



Ill. 3: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Potsdamer Platz*, 1914, oil on canvas (200 x 150 cm), Nationalgalerie Berlin, © Ingeborg & Wolfgang Henze-Ketterer, Wichtrach/Bern.

Streetwalking the Metropolis: Prostitutes in Expressionism

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KASIMIR EDSCHMID, ONE OF THE MASTERS of German expressionist narrative art and expressionism's most important theoreticians, once said that to really see is more difficult than dancing on a tight-rope.¹ In 1907, when Picasso created a new quality of abstraction and analysis of form in his cubist painting of *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O. J. No. 140), the painter Oskar Kokoschka composed the first expressionist drama: *Mörder, Hoffnung der Frauen* (Murderer the Women's Hope).² This play was considered an expression of what Ernst Stadler called the chaos of their epoch, the disintegration of tradition, the anarchy of values, and yet the arduous insistence in word and gesture on something none of them believed in anymore, since there was no "reality" behind it.³ In expressionist works of art, music and literature, recurring elements include acute contrasts and abrupt movements, sharp angles and bright colors, representations of outcries, fragmentations, the New Man, and marginalized figures of bourgeois society. The expressionist attitude was antitraditionalist, and especially antibourgeois. Expressionism's New Man was diametrically opposed to the supposedly well-educated and well-behaved bourgeois philistine, who was generally depicted as intellectually limited, puny, stolid, and dull, opposed to all extremes and frightened of chaos, — in short clearly impotent in all respects.⁴ For these young avantgarde artists and writers, the bourgeois (parental) space was a synonym for limited, closed space, without room for movement or thought, let alone creativity. In almost naturalist tradition, the expressionist sets out to confront the bourgeois with reality, — a reality, however, and this is quite contrary to naturalism, as he or she believes to be experiencing it. The bourgeoisie's faith in the appearance of Wilhelmine society and culture was shattered by expressionism in the prostitute's mirror. Poverty, sickness, violence, and despair, but also the prostitute's erotic and creative potential are repre-

sented. Indeed, there are so many depictions of harlots in expressionist poetry, plays, and prose that it will be impossible to mention all of them in this essay.⁵

Expressionists longed for an "Aufbruch," a new beginning. Due to the expressionists' experience of alienation — or, as Ernst Stadler put it in his famous poem "Der Spruch" (The Motto, 1914): "der Welt entfremdet, fremd dem tiefsten Ich"⁶ — their aim was to create "reality" anew⁷ and to uncover the essence of the modern human being in their art and literature. As Kasimir Edschmid declared, expressionists were no longer satisfied with mere descriptions of the "facts" of modern life — factories, disease, whores, hunger, and chaos — but attempted to experience reality and therefore to learn the essence of these "facts" rather than to merely reflect their outward appearance.⁸ 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."⁹ The aim was to find an adequate representation of modern time and space via new aesthetic means. The representational means, however, proved often just as contradictory as the times themselves. Kasimir Edschmid demanded a true, fearless gaze upon the modern metropolis and proclaimed the artist as sole legislator and creator of a new reality.

The expressionists' reality was largely determined by massive shifts of population from rural to urban landscapes. In 1871 the German Empire contained eight large industrial cities, by 1910 there were forty-four such "massive centers of urban population and industrial power."¹⁰ Between 1910 and 1930, Berlin was certainly the most imposing of these centers within the German Empire, having doubled its number of inhabitants from two million in 1910 to four million in 1920. But even within a European context, Berlin was rightly considered one of the most outstanding centers of the European avantgarde, a global city, and an experimental cultural playground of the machine age. Determined by speed, rhythm, dynamics, hustle, and bustle, Berlin filled expressionists with both fear and fascination. This voracious giant seemed irresistible to most expressionists — many of whom had moved from Leipzig, Dresden or Jena to take part in Berlin's metropolitan life. These young men and women wished to uncover not only the essence of being, but of modern time and space, although this was probably all they agreed upon. Expressionism remained a multi-faceted, pluralistic movement, radical but not necessarily united in its aims and objectives.

The relationship between expressionist writers and urban space has often, and rightly so, been described as rather negative or, at best, am-

bivalent. The city Berlin, the Moloch and demon, was by many perceived as "one of the most horrific, cannibalistic manifestations of modernity"¹¹ as Jost Hermand put it. Especially early expressionist lyric poetry offers many examples of a threatening, dark, and sinister image of Berlin, if we just think of Georg Heym's famous poem "Der Gott der Stadt" (God of the City, 1912), depicting a furious, power-hungry demon squatting on urban rooftops eagerly awaiting destruction and despair. In a first collection of expressionist poetry entitled *Menschheitsdämmerung* (Dawn of the Human Race), edited by Kurt Pinthus in 1920, the poems devoted to Berlin — such as Johannes R. Becher's long "Berlin"-poem or Paul Zech's "Fabrikstraße Tags" (Factory Street by Day)¹² — all signify the city as a place of disintegration and just vary in the degree of their sense of threat. But Berlin was much more than just a destructive demon of the machine age. The possibilities offered by the city were also experienced as liberating and intoxicating, and 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.

