

## Lotte in Weimar: Sex and Poverty in *Babylon Berlin*

The most internationally successful and expensive German-language television series ever produced (Dowling, Grey), *Babylon Berlin* (2017–) overburdens the body of its female lead, Charlotte Ritter, known to most as Lotte, played by Liv Lisa Fries. *Babylon Berlin* is a detective drama series set in Weimar-era Berlin that follows Gereon Rath (Volker Bruch), a police detective and traumatized WWI veteran from Cologne who arrives in the German capital with the covert mission of dismantling a sadomasochistic pornography ring. Once in Berlin, Gereon navigates a myriad of conspiracies—from a *noir*-inspired mystery plot involving a missing Russian freight train transporting poison gas and Imperial gold, to the widespread right-wing collusions marching towards a historically inevitable Nazism. To aid in his investigations of the unknown Babylonian capital, Gereon—and the spectator—is gifted Lotte, a casually employed stenographer at Berlin's Police Headquarters by day and flapper-come-prostitute by night, when Weimar Berlin's cutting-edge artistic, hedonistic, and liberal culture comes alive.

*Babylon Berlin*'s high production values, serious subject matter, labyrinthine plot structure, and distinctive visual style—often attributed to showrunner Tom Tykwer's authorial vision—positions the series firmly within the recent “quality European TV” canon alongside other international successes such as *The Young Pope* (2016), *The Crown* (2016–), *Gomorrah* (2014–), *Borgia* (2011–2014), and *The Bureau* (2015–) (Eichner 193, Barra and Scaglioni 1–10). Quality European television is a discursive category formulated as a transatlantic iteration of the American “quality” tradition, which heralded series such as *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), *The Wire* (2002–2007), *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013), and *Mad Men* (2007–2015) as more culturally legitimate offerings than their mass-appeal television counterparts on the basis of their employment of characteristics found in supposedly “higher” arts, such as literature and cinema. American “quality”

television has been characterized as an overtly masculinist tradition (Lotz, Fuller and Driscoll, DeFino). Indeed, recent series such as *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), *True Detective* (2014–2019), or *Westworld* (2017–) that court association with this “quality” label often position women as ciphers for investigations into the male psyche (Wilkins 37). As such, my opening claim may invite similar assumptions regarding Lotte. Yet, although frequently placed in situations that threaten gender-based violence and the associated male-serving corporeal traumas that recur in series like *True Detective*, Lotte's body is not used as a site for the explication of male psychological crises. Rather, Lotte is overburdened by the sheer volume of work *Babylon Berlin* requires her to perform. Lotte's work is represented narratively as a female member of the Weimar precariat and metatextually as a figure called upon to embody a range of competing historical and cultural referents and their respective ideologies in line with “quality” television's intertextual repertoires. On both levels, Lotte is overworked and ultimately, underpaid.

The most obvious of Lotte's tasks is the embodiment of competing notions of femininity and feminism. Lotte is at once the series' projection of a sexually emancipated feminist figure striving for economic independence in the shape of the Weimar New Woman and a reflexive disclosure of the ideals of that new gendered demarcation as merely a mirage (McBride 220). Redolent of Irmgard Keun's Doris in *The Artificial Silk Girl* (1932), Lotte is an aspirational young woman who, like Keun's demi-monde, self-assuredly exercises all financial avenues open to her under Berlin's glittering lights. Lotte's confidence, bobbed hair, glitzy flapper dresses, and frank attitudes toward sex may evoke the image of the New Woman, however, as the series progresses it becomes clear any implied independence is an illusion. Lotte is forced to depend on men for survival—financially, professionally, and, in a manner that always threatens to surrender her body to televi-

sion crime fiction's necropornographic gaze through her *Perils of Pauline*-esque (1914) brushes with death, literally (Stanley 4). In turn, she must submit to their demands or conditions. To most, Lotte is little more than an enticing spectacle of sex, or a warm body for purchase. Her independence is restricted to a matter of spirit and mind, made manifest in her ability to intellectually parley with men. As such, Lotte is equally reminiscent of the New Woman's muted inheritor, the classical Hollywood screwball comedy leading lady (Deleyto 83–84) who repackages her libidinous desires deemed incompatible with the patriarchal constraints of late 1930s and 40s Hollywood (and U.S. culture more generally) as quick-witted dialogue.

