Chapter 3

"New Objectivity": Ambivalent Accommodations with Modernity

> What would a surgeon be worth if his hand trembled out of sympathy? An emotional doctor is a bad doctor. Thank God that for the most part you are only so nauseously sentimental while drinking beer, Breslauer. Just like your colleague, this surgeon—what is his name? . . . . A competent man. Cold and sober as a modern refrigerator.
>
> —Irmgard Keun, *Nach Mitternacht* (83, 1937)[1]

MODERNITY IN WEIMAR

> The whole district is like this: street leading into street of houses like shabby monumental safes crammed with the tarnished valuables and second-hand furniture of a bankrupt middle class.
>
> I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking.
>
> —Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin,* 1

These lines from the beginning of a piece of autobiographically based fiction about life in Berlin at the end of Germany's Weimar Republic were written by an Englishman. Although Christopher Isherwood's observations were of course those of a foreigner who stood apart from what was going on, the lines above capture some significant aspects not only of Weimar culture but also of one of the predominant attitudes with regard to that culture among German intellectuals of the time.

Rather than illustrate the celebrated image of Berlin as the ultimate modern metropolis, as it was indeed seen at the time (and it is this image of

Berlin with which Isherwood's works about Berlin tend to be associated), these lines define Berlin as a visual monument to a bygone middle-class respectability. This "surface image" contradicted its "modern" image, based so much on the celebrated nightlife conducted mostly inside cabarets, cafes, and clubs. Modernization—in the form first of gaslights in the mid-nineteenth century and later of electrification—is of course what allows night life to flourish in the first place.[2] Capturing nocturnal reality with a camera has always been a technical problem. What was famously recorded on film in the 1920s were of course the displays of electric lights that transformed the workaday facade of the metropolis, but the traces of such displays tend to vanish in daylight. Of course, the very modern flow of traffic is visible in day—but this was set against the static background of the city's facade.[3]

The once pompous, now shabby facade of Berlin captured in Isherwood's description had been created during the German Empire, and the economic basis behind the image was squandered in financing the Empire's war and in the peace that followed the Empire's demise. Also implied in Isherwood's description is the ongoing German attachment to that lost status and identity, destabilized in the chaos of war, inflation, industrial rationalization, and then world depression.

The "photographic" attention to the actual surface reality of Berlin, the devotion to recording, and the disavowal of thinking evident in Isherwood's famous line beginning, "I am a camera" were attitudes quite typical of the Weimar intelligentsia. Typical as well was the implicit sense of alienation not unsurprising in a foreign observer like Isherwood yet shared in many ways by German intellectuals, no matter how hard they tried to overcome it—which went as far as this very disavowal of intellectual and ideological activity in their embrace of a passive, technological, "objective" documentation of social reality. This pose of detached observation was favored by many German intellectuals, at first enthusiastically, in harmony with the fashionable "New Objectivity" that became popular in the Weimar Republic's brief stabilized period (1924–1929), and then more helplessly in the face of the chaos of late Weimar, as the Republic neared its end (1933).

The culture of Germany's Weimar Republic—popular and intellectual—is of special interest to those interested in the study of modernity and modernization, both in general terms and in the specifically German context. With regard to economic modernization and the development of a capitalist consumer culture, the 1920s in Germany represent a crucial period. The Weimar period was characterized both by rapid industrial rationalization and by the development and the celebration of new forms

of mass culture. Intellectuals across the political spectrum, precisely at the moment when their middle-class income and status was no longer secure, began to embrace a modern mass culture about which they had long been at best ambivalent. The German Left, which had long remained loyal to high bourgeois culture and suspicious of modern mass culture, began during Weimar to revise its opinion of the new medium of film, becoming aware of "a democratic potential inherent in the structure of cinematic representation" (Hansen, "Early Silent Cinema," 172). Members of the leftist avant-garde began to praise mass culture as a weapon against bourgeois culture, fascinated as they were with "Americanism" (and, even for a while, "Fordism"). But on the anti-democratic Right as well, some influential factions also gave up their ambivalence about modernization (though never about democracy), as what Jeffrey Herf calls "reactionary modernism" was being fashioned.

Many of the developments in Weimar Germany that had significant influence on subsequent twentieth-century history were typical of the stabilized period and its characteristic New Objectivity. The latter is arguably the cultural disposition most unique to Weimar—as opposed to Expressionism or Dada, which had older origins. As mentioned above, Berlin gained recognition as *the* modern European metropolis during this period, modern consumer culture took hold in Germany on a new scale, and the new class of white-collar office workers became influential. The cinema became important in a new way during this era, as the German and American film industries became ever more entwined in Dawes Plan-type financing (see Saunders). In a sense, this brief era anticipated the consumer culture that would become dominant in Western Europe and North America after World War II, which in turn led ultimately to a "postindustrial" or "third stage" of capitalism.

It is clear that studies of modernity and modernization can benefit from examination of the development of consumerism and mass culture in the Weimar Republic. For beneath the new and happily distracted consumerist culture of the Weimar Republic, of course, all sorts of anxieties were lurking, especially about its de-stabilization of traditional identities—above all class, gender, and ethnic/national identities, but also sexual identities. These anxieties would have drastic consequences after the economic bubble burst at the end of 1929. I would assert that the stabilization of such anxieties remains a problem within industrial and postindustrial modernity up to the present, and that anxiety about the destabilization of traditional gender identities plays an especially crucial role.

