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The Ordinaryin the Novel of German Modernism

von
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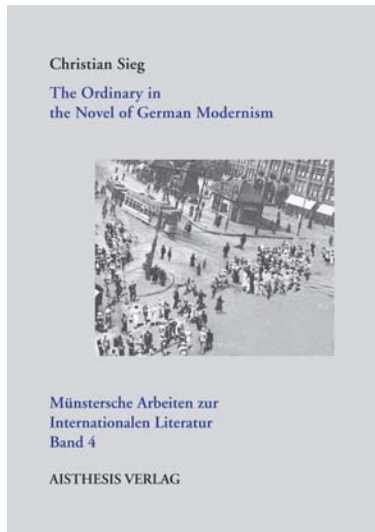

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Introduction

The ordinary is ubiquitous in twentieth-century art. Authors from James Joyce to Wallace Stevens cherished it as a subject of representation, and artists from Pablo Picasso to Marcel Duchamp pitted it against art as an institution.[1] Through both the historical avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde, objects of everyday life intruded on the realm of art: Pablo Picasso made use of newspaper fragments; Georges Braque included wallpaper in his collages; Kurt Schwitters employed waste for his Merz pieces; and Andy Warhol transformed Coca-Cola bottles and Campbell's soup cans into art objects. As many accounts, including Peter Bürger's seminal *Theorie der Avantgarde*, show, the twentieth-century success story of the ordinary posed substantial questions for the theory of art as well. Andy Warhol's 1964 display of Brillo boxes at Manhattan's Stable Gallery, for example, prompted Arthur C. Danto to ask, in his study *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, what it is that distinguishes artworks from everyday objects after all.[2]

The avant-garde discovered the revolutionary potential of the ordinary, but its significance for the arts has a long history. In different ways, the ordinary was highly appreciated by artists of other centuries as well. Two such ways in which art approaches the ordinary shall be outlined here, since they differ starkly from the representation of the ordinary in the German modernist novel and thus provide contrasts to what is at stake in the novels at the center of this study: Siegfried Kracauer's *Ginster. Von ihm selbst geschrieben* (1928), Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz. Die Geschichte vom Franz Biberkopf* (1929), and Elias Canetti's *Die Blendung* (1935). The first contrasting approach is exemplified by Dutch genre painting of the seventeenth century and nineteenth-century novels by Adalbert Stifter (1805-1868) and Gustav Freytag (1816-1895). These works transfigure the ordinary. Taking the ordinary as their subject matter, they glorify the everyday and erase its repetitive and deadening dimension. The second contrasting approach is taken by the Bildungsroman. Here, the ordinary serves as the antagonistic environment which the young protagonist strives to flee. Motivated by the

1 See: Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982).

2 See: Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

poetry of his heart, the protagonist resists the forces of the prosaic and – if successful – changes the everyday itself.

The representation of the ordinary in Kracauer's *Ginster*, Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, and Canetti's *Die Blendung* proceeds along different lines. On the one hand, rather than transfiguring the everyday, these novels emphasize its political and social dimension. As I will show, they exhibit an analytical agenda to which scholarship on modernism has paid scant attention. On the other hand, and in contrast to the Bildungsroman, in which the protagonist has a certain amount of autonomy, the protagonists in the three modernist novels have themselves become ordinary. Therefore, the novels offer no vantage point from which the ordinary could be evaluated as second-rate. It is my contention that ordinary practices are the true protagonists of the three novels at the center of this study.

The Transfiguration of the Ordinary

As Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes epitomize, the ordinary challenges the traditional notion of art. Why should we represent or exhibit what we are already familiar with? What can be gained by representing the ordinary? While the historical avant-garde dragged these questions into the center of our attention, they certainly did not originate in the twentieth century. Hegel had already asked whether the fact that Dutch genre paintings find their subjects in the "für sich genommen unschönen und prosaischen Dasein"[3] invalidates their status as art. His answer is a showcase of dialectical sophistication. For Hegel does not simply ignore the mastery of Dutch painters such as Gerard Ter Borch (1617-1681).[4] On the contrary, he enthusiastically praises their artistic technique. He maintains that the subjective appreciation of the

3 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik II*, vol. 14, Werke (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 223. While Hegel emphasizes the unique historical situation which explains the significance of the everyday in Dutch culture, Henri Lefebvre, although critical of the Dutch bourgeoisie, nostalgically laments that "such times cannot be restored" (Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 40).