Lotte embodies both the image of the sexually liberated Weimar woman and a critique of such female sexuality subsequently denied by Hollywood. This could be read as a reflexive comment on female agency and sexuality, a critique often ascribed to period dramas, where the embrace of period detail is in service of the politics of the present (Black and Driscoll 188). I do not deny Lotte performs these functions. However, *Babylon Berlin* layers Lotte's symbolic value with another tension between celebration and critique that certainly waters down its potency. After all, Lotte is not the only woman in Weimar, or Berlin for that matter, although the official *Babylon Berlin* website suggests otherwise. It describes Lotte in this way:

Determined and resourceful, poor but sexy. Stenotypist for murder investigations, over the course of the story becomes more than just Rath's assistant. The only woman among a host of crusty officials. Few take her seriously – but she can defend herself: by talking a lot, and quickly. By knowing a lot. By learning a lot. By partying a lot... (“Charlotte Ritter”).

While not as garrulous as a passage of Lotte's dialogue, this brief summation speaks loudly. The description's false opposition between “poor” and “sexy” highlights one of Lotte's weightiest embodied contradictions and reveals its ideological underpinnings. To Berlin tourists and denizens, the line “poor but sexy” is undoubtedly familiar as the city's unofficial slogan (“arm, aber sexy!”).

That the city's identifying tagline, “poor but sexy” was first uttered by Berlin's mayor, Klaus Wowereit in an interview with the neoliberal business magazine *Focus-Money* in 2003 is telling (Frey). Repeating the line on several occasions, Wowereit issued a clarion call to members of what Richard Florida termed the

‘creative class’ in which he proffered the city as the capital of European cool and open for business. His slogan sought to capitalize on Berlin's long history as an artistic hub for filmmakers, artists, musicians, and writers as well as its low cost of living relative to other European cities. Agata Pyzik terms “Berlinism,” the romanticization of the city as a dreamland. Berlinism, according to Pyzik, is a phenomenon traceable to the legacy of the Weimar era, heralding the city as a “capital of all sorts of debauchery and transgression, in culture, politics, literature, art, music and theatre. What built Berlin's reputation is a combination of German expressionism and cheap rents...Berlinism means the conscious use of this ambiguous cultural capital, made of sweat, camp, and danger” (80). It is precisely this image that *Babylon Berlin* courts and projects through Lotte—a romanticized spectacle of present Berlin's licentious and creative past. She is the Weimar era's “divine decadence,” to borrow a phrase from Christopher Isherwood's Sally Bowles (Wilkins “Babylon Berlin” n.p). Lotte is an exemplar of Berlin's glamour, creativity, and permissiveness: qualities that are, as Wowereit proclaimed, uniquely tied to its poverty.

Lotte's embodiment of this “poor but sexy” ideal is established in her introduction. Around a third of the way into the pilot, the action cuts from an early-morning police raid on a pornography shoot to an interior shot of a dilapidated and overpopulated apartment. Laundry hangs from the ceiling. A baby wails. Bathed in a cool blue light reminiscent of tinted film stock frequently employed in Weimar cinema (Rogowski 68), a young girl suddenly bolts upright in bed. She checks for her bedfellow but finds only an unused pillow. In a manner that somewhat recalls the anticipation of Rick's appearance through delay and deferral in *Casablanca* (1942), Toni asks her eldest sister “Where is Lotte?,”<sup>1</sup> who exhaustedly attempts to nurse the crying baby while penned in between another child and a snoring husband. Receiving only an indifferent shrug, Toni continues her search and in doing so guides the spectator through their dilapidated apartment, solidifying the family's socioeconomic standing. She peers through a broken glass window at her bedridden mother writhing in syphilitic discomfort and passes by her dementing grandfather murmuring incoherently in his sleep. Finally, Toni enters another room and spies a young woman smoking out a window. Still wearing her

1. All translations from German to English are my own, unless otherwise specified.



Lotte revealed, episode one.

overcoat, and with her bobbed brown hair tousled, it is clear she has not been home long. In contrast to the drab grey and brown walls the woman's face is illuminated by the early morning sun, the intended focal point of the image, and sequence. Confirming this, Toni calls out "Lotte?"