In Weimar Germany explicitly thematized anxiety about gender roles

was characteristic of much cultural discourse, in both "high" and popular culture. The photographic gaze applied to Weimar reality was called "passive" by Isherwood, but other preferred descriptions were "sober," "cool," or "coldly discerning," even "surgical."[4] Regardless of the particular description, this gaze was considered to be a male one, but it is perhaps better understood as a defensive male strategy for retaining mastery and avoiding "feminization," the fate of the objects of that gaze—and, as Eve Rosenhaft has shown, there is textual evidence of male anxiety about becoming the object of the gaze of emancipated New Women ("Lesewut," 138–40). Anxieties about status take explicitly gendered and sexualized forms in a wide number of cultural texts produced in Germany during the 1920s—in films and literary works, the primary focus of this study, but also in paintings, photojournalism, and other media of both "high" and "low" cultures.

The emphasis on the destabilization of gender roles must be seen in turn in the context of the construction of gender in bourgeois ideology since the eighteenth century. From the beginning, the exclusion of women from the public sphere played a formative (if unacknowledged) role in that ideology, since that sphere was defined in relation to a "private" realm of subjectivity, intimacy, and domesticity identified with women. This meant in real terms the confinement of (middle-class) women within this private realm, upon which the public sphere depended, and the denial of any public agency to women, fully in accordance with the new conceptions of "natural" gender roles that also were being consolidated with the rise of the bourgeoisie.[5] Weimar culture represents a historical moment of heightened anxiety about the erosion of those "natural" roles: women were appearing in public and assuming new public roles on an unprecedented scale. And whereas the subject of the bourgeois public sphere was supposedly universal but implicitly male, in Weimar culture and especially in New Objectivity one finds an overt thematization of anxiety about gender directed (in its dominant version) at an explicitly male subject—one no longer sure of the autonomy bourgeois subjecthood was supposed to guarantee. Of course, this pronounced emphasis on gender was bound to interest women as well.

WHAT WAS "NEW OBJECTIVITY"?

"Neue Sachlichkeit," usually translated as "New Objectivity," is most often identified with the stabilized period of the Weimar Republic. This period began in 1924 with the Dawes Plan, which arranged loans from American bankers that refinanced the crippling debts Germany owed to the victors of

World War I (as required by the punitive Versailles peace treaty). The Dawes Plan facilitated Chancellor Stresemann's elimination of the hyperinflation that had plagued Germany in the early 1920s, reaching a crisis point by late 1923. The new economic stability that began with the Dawes Plan would end with the onset of the world depression in 1929, when American bankers were forced by the Wall Street crash to call in foreign loans; Germany was thus hit very soon after the crash, and very severely.

But in 1924, the achievement of stability was quite a relief for the Weimar Republic after five chaotic years characterized by the national humiliation of the Versailles treaty, revolution from the communist Left, counter-revolution from the anti-democratic Right, and hyperinflation. In applying the term "New Objectivity" to a widespread sensibility that became dominant in the stabilized period, I am using it in its broadest sense, to characterize a cultural sensibility that connects a wide variety of social, political, and artistic attitudes and endeavors in Weimar culture. It was a period in which the "isms"—Expressionism, romantic anti-capitalism, revolutionary socialism, indeed any utopianism—seemed exhausted, and accommodation with capitalist modernization seemed the only pragmatic option.

There is considerable agreement that "New Objectivity" cannot be used to define a particular artistic school or movement; neither, for that matter, can it be applied to a particular political tendency.[6] In his famous study in 1970, Helmut Lethen wrote that there was much within New Objectivity to allow appropriation by conservative technocrats in West Germany in the 1950s (*Neue Sachlichkeit*, 1).[7] Certainly this is the case if it is defined strictly in relation to industrial rationalization and the "Fordism" that appealed to industrial managers and the engineers Herf stresses in his study (2–3, 152–88). But New Objectivity was hardly just a conservative or even centrist phenomenon. Indeed, it is difficult to restrict it to either end of the traditional political spectrum, and this confounding of ordinary left-right distinctions makes it almost "postmodern."[8] Many endeavors of Weimar's leftist avant-garde can be related to New Objectivity: Erwin Piscator's experimentation with technical innovations in the theater as well as the functionalist style of the Bauhaus after the early 1920s can certainly be considered "New Objectivist". The same can be said about Brecht, although he, like many others—including the much more centrist and "apolitical" Joseph Roth—became increasingly critical of it by the end of the 1920s. But of course, ambivalence about New Objectivity was actually quite common among those whose work can most clearly be considered New Objectivist.[9]

We can limit its definition in sociological terms: the adherents of New Objectivity were predominantly members of the intelligentsia (especially if this term is defined broadly enough to include professionals like engineers and the managerial class). In more recent studies, Lethen (1994) and Martin Lindner (1994) treat it as a stance of the historical avant-garde, but for them this group spanned a political spectrum stretching from Bertolt Brecht and Johannes R. Becher on the Left to Arnolt Bronnen and Ernst Jünger on the Right. While we tend to think of the Right as strictly antimodern in Weimar Germany, one can also notice parallels there with New Objectivity; indeed, the reconciliation of right-wing authoritarianism with technological modernization Herf calls "reactionary modernism" is typically New Objectivist. This odd synthesis obviously anticipates the "romanticism of steel" ("stählerne Romantik") Goebbels would proclaim as the appropriate sensibility for the twentieth century (Herf, 3).[10] But it also seems to have resulted from a process of reconciliation with modernity strangely comparable to that undergone by many intellectuals and artists of the liberal left during the 1920s. Alfred Döblin, for instance, went from condemning modern civilization in a typically Expressionist fashion to an embrace of the modern metropolis as a natural, "organic" form of human society (Dollenmayer, 54–62).[11]

