

Under Construction: Gender and the Representation of Prostitutes in Expressionism

Expressionists longed for an *Aufbruch*, a new beginning. Due to their sense of alienation – »der Welt entfremdet, fremd dem tiefsten Ich«,¹ as Ernst Stadler put it in his famous poem »Der Spruch« (The Motto, 1914) – their aim was to create »reality« anew² and to uncover the essence of the modern human being in their art and literature. As Kasimir Edschmid, one of the masters of German Expressionist narrative art and Expressionism's most important theoretician declared, Expressionists were no longer satisfied with mere descriptions of the »facts« and facets of modern life – factories, disease, whores, hunger, and chaos –, but attempted to experience reality unreservedly and entirely. Only if they grasped the *essence* of these »facts« of modern time and space, Edschmid insisted, could their representations be more than mere reflections of outward appearances.³

The aim was to find an adequate representation of modern, everyday life or »reality« (*Wirklichkeit*) via new aesthetic means.⁴ These latter often proved just as contradictory as the times themselves, and Edschmid admits that to really see is more difficult than dancing on a tightrope.⁵ He thus demanded a true, fearless gaze upon the modern metropolis and proclaimed the artist as sole legislator and creator of a new reality. Berlin, however, as the cultural avant-garde's experimental playground filled Expressionists with both fear and fascination. This voracious giant, the city as moloch and »Hure Babylon« (Alfred Döblin,

1 The last verse of Ernst Stadler's poem »Der Spruch«. Published in Pinthus (ed.), *Menscheitsdämmerung*, p. 196.

2 Cf. Edschmid, *Über den dichterischen Expressionismus*, p. 54.

3 Edschmid, *Expressionismus in der Dichtung*, p. 364. Cf. also Jacob, *Berlin – Vorkriegsdichtung und Lebensgefühl*, pp. 15–19.

4 Theodor W. Adorno on »Expressionismus und künstlerische Wahrhaftigkeit«: Their expressions were to be the most subjective, purest outcries, or, as Adorno put it: »der Expressionismus [setzt] das Ich absolut, fordert den reinen Ausschrei.« Adorno, *Noten zur Literatur*, p. 609.

5 Edschmid, *Portraits und Denksteine*, p. 291.

Armin T. Wegner), seemed irresistible to most Expressionists – and was, at the same time, by many perceived as »one of the most horrific, cannibalistic manifestations of modernity«⁶ (Jost Hermand).

More than other marginal figures that populate Expressionist literature and art (beggars, war cripples, madmen), the prostitute was appreciated by Expressionists as both signifier and product of the modern metropolis, and as a useful and provocative emblem of Wilhelm II's strait-laced Germany. In this repressive and hypocritical society, brothels and mental hospitals were remote and convenient »places of tolerance«,⁷ spaces of locked-up hysterics and whores that were, at least verbally, non-existent within bourgeois culture; for, as Michel Foucault has pointed out, »repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of non-existence, and by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know.«⁸

Not surprisingly, harlots thus became a favourite theme of anti-bourgeois Bohemian artists and writers, especially from the late 19th century onwards.⁹ The prostitute was particularly embraced by Expressionists and became the most predominant female figure in their art and literature. Being opposed to the repressive society they lived in, Expressionists emphasised the prostitute's existence and thus relieved her of her bourgeois spatial framing: the brothel was demolished via pen or brush, and the prostitute was turned loose on the streets of the metropolis, provocatively flaunting the modern destabilisation of all that was fixed and stable, beginning with her marginal place in a repressive society and in relation to traditional notions of femininity and gender.

Expressionist writers such as Alfred Lemm, Kasimir Edschmid, Wilhelm Klemm, Ernst Stadler or Curt Corrinth, to name but a few, or painters such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Otto Dix or George Grosz depicted prostitutes often as saintly utopian figures *and* as violently disintegrating commodities that effortlessly symbolised the Expressionists' ambivalent experience of modernity. Their bodies are depicted as inherently modern: offering bright, colourful glimpses of glamour and sparkle that, for the fleeting passer-bys, effectively veil hunger,

6 Hermand, *Das Bild der »großen Stadt« im Expressionismus*, p. 61.

7 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 4.

8 Ibid.

9 Frank Wedekind's *Erdgeist* (1895) and *Die Büchse der Pandora* (1904) are among the most influential pre-expressionist texts. Wedekind's plays, depicting the life and death of Lulu, the »Engelskind« and »Teufelsschönheit«, were not only meant to provoke, they already portray the prostitute as an ambiguous mixture of an »untermenschliches Elementarwesen« (Emrich, Wedekind, p. 207) and a divine figure.

shabbiness, disintegration and death. Imprinted on their skin, however, they do carry the wounds and scars of the dehumanising effects of urban space.