4 As always in his lectures on aesthetics, Hegel analyzes concrete works of art. Besides Ter Borch, he mentions earlier painters such as Hans Memling, Jan van Eyck, and Jan van Scorel. See: Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik II*, 228.

ordinary enables an unprecedented expertise in the art of painting: "wenn man wissen will, was Malen ist, so muß man diese Bildchen ansehen."[5] However, Hegel's praise does not conclude without dialectical reversal. In the end, the subjective skill of such painters depreciates the substantial content that art, according to Hegel, portrays:

> Dadurch [through the perfection of artistic technique] wendet sich nun aber das Interesse für die dargestellten Objekte dazu um, daß es die blanke Subjektivität des Künstlers selber ist, die sich zu zeigen gedenkt und der es deshalb nicht auf die Gestaltung eines für sich fertigen und auf sich selbst beruhenden Werkes ankommt, sondern auf eine Produktion, in welcher das hervorbringende *Subjekt* nur sich selber zu sehen gibt.[6]

Hegel's assessment of Dutch genre paintings is part and parcel of his larger thesis that the subjectivism of the Romantic period foreshadows the end of art itself. His dialectical conclusion implies that the ordinary as such is not worthy of representation. Rather than standing for itself, it becomes the material for the expression of artistic skill. Notwithstanding the broader philosophical implications of Hegel's analysis, his insight that the ordinary is transfigured in Dutch genre paintings is likewise of the utmost importance for the history of the novel. I limit myself to two examples from the 1850s.

In the context of German literary history, arguably the most prominent author who transfigures the ordinary in his oeuvre is Adalbert Stifter . Stifter's "sanftes Gesetz,"[7] which programmatically draws attention away from major events to the minor incidents of the everyday, is well known. According to Stifter, it is the very essence of prose to observe small things. Hegel's claim that Dutch genre paintings turn to the everyday in order to avoid the political sphere also pertains equally to Stifter, who is often addressed as the paradigmatic author of the Biedermeier. His prescriptive impetus transforms the ordinary into the normative and removes the everyday from its contemporary political context. Thus, everyday life resembles the idyllic. Erich Auerbach relates this to the very style of Stifter's novels:

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5 Ibid., 226.

6 Ibid., 229.

7 Stifter formulates this idea in the preface to *Bunte Steine*, see: Adalbert Stifter, *Bunte Steine: Erzählungen*, ed. Michael Benedikt und Herbert Hornstein, vol. 3, Gesammelte Werke (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1956), 10.

> He [...] stylizes the language of his characters, making it so simple, pure, and noble that we never find a coarse expression, hardly ever even a hearty colloquialism. His language touches the common things of everyday life with delicate, innocent, and somewhat timid refinement. This has a direct bearing on the fact that his characters too live in a world with hardly a trace of historical movement.[8]

Such a description is spot on. Stifter's extensive portrayal of everyday practices in the rural provinces of *Der Nachsommer* (1857), for example, deflects the vicissitudes of contemporary life and, as Russell Berman puts it, suggests "alternatives, bastions of order against an impending social and semiotic entropy."[9]

As another major novel of the mid-1850s shows, transforming the ordinary into the idyllic is not the only way to transfigure it. Gustav Freytag's *Soll und Haben* (1855) transforms the ordinary into the adventurous. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno uncover the ideological agenda expressed in Freytag's novel. According to the Frankfurt School philosophers, the transfiguration of the ordinary in *Soll und Haben* aims at concealing the contradiction between the humanistic ideal set forth by eighteenth-century autonomous art and the capitalistic world:

> Unter dem Deckmantel der abenteuerlichen Begebenheit schmuggeln sie die Konterbande der Utilität ein und überreden ihren Leser, daß er eigentlich vom Traum gar nichts zu opfern brauche, wenn er Ingenieur oder Handlungsgehilfe werde [...].[10]

Horkheimer and Adorno criticize the romantic transfiguration of the ordinary, which endows the repetitive rhythms of the everyday with qualities desired by the subject. However, the relation between the ordinary and the novel does not only concern ideologically colored narratives. The novel as

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8 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 518.

9 Russell A. Berman, *The Rise of the Modern German Novel : Crisis and Charisma* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 106.

