).

What this means is that most of my shadow stories—that is, my projections of the characters’ futures to 1933, 1939, and 1943—are shaped by my experience with what Lerner calls “standard representations” of Germany of the late 1920s. Once I leave off my conventional assessment of what the directors *must have surely* intended, and begin to pay attention to what is actually happening on screen, and, thus, to what the directors *may have* intended, I realize that some of these characters do not have any future in 1933. They die, or are killed, *now*, in the service of “nostalgia and loss”—some dreaming of a return of the old-world order; others determined to prevent these dreams from coming true; yet others, ravaged by disease contracted,

presumably, twenty years earlier, etc. One way or another, their fates are determined by the pull of the past and not that of the future.²³

So perhaps I should have been projecting my shadow stories back in time, using 1929 as a final destination rather than a point of departure. But it takes an effort to do so. It is easier, for instance, to think about what Moritz's remarkable marksmanship may portend about his career in the Wehrmacht in the mid-1940s than to ask what it may tell us about his experience of growing up in Köln, in the mid-1920s. Similarly, as long as I classify *Babylon Berlin* as a story of "a city on the edge of the abyss," it is easy for me to see Reinhold Gräf exclusively in terms of what the next decade would mean for him as a gay man. Yet isn't there something in Gräf's *past* history that Abbott would call a "permanent gap" (108)? Namely, why do the directors make Gräf forty years old in 1929 and yet not mention anything about his experience during World War I, especially given how large that experience looms for everybody else? Is it possible that his past contains more material for shadow stories than his future?

Yet when I make an effort to construct such past-oriented scenarios, the result is underwhelming. While there is still some bargaining happening (as in, "surely, Gräf couldn't have skipped the fighting because he is a coward; we have seen enough of his behavior to know how brave he is"), it is of a rather half-hearted sort. And when bargaining is half-hearted, imagination lags. For, it seems that the emotional intensity with which we plead for our "first-order" preferences, as well the mental conflict arising from our "second-order" (Flesch, 372) preferences for disregarding our first-order preferences, constitute the life-blood of our shadow stories.

Trying to understand why the past evoked so richly by *Babylon Berlin* may, nevertheless, be much less emotionally engaging to me than the future, I have to face some rather unflattering

insights about the way my mind works. Thinking with and not against a recognizable genre opens a mother lode of clichés which have become an integral part of what I call, unreflexively, my imagination.²⁴ There is so much to fall back onto if I let myself go with the teleological flow of “a city on the edge of the abyss” genre: from all those Soviet movies about the Second World War that I had watched as a child, to the biographies and autobiographies of victims and survivors that I read, later.²⁵ In contrast, if I resist that flow, the available stories are few and far between, and the cognitive cost of the effort involved in actually making something up looms large.²⁶

Consider, too, as we talk about this effortful imagining, that our repertoire of stories about the past may not really be as rich as we think it is. While the war movies that I watched and the war memoirs that I read may indeed have been countless, I suspect that what I have retained of them—that is, my images of possible outcomes and chains of events—have long been winnowed down to a few manageable clichés. If there had been, among them, any scenes and plot turns that had themselves resisted genre expectations, those might have been the first to fade from my memory. For, the work of minimizing cognitive costs never stops. (There is a reason that the literary process of “defamiliarization” is so hard that it has even earned a special name.)

Such, then, is my choice when it comes to constructing shadow stories while watching *Babylon Berlin*. Play it forward, to 1933, 1939, and 1943, and draw on readily available clichés. Or play it backward, as the directors (bless their iconoclastic souls) encourage us to do, and scramble for clichés, and come up nearly empty.

This, too, may be a factor in the process that Flesch describes as the bargaining between our later and our present selves, i.e., when our present self suspects (so to speak) that our later self may find the present self’s preferences “stale.” We yearn to be “blindsided” (383) by a story

told by someone else because, on some level, we know too well the value of our shadow stories. Or, to quote Joan Didion, we know the value of “the Rousseauian premise that most people, left to their own devices, think not in clichés but with originality and brilliance” (330).

In fact, it is not clear why we should even be expected to strive for any originality and brilliance when faced with “narrative gaps” (Abbott 104). Filling those gaps *anyhow*—with shadow stories that hit the sweet spot of being both plausible and immediately emotionally rewarding—seems to make more sense in terms of our intuitive cost-benefit analysis.