Moreover, in their literature, Expressionists reflect a distinct awareness of the social, legal, and moral framing of prostitutes at the time. Their representations unhinge the Madonna-whore dichotomy and declare a traditional Christian bourgeois value system utterly useless. Many Expressionists stubbornly question the streetwalker's embodiment of the rhetoric category »sexual = criminal woman«,¹⁰ which was constitutive for a specific and established understanding of female identity and reality in early 20th century German society and culture.

According to Paul Möbius, the German neurologist and author of the popular treatise »Über den physiologischen Schwachsinn des Weibes« (Concerning the Physiological Feeble-mindedness of the Female, 1900), it is instinct, not analytical thinking, which drives woman. Möbius notes that the instinctual woman poses a threat to the very structures of society, and he emphasizes that woman's duty is motherhood: »das Weib muß in erster Linie Mutter sein.« Women who fail to attend to motherhood, but rather position themselves in the public sphere, are threatened – as they will be, seemingly inevitably, »struck down« – with illness: »Versagt das Weib den Dienst der Gattung, will es sich als Individuum »ausleben«, so wird es mit Siechthum geschlagen.«¹¹ According to this well respected neurologist, the instinctual, sexual woman's unwillingness to accept marriage and motherhood as controlling mechanisms will inevitably lead to disintegration and death.

Expressionists, too, often depict prostitutes as instinct-driven and doomed, but at the same time boldly deconstruct the dichotomies that structure bourgeois thinking. In his novel *Bordell* (1919), the Expressionist Curt Corrinth describes the little barber Pasentrall's sexual liberation, which ends in his madness and death. Here, Pasentrall¹² himself is turned into a prostitute by upper-bourgeois women, and the hypocritical society is the brothel that finally destroys him. Only the streetwalkers are presented as human beings in this bestial society. They are pronounced superior to all the pathetic hypocrites of a so-called elite, as Pasentrall tells the daughter of his former landlady:

10 Cf. especially Lombroso / Ferrero, *La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale*, 1893 (trans.: *The Female Offender*, 1899) and Möbius, *Über den physiologischen Schwachsinn des Weibes*, 1900. See also Hales, *Blonde Satan*, pp. 131–46.

11 Möbius, *Über den physiologischen Schwachsinn des Weibes*, p. 39.

12 The name might be inspired by one of the battles of the First World War, namely the Battle of Passchendaele (Third Battle of Ypres, June–November 1917), one of the many salient examples of the insanity of war. Curt Corrinth's own experiences during the war, when he served both at the Eastern and Western fronts (1915–17), convinced him of the madness of war and turned him into a resolute pacifist. The war is here the brothel, in which Pasentrall as the common soldier is exploited by the generals, i. e. upper-bourgeois women, leading to his insanity and death.

Ahnst du verlorene Pflanze im Mist gar nicht, wie turmhoch die [the prostitutes] über dir stehen, he? – haben noch Mut zu ihrem Wandel – unangekränkt von dem Phrasentratsch und Moralitätennonsens einer dezenten (!) untergangsreifen Bourgeoisie! Freudigkeit des Fleisches! Bekennung aller natürlichen, unverbogenen Triebe! Ekstase der Ekstase! Das allein ist Zukunft! Dort allein ist Zukunft!¹³

In his idealist view and in sharp contrast to the dull *Bildungsphilister*, the prostitutes still have the courage to change, untouched by empty phrases and bourgeois morality nonsense. The future lies in their hands, for they still *know* how to be driven by desire. The future rests in the liberation of physical urges, and the ideal female has to embrace her instincts and urges to become divine. Corrinth creates a utopia of sexual freedom which empowers the prostitute. No longer a passive victim, the prostitute in Corrinth's texts is reclaimed as the ultimate representative of a liberated society. However naively idealistic and consciously provocative, Corrinth confronts bourgeois society's moral codes which are seen to demolish creativity, intelligence, hope and happiness. Only when the moral corset of society is ripped to shreds can Corrinth's protagonists develop their potential.

Expressionists never leave any doubt about the nature of the streetwalker's profession – they are described as mass society's colourful automatons, as for example by Oskar Kanehl in his poem »Nachtcafé«, »open for the insertion of money« by bourgeois society's well-respected hypocrites:

Nachtcafé

Peinlicher Duft beißender Parfümerien,
Rauschgetränke und Zigaretten.
An kleinen Tischen, von beweglichen Kellnern umflattert, heimentlaufene
Provinzialen,
vollblütige Jugend und, sichtlich gewürdigt,
glatzige Greise mit Stammkelchen.
An den Wänden glucken
wie Giftpilze bunt
Schneppen zur Wahl. Markt.
Fette und Fleischige, Schwammige, Wabblige,
wie Masttiere vom Schlachthof;
andere, hautüberzogene Knochen,
hölzern und eckig mager, angepinselte Leichen.
Halbakte. Entblößte Rücken
und Blusen bis an die Warzen.