The origin of the term "New Objectivity" is usually traced back to its application to painting. Gustav Hartlaub at the Mannheim Museum used the term in 1923 to define the return to objective realism in German painting in the aftermath of Expressionism and Dada (Schmied, "Neue Sachlichkeit and German Realism," 9). But there is evidence that Lion Feuchtwanger was using the term "sachlich" to apply to new directions in literature as early as 1922 (Becker, 14–15). Even when just limited to painting, the term encompassed at least two trends, a socially critical, naturalistic "verism," and a more conservative "magical realism." Kracauer used the term in *From Caligari to Hitler* to refer to a sensibility of the stabilized period beginning in 1924, which Hartlaub cannot have originally intended, given the fact that he saw precedents for this trend in painting going back a decade. Nonetheless, Hartlaub's coinage only caught on in the mid-1920s, and a number of famous painters and other visual artists continued to work in a "New Objectivist" vein throughout the 1920s: Otto Dix, Christian Schad, Max Beckmann, George Grosz, Hanna Höch; indeed, this was certainly the main epoch for this type of visual art, even if older precedents can be identified.[12]

But the term was not only limited to painting; by the late 1920s it could be applied to all sorts of cultural developments—trends in architecture, lit-

erature, photography, and film, as well as political attitudes, even "emancipated" sexuality (which could mean sexual behavior that was "modern," unconventional, sober, cynical, or simply de-sentimentalized). And although the "stabilized period" ends with the stock market crash in 1929, the New Objective sensibility can be said to continue at least until 1933. This is certainly the case in literature; as Becker points out, many of the most famous New Objective novels were written after 1929 (16–17). In late Weimar the sensibility is perhaps most famously exemplified in (and by) Erich Kästner's 1931 novel *Fabian,* in which a supposedly "free-floating" ("freischwebender") intellectual documents the chaos of the end of the republic as well as his own paralysis and impotence in the face of it.[13]

Kracauer ascribes the trend to social resignation and cynicism, and cynicism is of course the term Peter Sloterdijk uses to define the Weimar Republic, which provides the central historical model for his critique of Western intellectual history. But the era was much more ambiguous than such predominantly negative terms can imply. John Willett (*Art and Politics*), for instance, defines the period much more positively, in part by translating *Neue Sachlichkeit* as the "New Sobriety," and stressing the willingness of avant-garde artists to give up their anti-modern disdain for modern civilization, and instead to apply their skills to a modern, democratic design for the life of the masses. This commitment to produce a functional, political art can be seen as reflecting hopes that a truly democratic public sphere was emerging and that its formation could be assisted and influenced by artists and intellectuals.

This move in a pragmatic, democratic direction is typified by the Bauhaus's shift from a mystical, organic Expressionism to a rectilinear functionalism, certainly in the ideals behind this shift if not necessarily always in its results. Comparable too would be the activities of erstwhile Dadaist John Heartfield, who put photomontage to practical use in his work for the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung,* or "Workers' Illustrated Newspaper," a Communist publication directed at the working class. This application of the principles of photomontage to making critical statements about modern life can also be noted in a quite different manner in the work of Hanna Höch[14]—she was certainly not a doctrinaire Marxist like Heartfield—as well as in more clearly mass cultural venues, that is, in advertising and the illustrated press, the photojournalistic context Petro explores.

Many writers were influenced by journalists and the genre of *Reportage*—journalistic reporting as exemplified in the work of Egon Erwin Kisch, who eventually joined the KPD, the German Communist Party—especially its social engagement with contemporary events and its accessible style. Other

writers (like Döblin) moved toward a style that attempted to learn from mass culture by approximating filmic montage—another example of appropriating mass culture in the struggle against conventional bourgeois art, a favored avant-garde practice in the 1920s.

This avant-garde strategy—the attempt to use mass cultural forms as weapons against high culture, the kind of culture crucial to the classical bourgeois public sphere—bears a resemblance to the concept of a "counter-public sphere" as developed by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge in their 1972 book *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung* (*The Public Sphere and Experience*). Negt and Kluge saw the potential for an oppositional public sphere, as Miriam Hansen has written, "in the contradictory make-up of the late-capitalist public spheres of production" ("Early Silent Cinema," 156), that is, within the very processes of capitalist modernization that Habermas blamed for the decline of the classic bourgeois sphere. Within those processes there was the possibility of "a medium for the organization in relation to—rather than, as in the classical model, separation from—the material sphere of everyday life, the social conditions of production" ("Early Silent Cinema," 156). Of course, Negt and Kluge had no illusions about capitalist mass culture per se; they were arguing for a counter-public sphere that "was a fundamentally new structure opposed to both the classical-representative and the market-oriented types of public sphere" ("Early Silent Cinema," 156). They were not guilty of any naive optimism about mass culture.[15] Such optimism had still been possible in the 1920s, but it became much more difficult to maintain after the uses to which mass culture would be put in the 1930s by fascists and Stalinists—and capitalists in Hollywood too, one might add.