The juxtaposition of Lotte's luminosity and her gritty dwelling divulges *Babylon Berlin's* vision of poverty as an enticing spectacle. Indeed, somewhat perversely, the series' expense is made visible in the lavish design and sumptuous depiction of squalor, which in turn contributes to its status as "quality" television. The tension between poverty and the series' high production values results in a seductive, glossy view of these living conditions in line with Lotte's summative "poor but sexy" characterization. Presented in the right light, shabby becomes chic. Turning to her sister, and the camera, Lotte is revealed as a vision of pulchritude and exhaustion in battle. Her hair is ruffled and her make-up smudged in a manner that suggests a night of revelry rather than toil—although, as is made clear in the next episode, for Lotte the two are inseparable. She removes her overcoat and unveils a beaded shift dress beneath. A close-up on her cast-off Mary-Jane heels confirms that Lotte is a flapper.

Time poor, Lotte enlists Toni's assistance to prepare for clerical work at the Berlin Police Head-

quarters, where she must scramble for piecemeal jobs among hordes of underemployed women. Brimming with admiration for her older sister, Toni asks how Lotte can function in this way, in spite of her utter lack of sleep to which Lotte matter-of-factly replies, "You know the deal. If you sleep, you miss being awake." She scrubs her armpits and crotch with a wet rag and peers into a small mirror affixed to the wall with chewed gum to wipe the rogue makeup from her face. She and Toni joyously sing along to Hermann Leopoldi's *Deine Augen sind Magnete* ("Your Eyes are Magnets") as it blares from a neighbour's open window. Suddenly, the exhausted Lotte of only a minute prior is transformed into a perky, industrious young woman determined to provide the rent for which she is badgered by both her sickly mother and misogynist brother-in-law. Alone on Berlin's early morning city streets, Lotte smiles to herself and runs for a streetcar. This five-minute sequence establishes both the series' spectacle of poverty and Lotte's socioeconomic position and work ethic. It also juxtaposes her demeanour with her lot. This introduction explicitly declares Lotte as poor, while her physical attractiveness and good humour are indicative of what will come to be visualized as her sexiness. Yet, for the German-speaking audience, Lotte is explicitly tied to Berlin in a more subtle manner than the overt visualized embodiment

of its identifying slogan. Throughout the series, Lotte and her family speak "Berlinisch," a regional dialect with specific grammatical, vocabulary, and pronunciation characteristics. In *Babylon Berlin*, these linguistic qualities are only one aspect of the dialect's use as a marker of regional and cultural distinction.<sup>2</sup> Most obviously, Gereon's consistent use of *Hochdeutsch* (High German) and *Höflichkeitsform* (formal form) is placed in contrast with Lotte's casual use of the informal form and directness, consonant with Berlinisch conventions. Narratively, Gereon's polite formality indicates his Rhineland rigidity, however, it also signifies his higher socioeconomic status in comparison with Lotte, as the dialect is stereotypically associated with the working-class. Of course, Lotte can—and does—speak *Hochdeutsch*. She simply selects to use the vernacular with other native Berliners. Indeed, Lotte embodies all that is commonly celebrated as typically "Berlin" in the popular imaginary. More than a Berlinisch-speaker, she has "Berliner Schnauze" (Berlin snout), a term describing a stereotypical Ber-

liner attitude or persona, characterized by cynical quick-wittedness, directness (or even brashness), and pragmatism (Schlobinski 56). As such, Lotte's use of the vernacular and attitude points both to her lower socioeconomic status and desirable insider cultural cachet, further aligning her with the image that Berlin is, and always has been, "poor, but sexy." Thus, Lotte serves not only as Gereon's, but the spectator's guide to what is commonly projected as the "real" Berlin: its sex, poverty, creativity, and gumption.