10 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, vol. 3, Theodor W. Adorno, Gesammelte Schriften (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 300. The authors also refer in this passage to Max von Eyth's today lesser-known novel *Hinter Pflug und Schraubstock*.

genre is intrinsically interwoven with the representation of the ordinary. As Charles Taylor stresses in his magisterial study on the Western notion of selfhood, *Sources of the Self*, the novel was instrumental in the affirmation of ordinary life that has become part and parcel of our modern identity. Thus, having addressed Stifter's and Freytag's novelistic attempts to transfigure the ordinary, I will now focus on the novel as genre and in particular on the Bildungsroman. In the process I will introduce the difference between the ordinary and the everyday, which is of utmost importance for the representation of the ordinary in the modernist novel.

The Novel and the Ordinary

The everyday – the reoccurring aspects of our lives which range from bodily reproduction to recreational activities – has always been of central significance for the novel. Only through the emergence of the most modern of all literary genres have topics such as work, family life, and education become worthy of literary representation. According to Auerbach, the serious treatment of everyday reality is the very hallmark of the modern novel in general and literary realism in particular.[11] The novel overcomes the differentiation in literary style that reserved tragic seriousness for the depiction of noble heroes and saw in comedy the only permissible approach to the everyday.

Focusing in particular on the Bildungsroman, Hegel anticipates Auerbach's claim that the everyday is crucial for the emergence of the novel. He cites the primal scene in Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, where the abstract idealism of the hero is contrasted with the prosaic conditions of the world. As Peter Szondi cogently explains, Hegel argues dialectically; that is, he criticizes the prosaic state of affairs in the world as well as the abstract subjectivity of the romantic heroes in the novel.[12] Hegel describes the conflict emphasized by the novel – more precisely: the Bildungsroman – as follows:

> Besonders sind Jünglinge diese neuen Ritter, die sich durch den Weltlauf, der sich statt ihrer Ideale realisiert, durchschlagen müssen und es nun für ein Unglück halten, daß es überhaupt Familie, bürgerliche Gesellschaft, Staat,

11 See: Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*.

12 Peter Szondi, *Poetik und Geschichtsphilosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 458.

> Gesetze, Berufsgeschäfte usf. gibt, weil diese substantiellen Lebensbeziehungen sich mit ihren Schranken grausam den Idealen und dem unendlichen Rechte des Herzens entgegensetzen. Nun gilt es, ein Loch in diese Ordnung der Dinge hineinzustoßen, die Welt zu verändern, zu verbessern oder ihr zum Trotz sich wenigstens einen Himmel auf Erden herauszuschneiden: das Mädchen, wie es sein soll, sich zu suchen, es zu finden und es nun den schlimmen Verwandten oder sonstigen Mißverhältnissen abzugewinnen, abzuerobern und abzutrotzen. Diese Kämpfe nun aber sind in der modernen Welt nichts Weiteres als die Lehrjahre, die Erziehung des Individuums an der vorhandenen Wirklichkeit, und erhalten dadurch ihren wahren Sinn.[13]

Claiming that the lofty romantic hero finally has to reckon with the prosaic conditions of the world, Hegel draws attention to the educational passage that the hero traverses. As many commentators have noted, Hegel's language in the above-quoted passage is highly ambivalent – ironic, sarcastic, even cynical. But even more significant is a certain change of perspective in his phrasing which becomes evident in the last sentence. Hegel differentiates between the subjective perspective of the hero – emphasized by the ironic style in which the hero's task is portrayed – and the objective angle of the philosopher who knows about the course of history. His ambivalent treatment of the novelistic hero stems from this dialectical perspective. On the one hand, Hegel cannot help but accept the usual course of events in which he, in accordance with his philosophical premises, sees the true sense of history. But, on the other hand, he appreciates the poetry of the heart that the heroes express. Therefore, Hegel conceptualizes the passage from rebellion to acceptance not as the ultimate defeat of the hero, but as a story of recognition and change. He poeticizes the encounter with the prosaic; the contradiction between the poetry of the heart and the prose of the world is sublated, insofar as

> einerseits die der gewöhnlichen Weltordnung zunächst widerstrebenden Charaktere das Echte und Substantielle in ihr anerkennen lernen, mit ihren Verhältnissen sich aussöhnen und wirksam in dieselben eintreten, andererseits

13 Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik II*, 219f. For a discussion of this prominent passage see: Martin Swales, *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), 20f. Todd Curtis Kontje, *The German Bildungsroman : History of a National Genre* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1993), 24.