13 Corrinth, Bordell, p. 229.

Offen zum Geldeinwurf.
Augen voll Lebensgeschichten,
gemeine und traurige.
Schicksalberufene, Schicksalgestoßene,
Ausgelebte.
Sie blinzeln und zwinkern
und lächeln einstudiert.
Untereinander tuscheln sie,
obgleich sie sich hassen wie futterneidische Tiere.
Und lecken und beißen die Lippen,
nippen mechanisch am Glas.
Kellnervertraulichkeit. – –
Zweie sind sich einig und gehen.
Alle winken und schachern,
gemustert, bemessen und bemäkelt
wie Lumpen im Trödeladen.
Kaum daß man es merkt wechseln die Weiber.
Leise hautreizend, prickelnd,
frech und leidenschaftswild
wühlt ein Bohèmegeiger mit seiner Kapelle
Musik in die Glieder.

Kanehl's poem, which was published in the Expressionist journal *Die Aktion* in 1913, describes an uneventful evening at a nightclub. The verse »Offen zum Geldeinwurf« emphasizes the intersection of disadvantaged woman and slot-machine. In his *Philosophy of Money* (*Philosophie des Geldes*, 1900), the sociologist and neo-Kantian philosopher Georg Simmel depicts the prostitute as the most striking example of the power and mechanism of money in the modern metropolis. The price of the prostitute is not only subject to supply and demand; as Simmel points out, her value is integrated fully in the machinery of the city through the possibility of acquisition of her body by a male customer. Even her outward appearance, such as a bright red hat and dress as in 1914 paintings by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, i. e. fashion, may dictate her personal value, which nonetheless remains a monetary one. For Simmel, this monetary value thus incorporates a »Nivellierung«¹⁴ or »levelling out« of objects (»objects« here comprise human beings, too, having long since turned into objects themselves). According to Simmel, this »Nivellierung« is at the same time both cause and effect of the interchangeability of things.

In Kanehl's poem, the women, who sit in this club at night as colourful and revealing personal ads, are entirely interchangeable. The author is spoilt for choice – all types and sizes seem to be available that evening. But their descrip-

14 Simmel, *Philosophie des Geldes*, p. 540.

tions lack appeal, since all seem like painted corpses to him. Nevertheless, the poem refers to the place as bazaar, junk shop, slave market, and even abattoir. On the one hand, Kanehl describes a barter deal – sex for money –, but on the other the poem starkly highlights the continuous destruction of the individual in this economy. Although nothing but an exchange of commodities, which in itself is a neutral and everyday activity, the commodification of woman is clearly being perceived negatively in this text. The women Kanehl outlines are not eagerly desired products that sell in no time. The sale of female bodies is hard labour and leaves deep wounds. But there is no obvious sympathy, the tone of this poem is pejorative, the prostitutes are described as poisonous mushrooms, animals, rags and corpses. They appear in no way attractive, are either too fat or too thin, they have to reveal, wink, wave, and smile to attract the attention of possible clients.

Their commodification reaches its extreme when they are »offen zum Geldeinwurf,« as this verse removes their last human quality. All that is left is a vending machine, a lifeless and cold automaton. The tables in Kanehl's poem remain occupied, despite the fact that women leave. Just like the shelves in the supermarket which are constantly refilled to avoid disappointing the customer, the commodity »sex« is available all night; the interchangeability of individuals is made conspicuous. This representation of an utter mechanisation of interpersonal relationships destroys any illusion of the possibility of contact or even understanding between modern human beings in modern time and space. The stark images in Kanehl's text serve to shock the reader, but they also indicate the degree to which objectification, loss of individuality, and consumerism was experienced by this particular generation of writers.

At the same time, Expressionist poetry and prose emphasises the street-walker's kindness and warmth, her nurturing, motherly qualities traditionally associated with the female gender, which the isolated and alienated city-dwellers so gravely desire. By creating provocative, ambiguous screens for our collective imagination, the prostitute's multi-faceted marginal femininity is highlighted; the Madonna-whore dichotomy is challenged (and, therefore, speaking in gender terms, the construction of ideal womanhood is unhinged). Expressionists foreground the potential for transgression of this particular gendered identity and highlight the streetwalker's humanity, thereby contesting the confinement of the symbolic division between the pure, married mother as ideal and the fallen woman who uses her body as commodity.