Related to this optimistic attitude toward mass culture in Weimar was an uncritical fascination with (an idea of) America, but the influence of the Soviet avant-garde, from Constructivism to Eisenstein and Vertov, was equally important. This is particularly noticeable in the German cinema. Chaplin was enormously popular with audiences and with critics,[16] and in German filmmaking there was also an obvious move in the direction of American melodramatic realism. At the same time, however, *Potemkin*'s overwhelming popular success led to many attempts to imitate Soviet cinema, especially the shock effects created by Soviet-style montage. This attraction to the cinema and especially to technical innovation in the cinema may have been naive, or doomed, like the general technological optimism of the left avant-garde, but Willett is right to stress a positive moment, even if he underplays the disillusionment and cynicism that was also undeniably related to the overall mood of the period.

As Lindner asserts, the Americanism and the modern mass culture so celebrated in New Objectivity meant above all three things: "Sport, Kino und Jazz"—that is, sports, the movies, and jazz (171). The widespread popularity of jazz included the type of entertainment personified by the Tiller Girls, an English troupe of dancers whose chorus line routines could be said to fuse the display of female legs with the mechanized ethos of the assembly line.[17] As part of the "Americanist" fascination for sports, boxing especially was valorized. Brecht liked it so much he cited it as a model for entertainment superior to the bourgeois theater (Bathrick, 132).[18] It was also a model that was arguably more public and democratic and less elitist and pseudo-religious. But sports too became a cult, one that included the glorification of all outdoor activity, including mountain climbing.[19] The cinema participated in this cult of sports, the outdoors, and youth, as can be noted in films from across the political spectrum, from Brecht and Slatan Dudow's *Kuhle Wampe* of 1932 to Hans Steinhoff's pro-Nazi *Hitler Youth Quex* of 1933. All of these elements can be considered positively as part of the rejection of "high" bourgeois art, with its inwardness, elitism, and traditionalism—and more negatively as symptoms of the new consumer culture with its commodification of leisure time and youthful narcissism.

The cult of youth complemented the fascination with the new and the modern that was a function of another main element of New Objectivity: the glamorization and fetishization of technology. Related to this phenomenon is the scientism, the rationalistic "objectivity" so typical of the era. Even Brecht, who by 1929 was making fun of the sensibility with his poem titled "700 Intellectuals Praying to an Oil Tank,"[20] nonetheless remained very keen on seeing his Marxism as a "scientific" socialism, and he would not seriously relativize his infatuation with science until he heard about Hiroshima.[21]

One element that unites most of these amorphous elements is the gendering of New Objectivity: the gender of the subject who seemingly produced it, the subject it glorified, and to whom it was addressed, was obviously, explicitly, indeed defensively *masculine.* New Objectivity is typified by engineers, technicians, scientists, journalists, boxers, athletes, and the spectators for whom the Tiller Girls displayed their legs.[22] On a visual level one can get a feeling for the hard, scientific "masculinity" of the era defined as New Objectivist just by noting the shift in the designs of the Bauhaus from the rounded, "organic" Expressionism of Erich Mendelssohn's architectural work in the early 1920s to the rectilinear functionalism of Walter Gropius's designs in the mid- and later 1920s.[23]

The obviously gendered nature of New Objectivity is not addressed or

acknowledged by Kracauer, by Willett, or even by Sloterdijk, for all his attention to Weimar sexual cynicism (and the omnipresence of wounded war veterans, especially amputees, on the streets of Weimar Germany). Theweleit, who does draw attention to such dynamics in Weimar culture, does not concern himself with New Objectivity. Newer works by critics like Helmut Lethen and Martin Lindner do note the obviously gendered nature of discourses associated with New Objectivity, although it is not their main focus. Lethen, in his 1994 book *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte* (forthcoming in English translation as *Cool Conduct*), treats New Objectivity as a sensibility characteristic of the historical avant-garde from 1910 to 1930; it involved the clear rejection of the Expressionism's romantic ("feminized") cult of "authenticity," which had dominated the first decade of that period, in favor of a Baroque-inspired, coldly strategic, Machiavellian—and masculine—masquerade. In contrast to Sloterdijk, who attacks this masquerade—not really because it is male, but cynical—Lethen tends to defend it, or at least to demand that it be understood as a historical necessity, criticizing Sloterdijk for being ahistorical. While Lethen too has an acknowledged contemporary agenda behind his critique of Sloterdijk and others (140), his insistence on more attention to the original context of New Objectivity is to be welcomed. But his critique of Sloterdijk on these grounds, as persuasive as it is, is flawed by his apparent (and not very persuasive) connection of Sloterdijk with feminist and psychoanalytical positions on Weimar culture, and his defensiveness about the latter. It may indeed be too easy to psychoanalyze the "cold persona" of New Objectivity as merely the masquerade of "virile narcissism," especially if it is done with an ahistorical disregard for the specificity of its context (69–70). Yet Lethen himself both asserts—and provides a great deal of historical evidence—that it is a very "masculine" masquerade, all the while remaining defensive about a feminist analysis of the phenomenon.[24]

In the stress on more careful attention to historical context, he is allied with Martin Lindner. The latter, however, does not stress the break with Expressionism as Lethen does, but rather demonstrates how both Expressionism and New Objectivity were simply two phases in a longer historical development within the ideological disposition he calls "Lebensideologie," which I will translate as the "ideology of vitalism," which is related to, but broader than what is usually called "Lebensphilosophie" ("life-philosophy").[25] Strongly influenced by thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Georg Simmel, "Lebensideologie" according to Lindner was dominant in shaping the beliefs of the intellectual class from 1890 until 1955, a period he labels Germany's "classical modernity"

