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Girls Girls Girls Girls Girls: The Trans-Atlantic Mass Magazine Culture of the 1920s as a Gendered Affair

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the ways in which illustrated magazines of the Weimar period contribute to a larger gendering of transnational exchange, particularly through image-text doubling and shifts. It takes the Weimar society magazine *Uhu* as a major reference point, investigating how it modelled itself on American lifestyle and 'smart' magazines and made use of the iconic figure of the 'Girl' to carve out a spatio-temporal continuum between 'Amerika' and Europe. While the Girl is a figure of the stage and screen as much as of the modern magazine, it is in the magazine that this figure comes into her own. The Girl incorporates modernity as a multimodal and multifaceted configuration much like the modern magazine itself. The article argues that the Girl enters the illustrated magazines not only as a subject matter but also as a tool of gendered self-reflection, particularly in the work of female writers, illustrators, and photographers.

KEYWORDS

Weimar periodicals, Girlkultur, smart magazines, *Uhu*, Erich Kästner, Yva

The magazine is a strange thing: it promises variety and novelty but wraps up its material in structures that are pleurably and reassuringly familiar. This characterizes the function of periodical formats such as the cover, the editorial, the funnies, the photo series, the letters to the editor, and many more.¹ But in modern periodicals orientation derives not only from recurring graphical and layout cues and standard segments of organization. Orientation is also generated by way of signals to larger cultural contexts — recognizable and identifiable features in foreign constellations. Modern periodicals operate through multiplication: established cultural repertoires and archives of knowledge are not so much overthrown but rather amended, expanded, amplified, and anchored in different, unfamiliar grounds. To widen their reach, locally specific periodicals signal a larger — national and transnational — coherence. This becomes particularly evident in the case of the illustrated society magazines of Weimar Germany, which aimed to present themselves as well-informed about the trends and themes of a periodical market in the North Atlantic world. The modern ‘Girl’ captures the workings of this transnational network exemplarily and emblematically. Girls are the icons of modern multiplication: they are not only omnipresent on the covers and in the pages of the illustrated magazines, they also function as major components — and players — of modern periodicals’ routines of self-positioning and outreach, as I will show in this article.

As the point of reference for my analysis, I would like to use a striking (photo) illustrated society magazine of the 1920s: *Uhu: Das neue Ullsteinmagazin* [*Owl: The New Ullstein-Magazine*], published monthly from 1924 to 1934. The magazine targeted a sophisticated middle-class audience in Weimar Germany, urbane rather than exclusively urban. In keeping with other illustrated magazines of the period (such as *Die Dame* [*The Lady*; 1911–43], *Tempo* [*Tempo*; 1927], or *Das Leben* [*Life*; 1923–35]), it insisted on its modernity and routinely gestured to ‘Amerika’ (that is: the United States) to frame what it promoted as cutting-edge trends in society, style, and design. In this logic the United States gained both spatial and temporal significance, figuring forth a futuristic space where the contingent and confusing present and presence in Germany became readable and predictable. The thematic concern with the United States went together with an ‘American’ aesthetic — a journalistic style of worldly-wise detachment or cool reservation that went by the term ‘smartness’ in the US. Like their American counterparts (big and mid-size magazines such as *Vogue*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Vanity Fair*, and the *Smart Set*), the

1 This particular organizational logic of the magazine has been addressed in terms of miscellaneity recently. See Mark W. Turner, ‘Seriality, Miscellaneity, and Compression in Nineteenth-Century Print’, in *Reading Miscellanies/Miscellaneous Reading: Interrelations between Medial Formats, Novel Structures, and Reading Practices in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Daniela Gretz, Marcus Krause, and Nicolas Pethes (Hannover: Wehrhahn, 2021), pp. 303–14; James Mussell, ‘Elemental Forms: The Newspaper as Popular Genre in the Nineteenth Century’, *Media History*, 20.1 (2014), 4–20; Faye Hammill, Paul Hjartarson, and Hannah McGregor, ‘Introducing Magazines and/as Media: The Aesthetics and Politics of Serial Form’, *English Studies in Canada*, 41.1 (March 2015), 1–18; contributions in *Illustrierte Zeitschriften um 1900: Mediale Eigenlogik, Multimodalität und Metaisierung*, ed. by Natalia Igl and Julia Menzel (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016); Ruth Mayer, ‘Chorus Girl Modernity: Of Salamanders and Periodical Culture’, *Modernism/modernity*, forthcoming 2023.