In his »Lied einer Dirne« or »Prostitute's Song«, published in *Neue Blätter für Kunst und Dichtung* in 1920, Otto Zareck writes:

Ich bin nur Mensch, der Luft ist und sich schenkt
 An jedes Fleisch, zu jeder Zeit, in jedem Haus.
 Ich bin nur da, die Selige zu sein,
 Denn jedem war ich Erde, Trunk und Schmaus.¹⁵

Pointing to the ethereal quality and giving nature of the whore, Zareck subverts the prostitute's symbolic opposition to middle class woman, who, according to the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte,¹⁶ is submissive and loving, nurturing and caring, in short: the ideal woman. Here, in contrast, the prostitute is saint, human, *and* automaton – and seen by male Expressionists as being similarly caught up in the diminishing, devastating machinery of a capitalist, modern urban utopia. Numerous examples in Expressionist literature emphasize this sympathetic alliance between the artist / writer and the prostitute.¹⁷ Together with this »sister of steam turbines and rotor blades«, the Expressionist writer hopes to discover the essence of the modern human being, and energy, i. e. vitalistic power to boot – or, as Johannes v. Jensen exclaims in »Mein Tempo...« in 1914: »Turbinenschwester, dir mich zu verbinden!«

A similar sense of solidarity with and trust in modernity's streetwalker can be detected in the works of Max Brod. Published also in 1914, Brod's play *Die Retterin* portrays prostitutes as the kind and reliable saviours of young Alban Tuschkauer. Time and place of the play are »eine Großstadt, Gegenwart«. Here, the Tuschkauer family sets out to pay a laborious visit to the »Café Mondain« in order to confront the black sheep of the family, Alban. They are appalled by the company in which they find young Alban, and in the ensuing fight with his half-brother Bruno, Alban passionately defends his colourful companions Mitzka and Tilly:

Alban: Diese Mädchen waren die einzigen Menschen, die sich um mich gekümmert haben, als ihr, die ganze Familie, von mir nichts hören wolltet. Mit diesen Mädchen hab ich mich ausgesprochen, bei ihnen hab ich mich ausgeweint, es sind meine Freundinnen, sie sind mir heilig, hörst du.¹⁸

¹⁵ Zareck, *Lied einer Dirne*, pp. 118–19.

¹⁶ About Fichte's concept of marriage see H. Schröder, *Die Rechtlosigkeit der Frau im Rechtsstaat, dargestellt im Allgemeinen Preussischen Landrecht, am Bürgerlichen Gesetzbuch und an J. G. Fichtes Grundlage des Naturrechts*, Frankfurt am Main 1979, quoted in Frevert, *Women in German History*, p. 59.

¹⁷ For more examples and a more detailed analysis, see Schönfeld, *Dialektik und Utopie. Die Prostituierte im Expressionismus*.

¹⁸ Brod, *Retterin*, p. 16f. See also Max Brod's *Erlöserin. Ein Hetärengespräch* and his book of poems *Das Buch der Liebe*.

Again, this is not simply a confrontational canonisation of harlotry, it is part of the Expressionist's paradigmatic effort to uncover an essence of being that refused to perceive the prostitute as other than human; or, as Kasimir Edschmid put the Expressionist's viewpoint in 1917: »er sieht das Menschliche in den Huren«.¹⁹ While the whores' perceived instrumental and impersonal approach to sexuality, their sexual agency, *degender*s prostitutes in the eyes of the bourgeois – they are no longer »real women«²⁰ –, Expressionists like Max Brod reinstate the prostitute as a true, nurturing, caring, gentle female ideal, thus questioning a bourgeois gender construction simply based on narrowly defined notions of »normal« vs. »abnormal« sexual behaviour. In this collision with modern urban landscapes and alienated city-dwellers thus unfolds in Expressionist literature a new and entirely modern gendering of the prostitute, albeit fleeting in nature and always already unstable.

One of the most striking examples in Expressionist literature of this saintly, compassionate, sexual woman, which thoroughly demolishes the bourgeois *Weltbild* and re-genders the prostitute, is Alfred Lemm's »Die Hure Salomea«. In this tale, Salomea, a young, well-educated, semi-bourgeois medical student, who suffers from chronic boredom, observes in her favourite café the masses floating by when the First World War breaks out. She decides to volunteer as a nurse, but fails to dedicate herself completely to her new assignment. She finally has to leave the hospital, due to her neglect of a patient. Unable to understand her own indifference and lack of devotion, she returns to her café. One night she has a vision: »Sie sah die jungen Mannesleiber in ihrem Anatomiesaal, plump zerlegt zur Präparation, zerissen und blutig. Die weichsten Muskeln waren in strähniges, ochsenhaftes Fleisch der Schlächterläden verwandelt. Dunkelbraune Höhlungen, Obdach für Maden, stanken die zähfasrigen Rippenbuchtungen«.²¹ Suddenly aware of the impossibility of stopping the war machinery, she at least wants to cover the soldiers' wounds with her body, and give herself as often as was wished. Salomea hurries through the barracks, distributing herself with feverish force: »mit fieberhafter Kraft«.²² She soon becomes a legend among the soldiers, who joyfully wait for her as this tangible personification of the »New«,²³ a utopia that soothes pain, erases fear and conveys hope. After journalists discover her among the soldiers and publish a story