(2, 5).[26] Lindner demonstrates how crucial gendered polarities are to the polarities that constituted "Lebensideologie" (84–87), but beyond this analysis of gender's place in the ideological system created almost exclusively by male intellectuals whose ideas he surveys, Lindner does not thematize gender.[27]

It is not surprising that recent work by feminist scholars such as Adelheid von Saldern, Eve Rosenhaft, Anke Gleber, Kerstin Barndt, Katharina von Ankum, and a number of others whose essays are collected in the volume *Women in the Metropolis* (edited by von Ankum), have foregrounded the crucial role of gender in Weimar culture in a more systematic and persuasive manner than have the scholars mentioned above. In my opinion, this attention to gender helps to make sense of many of the apparently disparate ideologies, artists, and intellectuals connected to New Objectivity in Weimar. The gender dynamics at work teach us something that is more fundamental than what is attained through Lindner's exhaustive analysis and reconstruction of the paradigms of intellectual history. One concept of Lindner's that is quite useful is the idea of crisis, which he sees as crucial to New Objectivity in particular and to the larger period of "classical modernity" as a whole. For it is the modern crisis of the bourgeois subject that underlies all of the developments Lindner analyzes. Industrial modernity presented a serious threat to the proclaimed autonomy of the subject, which was always an implicitly male one. By the 1920s, the perception that this endangered subject was a male one was quite explicit, especially for the male intellectuals whose own social and economic status was specifically threatened. And that threat was quite often both perceived and depicted in gendered terms.

NEW OBJECTIVITY AND "MALE CRISIS"

In 1929, Kurt Pinthus defined New Objectivity in post-Expressionist literature specifically as "masculine" literature, in an essay with exactly that title: "Männliche Literatur." Of course nothing is more typical of modernist movements in the arts than the tendency to disparage slightly older movements as "feminine" in the attempt to stylize themselves as bold, "masculine," and revolutionary; this can be noted not just in New Objectivity's disparagement of what now seemed a romantic, sentimental Expressionism, but also in the Expressionists' vitalist/activist perspective on what they saw as an effeminate, mystical, escapist Neo-Romanticism, and in the latter's distancing of itself from the dandyist decadence of aestheticism.[28]

But Pinthus's argument is a bit less polemical; he defines the previous era

of literature, from 1910 to 1925, not as "feminine" literature but as the immature literature of the "Jüngling," the male adolescent. "Masculine" literature thus means "mature" literature; oedipal crises have been resolved, and naive youthful rebellion is over.[29] The process of maturation also seems to involve coming to terms with wartime experiences (Pinthus, 328–33). Indeed, war—or anti-war—novels became one of the main genres of literary New Objectivity, Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen nichts neues* (*All Quiet on the Western Front,* 1929) being the most well known example.

John Willett defines the experience of World War I as central to the generation of artists whose activities he traces in his book on the "New Sobriety" (*Art and Politics*, 20). He means primarily the experience of male artists, of course: it was the male rite of passage in World War I—the horrors of the trenches and gas warfare—that cured this generation both of nationalism and romantic utopianism, Willett asserts.[30] There can be no doubt that the trauma resulting from the first mechanized war of mass destruction had a tremendous influence on postwar society (especially on war veterans).[31] But with this analysis Willett reproduces yet again the male bias that is so striking both in so much of the art from the Weimar Republic and in the discourse about Weimar art and culture that prevailed for so long (e.g., Kracauer, Gay).

The war was indeed an experience that tended to be very different depending on gender—in a way that exaggerated male distrust and resentment of women. The actual experiences of most women and everyone else on the home front during World War I were not particularly easy, however; nor did the home front provide a "stab in the back" to the German war effort, in spite of how convenient this legend became to the military and the Right after the war.[32] But, as we have noted, a certain resentment of the home front was probably inevitable. There was thus the potential for some powerful misogyny, especially given other insecurities about modernization and the changing status of women during the war: their presence in greater numbers and in new sectors of the labor market—which must in turn have made the experience of the war positive for some women, in spite of the shortages and hunger on the home front.[33] After the war, women received new rights in the Weimar constitution; the new democracy also placed in question the old system of social status. Inflation then destroyed middle-class savings; consumerism and mass culture overturned traditional values. Many of the resulting insecurities crystallized around fascination with and contempt for the New Woman, who was so associated with both consumerism and sexual emancipation. A new order of modern social, gender, and sexual identities threatened more traditional concepts of identity. This perceived threat caused insecurity and disorien-

tation on the part of many, a condition that was likely further aggravated by homophobia, inspired by the open campaign for homosexual rights and fairly open urban homosexual subcultures.

New Objectivity can be interpreted as a particular response to such underlying anxieties as they manifested themselves during the stabilized period, above all for middle-class males, and especially for intellectuals. Indeed, the situation of intellectuals was so fragile after the chaos of inflation—for many whose savings, privileges, and secure positions were gone—that accommodation with mass culture, or rather the budding "culture industry," can be seen in terms of economic necessity (Kaes, *Kino-Debatte,* 12–17, 32–35). Resignation and cynicism ought only to be expected, but there was also genuine commitment on the part of some to playing a "public" role within the new society. (Probably a combination of both cynicism and commitment was also common). But the idea of the modern public still seemed to exclude women, for all their increased (and controversial) public presence. Women—especially "new" ones—were seen primarily as an obstacle to public rationality. In New Objectivity there is an obvious gesture of disavowal of the underlying anxieties about gender and modernity, an attempt to re-achieve "masculine" mastery through objectivity, science, technology. The hope was to master chaos, anxiety, and the specific social and economic problems plaguing intellectuals and artists—all of which tended to get subsumed under the supposed threat of women and the fear of male impotence or "feminization." Mastery would be regained by documenting the anxieties of modernity "objectively" and "soberly" with the help of modern technology and/or "scientific" methods.