Apart from the visions of chaos and disintegration mentioned earlier, actual place names entered titles of novels, such as in Curt Corinth's novel *Potsdamer Platz* (Potsdam Square, 1919) or Paul Boldt's *Friedrichstraßen Gedichte* (Friedrich Street Poems, 1914).¹³ References to distinct spaces within the Moloch Berlin also constituted titles of numerous drawings, etchings, or paintings especially by George Grosz, Otto Dix, Ludwig Meidner, and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: Friedrichstrasse, Nollendorfplatz, and time and again the Potsdamer Platz (see ill. 3). But what do these places have in common? The obvious connection is the combination of popular entertainment and commercial space that these places signify. But it is also the fact that these streets and squares were used by the majority of Berlin's estimated 30,000 to 50,000 prostitutes for their trade. Only the very attractive and elegant hetaerae could afford to be seen on the Kurfürstendamm, most sex workers used the Friedrichstrasse and the Nollendorfplatz.¹⁴ The Potsdamer Platz, of course, was the main red light district of Berlin at the time. But why is this apparent connection between the expressionists' experience of Berlin's spatial ambivalence and their depiction of streetwalkers significant?

As I have already mentioned in my introduction to this volume, in Wilhelmine society prostitution was perceived as an extremely explosive political as well as private topic. By 1900, the question of prostitution

had become one of the most discussed social problems in the German Empire. This concern for harlotry was a brew of compassion, repulsion and voyeurism, reflected in many representations of prostitutes at the time. In Wilhelmine society prostitution was visible, but not to be looked at, alluring, but to be ignored. Between 1871 and 1927 prostitution was regulated and registered prostitutes were forbidden to set foot into sixty-three of Berlin's streets and squares. However, the Morals Police was unsuccessful in their aim to exclude streetwalkers from bourgeois space. Expressionists such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner observed with fascination the carefully balanced and ambivalent behavior adopted by prostitutes when entering "illegal" territory such as the Kurfürstendamm. At once obvious enough to indicate availability to possible clients and inconspicuous enough not to attract the attention of a police officer, Kirchner time and again attempted to depict the sex workers' striking invasion of Berlin's streets and squares especially during the year 1914.

Prostitution was a delicate issue with much provocative potential, and it comes as no surprise therefore that harlots became a favorite theme of the antibourgeois Bohème as other essays in this volume well illustrate. But it was especially expressionist artists and writers¹⁵ who embraced the prostitute and made her the most dominant female figure in their art and literature. As I will show in this essay, the sex worker appears in a number of different forms, all reflecting facets of modern life as expressionists experienced it. The prostitute is an outsider, she is the "Other," the non-bourgeois, and she transgresses the social, moral, and legal boundaries prescribed. In her ambivalence, as commodity and saleswoman in one (as Walter Benjamin pointed out),¹⁶ the prostitute can be recognized as a personification of the expressionists' experience of modernity which was as ambivalent as modern space itself. The best example for an expressionist depiction of the prostitute as dialectical image, merchant and merchandise in one, is Max Brod's story of Hedwig Gabor in *Die Erlöserin: Ein Hetärengespräch* (The Saviour, a Conversation with a Hetaera, 1921). Here, the cultivated, intellectual prostitute sells her body to the highest bidder to ensure the realisation of her utopia: a humane community in Central Asia. At the end of the narrative, her client not only understands the necessity for her subordinating morals and even her body to her dream, but he deeply admires this woman as an outstanding and most worthy human being. In most cases, the expressionists' representation of prostitutes is a means of provocation which relocates the margin right in the center of the expressionist stage or canvas. Opposed to the "repressive society" they

lived in, the expressionists emphasize the prostitute's existence and thus relieve her of her bourgeois spatial "framing": the brothel is demolished via pen or brush, and the prostitute is turned loose on the streets of the metropolis. But how are we to interpret this willful act of liberation?

It has been the more or less unanimous view among feminist scholars of German expressionism that messianic expressionism and its implied quest for the New Man sheds a clear and fatal light on minorities in general and women in particular. The woman in expressionism seems either to be depicted as a flat and passive character of extremely minor importance or is simply portrayed as a sexual being with neither will nor power, which are seen as essential qualities of the New Man.¹⁷ Just as Zarathustra demanded, the New Man must rise, and be it from *their* ashes. The expressionist representation or outcry of this demand by, for example, Ernst Barlach in *Der tote Tag* (The Dead Day, 1912), Georg Kaiser in *Gas* (Gas, 1918), or in Kurt Heynicke's poem "Aufbruch" (Awakening, 1920), reflects the most dominant side of expressionist chauvinism. But the essence of expressionism lies partly in its conflicting, even contradictory tendencies. Time and again, there is an immanent dialectic to the representation of prostitutes, which mirrors the expressionists' relationship with the urban space surrounding them.