5. Online Research as a Form of Emotion Regulation; or, Everyone’s a Critic

The first-person perspective that I use throughout this essay raises questions about the relationship between the narrating “I” and the presumed typical viewer of *Babylon Berlin*. How much do the two have in common? Can I legitimately claim myself to be a stand-in for that viewer—as I spell out my shadow stories and my attendant emotional bargaining—especially being what I am: a literary critic who compulsively researches as she watches, sifting through scholarly articles and fan sites dedicated to the show?

Before I attempt to answer this question, let us recall that cognitive literary and film theory has long been concerned with the problem of the “ideal” or “typical” viewer. As Jason Mittell observes,

[David Bordwell’s classic 1985 study *Narration in the Fiction Film*] makes it clear that the viewer or spectator [assumed by the cognitivist account] is neither an empirical person nor an ideal reader best situated to understand a text but rather a ‘hypothetical entity executing the operations relevant to constructing a story out of

the film's representation' [*Narration*, 30]—in other words a generalized receiver of a film who processes its formal systems and cues to create a narrative in his or her mind. When Bordwell charts out this viewer's activity, he strives to understand the underlying universals that any competent viewer would likely carry out, rather than considering the contextually shaped variances that real viewers bring to their experiences. (165).

As Mittell shows, however, thinking in terms of this baseline competence by no means precludes a further inquiry into the “contextually shaped variances” of specific viewing experiences (165). In fact, as he argues in his study of the “cognitive poetics” of television drama, cognitive psychology is often “best suited to answering particular, limited questions about viewers' mental activity and engagement” (205). Mittell focuses specifically on the new “participatory culture” of serial television, which allows viewers to actively manage the flow of information and the formation of memories, as well as the emotional impact of the stories' “revelations, enigmas, and ambiguities” (166). For, viewers can now choose how many episodes they watch and re-watch at once—thus overriding some of the effects fostered by the original week-long intervals between the series—and they can also choose whether or not to take advantage of various paratexts associated with the show, such as reviews, online forums, wiki sites, and synopses featuring spoilers.

These two variables (how much to watch at once; and how much extra information to admit) result in many different combinations of the viewers' experience. Moreover, the awareness of this *range* of combinations allows me to tackle the question that I asked above, which is, whether a literary critic can legitimately consider herself as a stand-in for a “typical” viewer. For, among several different types of viewers fostered by the participatory culture, some

map closely onto the profile of the critic. As Mittell puts it, “by knowing the story ahead of time, spoiler fans and rewatchers both approach an episode more like a critic, simultaneously experiencing and analyzing a text, foregrounding the operational aesthetic” (178).

In other words, the traditional separation between the “typical” critic and the “typical” viewer, based on the former’s interest in historical backgrounds and “operational aesthetic,” may not obtain anymore. As long as I possess what Bordwell would characterize as the baseline competence for understanding the television narrative and also behave similarly to the viewer who actively takes advantage of various available paratexts, I *am* the typical viewer, which is to say one of several possible types of typical viewers.

Like those viewers, I choose when and how much to watch and re-watch, thus managing the seriality of the drama and some of my emotional responses, on my own terms. As Mittell puts it,

A rewatcher’s anticipation is inflected with imperfect memory, as our memories are rarely sufficiently exact to precisely match our anticipation. Thus rewatchers actively compare the unfolding series with their memories, resulting in minor surprises and moments of recognition alongside larger feelings of anticipation (177).

Consider, for instance, what happens when I am delighted to discover my erstwhile perceptual blindness—while rewatching the newly legible opening scene of *Babylon Berlin*, or while *suddenly* hearing the phone in Litten’s office answered by “Seegers.” I seemed to have cultivated my own emotional reward: a pleasing moment of recognition that builds on my “imperfect memory” and on my attribution of certain mental states to the directors, who, I suspect, may have planted that moment of recognition for me.

Social cognition of serial television viewing in the age of the Internet is thus entangled with new opportunities for emotional management. I can regulate aspects of my emotional responses—including those involved in my construction of shadow stories—by watching several episodes at once and/or by stopping mid-episode and turning to external sources to learn more about the directors’ presumed intentions and about other viewers’ emotional responses (and their shadow stories!). While key elements of this emotion regulation²⁷—such as the know-how of researching background histories and other people’s perspectives—have traditionally been the prerogative of scholars, they are now available to anyone with a decent Internet connection.

To think of the practice of literary criticism as a type of emotion regulation is in line with cognitive-literary theorizing that shows how much both literary and film scholarship depend on elaborate attribution of mental states to characters, authors, other critics, and readers/viewers.²⁸ Now we are also in a position to acknowledge that not only can watching television series function as a form of emotional management (as Elka Tschernokoshewa puts it, a “strategy for coping with life”²⁹), but that talking about the series in online forums *and* writing about them in scholarly journals are also aspects of such management.