German illustrated society journals of the 1920s aimed to reach a broad audience which they carefully marked as anything but mainstream: sophisticated, discerning, special.²

Content-wise, the American and German smart society magazines of the early twentieth century were not all that different from their respectable and established predecessors — the family magazines and literary journals of the turn of the century. They offered a variety of non-fiction and fiction, and particularly in the latter texts love and marriage plots are still quite dominant. The difference is in mediality, tone, and style. To achieve their effects, these magazines — on both sides of the Atlantic — use text-image relations in a way that signals modernity. Illustrations, photographs, cartoons, and other pictorial media evoke new aspects, different perspectives, or just more of the same next to reportage, stories, poetry, or editorials. Images are used both as indexical signifiers pointing to the specificity, novelty, and uniqueness of the subject matter in the magazine, and as iconic signals of modernity more generally. The girl, as we shall see, is almost always both: specific and generic, unique and representative of a larger trend.

The dominant mode of expression informing such image/text-conjunctions is irony. Instead of moral guidance and orientation, which were offered by their bourgeois periodical predecessors, the newer illustrated magazines promise entertainment and informed up-to-dateness: not the final word on the matter, but the most recent one.³ *Uhu* is a case in point. Its first issue opens with a poem, titled, programmatically, 'Uhu,' and illustrated with its signature animal, the owl, in caricature style, drawn by the famous illustrator Walter Trier (Fig. 1). (The owl symbolizes wisdom, which in the magazine's diction would probably translate to cleverness.) The poem unfolds the codes of smart detachment by way of references to a serialized and global entertainment culture relying on miscellaneity and distraction:

Wenn einer und er will was lesen,
Nimmt er sich einen Leihroman,
Man seufzt, wenn es recht schön gewesen,
Und fängt sofort den nächsten an.

Der Zweite will vom Mars was wissen,
Die Dritte liebt die Modenschau,
Der Vierte ist ganz hingerissen,

- 2 On the 'smart' style as a transnational phenomenon see Catherine Keyser, *Playing Smart: New York Women Writers and Modern Magazine Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010); Kathy Peiss, 'Girls Lean Back Everywhere', in *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, ed. by Alys Eve Weinbaum et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 347–53; Patrice Petro, 'Perceptions of Difference: Woman as Spectator and Spectacle', in *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, ed. by Katharina von Ankum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 41–66; Carol Schmid, 'The "New Woman": Gender Roles and Urban Modernism in Interwar Berlin and Shanghai', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 15.1 (2014), 1–16; Elizabeth M. Sheehan, 'Now and Forever? Fashion Magazines and the Temporality of the Interwar Period', in *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in the Interwar Period, 1918–1939: The Interwar Period*, ed. Catherine Clay et al. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 124–38.
- 3 On smartness as a mode of sophistication and ironic distancing see Daniel Tracy, 'Investing in "Modernism": Smart Magazines, Parody, and Middlebrow Professional Judgement', *The Journal of Modern Periodical Studies*, 1.1 (2010), 38–63; Ruth Mayer, 'Engineered Desire: *The Smart Set*, Mass Culture, and the Dispositif of Distraction', in *Modernity and the Periodical Press: Trans-Atlantic Mass Culture and the Avantgardes, 1880–1920*, ed. by Felix Brinker and Ruth Mayer (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming 2023); Matthew Stratton, *The Politics of Irony in American Modernism* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2014). On *Uhu* more particularly: Julia Bertschik, 'Uhu', in *Transdisziplinäre Konstellationen in der österreichischen Literatur, Kunst und Kultur der Zwischenkriegszeit*, FWF-Projekt, 2016 [accessed 11 March 2022]; Corinna Norrick, 'Literarische Zeitschriften und Publikumszeitschriften', in *Geschichte des deutschen Buchhandels im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert, Bd. 2: Die Weimarer Republik 1918–1933*, ed. by Ernst Fischer and Stephan Füssel (München: K. G. Saur, 2012), pp. 91–110.