One of the dominant features of their urban experience was, of course, the objectification and indeed commodification and therefore alienation of the modern human being. Their own full integration into modern production processes is one of the most important topics in expressionist literature, from Georg Kaiser's *Von morgens bis mitternachts* (From Morning to Midnight, 1916) to Franz Jung's *Die Eroberung der Maschinen* (Conquering the Machines, 1923).¹⁸ It is this experience of alienation that motivates the expressionists' search for the essence of the human being. This objectification could, in the expressionists' view, be released into aesthetic representation via the transformation of experience and emotion. As I have already pointed out, these young avantgarde artists and writers searched for true, uncontained expression, and they hoped for release via a representation of the essence of their experience. Their experience of the metropolis, however, was entirely ambivalent. The sex worker, we might assume, offered herself as sign or signifier, combining a seemingly non-alienated form of existence via her own "unrestrained" sexuality with elements of urban reality such as spectacle, publicity, capitalism, and loud decay. Just as in their experience of ambivalence regarding the modern metropolis, the disgust over marginal women is paired with — if not depreciated by —

fascination and admiration. Expressionism's communionist poetry or *O Mensch-Dichtung* is imbued with declarations of solidarity. A solidarity, which is not anymore just a critique of the morbid frailness of modern urban society, but a fellowship that attempts to go beyond Ernst Stadler's humanistic emotion, that calls the drastically marginalized prostitutes its "lieb Geschwister" or "dear siblings." Ludwig Rubiner calls harlots his friends and accomplices, and sees his fellow expressionists as part of a "holy mob" of whores, lovers, thieves, critics, chain-smokers, and the unemployed.¹⁹ In their longing for an utopia of free love and a harmonious community of all — as it becomes apparent in the section "Liebe den Menschen" (Love the Human Being) in *Menschheitsdämmerung*, or in Ludwig Rubiner's *Kameraden der Menschheit* (Comrades of the Human Race, 1919) — expressionists not only included the prostitute in their vision but also identified her as a human being. The streetwalker is moved from the margins of society to the center of their utopia, as in Walter Hasenclever's "Ode an eine Tänzerin" (Ode to a Dancer, 1922). The prostitutes are the sisters whose company Armin T. Wegner seeks in his poem "Des Dichters Lied von den Dirnen" (The Poet's Song of Prostitutes, 1917). She is, like the expressionist, a victim of bourgeois society, and therefore the poet's accomplice. It is in her company that the expressionist finds understanding and support, as Max Brod declares in his text *Die Retterin* (The Savior, 1914). Often, however, there is a fine line between solidarity or compassion²⁰ and the intent to shock the reader or an audience by depicting the depths of being, as for example in Gottfried Benn's poem "Saal der kreißenden Frauen" (Delivery Room, 1912). Often the literary text functions as an expression or even allegorization of the social, political, or cultural crisis, as we can for example witness it in Ernst Blass's collection of poems *Die Strassen komme ich entlang geweht* (I Come Blown Down the Streets, 1912).²¹

The perception of the prostitute in expressionism is immanently connected with the expressionist vision as such. When Kasimir Edschmid wrote in 1918 that instead of seeing, the expressionist poet envisions, instead of describing, he experiences, the bourgeois conception of the world — or "Weltgedanke," as Edschmid calls it — was brought to an end. This implied both the demise of positivistic knowledge and a deconstruction of the marginality-centrality paradigm. All there was left was the possibility of a vision.²² In their paradigmatic effort to uncover an essence of being, the expressionist writer refused to perceive the prostitute as other than human: "er sieht das Menschliche in den Huren."²³ Now, as Edschmid put it, the whore is not anymore an ob-

ject, adorned and painted with the decorations of her trade. In expressionist literature, she will appear without perfume, without swaying thighs, because the reality of her human existence should be of no significance. Her hat, her walk, her lips are only surrogates that can never completely reveal her true nature.²⁴ All those substitutes for a human essence, sensually perceptible though they may be, theoretically cease to exist for the expressionist writer; the context, that which allows for signification, is shattered. Edschmid declares that in expressionist literature, any context, any coherence is recognized as illusion and therefore discarded. The context is the veil covering the vision of the modern human being. Unveiled, the essence can finally come to light.²⁵

This "enlightened" expressionist representation of the prostitute takes many forms. Predominant, however, are provocative declarations of solidarity with marginal women and shocking representations of their contaminating touch — and both, as contradictory as they may seem, are efforts to shatter bourgeois contexts and prejudices that manifest the peripheral (female) space. At the same time the streetwalker offers herself as a representation of the essence of the writer's own modern urban experience. Expressionists such as Kurt Heynicke lived in a time of extreme change, creation, and destruction, and were therefore not looking for cosiness but activity, not aestheticism but bare life in the literature they produced.²⁶ "Die Hure Babylon," as Berlin is called by Alfred Döblin or Armin T. Wegner, is the space in which activity and chaos, as well as the alienation and commodification of the individual was experienced to the highest degree. And again, it is the prostitute who walks the streets, waits in doorways, and merges with the asphalt. The connection between the metropolis and the streetwalker, 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,²⁷ manifests itself on the "urban" canvas of the Berlin expressionists²⁸ such as Kirchner or Otto Dix, as well as in the writings of Alfred Döblin,²⁹ Ernst Blass,³⁰ Hans Leybold,³¹ or Alfred Lichtenstein,³² to name but a few. In these "urban descriptions" of the prostitute, the ambiguous relationship between Bohemian and hooker becomes most apparent. In Johannes R. Becher's "Berlin"-poem (Berlin, 1920), as in Ernst Stadler's poem "Heimkehr" (Coming Home, 1914), old whores with worn-out orifices creep through the city's streets at dusk. The metropolis made good use of their services during the night, but in the early morning when the market value of their commodities is at its lowest, the city releases them again. Not colorful and alluring, but pale, cold, and tired

are those prostitutes portrayed by Becher and Stadler. Armin T. Wegner describes a "Hure Babylon,"³³ that flattens and breaks everything with her clumsy stone body.³⁴ He, too, quite clearly emphasizes the destructive potential of both the metropolis and the streetwalker.