> aber von dem, was sie wirken und vollbringen, die prosaische Gestalt abstreifen und dadurch eine der Schönheit und Kunst verwandte und befreundete Wirklichkeit an die Stelle der vorgefundenen Prosa setzen.[14]

Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* has become the paradigmatic novel for such analysis of the everyday, since the adventure within it is triggered by a disappointment with the ordinariness of bourgeois life itself. Wilhelm Meister flees the narrowness of his industrious home in order to transform his entire lifestyle. To be sure, not all novelistic protagonists find their personal fulfillment (as Wilhelm does); but they are all alike in that they strive for neither distant kingships nor glorious battles but a more livable everyday life. The Bildungsroman shows how to engage with the everyday without necessarily succumbing to the prose of the world.[15] Hence, Franco Moretti claims that the Bildungsroman symbolically legitimizes the state of affairs: it expresses ways of fulfilling both the individual's demand for self-determination and society's need for reproduction. Wiping the prosaic dust from everyday life, the biographical success of an exemplary individual serves a symbolic function.[16] Thus, inherent in this dialectical perspective on the novel is a justification of everyday life, which, in the individual light of the novelistic character, loses its ordinariness. In dialogue with the Marxist philosopher of the everyday, Karel Kosik, Moretti claims:

> In everyday life, it is activity – *any* activity, at least potentially – that must be submitted to the service of the individual. It must become proportional to "his abilities and resources." If the enterprise succeeds, "an individual can realize his intentions," and the world acquires the comforting dimension of familiarity.[17]

14 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik III*, vol. 15, Werke (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 393.

15 In this way, Georg Lukács has claimed that the novel is the work of the mature poet (the "Form der gereiften Männlichkeit") who himself had experienced the poetry of the heart before he had to accept the prose of the world. See: Georg Lukács, *Die Theorie des Romans; ein geschichtsphilosophischer Versuch über die Formen der grossen Epik* (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1971), 74.

16 Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World : the Bildungsroman in European Culture*, Second ed. (London: Verso, 2000), 16.

17 Ibid., 34.

In Hegel's terms: the protagonist of the novel appropriates a piece of heaven on earth and makes himself a home. Consequently, family, love and youth are the crucial topics of the Bildungsroman.

Literary modernism disrupts the dialectic between subject and world that lies at the center of the Bildungsroman. This results from the fact that the protagonists of the modernist novel have become ordinary themselves. They are characterized by anxiety, disorientation, and a lack of qualities. Who is to affirm everyday life if the notion of selfhood itself is at stake? And whose intention might build the center of the narrative if the coherence and consistency of the ego is called into question? Elaborating on the standing of the everyday in the modernist novel, I will show how this literary form foregrounds aspects of the ordinary to which the realist novel and in particular the Bildungsroman were necessarily oblivious. In the first place, it is the absence of any subjective perspective that allows us to perceive the everyday afresh. In the three modernist novels at the center of this study, the protagonists are unable to evaluate the world into which they are thrown. Using the term "ordinary," I wish to emphasize those aspects of the everyday which come to the fore under modernist conditions. Here, the protagonists of the novel have become ordinary themselves; every attempt to differentiate between their autonomous subjectivity and the prose of the world that surrounds them necessarily fails. Hence, the ordinary that is represented and invoked by the three modernist novels in question precedes the subject-object dichotomy itself – leaving no vantage point from which it could be assessed as second rate. It is my contention that mere ordinary practices, rather than subjective agents, are the true protagonists of Siegfried Kracauer's *Ginster*, Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and Elias Canetti's *Die Blendung*. Contrary to Stifter's vision, the ordinary practices represented by all three novels are not in control of the characters who perform them. Rather, they express the merits and failures of their time.