19 Edschmid, Über den Expressionismus in der Literatur und die neue Dichtung, p. 54.

20 This argument is inspired by Kempadoo, Sun, Sex and Gold, p. 41.

21 Lemm, Die Hure Salomea, p. 106: »bodies of young men ready for preparation, torn and bloody. Muscles were turned into strands of beef in a butcher's shop. Between the ribs darkbrown hollows sheltering maggots. Arms hanging one by one [...] on hooks [...]«

22 Lemm, p. 109.

23 Ibid.

about her »commitment«, she is arrested and – in a truly Kafkaesque trial – sentenced to eight years in jail for indecency during a time when everyone else was to think about serving the country. Being ignorant of the fact that »serving« was exactly what she was doing, the judges send her to prison in a freight car overcrowded with seriously injured prisoners of war. There again, by that time suffering from cramps and hallucinations, she makes love to several of these casualties to ease their pain. When a Croat recognises her as his patron saint, the other soldiers join his prayers to their own saint or the Holy Mary appearing in the body of this »disintegrating Jewish whore«.²⁴ »Inbrünstig lobten sie, jeder in seiner Sprache, die Gebenedeite«²⁵ – ardently and everyone in his own language did they praise the Blessed Virgin – wrote Alfred Lemm at the end of this tale, knowing that this comparison signified the most radical destruction of a bourgeois value system and stable gender construction.

Nonetheless, the Expressionist representation of the prostitute is never satisfied with a simple transformation of a whore into a saint. The essence of the harlot is not her profession, Expressionism seems to tell us, but it is always exactly that, too. She must be both – hooker *and* saint – to successfully deconstruct the »possibility of difference«, as Jacques Derrida²⁶ would call it, and to be able to forcefully rebel against the comfortable world of bourgeois dichotomies and antagonisms.

It is in this first dialectical »vision« of the prostitute, the fact that her »essence« lies beyond the unambiguity of traditional bourgeois spaces, that we begin to understand a second, and even more fundamental »vision« of no less dialectical proportions. Like the prostitute and in fact sheltering her, it was the opacity of the modern city that, as mentioned above, exerted both fascination and repulsion on the imagination of its inhabitants. Small wonder, then, that in going beyond a simple anti-bourgeois canonisation of harlotry, the prostitute's essence in Expressionism is often secured through her correlation with and existence in the chaos of modern urban spaces that, with reference again to Georg Simmel, are utterly determined by a money economy which consequently leads to the specialisation of social activity and the depersonalisation of individual as well as of social relationships. It is money which represents the sole relation left between the city-dwellers.

While Simmel rightly calls the prostitute a perfect example of »the power and mechanism of money in the modern metropolis«,²⁷ the harlot in Expressionism remains directly *inside* and at the same time entirely *outside* of

24 Lemm, p. 120: »die zerfallende jüdische Hure«.

25 Ibid.

26 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

27 Simmel, *Die Philosophie des Geldes*, pp. 482–529.

modern society; the Expressionist representation consolidates the prostitute's complete integration into immense production processes as well as her lethargic dwelling in total isolation. She appears as a woman thoroughly determined by the money economy of the modern metropolis and at the same time fixes her own price at the corner of the street, making her an ideal symbol for a dialectical capacity that characterises modern capitalism down to our own day.

The original meaning of harlot – or its Old French root *arlot* – was vagabond (and is, however urbanised, still present in the term »street-walker«). In Expressionist literature and art the prostitute often appears as nomad,²⁸ wandering the streets of the roaring metropolis Berlin, belonging and not belonging, familiar and strange. At once invited and yet by definition outside bourgeois space, she is akin to »the stranger« who was so pointedly described by Georg Simmel in 1908 as »the man who comes today and stays tomorrow«.²⁹ The stranger and the prostitute bring themselves into the most inner circle of society while at the same time remaining spiritually, socially or even legally remote. Following Simmel, the stranger represents »a synthesis of nearness and remoteness«,³⁰ which is surely true for the prostitute as well. The stranger and the prostitute are neither friend nor enemy and therefore incongruous with Wilhelmine society. Again they lack this opposition that – to quote Zygmunt Bauman's essay on »Modernity and Ambivalence« – »sets apart truth from falsity, good from evil, beauty from ugliness.«³¹ It is precisely along these lines that the Expressionists' representation of the prostitute denies the bourgeois *Weltbild* and its cosy set of oppositions which make the world »readable« and put the sexual woman in her place. Their depiction of the whore is frank, but rarely straightforward; it indulges in doubt and confusion, for this, according to the Expressionists, is the *essence* of modern urban spaces and their inhabitants.