"Lichte dirnen aus den Fenstern / Die Seuche spreitet an der Tür," writes August Stramm in his poem "Freudenhaus" (Brothel, 1915). In his creation of the verb *spreiten* he innovatively combines the verbs *spreizen* (to spread, usually legs) and *verbreiten* (to spread, usually news or disease). In connection with the noun "Seuche" or epidemic/pestilence, the origin of disease is clearly located between the legs of the sex worker. Other expressionists who point to the contaminating touch of the streetwalker include the specialist in venereal disease and expressionist writer Gottfried Benn, but also Alfred Wolfenstein, for example in his short play *Besuch der Zeit* (Time's Visit, 1916). In many expressionist texts, the prostitute's destructive potential and the streets themselves merge to formulate ambiguous signs of modern spaces. Spaces, in which street-lights create geometric figures, that seem to stretch a monstrous spider's web between the grey walls of the city. In it the people are caught like prey,³⁵ as Oskar Loerke puts it in his short narrative "Die Puppe" (The Doll, 1919). And it is here, in the city, that the prostitutes stand soiled with saliva on the deserted tablecloths of asphalt — like a mouthful, spat out by one, eaten by the next and spat out again, as Alfred Lemm depicts them in his story "Weltflucht" (Escape from the World, 1918).³⁶ We find outcries by expressionists, like Paul Boldt, who fearfully recounts the ruinous appetite of whores,³⁷ but at the same time describes himself as a lonely city-dweller who gladly relied on their services in those modern times of anonymity. For the harlot appears not only in a harmful capacity but also symbolizes the revitalising forces of both eros and the modern metropolis.

The horrifying and seductive force of the metropolis, its destructive rhythm, as it becomes chaotically manifest in, for example, Ludwig Meidner's art and writings,³⁸ as well as its "unanswered questions and unknowable qualities,"³⁹ endangered the citizen's individual identity and destabilized the position of the subject in relation to the modern environment.⁴⁰ Urban spaces, as Cole Swensen phrased it, "are marked by abundance, diversity, and movement in such unpredictable occurrences that the overall effect is one of chaos, mutability and incomprehensibility."⁴¹ The only relation left between the city-dwellers is money, as Georg Simmel had already written in 1900 in his *Philosophie des Geldes* (Philosophy of Money). As I pointed out in my introduction to this

volume, Simmel depicts the prostitute as the most striking example of the power and mechanism of money in modern urban, capitalist centers, for her objectification is complete and her value is integrated wholly in the machinery of the modern metropolis. She is the perfect symbol for the alienation of the individual through the money economy of urban spaces. Simmel's writings were well known among the avantgarde, and there is no doubt that his identification of the prostitute as symbol of modern, urban life has left its mark on expressionist literature.

Especially at night, the expressionist's experience of the metropolis included at least the recognition of this particular city-dweller who is at once marginalized and yet at the center of urban spaces. Her body merges with the money economy and becomes the ultimate emblem of the objectification and alienation of the modern human being. She advertises herself, is being looked at, assessed, touched, and eventually bought. She embodies the boundlessness of objectification and the power of capitalism. Nature is for sale, since it is sex that is on offer. The more perfect the illusion of sensuality, the more attractive the product and the higher the price. There are many examples of expressionist representations of sex workers as symbols of capitalist structure and consequence, but few are as raw and aggressive as Oskar Kanehl's poem "Nachtcafé" (Nightclub, 1913):⁴²

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
Schnepfen 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.
Offen zum Geldeinwurf.
Augen voll Lebensgeschichten,
gemeine und traurige.

Schicksalberufene, Schicksalgestoßene,
 Ausgelebte.
 Sie blinzeln und zwinkern
 und lächeln einstudiert.
 Untereinander tuscheln sie,
 obleich 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.

“Open for the insertion of money” is one of the verses in Kanehl’s poem which was published in one of the main expressionist journals — *Die Aktion* — in 1913. The verse does not refer to a slot-machine or some other kind of vending machine, but to women, who sit in a club at night, colorful and revealing, as human advertisements. The author is spoilt for choice — all types and sizes seem to be available that evening. But their descriptions lack appeal, and they appear like painted corpses to him. Nevertheless, the poem refers to the place as market, junk shop, slave market, and even abattoir. On the one hand, Kanehl describes a barter deal — sex for money —, but on the other it is the destruction of the individual this poem is brutally about. 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 quickly. The sale of female bodies is hard labor 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: they are “offen zum Geldeinwurf,” and this 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 are constantly refilled, the commodity “sex” is available all night. The exchangeability of individuals is made obvious. This representation of an utter mechanisation of interpersonal relationships destroys any illusion of the possibility of contact or even understanding between modern human beings.