In other words, far from merely observing the workings of social cognition from the outside, literary criticism *is* a form of social cognition. While shaped by specific institutional histories and other cultural contexts, it builds on attribution (and, unavoidably, misattribution) of mental states, entangled, at every step, with emotional negotiation and regulation. Call it a cognitive-cultural, or cognitive-historicist perspective; either way, the distinction between the “typical” viewer and “typical” critic begins to seem an artifact of a particular historical period, which now may be coming to an end.

6. Social Cognition of What's Not There

Let us try to bring it all together now, while keeping in mind the emerging interchangeability between the terms critic and viewer. To get a better sense of “an eventfulness of mind” excited by complex cultural artifacts, such as *Babylon Berlin*, a cognitive literary critic may start by articulating shadow stories that the series encourages its viewers to construct, and acknowledging the importance of those “virtual events” (Abbott 104) for the emotional bargaining integral to the experience of watching. The critic may also expect that the range and, indeed, availability, of those shadow stories will depend on the viewer’s assessment of and familiarity with the work’s genre; and that the bargaining will be rife with mental conflict, for, a viewer may anticipate being disappointed if her cliché-ridden and short-term emotionally rewarding scenarios actually get realized.

The critic may also assume that the viewer will continuously engage with the intentionality behind the series, although both the form and intensity of this engagement will vary. To begin with, the viewer may implicitly attribute certain mental states to the makers of the show, when she “communicates” with them via her emotions. For instance, she may attempt to sway them, as it were, by her fear and anguish, so that they would let a beloved character survive a dangerous situation (even while also hoping that the outcome they have planned is superior to hers).

In addition, the viewer may also do some background research to find out what the directors *said* they had meant, and then see how those stated intentions jibe with what she may experience as their revealed intentions. Reading, and, of course, misreading, of the directors’ minds may thus become as central to the viewer’s emotional engagement with the series, as is

her reading, and misreading, of characters' minds (a process that, cognitive literary critics have argued, is fundamental to our engagement with works of fiction³⁰).

Finally, the viewer may focus even more intensely on the directors' intentions by recognizing that they are doing something unexpected with the "shape of the fictional world" such as, for instance, experimenting with its genre (Kukkonen, "Bayesian Narrative," 725). To borrow from Ellen Spolsky's discussion of the role of such "prediction errors" in the history of art, "viewers who learned to refocus their attention toward the artist's own activity" would have more "success in understanding" innovative works of art.

What it all adds up to is that making sense of *Babylon Berlin* is a fundamentally social endeavor. It involves communicating through emotions, while also hoping that the powers-that-be will ignore the shadow stories that promise us a quick return on our emotions; as well as negotiating between what we have learned about the directors' stated intentions and what we may intuit about those intentions through the shape of their work.³¹ When talking about this, we may discuss these different aspects of social cognition separately, but when we actually watch the series (and re-watch it, and research it), our implicit and explicit constructions of intentionality jostle with each other and transform each other, contributing to our emotion regulation. Social cognition of what's not there—the "virtual events" that may never make it to the actual *Babylon Berlin*—is our emotional reality.

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Notes:

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¹ Mila Ganeva, "Forum," 837.

² Martha Greengrass and Volker Kutscher, quoted in Hall 317.

³ Frith, 2033.

⁴ For a discussion, see Zunshine, *The Secret Life*.

⁵ For a discussion, see Zunshine, "Introduction."

⁶ For a recent discussion of the “process of Bayesian inference and the probability design of a narrative” (736), see Karin Kukkonen, “Bayesian Narrative” and “The Speed of Plot.”

⁷ As Kukkonen puts it, the “probabilistic and the emotional go hand in hand” (“Bayesian Narrative,” 731).

⁸ Compare to Kukkonen’s argument that “emotional investments form an important part of the probability design of a narrative” (“Bayesian Narrative,” 730)

⁹ Compare to Patrick Colm Hogan’s argument about appraisal processes underlying our emotional responses to fiction (51).

¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion of the process of forming such “possible event sequences,” see Abbott 105-106.

¹¹ For an earlier discussion of the role of temporality and surprise in fiction, see Sternberg, *Expositional Modes*.

¹² See Nancy Easterlin, “Novelty.” See also Hugo Mercier on the role of surprise in our experience of relevance. As he puts it, “everything else being equal, more surprising information is more relevant information” (158).