A sequence in episode two literalizes Lotte's role as a guide to Babylonian Berlin. Echoing Curt Moreck's *Guide Through 'Depraved' Berlin* (1931) city guide, which "paradoxically both glamorised and defamed Berlin as the city of sexual exploits" (Smith 231), Lotte exposes the inner workings of the Moka Efti nightclub, a sprawling and glamorous cabaret club housing an up-market clandestine brothel in its labyrinthine underground dungeons. Following the series' most famous cabaret dance number "Zu Asche zu Staub" (To Ashes to Dust) in which Nikoros (Severija Janušauskaitė), a cabaret performer in dandy male drag, conducts a crowd of revellers in a choreographed number, Lotte is subtly summoned from her joyous participation at the helm of the ecstatic throng for her sexual services. Lotte instantly shifts between what is projected as a leisure activity and work in a manner that aligns

2. The edited collection *The Sociolinguistic Economy of Berlin: Cosmopolitan Perspectives on Language, Diversity and Social Space* has a good English-language essays on Berlin's sociolinguistic specificities.



Lotte as spectacle.

with what Anja Schwanhäußer calls “Berlin Capitalism,” a concept denoting “a certain way of life [based on] consumption needs that are mass-produced, and is linked to a work ethic that gradually changes from bourgeois discipline and industry to creativity, flexibility, anti-hierarchy and network production” (105). As Schwanhäußer describes in relation to Berlin’s organized party scene, such conditions blur the line between commercial exchange and leisure activities (109–110). While Lotte’s commercial exchange may not be in line with the type of creative work identified by Schwanhäußer, her work-life balance, where prostitution is but one (paid) element of revelry among multiple income streams, certainly mirrors the fuzzy demarcations between work, leisure, and experience associated with the neoliberal structures that promote cultural entrepreneurialism, which underpin Berlin’s “new” creative economy (Otkay 212).

Lotte guides the man, and the spectator, through the brothel’s corridors. They pass flapper and businessman pairings in all stages and varieties of copulation, from shots of passionate kissing to bondage. Crucially, these shots portray the woman frontally such that their bodies and faces are exposed to the spectator while, with the exception of Lotte’s customer, their male companions are little more than anonymous bodies—as in the case of a bare-breasted woman in a leather corset who gyrates against a male customer pinned to a wall and the to-camera positioning of another as the grateful recipient of cunnilingus. In her sex act, Lotte’s body is projected as a spectacle. A low-angle shot aligns the viewer with Lotte’s male customer as he gazes up at her naked body, but for a metal chain collar and leather body harness, astride him (Wilkins “Babylon Berlin” n.p). In this sequence, Lotte is not only projected in the adjectival sense as “sexy” but is presented as consonant with the noun. She becomes a promise of spectacular fornication in the city.

As her quick turnaround from nighttime flapper and prostitute to daylight clerk illustrates, Lotte is a member of the precariat, a cohort of society acutely identified with the rise of the creative industries and creative city who rely on freelance work. Without the income stability of a consistent wage, the precariat must constantly seek employment even during periods of hire, resulting in a new situation of constant activity and hard work to maintain livelihoods and support families (McRobbie 12). Lotte must constantly hustle—in many senses of the term—to keep her family fed and housed within the Neukölln tenement

slums.<sup>3</sup> Yet, as Lotte’s introductory demeanour suggests, her unstable employment is not depicted as wholly undesirable. Lotte’s life is shown as vibrant and exciting. Her casual police clerk work involves her in mysteries and political conspiracies while at night she haunts venues brimming with music, recreational drug use, and uninhibited sex. Importantly, she does not view her prostitution as anything other than a constructive means of ensuring financial security and even encourages her destitute friend, Greta (Leonie Benesch), to take up the trade by assuring her there is nothing to fear from the customers.

Lotte’s prostitution is only one aspect of her multi-job existence, and in a narrative sense, it is not the most exploitative. Rather it is the exploitation of her Berlin cultural ken by the police force who issue her temporary, but legal employment that best illustrates the inequitable nature of precarious work. At times Lotte herself probes the equitability of her labour expenditure and remuneration, as in a sequence where her knowledge and access to Berlin’s underground scenes results in a vital break in Gereon’s case. During their departing words, Lotte suddenly stops and asks Gereon, “Do I get paid by someone for this? For my work?” Gereon chuckles, “I have no idea”. Lotte’s smile fades, “What do you mean...?” Gereon replies, “We’re just getting started”. This nonresponse satisfies Lotte. She grins and runs to catch the metro to her next appointment. The promise of experience, and potential future employment successfully defers the obligation of payment for services rendered.