Artistic mastery was also at stake—a certain modernist hubris, as it were. Willett, for example, summarizes the advice of a 1928 primer on photography by the Berlin Constructivist Werner Graeff with the assertion that "there is no reason on earth for the camera to obey the same laws of perspective and balance as the human eye. It can twist, foreshorten, superimpose, blur and cut; *all that matters is that the photographer should remain in control*" (my emphasis; Willett, *Art and Politics,* 140–41). This is an attitude toward the camera Willett finds "astonishingly up to date"; it is interesting in this context precisely for its emphasis on control and mastery—qualities that the increasingly marginalized modern artist seems here to be able to reclaim. Graeff gives advice that is by no means aimed at a merely "realistic" or "documentary" use of the camera—that is, the aesthetic associated with the most common (and more narrow) understanding of New Objectivity. But its relation to the fetishization of technology and the underlying quest to regain mastery is also clear.

NEW OBJECTIVITY AND THE CINEMA

The "excess" occasioned by joy in the mastery of new technology is very typical of German cinema in these years. What meaning does New Objectivity have for the German cinema? The German cinema that became internationally famous after World War I was the "Expressionist" or "fantastic" cinema epitomized in films like Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), the first film adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. This type of cinema represented a small segment of German film production in the early Weimar years (Kaes, "Film in der Weimarer Republik," 46); even among films belonging to the "Autorenkino," or the "cinema of authors/auteurs," the small but prestigious art film sector of film production in this period,[34] by no means can all films be called Expressionist. Thomas Elsaesser has asserted that the so-called Expressionist cinema actually functioned like a genre ("Secret Affinities," 35), an apt term if only for the reminder that Expressionist (and other types of art films) were produced by the commercial film industry in Germany.[35] It should also be noted that Expressionism came to the cinema when it was just about exhausted already in the theater, and it had long been moribund in painting—although of course many painters who became famous during the heyday of Expressionism before World War I continued to paint, but rarely in a style still considered "Expressionist." Otto Dix is a good example of someone whose style by the mid-20s is categorized as New Objectivist.

In *Caligari,* "fantastic" effects are achieved primarily by mise-en-scene, the painted false perspective of the theatrical, "Expressionist" sets (although the style has also been called "cubist"—cf. Budd). A few years later, in *Nosferatu,* much of the film is shot outdoors, on location, and the fantastic effects are more properly cinematic—negative footage, fast-motion and other special effects—all of which are associated with the monster. As the German cinema became more technologically advanced, there was a move toward more realistic stories in more contemporary settings; this is already true of Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (*Der letzte Mann,* 1924), which, again, was famous for its use of mobile and subjective camera. The development accelerated in the stabilized period by the apparent attempt to approximate American filmmaking.

Even in the less fantastic, more realistic films of the middle and later Weimar years, a certain technical "excess" remains. This is true even of films by its most "realistic" directors, such as G.W. Pabst, whose best work is traditionally lauded for its "social realism" and who indeed is the only film

director Kracauer discusses in the chapter in which he defines the New Objectivity (*Caligari,* 165–80). This excess is probably what most clearly distinguishes Weimar realism from Hollywood realism—or for that matter from the entertainment cinema of the Third Reich. In that excess one can perhaps note some resistance to the homogenizing tendencies toward the "classical" model of realist cinema that would become consolidated in the 1930s in Hollywood (a model the German cinema of the Third Reich would for the most part emulate).

New Objectivity for the German cinema, then, meant this move toward realism, contemporary settings, combined with a technical virtuosity in camera work, optical printing, and editing that was not completely subordinated to the story. The influence of American-style melodrama is evident, but so are Soviet montage and a somewhat brutal social realism that would seem to have its origins in German theatrical Naturalism.[36] The move in literature toward Reportage and the experimentation on the stage with "documentary" theater found cinematic parallels in somewhat conservative cultural documentaries, the so-called "Kulturfilm,"[37] and in more progressive "city films" like the avant-gardist Walter Ruttman's Berlin-montage *Berlin, die Symphonie einer Großstadt* (*Berlin, Symphony of a City,* 1927) or *Menschen am Sonntag* (*People on Sunday,* 1929), a collaboration by Robert Siodmak, Billy Wilder, Fred Zinneman, and others.

Even Fritz Lang's *Metropolis,* made in 1926, released in 1927, and often considered the last gasp of Expressionism, is perhaps more properly described as "futurist." If anything, it is the last gasp of the big-budget art film of the mid-1920s, since it bankrupted Ufa and drove its producer, Erich Pommer, to Hollywood for a few years. Andreas Huyssen has interpreted it not as an Expressionist denunciation of technology but rather a New Objectivist reconciliation with technology, for in it the threat of technology is displaced onto a female robot/vamp who eventually is burned at the stake: technology thus is purged of its threat (Huyssen, 81). The technical excess in cinematic New Objectivity is not merely a formal or stylistic matter; it is intricately related to the gender anxieties foregrounded in this book. This is evident with regard to the special effects used for the creation of the robot in *Metropolis,* as well as to the most frantic moment of montage at the heart of the urban "documentary" film *Berlin, Symphony of a City*, in which one finds the staged suicide of a despairing woman (cf. Petro, *Joyless Streets*, 43). As Lethen asserts, film and photography were exemplary of New Objectivity's concern with surface reality, its disavowal of "inwardness," and its obsession with surveillance (*Verhaltenslehren*, 50–51). Lethen admits that New Objectivity was an over-

whelmingly masculinist sensibility. Of course, the obsession with a controlling gaze was as much (if not more) an anxiety about being exposed to such a gaze as it was about the desire to wield that gaze—hence the concern with masks.