In Expressionist literature, our attention is consequently drawn to the prostitutes' deconstructive strength. It is not accidental that Alfred Lemm describes his Salomea as the personification of the »New«.³² Prostitutes in Expressionism are neither hookers nor saints, but they may be both – they are unclassifiable.³³ Expressionists like Alfred Lemm or Ernst Stadler deny us certainty, and thereby

28 Cf. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, pp. 105ff.

29 Regarding Georg Simmel's essay »Der Fremde« (1908), cf. the English translation in: *On Individuality and Social Forms*, p. 143.

30 Simmel, *The Stranger*, p. 145.

31 Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, p. 144.

32 Lemm, p. 109.

33 Cf. Lulu: »Auffällig an der Lulu-Tragödie ist zunächst die Tatsache, daß hier inmitten einer klar gegliederten und begrenzten modernen gesellschaftlichen Wirklichkeit ein Wesen auftaucht, das in keiner Weise bestimmbar ist.« Emrich, p. 207.

shake bourgeois society with its clearly defined boundaries and categories to its very foundations. The revolutionary potential of this disorganisation of the common *Weltbild* cannot be overemphasised.

If this lack of certainty, as expressed in the »vision« of the prostitute, is still largely implicit and hence unspecific in Simmel's notion of »the stranger«, it was to become a focused concept in the work of Walter Benjamin. Here, and chiefly in his *Passagenwerk*, the prostitute represents the personification of what he calls »a dialectical image«. No longer a serviceable nobody and irritating fly in the ointment of bourgeois societies, she now is commodity and seller, owner and means of production in one,³⁴ and hence beyond the reassurance of a designated marginality. A symbol of capitalism, she is now beyond any simple synthesis of »the form of the commodity and its content«,³⁵ as Susan Buck-Morss phrased it. Rather, the synthesis is here thesis and antithesis in one without losing the dialectic of contradiction between the two.

Benjamin's »dialectical image«, I would argue, has a direct counterpart in the depiction of the prostitute in Expressionism. What is more, in their art and literature we can witness what can be called an »internal folding«³⁶ of this image, since it is uneasily »placed« in front of likewise »folded« backgrounds depicting modern urban landscapes. The connection between the metropolis and the street-walker, whom – reflecting upon a painting by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner – the art historian Wieland Schmied has called the »perfect type«, the symbol and »product« of the metropolis,³⁷ manifests itself on the »urban« canvas of the Berlin Expressionists like Kirchner or Otto Dix, as well as in the writings of Alfred Döblin,³⁸ Ernst Blass,³⁹ Hans Leybold⁴⁰ or Alfred Lichtenstein,⁴¹ to name

34 »Zweideutigkeit ist die bildliche Erscheinung der Dialektik, das Gesetz der Dialektik im Stillstand. Dieser Stillstand ist Utopie und das dialektische Bild also Traumbild. Ein solches Bild stellt die Ware schlechthin: als Fetisch. Ein solches Bild stellen die Passagen, die sowohl Haus sind wie Sterne. Ein solches Bild stellt die Hure, die Verkäuferin und Ware in einem ist.« Benjamin, Paris, die Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts, in: ders.: Illuminationen, pp. 170–84, here p. 180.

35 Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 185.

36 Cf. Deleuze, Foucault, pp. 94ff.

37 »Den vollkommenen Typus der Großstadt definiert Kirchner in der Kokotte. Die Kokotte ist ein Produkt der Großstadt.« Schmied, Ausgangspunkt und Verwandlung, p. 24. See also Sykora, Weiblichkeit. Grossstadt. Moderne: Ernst Ludwig Kirchners Berliner Strassenszenen 1913–15.

38 This is most apparent in Döblin's post-Expressionist novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Not only are virtually all major female characters in this novel prostitutes, but also the city which shelters them: the space that is essential to their existence is nothing but a whore: *die babylonische Hure Berlin ...*; cf. Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, pp. 488ff.

39 Cf. Blass's poems »Bordell« and »Große Stadt«; also: »Then you'll remember me ...« and »Nacht« in: Geerken (ed.), »Dich süße Sau nenn ich die Pest von Schmargendorf«. Erotische Gedichte des Expressionismus, pp. 180 and 184. See also his anthologies *Die Straßen komme ich entlang geweht*, 1912, and *Die Gedichte von Trennung und Licht*, 1915.