The colloquial term “LIME” (“Less Income, More Experience”) is used to refer to members of Berlin’s creative-industry precariat tied to the increasingly prominent cultural economy of the “New Berlin”—a brand developed by city marketers and planners since reunification. As Geoff Stahl writes, LIMEs are fundamental to “new” Berlin’s creative life “where entrepreneurship, creativity, innovation and cultural labour are activities shaped by an ideology that values flexibility, mobility, immediacy, efficiency, and adaptability” (“Getting By” 193). In spite of her poverty, and the physical and emotional exhaustion that accompanies a life of insecurity and overwork, Lotte is most alive in the glamorous cabaret nightlife, and as bright as

3. Neukölln is an area that has since tipped over from poverty into an aestheticized shabby chic. Indeed, it is now considered among the city’s most creative, hip, and gentrified locales, particularly popular among international students and creative industry practitioners (McRobbie 123).

any of the assorted colourful characters with whom she rubs shoulders. Lotte is industrious, adventurous, and brimming with moxie—in short, although she is not a member of the traditional creative class, she is the model LIME. As Stahl continues:

For many artists (and countless others) living and working in the New Berlin... there are no guarantees, no assurances of a sustainable career, and decreasing purchase in a creative field which privileges uncertainty as the necessary force driving its competitiveness. The restless energies generated through this restless quest for a creative life in Berlin now serve as a semiotic resource, a city-as-scene that can be used to market the virtues, and certainly many of the vices, of its creative life to artists, entrepreneurs, investors and, lately, tourists from around the world. (“Getting By” 193)

Lotte personifies this advertisement of Berlin as a city of vice under the “poor but sexy” banner and reveals its deceptions. While the suggestion that someone may be sexy *in spite* of their low socioeconomic status is at least unkind, if not outright offensive, Wowereit’s statement is employed here to more insidious ends. For the young female body, poverty is sold as sex appeal. Lotte is not sexy *in spite* of her poverty, but because of it. While the series casts her nakedness and sexuality as principal sights in its spectacle of poverty, she is ambivalent toward her own prostitution. Her rationale for this form of employment is simple: “I need money.” In fact, Lotte is never seen engaging in sexual activity that is not mercenary. However, as Lotte is the series’ guide to hedonistic Weimar Berlin, for the city to remain Babylon, Lotte must remain poor. As such, luxuriating in Lotte’s “poor but sexy” existence and the spectacles that such characterization facilitates must, on some level, make one complicit in endorsing the structural mechanisms that will keep her in that position. Without Lotte’s prostitution, there is no narrative justification for spectacles of her naked body, BDSM costumes, or scenes of her engaged in sex acts. In the absence of these sequences, Lotte is a quick-witted, vivacious, and attractive (but modestly clad) ambitious young woman driven to succeed in a career society deems just out of her reach—attributes that can undoubtedly be considered sexy, but hardly Babylonian.

As Stahl points out, almost two decades on from Wowereit’s initial proclamation, the slogan has been “reduced to a faint-praise brand, stretched to break-

ing point over thousands of handbags, its meaning thinned out across t-shirts, postcards, documentaries, songs, and websites” (“Introduction” 13). Perhaps Lotte’s depiction as a matter-of-fact young woman who enjoys the cultural offerings of Berlin’s nightlife but restricts her “hedonistic” sexual exploits to those paid in line with an overall ambition toward economic stability and increased social status does embody this diluted, commercialized version of the city’s identifying motto. In part through the genericity of her characterization as the screwball leading lady and in part a response to contemporary Berlin’s ethos as a creative city with a uniquely “laid-back coolness, pleasant scruffiness, urban-idyll and carpe diem,” (Otkay 219) Lotte regards her lifestyle as an exciting adventure. After all, she is called upon to project the illusion of Weimar’s debauchery at the same time as the outwardly sanitized Hollywood screwball leading lady. As such, it cannot be her own libidinous desires that drive her inculcation in Berlin’s “depraved” scenes—it must be financial with the view to upward mobility.