WOMEN AND NEW OBJECTIVITY

> Women caused particular concern in this process of "disenchantment"—the introduction of the "new objectivity" (*Neue Sachlichkeit*)—into daily life. Women, after all, had traditionally been understood as the embodiment of the irrational. They were thought to resist discipline, organization, and instrumental rationality and to remain need-oriented in the service of human needs. The new rationalized woman seemed particularly threatening at the same time she was absolutely necessary if women could continue to fulfill their womanly and maternal duties in the new age. But if New Women learned to practice the speed and utilitarian values of rationalization in their own homes, who would provide the home to succor and replenish workers from the rigors of rationalized industry?
>
> —Atina Grossmann, "*Girlkultur,*" 75–76

Women—especially "emancipated" women—were, of all the threatening "Others" in Weimar society, the one group that many male intellectuals across the political spectrum found especially disturbing—and as Grossmann points out, concerns about "controlling" them motivated sex reformers, social scientists, and social workers (and many of this last category were themselves women). Even though the New Woman and emancipated sexuality were very much associated with the era, indeed in some ways were seen to represent New Objectivity and Americanism more than any other phenomena, in general they remained "problems" to be solved by rational engineering, or a symptom to be analyzed under the inspection of a "sober" male gaze.[38]

Kracauer, for instance, treats them in exactly this way in his writings in the 1920s and 1930s—that is, as symptoms. The Tiller Girls are discussed as symptomatic of modern mass culture—indeed, as emblematic of the logic of capitalism—in his article "Das Ornament der Masse" ("The Mass Ornament," 1927), and another troupe of dancers is discussed as symptomatic of the irrelevancy of Americanism after the Wall Street crash in his "Girls und Krise" ("Girls and Crisis," 1931). Women tend to become identified with New Objectivity (and Americanism) especially once these sensibilities begin to fall into discredit; in disparaging New Objectivity, critics disparage

it too as being feminized and decadent or degenerate, no longer masculine and scientific.

Technology and science—as glorified in the justification for industrial rationalization, as thematized in literature and the cinema, and as manifested in new photographic and cinematic techniques—were also invoked in the examination and control precisely of the destabilization women were seen to represent. Emancipated women were considered decadent excesses of modernity that if not controlled would threaten the stable, rational, scientific modernity with which the male subject was now identified (as well as endangering the old-fashioned intimate sphere necessary for its reproduction). Stabilizing modernity gets equated with stabilizing threats to male subjectivity, and male anxieties become foregrounded in very explicit ways as part of this project of "curing" them. It is also interesting how many German "art films" of this era openly thematize male anxieties about women—projecting onto images of women supposedly "private" anxieties that represent social anxieties as much as (if not more than) purely psychological or sexual anxieties.

The excess in the films of the era seems ultimately to represent an admission of instability and a lack of resolution for which there would be little if any room in Nazi culture. Indeed, perhaps in the end all this excess occasioned by attempts to represent anxieties about gender in modernity did have a positive function—one that might correspond to something like a genuine public debate on gender. It was certainly no debate among "equals," given the obvious masculine bias of German culture at this time—from the literary world to the film industry that was producing such films—but the very thematization of social anxieties about gender was bound to interest those less invested in such bias—above all women. The open acknowledgement of such anxieties (even if only for exploitative purposes) is indeed typical of Weimar cinema, and it becomes much less customary in the Third Reich (in which it was less permissible to admit weakness).

In any case, it is the explicit depiction of male anxieties in cinematic and other cultural texts of the Weimar era that enacts a destabilization not adequately contained, excessive to narrative closure. This is one of the reasons why Patrice Petro finds Weimar cinema to be interesting from the perspective of female spectators—the *female* subject absent in so much discussion of Weimar culture. The marking of males in crisis as "impotent" or "feminized" in Weimar cinema, which from the dominant heterosexual male perspective represented anxieties about loss of power, would necessarily be received somewhat differently by women, whose relation both to power

and to social constructions of what "femininity" entails was obviously different (Petro, e.g., 25). The excess associated with the destabilization of traditional gender and sexual identities in Weimar culture also "exceeds" male paranoia and any misogynistic intentions. To some extent, then, the cinema served a public function in addressing spectators of both genders and of various classes concerned about their roles and status within Weimar society. There is thus something potentially emancipatory about the depiction of weak males, but this is a very contradictory dynamic, given the relationship of such male anxieties about power to the misogynistic depiction of violence against women of the sort Maria Tatar investigates.[39]

A further complication of the meaning of such excess is the obvious potential for a homoerotic reception of "feminized" males and "masculinized" females in Weimar texts, in spite of the male and heterosexual paranoia that seem so often to motivate such depictions. The potential for a homoerotic reception cannot have been overlooked—and from what we know of Carl Froelich's efforts in producing the 1931 film *Mädchen in Uniform,* the benefits and dangers of this reception were openly calculated.[40] This is not surprising, given the public awareness of homosexuality in Weimar due to the overt political campaigns on behalf of homosexual rights and to the not very covert lesbian and gay subcultures in Berlin—indeed, some of their bars and cafes were listed in tourist guides to Berlin's risqué night life.