Analyzing Ordinary Behavior

Rather than focusing on the subject-object relationship, which always entails an ethical or epistemological perspective, Kracauer, Döblin, and Canetti focus on the manner in which the protagonists inhabit their worlds. Whereas the Bildungsroman was a story of experience, its modernist counterpart is an account of behavior. However, behavior is not portrayed as something

natural, in a behaviorist manner, but rather as a social construct. The ordinary practices represented by literary modernism are commonly encountered and regularly performed. Drawing attention to practices that are characterized by their abundance and anonymity, the modernist novel responds to the contemporary philosophical debate regarding the masses to which thinkers such as Jaspers, Heidegger, and Ortega y Gasset contribute. Whereas the cultural pessimism of the 1920s one-sidedly focuses on the negative aspects, these three novels do not disparage ordinary practices. To be sure, Canetti's *Die Blendung* paints a predominantly sinister picture of everyday life; however, Kracauer's *Ginster* and Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* stress just as much the cunning intelligence that distinguishes ordinary practices. More important than the questions of authenticity that dominate the philosophical discourse is the analytic orientation that characterizes the three novels. They do not condemn or celebrate the ordinary, but rather emphasize it as a human reality that must be considered. Apart from ethical judgments – which are not completely absent – all of these novels bring the reasons for and contexts of behavior to the fore. The different narrative techniques that these novels use will be analyzed in the respective chapters. What should already be highlighted here is that they all emphasize discrete facets of the ordinary. As an ethnologist of his own society, Kracauer draws attention to the diagnostic value of ordinary practices; Döblin takes pragmatic aspects into account; and Canetti extends the scope of existential matters.[18]

The analytic approach of these novels can be explained in two ways. On the one hand, the social, pragmatic, or existential aspect foregrounded in each work supplies the novelist with a context that – by lack of a teleological temporal structure – allows the blending of various episodes and an overcoming of the merely iterative rhythm of the everyday. Kracauer's portrayal of the war, Döblin's vision of the city, and Canetti's depiction of everyday habitats adumbrate a field of interest which the narrative fills out. On the other hand, this analytical orientation has biographical roots. Making use of a skill which made him one of the most prominent feuilleton writers of the Weimar Republic, Kracauer integrates methods of cultural analysis into his

18 For an excellent account of the analytic thrust of Canetti's *Die Blendung* see: William Collins Donahue, *The End of Modernism: Elias Canetti's Auto-da-fé* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001). While I disagree at various points with Donahue, I am indebted to the notion of "analytic modernism" that his study suggests.

novel. Meanwhile, Döblin orients his poetics along the lines of his work as a psychiatrist, and Canetti exhibits a sociological and anthropological interest that would later move him from his first and only novel, *Die Blendung*, to his more scientific work, *Masse und Macht*.

The analytic focus of the three novels can also be traced back to a crucial characteristic of ordinary practices: their ephemeral quality. As Hegel's famous dictum suggests, it is precisely because ordinary practices are most common that they take place below the level of consciousness: "Das Bekannte überhaupt ist darum, weil es bekannt ist, nicht erkannt."[19] The ordinary may be seen as a negative universal. It exhibits a collective quality by transgressing subjectivity; at the same time, however, and by virtue of its commonness, the ordinary is taken so much for granted that we hardly even notice it.

> The everyday escapes. Why does it escape? Because it is without a subject. When I live the everyday, it is anyone, anyone whatsoever, who does so, and this any-one is, properly speaking, neither me, nor, properly speaking, the other [...].[20]

In these lines, Maurice Blanchot points to the collective quality of ordinary practices that lack individual distinctions. But this is not a negative judgment on his part. The unconscious, or better preconscious dimension of ordinary practices is not a failure which should be overcome therapeutically or politically, but a fundamental feature of human practice. While indeterminacy remains a crucial aspect of the ordinary in everyday existence, the ways in which ordinary practices proliferate can be studied, as these three novels demonstrate.

In order to conceptualize the non-conscious and social qualities of everyday practices, throughout this study I will draw from philosophers of the ordinary who revaluate mimesis as a fundamental anthropological and sociological category. This, as I will show in my first chapter, is the only theoretical reconsideration that allows an understanding of the ordinary beyond depreciative representations based on concepts such as alienation or instrumental reason. However, that is not to say that the latter concepts are without their merits. The neo-Marxist discourse surely captures aspects of the everyday,

19 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, vol. 3, Werke (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 35.

20 Maurice Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," *Yale French Studies*, no. 73 (1987): 18.

but its dominance in the humanities has made us oblivious to the wealth and creativity that the ordinary possesses as well. Following eminent thinkers of the ordinary such as Michel de Certeau and Pierre Bourdieu, I conceptualize the ordinary as an immanent aspect of the practices that comprise it. Though not in a conscious way, the ordinary is what is always already known and present in everyday practices. It is a "know-how" rather than a "know-that." Thus, as an operational logic the ordinary transgresses the boundaries that divide subject and object, consciousness and body: it is a "popular ratio, a way of thinking invested in a way of acting, an art of combination which cannot be dissociated from an art of using."[21] Its operational logic and its ephemeral qualities explain the role that modernism plays in its representation. By transforming the very form of the novel, modernism draws attention to the neglected aspects of the ordinary. As I will show in the respective chapters, the episodic structure of all three novels, which clearly breaks with the teleological temporality of the Bildungsroman, can be traced back to an analytic focus on the ordinary.