Fig. 1 Ironic Animal: Illustration of the poem 'Uhu' by Walter Trier in *Uhu*, 1.1 (October 1924), 1.

Vom Bildnis einer schönen Frau.

Die Pickford, Jannings und Max Landa,
Mars, Mode, Bildnis und Roman,
Nebst Walfischfang bei Haparanda:
Hier ist's vereinigt, sieh's dir an!⁴

Switching between the male and female form to reflect the magazine's target readers, the poem presents an array of topics and sights that are made out as relevant because they are 'new' and 'different' from what came before. The modernity that comes to the fore here and throughout the magazine spans the width of an emerging mass-medial continuum between the United States and Germany — the very sphere that Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer twenty years later would call the culture industry. From the vantage point of the Weimar magazine culture, this cultural continuum seems to stretch into an open future of transatlantic modernization. But of course, the flow of images, ideas, narratives, and careers that infuses the popular cultural scenes of the United States and Weimar Germany would be funnelled into sharply distinct channels in the 1930s. *Girlkultur* did not disappear in Nazi Germany, but its cosmopolitan dimensions, its ironic bent, and its spectacular self-referentiality were eradicated, as

4 'If someone wants to read something / He takes out a library novel, / One sighs if it was quite nice / And immediately starts the next one. / A second person wants to learn of Mars, / The third one loves fashion shows, / The fourth one is all carried away / By the picture of a beautiful woman. / Pickford, Jennings, and Max Landa, / Mars, fashion, image and novel / Next to whale fishing in Haparanda: / Here all of this comes together: look at it!' [Anon.], 'Der Uhu', *Uhu*, 1.1 (October 1924), 1. Here and in what follows, translations from the German are mine.

‘the Nationalist Socialist regime offered the German public a homegrown counterpart to American mass cultural productions’.⁵

In *Uhu*, in contrast, ‘America’ still features as both a site of industrialized and serialized cultural production, and at the same time as the space of novelty and possibility which borders seamlessly on the modernity of the German-speaking world: just think of the list of ‘Pickford, Jannings, and Max Landa’, which collates the American star actress with the Swiss-born son of an American who had become famous as an actor and director in Germany and would soon test out his chances in Hollywood, and finally the Austrian actor who made a name for himself starring as the ‘English’ detective Joe Deeb in a German film serial of the 1910s.

Indeed, in the 1920s, an idea of ‘America’ had firmly established itself at the roots of German entertainment culture. A flourishing transnational market — travelling dance revues, vaudeville troupes, jazz bands, silent films, and a vibrant business of literary translation (at least from English to German) — interlinked European and North American metropolises and reached beyond these centres, and the circulating images, texts, ideas, and people made it increasingly difficult to maintain neatly circumscribed national boundaries in cultural meaning-making.⁶ The ambivalent connotations of ‘America’ were further accentuated by writers and artists who were active on both sides of the Atlantic, and by an increasingly global market of commerce and advertising. Most importantly, for my purposes: by the mid-1920s, up-to-date German readers were well aware of the key players of the stylish US magazine culture.

In close conjunction with their American peers (and forerunners), the Weimar illustrated magazines enact their new periodical arena as a gendered space. The exemplary modern subject is female — and she makes an appearance both as a target reader and a phenomenon and spectacle of representation.⁷ Even though the programmatic poem opening the *Uhu* project seems to perpetuate established gender binaries by attributing fashion interests to women and assuming a heterosexual male gaze, the magazine at large is more diffuse, as we shall see. This may well have to do with the phalanx of popular and successful women writers who contributed to the magazine, and it hinges closely on the polysemic potential of text-image relations. In what follows I want to explore more closely how *Uhu* both relies upon the larger cultural repertoire of *Girllkultur* and how it refashions this repertoire particularly through essays, stories, and pictures authored by women. To do this, I will first have to sketch a broader horizon of the periodical enactment of the modern girl, before zooming in on *Uhu* in the second part of my article.