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. Berlin Expressionists, such as Kanehl, Armin T. Wegner or Georg Kaiser, go beyond Marx’s objectification of the individual and create texts in which “being” is levelled out. There is no space for moral codes, they lead themselves *ad absurdum*. Only in the sex worker’s eyes may we possibly find a glimpse of life (and their humanity) as a narrative of the past. The lack of emotion and the loneliness among modern city dwellers are represented here to the extreme. In many of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s drawings and paintings the streets of Berlin are filled with people, but their mask-like faces, their similar outward appearances suggest the psychophysiological reduction of the modern human being. Only the prostitutes, like colorful birds of paradise, emerge from the masses. Although archetypes themselves and signified through their profession, through their own incongruity these picturesque cocottes nevertheless emphasize the inability to distinguish individuals from the masses of this faceless society. The expressionist representation of the metropolis in art and literature accentuates the experience of a threatened individuality and the impossibility of Hegelian harmony within the human being as such, as well as between the individual and his or her environment.

Yet it is in the “doubling” of this experience through the juxtaposition of urban landscapes and prostitutes that expressionist art achieves a truly un-Hegelian but entirely Benjaminian “dialectical image.” If isolated from one another, both apocalyptic landscapes — as Ludwig Meidner draws and paints them at the time — and prostitutes still embody an almost utopian longing for a reconciling context, their unresolved contrast *in one image* denies this possibility of resolution. Instead, they both mirror one another in all of their fracturedness, thus leaving the spectator with no plausible escape route from the internally necessary chaos portrayed. Here vanishing point and perspective literally become one another; become, in fact, a soiled kind of Möbius strip.

In expressionism, the experience of this endlessly broken mirror is still the experience of an individual facing the shock of being swallowed by the city and its masses. An expressionist representation of this “folded dialectical image” thus incarnates one last cry for the human condition. And again, it is the prostitute that symbolizes not only complete alienation and commodification as mentioned before, but the opposite — a human being and a saint.

One of the most striking examples of both a depiction of the essence of humanity and a complete demolition of a bourgeois conception of the world is, in my opinion, Alfred Lemm’s “Die Hure Salomea” (Salomea the Whore, 1918).⁴³ In this tale, Salomea, a young, well-educated, semi-bourgeois medical student, who suffers from chronic boredom, sits in her favorite café observing the masses floating by, when the First World War breaks out. She decides to volunteer as a nurse but fails in dedicating herself fully 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 of bodies of young men ready for preparation, torn and bloody. She sees arms hanging one by one on hooks, and between the ribs dark brown hollows shelter maggots.⁴⁴ 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 they wished. Salomea hurries through the barracks, distributing herself with feverish force.⁴⁵

She soon becomes a legend among the soldiers, who joyfully wait for her as this touchable personification of the “New,”⁴⁶ a utopia that soothes pain, erases fear, and conveys hope. After journalists discover her among the soldiers and publish a story 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 was expected to think about how best to serve their country. 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 recognizes 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 whore. Ardently did they praise the Blessed Virgin — “Inbrünstig lobten sie, jeder in seiner Sprache, die Gebenedeite” —,⁴⁷ wrote Alfred Lemm at the end of this tale, knowing that

this comparison signified the most radical destruction of a bourgeois value system.

But Alfred Lemm was not the only expressionist to correlate, or even equate the prostitute with a saint, if not God. Iwan Goll calls her “Du allbarmherzige Märtyrerin” or merciful martyr in his poem “Die Kokotte” (The Coquette, 1919), and Otto Zareck’s poem “Lied einer Dirne”⁴⁸ (A Prostitute’s Song), published in the same year in the journal *Neue Blätter für Kunst und Dichtung*, depicts a “blessed” prostitute. She gives herself to save and nourish, going through her “Hexenküche” — or hell on earth — for the sake of the reader and the human race. Like Jesus, she takes all earthly wrong and sin onto her shoulders, chosen to suffer for the world. The streetwalker is depicted as a saint, as by Paul Kornfeld in his play *Himmel und Hölle* (Heaven and Hell, 1919). Selfless, “holy” prostitutes appear in Georg Trakl’s poems “Sonja” and “Afra,”⁴⁹ both written in 1913 and first published in the December issue of the journal *Brenner*. The name Sonja appears in Dostoyevsky’s novel *Prestuplenie i Nakazanie* (Crime and Punishment, 1866) as a girl who prostitutes herself to save her family from starvation, and Sieglinde Klettenhammer argues that it is clearly this Sonja that Trakl describes in his poem.⁵⁰ Afra was also a prostitute. According to the legend she lived in late Roman times as a whore and owner of a brothel in Augsburg, when she was converted to Christianity and later died as a martyr. In Ernst Stadler’s poem “Die Dirne” (The Prostitute),⁵¹ which appeared in *Die Aktion* in 1913, the prostitute’s first lover is compared to God, and her suffering is construed as nothing but a divine trial. She is always offering herself to Him, while practicing her profession; He is the one penetrating her, and “revolting victuals” seem like consecrated wafers in her mouth.⁵²

As early as 1891, Julius Hart complained that Christianity taught us to despise physical pleasure.⁵³ He longed for a “Greek harmony” between mind and body, and, like Nietzsche, condemned the dissonance formulated in the Christian tradition and upheld by bourgeois society. Expressionism’s canonization of harlotry is meant as a clear antipode to Christian and bourgeois values. Expressionists ignore society’s obsession with dichotomies such as good and evil, normal and abnormal, and focus on the “holy” prostitute who embodies the essence of the modern human being and offers vitalistic power. Due to her inherent instability and ambivalence, however, the expressionist representation of the prostitute is not 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, it is, however, always also precisely that. She must

be both — hooker *and* saint — to successfully deconstruct the “possibility of difference,” as Derrida⁵⁴ would call it, and to be able to forcefully rebel against the comfortable world of bourgeois antagonisms.