Modernism and the Ordinary

Modernism is often discussed as a symptom of cultural crisis. Epistemological uncertainty, ethical indeterminacy, and the dissolution of the self are central topics in the literary scholarship that addresses it. In this way the modernist novel has come to be linked with contemporary developments in philosophy and the sciences. Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, Friedrich Nietzsche's perspectivism, Henri Bergson's theory of time, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, Ernst Mach's empiricism, and Max Weber's disenchanted sociology are all frequently invoked to characterize the cultural disturbance that generated modernism. However, a merely symptomatic reading of the movement is biased, to say the least. The adjective "modernist" pertains to a dynamic and heterogeneous field of artistic production that is generated in a historical context but at the same time responds to it.[22] Consequently, it is crucial

21 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, Calif. London: University of California Press, 1988), xv.

22 The amount of literature on modernism is vast. The by now classic account: Malcolm Bradbury and James Walter McFarlane, *Modernism : 1890-1930* (New York: Penguin, 1976). Similarly influential: Art Berman, *Preface to Modernism*

to differentiate, as Richard Sheppard reminds us, between two "modernist" perspectives: on the one hand a diagnosis of modernity that was shared and formally expressed by such diverse movements as Expressionism and Dada as well as novelists like Robert Musil and Thomas Mann, and on the other hand the respective and widely varied responses that such figures had to the crisis surrounding it.[23] What unites the subjects of my inquiry is the way in which they respond to the cultural crisis diagnosed by modernism. All three novels focus on the ordinary – on practices which are commonly encountered and of anonymous quality – in order to overcome the predicaments of narration caused by epistemological and ethical disturbance.

By foregrounding a strand of modernism that stresses the social dimension of human practice, I wish to contribute to a more balanced assessment of modernist literature. The modernist response has often been read as an "inward turn" that breaks with the realist epistemology in order to convey the experience of the endangered self. In particular Marxist literary criticism sees in modernism an escapist retreat from the social into a purely subjective realm. The normative dimension of this criticism is most apparent in Lukács' condemnation of Kafka, in whose texts he detects nothing but a subjectivist distortion of reality.[24] Frederic Jameson, the most influential voice

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(Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994). Most important surveys and collections concerning the literature of German modernism: Berman, *The Rise of the Modern German Novel : Crisis and Charisma*; Stephen D. Dowden, *Sympathy for the Abyss. A Study in the Novel of German Modernism: Kafka, Broch, Musil, and Thomas Mann* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1986); Douwe Fokkema and Elrud Ibsch, *Modernist Conjectures: A Mainstream in European Literature 1910-1940* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988); Andreas Huyssen and David Bathrick, *Modernity and the Text : Revisions of German Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); Graham Bartram, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Modern German Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,2004); Ritchie Robertson, "Modernism and the Self 1890-1924," in *Philosophy and German Literature, 1700-1990*, ed. Nicholas Saul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

23 See: Richard Sheppard, *Modernism-Dada-Postmodernism* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 1-88.

24 According to the Marxist critic, Kafka's prose – as the pinnacle of avant-gardism – only renders subjectivist experience which is without 'objective' relevance: "Die Angst, der panische Schrecken vor der restlos verdinglichten Welt des imperialistischen Kapitalismus (mit Vorahnung seiner faschistischen

in the contemporary debate, proceeds with more charity when he at least acknowledges the problem-solving character that qualifies –if merely on the level of imagination –modernist subjectivism. According to him, modernism intends "to manage historical and social, deeply political impulses, that is to say, to defuse them, to prepare substitute gratifications for them."[25] The emphasis on the subjective in literary modernism might be more perceptible in the work of authors like Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf, or Marcel Proust[26], but to some degree it also captures the disorientated self that Mann and Musil exhibit in their essayistic novels. The strand of German modernism on which I concentrate breaks with the emphasis on the subjective. To be sure, all three novels have main protagonists, but it is the representation of ordinary practices which truly occupies the center of Siegfried Kracauer's *Ginster*, Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, and Elias Canetti's *Die Blendung*.