The Girl is Everywhere

While mass culture operated on many levels, the illustrated magazines have been rightfully identified as seminal tools in the transnational mediation and management

5 Terri Gordon, ‘Fascism and the Female Form: Performance Art in the Third Reich’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 11.1/2 (January–April 2002), 164–200 (p. 183); cf. also Karsten Witte, ‘Visual Pleasure Inhibited: Aspects of the German Revue Film’, *New German Critique*, 24/25 (Fall/Winter 1981–82), 238–63.

6 See Egbert Klautke, *Unbegrenzte Möglichkeiten: “Amerikanisierung” in Deutschland und Frankreich (1900–1933)* (Heidelberg: Franz Steiner, 2003), pp. 239–68.

7 Much has been written on this feminization of modernity, and on the transnational dimensions of this move: Andreas Huyssen, ‘Mass Culture as Woman: Modernity’s Other’, in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (New York: Macmillan, 1986), pp. 44–64; Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Sabine Hake, ‘In the Mirror of Fashion’, in *Women in the Metropolis*, ed. by Katharina von Ankum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 185–201; Jean Marie Lutes, ‘Journalism, Modernity, and the Globe-Trotting Girl Reporter’, in *Transatlantic Print Culture, 1880–1940: Emerging Media, Emerging Modernisms*, ed. by Ann Ardis and Patrick Collier (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 167–81.

of cultural content. This is in keeping with the periodicals' propensity to manage and mediate mass culture, particularly through image-text doubling and shifts.⁸ As the authors of *The Modern Girl Around the World* have pointed out, the girl appeared nearly simultaneously all over the world; she was not exclusive to Europe or North America. But while it is indeed difficult to locate a centre, core, or origin of the phenomenon, the participants of the girl craze overwhelmingly did assume that there was one: the United States.

This manifests exemplarily in a piece by the journalist Ann Tizia Leitich from 1928. Leitich reported from New York for the Austrian *Neue Freie Presse* [*New Free Press*] in the late 1920s in pieces jam-packed with English expressions. In her article 'Girldämmerung', whose title alludes to Wagner's opera *Götterdämmerung* [*Twilight of the Gods*], she alerts a German-speaking female audience in an 'Advance notice' (English in the original) of changes that are bound to manifest in their world sooner rather than later.⁹ Like so many other experts on the Girl of the day, Leitich identifies the figure as part of a quasi-militaristic formation, an unceasing parade of 'newly advancing troops'.¹⁰ The Girl is everywhere but she stems from the American revue stage, from which she entered the covers and pages of the global 'popular magazines' and the 'almighty silver screen'.¹¹ By figuring forth 'America' on foreign ground, the Girl epitomizes the transnational continuum of modernity, in which sophisticated readers may need 'advance notice' of cultural trends, but also have ample means of accessing the information on their own: 'This will be no novelty to whoever got hold of *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazar* or *Vanity Fair*', closes Leitich, thus both authenticating her information and acknowledging her informed readers.¹²

What a writer of a British newspaper wrote in 1927 could thus have been extended — with linguistic reservations — to a culturally savvy urban German scene: 'they talk America, think America, dream America; we have several million people, mostly women, who, to all intents and purposes, are temporary American citizens.'¹³ 'America', in this equation, is a fantasy space, of which Berlin, in the assessment of the writer Otto Alfred Palitzsch in 1928, quickly became a 'suburb'.¹⁴ This in-between space increasingly merges with the space of the illustrated magazine.