Beyond the obvious significance of female subjects in Weimar culture with regard to questions of address and reception, there were also women involved in its production. There were a number of women authors in the Weimar Republic: to name only a few, Else Lasker-Schüler, Ricarda Huch, Anna Seghers, Marieluise Fleißer, Irmgard Keun, Vicki Baum, and Thea von Harbou (most famous for the screenplays she wrote for Fritz Lang's films). There were also two women who directed famous films in the years just before 1933—Leontine Sagan, who directed *Mädchen in Uniform,* and Leni Riefenstahl, who directed *The Blue Light (Das blaue Licht,* 1932).[41]

At first glance, neither Riefenstahl nor Sagan would seem especially New Objectivist, but they can be related to its sensibilities without much difficulty. Sagan directs a film that contrasts authoritarian with democratic values, while at the same time thematizing sexual emancipation as clearly one of the latter, central to the film's emphasis overt emphasis on lesbian love. Riefenstahl's film is after all a mountain film, a genre closely related to the cult of youth, sports, and nature. While Riefenstahl's own contribution to the genre is a fairy-tale romanticism more readily amenable to right-wing tendencies than is the case with some other mountain films, it was in

fact the left-wing Bela Balasz whose assistance was so crucial to her work on the film.[42]

Even in its most narrowly defined sense, New Objectivity was not produced solely by men; indeed, Pinthus, in calling its literary manifestation "masculine," claimed for it works by Fleißer and Seghers. What did he find so "masculine" in their works? In Seghers it was an absence of sentimentality, and in Fleißer it was the de-mystification of romantic love (Pinthus, 331–32). In the 1980s Livia Wittmann noted that in the works of Fleißer and Keun all the typical formal characteristics of literary New Objectivity are to be found, and then questioned why novels by Fleißer and Keun were not canonized in postwar literary history with other classics of New Objectivity like those by Kästner or Hans Fallada. Seghers, Fleißer, and Keun were suppressed in the Third Reich. But Seghers was canonized within the Marxist tradition, whereas Fleißer and Keun were mostly ignored for most of the postwar period.[43]

Only in the late 1960s would Fleißer be rediscovered, and Keun had to wait about another ten years. Why? In part simply because they were women—a fact that has always hindered literary canonization—but also because their New Objectivist demystification of romantic love from the perspective of *female* characters was somehow more threatening than what one finds in the novels of the men, a reaction noted already in the response of contemporary critics (Wittmann, 56–63). As Lethen points out, there was a special provocation to masculinist New Objective attitudes toward gender in the creation of female characters whose identities were neither "authentic," harmonious, nor sentimental, but just as oriented to mimicry and simulation in dealing with the chaos of modernity as were many male characters (242–43).

The apparent threat posed by such writing was not unrelated to a definite trend that can be noted in the Weimar Republic after about 1930: together with the overall shift to the Right under the Brüning government as political polarization set in during the Depression, there was also evident a concerted effort to restore traditional conceptions of family and motherhood as against emancipated "New Women" and the hedonistic "Girlkultur" of Americanism. The economic collapse and the conservative shift in the government also meant the abandonment of the welfare-state experiments intended to make women's double burden easier (Grossmann, "*Girlkultur,*" 76). Emancipated and androgynous types of women were denounced all the way from the fashion magazines (cf. Petro, *Joyless Streets*, 121–24) to Kästner's *Fabian,* a novel that in terms of gender politics is definitely a nostalgic lament. In January of 1933, just days before Hitler would

take power, Alice Rühle-Gerstel wrote bitterly that the restorative trend was evident not just in the media campaign directed at women, but among many women themselves as well (359–60).[44]

In New Objectivity and in late Weimar culture we note a public fascination with the instability of traditional, fixed gender identities in modernization but also already an attempt to "control" them—and that attempt seems to be related to tendencies toward homogenization and control in popular culture in general, and in the entertainment film in particular. In contrast to New Objectivity, National Socialism provided a much more definitive "answer" to such consequences of modernization as destabilized identities, subversive or divisive elements in mass culture, and other problems of national resolve. As a "reactionary modernism," fascism was an emphatic disavowal not really of modernity but rather of heterogeneity (and of course democracy) in modernity. The new managerial class whose fate was tied to modernization opted to acquiesce in this disavowal for the sake of a strong, "masculine" and homogenous national identity—an acquiescence that certainly deserves to be called cynical.

For in the Third Reich, any anxieties or doubts about "natural" roles according to gender and "race" (a category inseparable from certain "biological" assumptions about gender) would be much more forcefully disavowed. This had its effect throughout the culture, including the cinema, where, in contrast to films of the Weimar period, female characters would tend to be trivialized to the point where they would no longer be allowed even to represent any serious threat.[45] The affirmation of a homogenous national identity included, especially in the cinema, a program for a unitary, "middle-brow," and predominantly escapist mass culture in which traditional identities were not to be questioned.

But was this the inevitable end of the consumerist popular culture of the 1920s, or was it a forced co-optation of that culture by the new regime in the Third Reich? While for many years studies of the new consumer culture that became dominant in the Weimar Republic have tended to view it exclusively as a symptom of the decay of an idealized, democratic public sphere, the parallels between the concerns about such "decay" and concerns about the (post)modern blurring of idealized class and gender identities should give us pause. There were and are new developments here that deserve more than just wholesale denunciation.[46]