Analyzing the representation of the ordinary in the novel of German modernism, I suggest reconsidering the content of the modernist form. Against the backdrop of Adorno's highly influential reading of the formal characteristics of modernism, incomprehensibility has been interpreted as the very hallmark of modernist works of art. Adorno claims that formal features such as fragmentation, montage, and an unreliable narrator serve to break with the autonomous status of art which is art's raison d'être as well as its illusion.[27] Refusing the consolation provided by well-rounded and perfectly harmonized autonomous works, incomprehensibility becomes a figure of resistance in Adorno's analysis of modernism. In a society dominated by exchange

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Varianten) schlägt aus dem Subjekt in die Substanz um, welche aber dennoch eine hypostasierte Pseudosubstanz bleiben muß, und das Abbilden der Verzerrung verwandelt sich deshalb in ein verzerrtes Abbild" (Georg Lukács, "Die Gegenwartsbedeutung des kritischen Realismus," in *Essays über Realismus*. Werke, vol. 4 (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1971), 506). According to Lukács, literature has to transgress this supposedly subjective perspective and relate in a "realistic manner" to the social.

25 See: Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), 266.

26 Randall Stevenson makes use of the Jameson perspective when he discusses these three authors. See: Randall Stevenson, *Modernist Fiction: An Introduction* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992).

27 See: J.M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1992), 194ff.

value and instrumental reason, Adorno maintains that modernist works, by virtue of their incomprehensibility, remind us, at least negatively, of what has been lost in the Enlightenment process.[28] The three works of art that constitute the locus of my inquiry resist the equation of modernism with semiotic indeterminacy. Their analytic agenda, like that of Brecht's plays, aims at the reader's understanding.[29] It is through such social commitment that the focus on the ordinary breaks with the culture of detachment that, according to Dagmar Barnouw, characterizes most Weimar intellectuals.[30] This suggests a reconsideration of the form of the modernist novel, calling into question the canonical differentiation between political and modernist art. Adorno's rigid delineation between committed art, which conveys a pedagogical message, and autonomous modernist works, which defy instrumental reason, is incapable of recognizing what is at stake in the encounter with the ordinary. Kracauer, Döblin, and Canetti's works are politically committed insofar as they disclose a social terrain hitherto undiscovered by the novel, but at the same time they adhere to the modernist sensibility in that they reject any pedagogical agenda. Hence, while the novels have no message, they are also not incomprehensible in the emphatic sense. What they stage is not – as Adorno wants us to believe – the indeterminacy of language or the attendant

28 "Die rücksichtslose Autonomie der Werke, die der Anpassung an den Markt und dem Verschleiß sich entzieht, wird unwillkürlich zum Angriff" (Theodor W. Adorno, "Engagement," in *Noten zur Literatur* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), 425).

29 I am interested here in the general coordinates of Adorno's assessment of modernism which have been so influential in German Studies. While Adorno praises Kracauer's novel *Ginster* as "erneute Manifestation einer ehrwürdig aufklärerischen Gattung, dem 'roman philosophique'" (Theodor W. Adorno, "Der wunderliche Realist," in *Noten zur Literatur* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), 401), an appraisal which seems double edged when compared with Adorno's favoring of modernist art, he never commented on Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* – an exclusion which might have been caused by Adorno's reservations vis-à-vis the avant-garde. There are also no judgments on Canetti's novel but a strong suspicion of satire which is precisely founded on its cognitive dimension. See: Theodor W. Adorno, "Juvenals Irrtum," in *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, *Theodor W. Adorno, Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997).

30 See: Dagmar Barnouw, *Weimar Intellectuals and the Threat of Modernity* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

horror of the non-identical, but rather the ambiguity of the ordinary, which rests on practical and not epistemological questions. The episodic structure of the novels, which will be addressed in their respective chapters, points to the pragmatic contexts in which practices take place and from which alone they acquire significance. Ordinary practices are not biographical in nature, but context sensitive – a difference which the brief time span covered by the novels further stresses. Hence, it is my contention that ordinary practices, more than a mere topic, affect the very poetics of the modernist novel. Analyzing the formal complexity of this process, I follow its trajectories on different narratological planes – plot, language, and character – while reflecting on its cultural and philosophical significance.