It is in 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 —, that we begin to understand another, no less dialectical representation. For it is the prostitute — perceived by both scholars and many writers as destructive and threatening — who 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* (Regarding the Cosmogonic Eros, 1922), when he ends his text with the command: Rule Eros, who started it all!⁵⁵ The influence of vitalism on expressionist literature becomes most explicit in Curt Corrinth’s early novels, published in 1919 and 1920. The titles of his texts place their narratives: *Trieb* (Urge, 1919), *Postdamer Platz*, and *Bordell* (Brothel, 1920). 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.⁵⁶ Corrinth’s New Man is represented as the paradigm of a creature of instinct, 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,”⁵⁷ 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 center of his dionysian struggle, of course, had to be Berlin’s red light district, the Potsdamer Platz. Berlin, which Corrinth calls the true eternal city of pleasure,⁵⁸ witnesses a tenfold increase in population due to the popularity of Termaden and his liberated followers. Even the authorities seem powerless. Every effort to quash the sinful behavior on the 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 bal-

cony, looking down over the Potsdamer Platz. With the aid of liberated women, he had successfully created a utopia, a second world, a paradise: “Paradiese gleiften; 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.”⁵⁹

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.”⁶⁰ Carnival, however, as it has been stated by Bakhtin and emphasized by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, carnival, its behavior, its laughter, is “profoundly ambivalent.”⁶¹

In his novel *Bordell*, Corrinth describes the little barber Pasentrall’s sexual liberation, which ends in his madness and death. Here, Pasentrall himself is turned into a prostitute by upper-bourgeois women, and the hypocritical society is the brothel that finally destroys him. Again, only the harlots are presented as human 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: “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 Moralitätensnonsens einer dekadenten untergangreifen Bourgeoisie! Freudigkeit des Fleisches! Bekennung aller natürlichen, unverbogenen Triebe! Ekstase der Ekstase! Das allein ist Zukunft! Dort allein ist Zukunft!” The sex workers 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 their desires.⁶² The future is the liberation of physical desires, and the female ideal has to embrace its instincts and urges to become divine. Corrinth creates a utopia of sexual freedom which fully empowers the prostitute. No longer a passive victim, the sex worker in Corrinth’s texts is reclaimed as the ultimate representative of a liberated society. However idealistic and consciously provocative, Corrinth does confront bourgeois society’s moral codes which are seen to demolish creativity, intelligence, hope, and happiness. Only when the moral cor-

set of society is ripped to shreds can Corrinth's protagonists develop their potential.

By creating contradictory and ambivalent representations of the prostitute that mirror the expressionists' ambivalent relationship with the modern metropolis, the writers of the time managed to represent something entirely essential in regard to their experience of modern time and space without losing sight of their aim to provoke and shock the bourgeoisie. When focusing on the streetwalker, we understand what Kasimir Edschmid meant when he proclaimed the destruction of the unambiguous bourgeois concept of the world. By depicting the ambivalent prostitute in the modern metropolis, expressionists not only represented their reality, but made seeing and reading this new reality a little bit easier.

Notes

¹ Kasimir Edschmid, "Über die Kunst 'Wirklichkeit' zu sehen," *Portraits und Denksteine* (Wien: Desch, 1962), 291.

² For Michael Hamburger's translation of this drama see Ernst Schürer, ed., *German Expressionist Plays* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 1–5.

³ Ernst Stadler (1914) in Wolfgang Wendler, *Carl Sternheim: Materialienbuch* (Darmstadt, Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1980), 17.

⁴ See, for example, Jürgen Froehlich, *Liebe im Expressionismus* (New York, Bern, Frankfurt: Lang, 1990) 130; Theodor Haubach, "Wider die Politik," *Das Tribunal* 1 (1919), 52.

⁵ For further examples, see Jürgen Froehlich, *Liebe im Expressionismus* (New York, Berne, Frankfurt: Lang, 1986); Nancy McCombs, *Earth Spirit, Victim, or Whore* (New York: Lang, 1986); my book *Dialektik und Utopie* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1996). Rita Täuber's book *Der häßliche Eros: Darstellungen zur Prostitution in der Malerei und Grafik 1855–1930* (Berlin: Mann, 1997) gives a number of expressionist poems on prostitutes in the appendix (259–65): Johannes R. Becher's "Die Huren," Paul Boldt's "Friedrichstrassendirnen," "Friedrichstrassenkroki 3 Uhr 20 nachts," and "Der Frauentod," Iwan Goll's "Nachtwandlerinnen" and "Die Kokotte," Armin T. Wegner's "Des Dichters Lied von den Dirnen," and August Stramm's "Freudenhaus."

⁶ The last verse of Ernst Stadler's poem "Der Spruch," Kurt Pinthus, ed., *Menschheitsdämmerung* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1982), 196.

⁷ See Kasimir Edschmid, *Über den dichterischen Expressionismus* (Berlin: Erich Reiß, 1919), 54.