40 Cf. »Tausend Flöten« in Geerken (ed.), p. 167.

but a few. In these urban descriptions of the prostitute, the ambiguous relationship between Bohemian and hooker becomes most apparent, as does the Expressionists' fascination and disgust with the modern metropolis. The destructive force of both the streetwalker – as often pointed out by the specialist in venereal disease Gottfried Benn – and the streets themselves collide and merge to formulate ambiguous signs of modern spaces. Spaces, in which street-lights create »geometric figures, stretching a monstrous spider's web between grey walls«, and in which the people are caught »like prey«,⁴² as Oskar Loerke puts it, and where, according to Alfred Lemm, »like a mouthful, spat out by one, eaten by the next and spat out again, the prostitutes stood soiled with saliva on the deserted white tablecloths of asphalt«.⁴³

Alongside depictions of the horrifying and seductive force of the metropolis and its destructive rhythm, the multi-layered possibilities offered by the city were experienced and represented as liberating and intoxicating. Many Expressionists – such as Alfred Lichtenstein, Ernst Blass, Georg Kaiser, and Alfred Döblin – convey a sense of pride and a distinct enthusiasm in their texts regarding their status as cosmopolitan outsiders, that is Bohemian, avantgarde artists and writers. They take ownership of the street and actual place names appear in titles of literary texts – such as Paul Boldt's poem »Friedrichstrassendirnen« (1913) or Curt Corinth's novel *Potsdamer Platz* (1919)⁴⁴ – and also in titles of drawings, etchings, or paintings by artists such as George Grosz, Otto Dix, Ludwig Meidner, and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: time and again it is Friedrichstraße, Nollendorfplatz and Potsdamer Platz. But what do these places have in common? The obvious link is the combination of popular entertainment and commercial space that these places signify. Also, according to the *Berliner Polizeiliche Verordnungen* of 7th December 1911, these places are among the 63 streets and squares prostitutes were barred from entering.⁴⁵ But it is a fact that it was precisely along the Friedrichstraße, Nollendorfplatz and on Potsdamer

41 »Um harte Häuser humpeln Huren hin und wieder, ...« – Cf. Lichtenstein, »Die Nacht«, in Geerken (ed.), p. 182.

42 »Lichter steckten geometrische Figuren ab, spannen zwischen den grauen Wänden ein ungeheures Spinnennetz. Die Menschen hingen wie eine Beute darin und wußten es nur noch nicht.« Loerke, *Die Puppe*, p. 278.

43 »Wie Bissen, die von dem einen ausgespuckt, vom Nebenmann wieder gegessen und wieder ausgespuckt waren, standen die Straßenmädchen speichelbeschmutzt auf den verlassenem weissen Tischdecken des Asphalts.« Lemm, *Weltflucht*, p. 253.

44 See for example the poems »Friedrichstrassenkroki 3 Uhr 20 nachts« and »Friedrichstrassendirnen«, in: Täuber, *Der häßliche Eros*, p. 262 and Boldt, *Junge Pferde! Junge Pferde!*, p. 19.

45 Appendix II in Flexner, *Prostitution in Europe*, pp. 415ff. Regulation of prostitution was changed in 1922, mainly due to the political action of Abolitionists.

Platz that many of Berlin estimated 30,000 to 50,000 prostitutes sought to trade their bodies for cash.⁴⁶

Berlin's police failed miserably in regulating the Berlin street life, and both the presence and representation of prostitutes in spaces clearly and unambiguously defined as *free* from »deviant« sex for sale distinctly marks and questions the lines drawn between normal and abnormal, legal and illegal, public and private. As Derrida pointed out in his essay on *Rogues*, any boundary is by its very nature double-faced. In the eyes of young Expressionists, drawing lines, excluding, categorising is what their intolerable bourgeois fathers did best. The two-faced nature of boundaries and demarcations mirrors the bourgeoisie's moral hypocrisy so despised by young Expressionists. Their representations of prostitutes going about their everyday business in spaces they are officially forbidden to enter are more than provocations of the stuffy bourgeoisie. These depictions of sex workers street-walking specifically those parts of the modern metropolis Berlin they are legally excluded from should also be read as passionate assessments of the prostitute's social, spatial and moral framing. They question the dominant construction of ideal womanhood and hope to aid the prostitute in transgressing the confinement of her traditional gendered identity.

In addition to these first dialectical »visions« of the prostitute – the fact that her »essence« lies beyond the unambiguity of traditional bourgeois spaces and is inherently connected to the ambivalent urban space surrounding her –, confinement and liberation structure yet another and no less dialectical Expressionist representation of the street-walker. For it is the prostitute, perceived by both scholars and many writers as destructive and threatening, that is presented as the only sensual and emotional human left on the streets of the metropolis. Eros is regarded as life force, and the miracle of the liberated body is an integral part of vitalist Expressionism. Vitalist philosopher Ludwig Klages summarizes many Expressionists' desires in his book *Vom kosmogonischen Eros* (1922), when he ends his text with the command: Let Eros rule, who started it all!⁴⁷ The influence of vitalism on Expressionist literature becomes most explicit in Curt Corinth's early novels, namely *Trieb*, *Potsdamer Platz* and *Bordell*, all published in 1919. In chains of ecstatic visions, prostitutes in these texts are presented as the saviours of modern times, for their liberated bodies offer freedom and divine force.

