



Photos courtesy of Betafilm

twin millstones of grinding poverty and chronic illness recall Arno Holz's unrelentingly bleak stage play *Die Familie Selicke*, which exposed the social inequalities endemic in Wilhelmine Germany when it opened in 1890.

Except that this is 1929. A devastating world war has cut a swathe through a generation of young men across the continent, and daytime Berlin is in thrall to the recent memory of hyper-inflation. Rath, who is a war veteran, has his demons as well, though his take the form of PTSD rather than wheelbarrows of worthless bank notes.

Early in the first episode, he has to listen to a senior officer telling him that 'shakers' are 'broken automatons who belong on the scrap heap', unable to admit that he is himself reliant on morphine to rein in the violent fits that consume him at moments of heightened stress. Given that two desperate criminals point a gun at his head inside the opening hour and a half of the series, the casual observer might conclude that Rath is in the wrong job.

The male protagonist scarred by war is far from unheard of in German cinema, especially in those productions that contributed to what came to be known as the *Trümmerfilm* (rubble film) genre. The first of these, *Murderers Among Us* (1946), depicted an alcoholic military surgeon plagued by flashbacks who turns vigilante in an abortive bid to bring to justice a war criminal who has been allowed to continue life as normal after the Second World War.

Work began on the film just months after the Third Reich's surrender, meaning there was no need to go to the trouble of artificially replicating the bombed-out wasteland of defeated Berlin. As the *Trümmerfrauen* – rubble women – cleared the debris around them, director Wolfgang Staudte and his team set about orchestrating Germany's first painful step towards redemption.

Rath's trauma belongs squarely in that tradition, with one key difference. He is the survivor of an imperial war, not the stooge of a genocidal fascist crusade; a victim, not a perpetrator. In the wake of the Holocaust, it would be decades before the Germans could entertain the idea of their own victimhood.

The First World War, by contrast, was not only less black and white in the first place, but many Germans felt they had effectively been punished twice, with crippling reparation payments jeopardising post-war economic recovery and giving the French carte blanche to assert their moral and military superiority by marching into the Ruhr in 1923. The history books rightly tell us that this sense of injustice created the perfect conditions for the Nazis' aggressively self-righteous brand of nationalism to take seed.

However, *Babylon Berlin* shows us that indignation was not the only emotion at play in Weimar Germany. Superintendent Wolter's showy intolerance of shellshock sufferers and the pathetic lasciviousness of Lotte's unemployed brother-in-law positively reek of emasculation.

Both men, brought up to believe in the invincibility of the German Reich only to suffer double humiliation, are adrift in a society where women quite literally wear the trousers.

One such is the darling of the Moka Efti stage, a gamine Stalinist spy with a fake moustache and the charisma to lead a seething mass of Berlin youth in a Bacchic whirl across the dance floor just hours after shopping her lover to the Soviet embassy.

The choice between their ongoing submission and the restitution of their supposedly natural authority drove millions of men into the strong Aryan arms of the Nazi Party within four years.

It is precisely this political urgency that makes *Babylon Berlin* a landmark event in German television. Now that xenophobic right-wing forces stalk the corridors of the Reichstag once again, albeit with different scapegoats this time, the arrival of a drama that reminds viewers of the dangerous allure of simple solutions is both a timely warning to an increasingly disaffected electorate and a shot in the arm for a medium with a lot of ground to make up.

■ Episodes 5 and 6 of *Babylon Berlin* are on Sky Atlantic from 9pm on Sunday November 19

■ Jack Arscott is a freelance journalist and Europhile blogger

THE PLACES SO GOOD THEY NAMED THEM TWICE

They are not always easy to spot, but Europe is filled with tautological place names.

PETER TRUDGILL explains



There are several waterways in England and Scotland called the River Avon. This is a rather odd name, because Avon comes from the word *abona* which meant 'river' in the original language of our island, Brittonic Celtic.

The modern Welsh word for river is *afon*, while in the other Brittonic languages, Cornish and Breton, it's *avon*. The related Goidelic Celtic languages also have similar forms: in Irish and Scottish Gaelic 'river' is *abhainn*, and in Manx it is *awin*.

In one way, then, it's not surprising that there are so many rivers in England and Scotland called Avon – at least eight of them. But the name 'River Avon' is still rather peculiar because it literally means 'River River' – why would anyone want to call a river that?

The answer is that the name arose in bilingual situations where speakers of an incoming language (Old English) were in contact with an indigenous language (Brittonic or Old Welsh). Hearing a Briton referring to a river as *avon*, Angles and Saxons mistakenly believed that this was the name of a particular river and called it that.

Of course very many Celtic river names, such as Thames, Derwent and Stour, did not succumb to bilingual confusion and have survived. But the fact that there are so many River Avons in locations as far apart as Devonshire and Stirlingshire shows that this was a frequent enough occurrence.

There are many other examples of the repetition of elements in names for topographical features resulting from contact between languages. In the UK, there are at least four rivers called the Ouse, which comes from the Brittonic word *udso* meaning 'water' – so the literal etymological meaning of the River Ouse is 'River Water'. Given that British rivers do tend to have water in them, this redundancy can only have arisen out of confusion arising out of language contact.

Another Welsh–English bilingual misunderstanding resulted in the name of Penhill in Yorkshire: Welsh *pen* is 'head, top, summit, hill'. Knockhill in Scotland derives from exactly the same confusion, but in this case between Gaelic and English: in Gaelic *cnoc* means 'hill'.

Other Scottish examples of bilingual tautological naming involve the language of the Vikings, Old Norse. In the name of

Wig Bay, near Stranraer, *wig* comes from Scandinavian *vik* 'bay'. And we often talk of the Orkney Islands, although the *-ey* element is from Old Norse and means 'island'; we can see a similar repetition further north in the name of the Faroe Islands, where the *-oe* also corresponds to Norse for 'island', thus giving us 'Sheep-island Islands'.

This kind of reduplicative naming process has happened all over Europe. The Spanish river El Rio Guadalquivir was originally Arabic Al-wadi al-kabir, where *wadi* means 'river-bed' and *kabir* 'big'. Góra Chełm is a small mountain in southern Poland: *góra* means 'mountain' and *chełm* comes from an ancient Germanic root which survives in modern Low German as *holm* 'small hill'.

The name of the Val d'Aran in Catalonia consists of two words meaning 'valley': Occitan *val* and Basque *haran*, which reflects contact between indigenous Basque speakers and incoming speakers of Vulgar Latin, as the Roman Empire expanded.

Confusion can also occur across generations. The Anglo-Saxons did not actually use the name River Avon themselves, because river was not an Old English word – it was borrowed into English from Anglo-Norman only in the 1300s.

So the first part of the name River Avon was originally French, and the second part Welsh!

The word the Anglo-Saxons did use for 'river' was Old English *ea*. The *ey* at the end of river names such as the Welney, Waveney and Wissey was originally *ea*, so the River Wissey is in origin 'the River Wiss-river'. The bilingual confusion here was between Old English and later forms of English, as English speakers gradually forgot what *ea* had meant.

■ Peter Trudgill is professor emeritus of English linguistics at the Université de Fribourg/ Universität Freiburg, Switzerland

VULGAR LATIN

Vulgar Latin was the everyday language spoken by the ordinary people of the Roman Empire from around 200AD onwards. It was this variety of Latin, rather than the written Classical Latin of Cicero and Virgil, which over the centuries gradually morphed into the modern Romance languages French, Catalan, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Romanian, Sardinian, and the Romansch language of southeastern Switzerland.