⁸ Kasimir Edschmid, "Expressionismus in der Dichtung," *Die neue Rundschau* 1 (1918): 364. See also Heinrich Eduard Jacob, "Berlin — Vorkriegsdichtung und Lebensgefühl," *Expressionismus: Aufzeichnungen und Erinnerungen der Zeitgenossen* (Olten, Freiburg: Walter, 1965), 15–19.

⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, "Expressionismus und künstlerische Wahrhaftigkeit," *Noten zur Literatur* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1981), 609.

¹⁰ Reinhold Heller, "'The City Is Dark': Conceptions of Urban Landscape and Life in Expressionist Painting and Architecture," Gertrud Bauer Pickar and Karl Eugene Webb, eds. *Expressionism Reconsidered* (München: Fink, 1979), 42.

¹¹ Jost Hermand, "Das Bild der 'großen Stadt' im Expressionismus," Klaus Scherpe, ed., *Die Unwirklichkeit der Städte: Großstadtdarstellungen zwischen Moderne und Postmoderne* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1988), 61.

¹² Kurt Pinthus, ed. *Menschheitsdämmerung* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1982), for Becher's poem see pages 43–45, Zech's poem is on page 55.

¹³ See for example "Friedrichstrassenkroki 3 Uhr 20 nachts" and "Friedrichstrassendirnen," in Rita Täuber, *Der häßliche Eros*, 262.

¹⁴ Wolf von Eckardt and Sander Gilman, *Bertolt Brecht's Berlin* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1993), 36.

¹⁵ As most influential pre-expressionist examples should be mentioned Frank Wedekind's *Erdgeist* (published in 1895 by Albert Langen) and *Die Büchse der Pandora* (the first edition of 1904 was confiscated on Wilhelm II's order). Wedekind's plays depicting the life and death of the prostitute Lulu, the "Engelskind" and "Teufelsschönheit," were not only meant to provoke, they already portray the prostitute as ambiguous mixture of an "untermenschliches Elementarwesen" and a divine figure. See Wilhelm Emrich, "Wedekind: Die Lulu-Tragödie," *Das deutsche Drama II* (Düsseldorf: Bagel, 1958), 207.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Passagenwerk* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983), 55. See also Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1989).

¹⁷ See especially Marion Adams's essay on "Der Expressionismus und die Krise der deutschen Frauenbewegung," and Maike Leffers's article on Carl Sternheim "Die Maske als Ausdruck der Herrschaftskrise," both in *Expressionismus und Kulturkrise*, ed. Bernd Hüppauf (Heidelberg: Winter: 1983), 105–30 and 131–46 respectively; Barbara Wright, "Expressionism and German Feminism," *German Quarterly* 60 (1987): 582–99; and Della Pollock, "New Man to New Woman: Women in Brecht and Expressionism," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 3 (1989): 85–107.

¹⁸ See Ernst Schürer's books on *Georg Kaiser* (New York: Twayne, 1971) and *Franz Jung* (New York: Lang, 1994).

¹⁹ Ludwig Rubiner in *Die Aktion* 1 (1912), quoted in Nancy McCombs, *Earth Spirit, Victim, or Whore*, 172.

²⁰ This is what Jürgen Froehlich calls the "expressionistische Mitleidsethik." See his book *Liebe im Expressionismus* (New York: Lang, 1990).

²¹ See especially the poems "An Gladys," "Abendstimmung," "Der Nervenschwache," "Augustnacht," and "Diese ruhigen Nächte."

²² Edschmid, "Expressionismus in der Dichtung," *Die neue Rundschau* 1 (1918), Jg. 29: 364. See also Heinrich Eduard Jacob, "Berlin — Vorkriegsdichtung und Lebensgefühl," 15–19.

²³ Edschmid, *Über den dichterischen Expressionismus: Über den Expressionismus in der Literatur und die neue Dichtung* [1917], Tribüne der Kunst und Zeit 1 (Berlin: Reiß, 1919), 54.

²⁴ Edschmid, "Über den dichterischen Expressionismus," 56.

²⁵ Edschmid, 57.

²⁶ Kurt Heynicke, "Die neue Form," *Eckart* 7 (1925): 189.

²⁷ Wieland Schmied, "Ausgangspunkt und Verwandlung. Gedanken über Vision, Expression und Konstruktion in der deutschen Kunst 1905–1985," *Deutsche Kunst im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Prestel, 1986), 24.

²⁸ The connection between the prostitute and the metropolis is consequently reflected on the canvases of those expressionists living in the metropolis. Only the Berlin Brücke artists painted harlots, and not for example the Blauer Reiter artists, like Kandinsky or Marc, who lived in utterly rural settings of Murnau and Kochel.

²⁹ This is most apparent, of course, in Döblin's novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Not only are virtually all major female characters in this novel prostitutes, also the city which shelters them, the space which is essential to their existence is nothing but a whore: "die babylonische Hure Berlin." See Alfred Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1980), esp. 488ff.

³⁰ See Blass's poems "Bordell," *Die Aktion* 1 (1914): 5; "Große Stadt," *März* 1 (1913): 29; "Then you'll remember me . . ." and "Nacht" in *Dich süße Sau nenn ich die Pest von Schmargendorf*, 180, 184. See also his anthologies *Die Straßen komme ich entlang geweht* (Heidelberg: Richard Weissbach, 1912) and *Die Gedichte von Trennung und Licht* (Leipzig: Kurt Wolff, 1915).