By limiting myself to these novels by Kracauer, Döblin, and Canetti I do not wish to suggest that the ordinary plays a minor role in other German modernist novels.[31] Though the strong impact that the representation of the ordinary has on the form of these three novels distinguishes them in particular, the ordinary is also a dominant topic, for example, in Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* and Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. The very protagonists of the latter novels are a case in point. At the very start, Mann's narrator introduces Hans Castorp as "einen einfachen, wenn auch ansprechenden jungen Menschen,"[32] a modernist everyman. The ordinary also figures prominently for Musil's man without qualities. Ulrich, whose very lack of personal traits alludes to the public character of behavior and thought, goes so far as to suggest a definition of modernity on the basis of the ordinary. According to Musil's protagonist, the achievements of modernity can be traced back to the inconspicuous heroism of the ant – that is, to the plethora of practices which only in their functional whole become relevant.[33] Musil and Mann place their protagonists in either Swiss retreats or Viennese salons, where they reflect the ordinary state of affairs. But in these

31 As Liesl Olson's book on the ordinary in Joyce, Woolf, Stein, and Stevens shows, the significance of the ordinary in modernism transgresses national boundaries. But to broaden the picture in a comparative perspective and take at least British, American, and French modernists into account lies beyond the scope of this book. See: Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

32 Thomas Mann, *Der Zauberberg*, ed. Michael Neumann, vol. 5.1, Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2002), 9.

33 See: Robert Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften. Erstes und Zweites Buch*, ed. Adolf Frisé (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1988), 12.

cases the ordinary is one topic among others and does not possess the same significance as it does for the strain of German modernism on which I focus. At times amazing and at other moments more discomforting, the aspects of ordinary practices which Kracauer, Canetti and Döblin bring to the fore never encounter intellectual reflection. In their novels, the focus on the ordinary impacts the novelistic form itself. Moreover, the three novels neither search for alternatives to the quotidian – as Musil's Ulrich does in the mystic bliss of the "Other Condition" or the incestuous encounter with his sister – nor do they regard the ordinary as epiphenomena for mythical structures, as Thomas Mann suggests in *Der Zauberberg*.[34] Instead, they represent the ordinary as the primary field of human practices and interaction.

The following chapter reviews the theoretical considerations that have traditionally dominated the notion of the ordinary in literary scholarship on German modernism. In particular, I argue that the immeasurable influence of the Frankfurt School has resulted in a one-sided perspective on the ordinary. Suggesting an anthropological paradigm as an alternative, I hope to elucidate aspects of the representation of the ordinary to which we have been hitherto oblivious. The reevaluation of the ordinary in the first chapter provides the theoretical basis for the subsequent three chapters of the book, each of which focuses on one of the three authors and shows how the focus on the ordinary alters the poetics of the respective novel. Whereas these chapters are ordered by author, they nonetheless focus on topics which are relevant for all three novels: "surface," practical intelligence, and existential questions. The second chapter centers on Siegfried Kracauer's novel *Ginster. Von ihm selbst geschrieben* (1928) but also takes into account the author's various analytic contributions to a theory of the ordinary. Pairing *Ginster* with Kracauer's own reflections on the ordinary, I show how his novel continues this analytic endeavor and utilizes the aesthetic possibilities of literature. In the third chapter I turn to Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz. Die Geschichte vom Franz Biberkopf* (1929), which I read as a modernist encyclopedia of

34 For the ways in which Musil's protagonist aims at erasing ordinary experience, see: Patrizia McBride, *The Void of Ethics: Robert Musil and the Experience of Modernity*, Avant-Garde & Modernism Studies (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006). Russell Berman shows how myth becomes the device to endow individual issues with universal significance in *Der Zauberberg*, see: Berman, *The Rise of the Modern German Novel : Crisis and Charisma*, 261-86.

urban behavior. Analyzing the modernist fragmentation of the novel as a form prompted by the representation of the ordinary, I draw attention to the pragmatic aspects of Döblin's novel. In the fourth chapter I concentrate on Elias Canetti's *Die Blendung* (1935), which aims to overcome the drawbacks of satire in an analytic fashion. As I demonstrate, Canetti teases out the threats of an existential dimension from the texture of the everyday. Finally, in the fifth chapter I focus on what connects the three novels and reconsider the standing of the modernist form – thereby placing emphasis on the relation between modernism and the avant-garde.