Echoing some of the more tedious aspects of the well-worn “quality” television debates, *Babylon Berlin*’s expense has been lauded as a virtue in and of itself (Connolly). That much of this expense is visible in lavish spectacles of both nightlife decadence and poverty that are narratively facilitated by Lotte’s “poor but sexy” characterization unveils the series’ relationship to that demarcation and its implications. Poverty may be sexy when its embodiment can temporarily move out of squalor and into scenes of choreographed cabaret, high-end prostitution, and non-dependent drug use—in short, when poverty is not too proximate. Bodies may be “poor but sexy” provided they are not too poor—the spectacle of poverty cannot abide those that are unwell, unintelligent, or unattractive as a result of their lot. Indeed, Lotte’s ability to work around the clock is a product of her determination and her privileges while the need to do so is a product of systemic inequality. Ultimately, Lotte’s “poor but sexy” aesthetic is the result of her relative poverty rubbing against the illusory promises of neoliberal entrepreneurialism under the guise of the creative economy. As such, perhaps Lotte does embody Wowereit’s statement, but in its modified, more prosaic iteration from 2011, “We want Berlin to become richer and still remain sexy” (“Introduction” 14).

*Babylon Berlin*’s spectacle of poverty traps Lotte between the promise of feminist autonomy through upward mobility and its ultimate disavowal. Lotte must work tirelessly to improve her lot and yet, as

*Babylon Berlin* exploits her sex work and poverty as spectacle, this ambition explicitly hinders any true movement. The harder Lotte works to alleviate her poverty, the more numerous the opportunities to project her prostitution as spectacle. Each instance is justified by the notion that her labour follows from her motivation to change her socio-economic condition. But, it is not her increased sex work, rather the conditional assistance of her male employers in the police force that ultimately lifts Lotte out of poverty and prostitution. In keeping with the conservative heterosexual coupling ideals associated with Hollywood narrative traditions, Lotte is only released from the spectacle of poverty by trading her image as an erotic object for a potential romantic interest for Gereon, the series' protagonist, and her employer. It is, after all, no coincidence that Gereon and Lotte's initial encounter in the first episode takes the form of a classic meet-cute: a workplace collision. Neither is it a coincidence that the two do not share their first romantic kiss until Lotte is no longer a sex worker, twenty-four episodes later. Across *Babylon Berlin*'s first three seasons, Lotte is promised a compromised payoff that is delayed to keep her poor—or poor enough—to be sexy.

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## Hayley Rose Malouin

### "Gooble Gobble, One, or Several of Us": Becoming-Molecular, Becoming-Imperceptible in Tod Browning's *Freaks*

"Children? Monsters!"  
"Oh, you're a circus. I understand."  
— *Freaks*, 1932

The midnight procession of caravans halts. Beautiful but conniving aerialist Cleo is chased through the rain and mud by a group of sideshow 'freaks,' her shrill screams amplified in darkness as a multitude of bodies descend. Later, the camera cuts to the same Cleo, now a squawking, disfigured woman-chicken hybrid on display in a freak show of her own.

Cleo's deceptive monstrosity and her mutilation serve as the seductively horrific linchpins of Tod Browning's pre-Code box office bomb *Freaks*. The predominant—if overly moralizing—takeaway is that monstrosity is a state of mind; by comparison, the titular *freaks* are veritably normal. But this inversion of monstrosity serves to subsume difference, couching freakery in a comfortably reductive chain of cause, effect, and identification: you commit monstrous acts, you become a monster—materially, biologically, irrevocably. Freakishness, in this context, becomes what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe as a "molar aggregate," the perception of which can grasp the movement of freakery "only as the displacement of a moving body or the development of a form" (280-81).

Dangling just the other side of this cosily grotesque equation are the 'born freaks' who make up

1. As distinguished from other sideshow performers who augment their bodies in order to gain a freakish status and allure (tattooed painted ladies, muscular strongmen, and so on), 'born freaks' are performers whose main attraction as entertainers is their singular physicality (conjoined twins, little people, performers with missing limbs, among others). This dichotomy between born

much of the supporting cast in Browning's film. These freaks are coded, first, as children and, second, as righteous avengers in order to evade the slippery territory (or, rather, de-territorialization) produced by the film's reductive imperative. In this slippage, we find the potential for a distinctly freakish becoming-imperceptible, which can erode narratives of infantilization and vilification alike. This elusive freakery is in motion "below and above the threshold of perception" and, indeed, below and above *Freaks*' cinematic lens (Deleuze and Guattari 281).