Hans Termaden, the main character in *Potsdamer Platz*, is portrayed as the »new Messiah« once he learns to be guided completely by his physical urges.⁴⁸ Corinth's »New Man« is represented as the paradigm of a creature of instinct,

46 Eckardt / Gilman, Bertolt Brecht's Berlin, p. 36.

47 Klages, *Vom kosmogonischen Eros*, p. 158: »So herrsche denn Eros, der alles begonnen!«

48 Corinth, *Potsdamer Platz oder Die Nächte des neuen Messias*.

and the prostitute – as the only one having unfastened the moral corset of bourgeois society – is depicted as aid and companion in this celestial journey. Liberation of the body is the aim, and Termaden is described as extremely successful in working towards this goal. Following the call »der fleischlichen (höchsten) Liebe«,⁴⁹ that is of physical, i. e. highest love, thousands of women flock to Berlin, to be liberated by this »New Man«. In increasingly biblical tone, Termaden sees himself as a revolutionary of sexual moral codes, and promises to liberate his fellow men and women. The eccentric centre of his Dionysian struggle, of course, had to be Berlin's red light district, Potsdamer Platz. Berlin, which Corrinth calls the true eternal city of pleasure,⁵⁰ witnesses a tenfold increase in population due to the popularity of Termaden and his liberated followers. Even the authorities seem once more powerless. Every effort to restrain the sinful behaviour on Potsdamer Platz results in even more police officers and soldiers joining the joyful rituals. Finally, Termaden, the messiah of physical pleasure and destroyer of bourgeois moral codes, stands victoriously on his balcony looking down over Potsdamer Platz. He had successfully, with the aid of liberated women, i. e. sex workers, created a utopia, a second world, a paradise:

Paradiese gleißten; urmenschliche erste sündenlose und heilig schamlose Nacktheit sonnte ihre Weiße; Menschheit hatte zurückgefunden zu erster ursprünglicher Seligkeit. Ah Sonne über den himmlischen Geländen trunkener Menschenlust.⁵¹

Although the style is self-ironically over-the-top, Corrinth describes his utopian vision of a second world outside bourgeois space without its norms, codes, and regulations. The climactic orgy at the end of the text signifies its antipode: the stiff morality and the politics of exclusion of his time. Like a carnival, Corrinth celebrates a utopian liberation from the existing order and popular truth. As Bakhtin pointed out, carnival »marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.«⁵² And as stated by Bakhtin and emphasized by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, carnival, its behaviour, its laughter, is »profoundly ambivalent«.⁵³

49 Corrinth, p. 50.

50 Corrinth, p. 57.

51 Corrinth, p. 88.

52 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 10.

53 Stallybrass / White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, p. 8.

As Jacques Derrida pointed out in his essays on *les voyous* and *les roués*, when those that are considered separate, wayward, outcast take to the streets, disorder is introduced.⁵⁴ This is especially the case when the mere act of walking the street is declared illegal and as such a subversive act denouncing the bourgeoisie's moral values and the state's juridical order. As a dialectical image, the prostitute in Expressionism is clearly defined and colourfully adorned with hooker attributes in order to render her presence on the street or square in itself an act of resistance – she is not supposed to be there, but in fact she most certainly *is*. In poems such as Paul Boldt's »Friedrichstrassendirnen«, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's paintings or Curt Corrinth's novel *Potsdamer Platz*, Expressionism's portrayal of her dialectical presence as a streetwalker in the modern metropolis is provocatively evident, and as an act of resistance it is permanent and stable. In contrast to these colourful representations, however, Berlin's prostitutes' actual appearance and behaviour had to be ambiguous and fleeting in order to avoid her arrest by the vice squad.

But it is exactly the prostitute's motile transgressiveness in the context of legal principles of moral order, bourgeois sexual codes and gendering that unveil the Expressionists' effort to comment on the bourgeois *Weltbild* and the ongoing destabilisation of fixed gender categories. Distinct boundaries, clearly defined categories of belonging and not-belonging, of morality and gender are declared useless due to their collision with modern urban space. For much too long and all too consistently, Expressionism tells us, traditional gender categories have negated change and rested parasitically on what has become a modern, urban civilisation. The poet's voice in Expressionism reminds us that not only the modern city's *street* – as a carnivalesque space, a site of noise and speed, cultural interchange and social mobility, of both order and chaos – is a permanent construction zone. Its inherent instability calls into question the legitimacy of boundaries that constitute Wilhelmine / Weimar society as much as the Expressionists' representations of the women who *walk* it.

54 See especially the chapter on »The Rogue That I am« in: Derrida, *Rogues*, pp. 63–70.