¹³ Compare to Kukkonen’s argument about the role of “prediction errors” in fictional narrative. As she puts it, a plot “can be understood as a sequence of unexpected events, or prediction errors, that change readers’ expectations as to how the narrative will develop further. The probabilities of the narrative get revised with each plot event, building a trajectory of prediction errors where the ending increases—steadily or suddenly—in probability (“The Speed of Plot,” 76).

¹⁴ As Kukkonen observes, the “probability design of a fictional narrative . . . is often engineered to overthrow readers’ predictions and the new observations force them to reconsider its probabilities” (“Bayesian Narrative,” 727).

¹⁵ Yet another important generic affiliation, which I do not consider in this essay, concerns *Babylon Berlin*'s relationship with the long tradition of representing the history of the Third Reich on screen. As Anton Kaes points out, this representational mode features a “commingling of historical events with invented characters, of political Geschichte (history) with private Geschichten (stories),” and is itself an heir to “the classical historical novel in the tradition of Walter Scott” (29).

¹⁶ See Zunshine, *Why We Read*, part III, chapter 3(d): “Alone Again, Naturally.”

¹⁷ Indeed, some readers of the original series would still prefer it. As one anonymous amazon.com reviewer puts it, “I grow bored with the incessant back and forth between Rath and Charlotte - the relationship takes away from these novels being true police procedurals” (“Autumn Leaves,” November 4, 2019).

¹⁸https://www.reddit.com/r/BabylonBerlin/comments/ahdrwr/charlotte_thoroughly_drowns_then_is_saved_bykiss

¹⁹ Esme Nicholson, “Germany’s ‘Babylon Berlin’” (np.). Quoted in Fuechtner, “Forum,” 835.

²⁰ As Jill Suzanne Smith puts it, “for scholars of the era,” the show’s occasional historical inaccuracies “are maddening” (“Forum,” 840).

²¹ For a discussion of other “historical ‘cheats’” in *Babylon Berlin*, see Hall 315.

²² For a useful review, see Moniek M. and Frank Hakemulder, “Understanding.”

²³ Compare to Hall’s argument that the intentional anachronisms of *Babylon Berlin* “disturb any sense of the fixedness of the past and challenge a teleological concept of twentieth-century German history in general, and late silent and early sound film history in particular” (315).

²⁴ For a discussion of the powerful yet tacit influence of collective memory shaped by screen representations on the individual imagination, see Thomas Elsaesser’s *Film History as Media*

Archaeology. As he puts it, “key elements of cinematic perception have become internalised also as our modes of cognition and embodied experience, such that the ‘cinema effect’ may be most present where its apparatus and technologies are least perceptible. Cinema’s role in transforming the past and historical representation into collective memory is now a matter of intense debate, while its ‘invisible hand’ in our affective life and in our modes of being-in-the-world—our ontologies—has preoccupied both psychoanalysis and philosophy” (71). It is my hope that the cognitivist account developed by my essay would complement such debates.

²⁵As Kaes puts it, “Cinematic representations have influenced—indeed shaped our perspectives on the past; they function for us today as a technological memory bank. History, it would seem, has become widely accessible, but the power over memory has passed into the hands of those who create those images” (ix).

²⁶ Consider, in this context, another review of *Babylon Berlin*, whose author both acknowledges that the series resists “the portentous insight that hovers over so many films about the period, such as *Cabaret*,” yet still experiences its characters as “dancing on the edge of the abyss” (Stanley, “Lotte in Weimar”).

²⁷ For a review of work on emotion regulation, see James Gross.

²⁸ See Zunshine, *The Secret Life*.

²⁹ “Das Anschauen von Filmserien im Netz ist eine Strategie der Lebensbewältigung” (Tschernokoshewa, 132). For a review of effects of binge-watching, see Maèva Flayelle *et al.*

³⁰ By doing so, she would exercise her “theory of mind,” aka “mindreading,” which, it has been argued, is central to our interaction with any work of fiction. See Zunshine, *Why We Read* and *Getting Inside Your Head*, and Alan Palmer, *Fictional Minds*.

³¹ Compare to Valentijn Visch, Ed Tan, and Dylan Molenaar's argument about the emotional experience of "highly immersive cinema." As they put it, while "the experience is at the same time emotionally arousing and attractive, because all emotion intensities were relatively high," it does not impede "more complex cognitive processes," such as "viewers' awareness that the fictional world is presented by way of an artefact" (np).