The elucidation of such a freakish becoming-imperceptible is the purpose of this brief consideration. The freaks of *Freaks* are irreducible to the moralizing—and molarizing—ideology presented by the very narrative they inhabit. They exist, instead, in moments of suspended, freakish contemplation, and in so doing they work to unravel the neatly woven filmic tapestry that situates monstrosity as a punitive response to wrongdoing. In turn, this becoming-imperceptible acts upon *Freaks* to un-work it as a cohesive fiction and dilute its narrative linearity, enabling cinematic *lines of flight* to rupture and emerge in its place and rendering *Freaks* as rhizome—an assemblage in a constant state of de-stratification and re-stratification and overtaken by "a transversal movement that sweeps one way and the other" (Deleuze and Guattari 25). Both *Freaks* and its freaks are rhizomatic assemblages continually be-

and acquired freakishness is central to discourses on the circus as a site of both the veneration and exploitation of difference, disability, and otherness. See Fricker and Malouin (2018) and Carter (2018).

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# Simona Schneider

## Invocation by Proxy: Ali Cherri's "My Pain is Real"

It is entirely conceivable that life's splendor forever lies in wait about each one of us in all its fullness, but veiled from view, deep down, invisible, far off. It is there, though, not hostile, not reluctant, not deaf. *If you invoke it with the right word, by its right name, it will come. This is the essence of magic, which does not create but invokes.*

... *Ruft man sie mit dem richtigen Wort, beim richtigen Namen, dann kommt sie. Das ist das Wesen der Zauberei, die nicht schafft, sondern ruft.*  
— Franz Kafka, October 18, 1921<sup>1</sup>

One large monitor roughly 60cm x 32cm hangs adjacent to two abutting 9" screens (19cm x 14cm) like the ones used in cars. The displays engage in an oblique crossfire, issuing indirect addresses to the viewer standing at their intersection, who turns towards and away and wears the headphones attached to the small screens. Lebanese artist Ali Cherri first showed his three-channel video installation "My Pain is Real" (2010) at Galerie Iman Farès in 2010 in Paris as part of the inaugural exhibition "Co-incidences" in this configuration. The scale bookends the human. The larger shows a man's face more tightly cropped than a talking head and closer to an intimate interlocutor skyping from a relaxed position, but its size moves the visitor back. Conversely, the two smaller monitors bring the viewer closer and accommodate the interval between the eyes, recalling viewfinders. As his visage progressively becomes bruised, battered, and wounded, he looks both on and out without saying a word and with muted emotions.

Meanwhile, the diptych alternates between identical and slightly overlapping, contiguous images, including idyllic, long takes of a sun-drenched, still room and a more tumultuous sea interspersed with flickering, fast-paced montages of war media footage and everyday scenes. All three videos run on a loop, but the video on the main display runs more than twice as long as that of the two mini consoles and consists of one long take (that form often championed for its veracity) internally cut as a collage through special effects.

When I first saw the piece, Cherri, who was present, projected this channel—his own countenance—on a cinema screen, and his gigantic, imposing face stared down towards the spectators into a middle distance.<sup>2</sup> In its original installation, two people watching the adjacent screens must occupy nearly the same position in intimate proximity. Otherwise, it is possible to revisit the piece through Cherri's website (alicherri.com) on a personal computer. The mouse inter-

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1. Translation modified and italics added. Kafka, Franz. *The Diaries of Franz Kafka: 1914-1923*. Translated by Martin Greenberg, vol. 2, Schocken Books, 1948, 195; Kafka, Franz. *Tagebücher*. Edited by Hans-Gerd Koch, Michael Müller, and Malcolm Pasley. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002, 866.
  2. This first viewing occurred on the occasion of the 2013 *Unfixed Itineraries: Film and Visual Culture from Arab Worlds* conference at UCSC Digital Arts Research Center organized by Peter Limbrick.