³¹ See "Tausend Flöten," *Dich süße Sau nenn ich die Pest von Schmargendorf*, ed. Hartmut Geerken (München: Renner, 1985), 167.

³² "Um harte Häuser humpeln Huren hin und wieder, . . ." see Alfred Lichtenstein, "Die Nacht," *Dich süße Sau nenn ich die Pest von Schmargendorf*, 182.

³³ See his poem "Die Weltstadt," in his collection of poetry *Das Antlitz der Städte* (Berlin: Fleischel, 1917).

³⁴ See Armin T. Wegner's poem "Der Zug der Häuser," *Großstadtlyrik*, ed. Wolfgang Rothe (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1973), 135.

³⁵ Oskar Loerke, "Die Puppe," *Prosa des Expressionismus*, ed. Fritz Martini (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1970), 278.

³⁶ Alfred Lemm, "Weltflucht," *Prosa des Expressionismus*, 253.

³⁷ Paul Boldt, "Der Primäreffekt," *Die Aktion* 27 (1913): 650.

³⁸ See especially Meidner's text *Im Nacken das Sternemeer* (Leipzig: Wolff, 1918).

³⁹ Cole Swensen, "The Body in the City," *History of European Ideas* 1–3 (1993): 31.

⁴⁰ See Wolfgang Rothe, "Expressionismus in der Literatur," *Deutsche Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Prestel, 1986), 91–97.

⁴¹ Swensen, *The Body in the City*, 31.

⁴² Oskar Kanehl, "Nachtcafé," *Die Aktion* 1.11.1913, Sp. 1021–22.

⁴³ Alfred Lemm, "Die Hure Salomea," *Zwischen Trauer und Ekstase*, ed. Thomas Rietzschel (Zürich: Arche, 1988), 99–120.

⁴⁴ Lemm, 106.

⁴⁵ Lemm, 109.

⁴⁶ Lemm, 109.

⁴⁷ Lemm, 120.

⁴⁸ Otto Zareck, "Lied einer Dirne," *Neue Blätter für Kunst und Dichtung* 1919/20 (Dresden: Kraus Reprint, 1970), 118–19.

⁴⁹ See Walter Methlagl, "Sonja und Afra," *Austriaca* 25 (1987): 68–87; and Sieglinde Klettenhammer, "Figurationen des Weiblichen in der Lyrik Georg Trakls," *Zyklische Kompositionsformen in Georg Trakls Dichtung* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1996), 189–215.

⁵⁰ Klettenhammer, "Figurationen des Weiblichen," 196.

⁵¹ Ernst Stadler, "Die Dirne," *Die Aktion* 27 (1913): 662–63.

⁵² Ernst Stadler, "Die Dirne," 663.

⁵³ Julius Hart, "Freie Liebe," *Freie Bühne* 2 (1891), 398.

⁵⁴ See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974).

⁵⁵ Ludwig Klages, *Vom kosmogonischen Eros* (Munich: Müller, 1922), 158.

⁵⁶ Curt Corrinth, *Potsdamer Platz oder Die Nächte des neuen Messias* (Munich: Müller, 1919).

⁵⁷ Corrinth, *Potsdamer Platz*, 50.

⁵⁸ Corrinth, *Potsdamer Platz*, 57.

⁵⁹ Corrinth, *Potsdamer Platz*, 88.

⁶⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1984), 10.

⁶¹ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1986), 8.

⁶² Curt Corrinth, *Bordell* (Berlin: Jatho, 1919), 229.

Blonde Satan: Weimar Constructions of the Criminal *Femme Fatale*

Barbara Hales

THE PREMIÈRE OF G. W. PABST'S FILM *Pandora's Box* in 1929 unleashed a flurry in the Weimar press. The film's star Louise Brooks was the embodiment of dramatist Frank Wedekind's Lulu, an instinct-driven woman, possessed by insatiable sexual desire; a flame that consumed everything and a whore by nature.¹ Critics saw a sexual instinct in Lulu they considered demonic and typically female. The popular reception of Lulu's monstrous sexuality reveals a widespread trend in Weimar Germany to stamp the sexual woman as criminal. Present in early twentieth-century medical and social treatises, the idea of the sexual, criminal woman was manifest in Weimar psychological and sociological writings as well as in police reports of the time. In this paper, I explore the connection between female sexuality and criminality, as understood in the cultural currency of Weimar Germany. Contemporary scientific studies, police reports, and the mainstream journalism of the period portray a close relationship between the independent woman and manifestations of a perceived unnatural female sexuality resulting in criminal, psychotic behavior. Weimar street films such as *The Street* and *Asphalt* demonstrate a penchant for the female sexual criminal. Implicit in these filmic images are the criminal woman's link to the city and her distance from the traditional bourgeois family.

In order to trace the notion of woman as sexual criminal, it is important to understand the early twentieth-century movement that branded woman as a dangerous instinctual being. The period 1890–1910 was a time of social, political, and economic upheaval in Europe, as women rallied for equal rights. This great debate sparked an interest in the true *nature* of woman. The scientific community felt compelled to explore perceived biological, psychological, and physiological traits that set women apart from men. German neurologist Paul J. Möbius, for example, argued that women were “feeble-minded” and unable to measure up intellectually to men.²