The title of Leitich's piece, 'Girldämmerung', harbingers the impending demise of the Girl, in fact proclaiming the advent of another type of womanhood — the 'sophisticated woman' (English in the original).¹⁵ One reason why Leitich may have been eager to kiss the Girl goodbye could have been that by 1928, so much had been written

8 Hans-Jürgen Bucher, 'Mehr als Bild mit Text: Zur Multimodalität der Illustrierten Zeitungen und Zeitschriften im 19. Jahrhundert', in *Illustrierte Zeitschriften*, ed. by Natalia Igl and Julia Menzel (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016), pp. 25–74; Madleen Podewski, 'Abilden und veranschaulichen um 1900: Verhandlungen zwischen Texten und Bildern in der *Gartenlaube: Illustriertes Familienblatt*', in *Illustrierte Zeitschriften*, ed. by Natalia Igl and Julia Menzel (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016), pp. 219–30; Gustav Frank, 'Prolegomena zu einer integralen Zeitschriftenforschung', *Jahrbuch für internationale Germanistik*, 48.2 (2016), 101–21 (pp. 111–13).

9 Ann Tizia Leitich, 'Girldämmerung', *Neue Freie Presse* (22 January 1928), 29–30 (p. 30). On Leitich, see Rebecca Unterberger, 'Ann Tizia Leitich', in *Transdisziplinäre Konstellationen*, FWF-Projekt, 2015 [accessed 11 March 2022].

10 Here and in what follows I use 'Girl' to refer to the figure's variant in the German-speaking world; 'neu anmarschierende Bataillone'. Leitich, p. 29.

11 'von den Titelblättern und aus den Seiten der populären Magazines' and 'die allmächtige Silberleinwand'. Leitich, p. 29.

12 'Wer "Vogue", "Harpers Bazar" oder "Vanity Fair" je in der Hand gehabt hat, dem wird dies keine Neuigkeit sein'. Leitich, pp. 29–30.

13 Quoted in Victoria De Grazia, 'Mass Culture and Sovereignty: The American Challenge to European Cinemas, 1920–1960', *The Journal of Modern History*, 61.1 (March 1989), 53–87 (p. 53).

14 Quoted in Günter Berghaus, 'Girlikultur — Feminism, Americanism, and Popular Entertainment in Weimar Germany', *Journal of Design History*, 1.3/4 (1988), 193–219 (p. 208).

15 Leitich, p. 29.

about this phenomenon already. Girls were all over the place in the Weimar imagination, and they often served to point away from female experiences or performative expression to larger phenomena of social, economic, or political change, as reviewed by the leading voices of the German *feuilleton*: Alfred Polgar, Joseph Roth, Fritz Giese, Siegfried Kracauer, and others. These are the authors who come to mind to this day as the archivists of a Weimar *Girllkultur* (which is the catchy title of Giese's book but came to stand in for a culture at large). In her attempt to capture a transatlantic cultural status quo, Ann Leitch introduces the term 'Imitationsgirls' to indicate the self-propelling quality of the phenomenon.¹⁶ A similar attribution of secondariness to the Girl informs the writing on the subject matter that professes to take a systematic approach. Alfred Polgar, thus, famously pointed out that, strictly speaking, there is no Girl. In a short text titled 'Girls', he comes to the insight that

Girls are a so-called 'plurale tantum'. This means that the term appears linguistically only in the plural form. There is no *one girl* [...]. [However] [to] put girl next to girl like the elements of an equation does not yet constitute 'Girls', this is only brought about by the completed addition, which fuses the singular entities into a collective.¹⁷

The exemplary site of manifestation for this phenomenon, as Polgar concludes along with Leitch and many others, is the dance revue, originating in the United States where Florenz Ziegfeld had given it legendary form with his Follies. From the revue stage, the girls had migrated to the big screen of the cinema. But it was the illustrated magazine that was most involved in rendering Girls a global presence, known from 'the Eskimos to the Zulu Kaffirs', as Gustav Kauder put it in a 1926 *Uhu* piece titled 'Gold-Diggers (in the Pockets of Men): A Natural History of the Girl'.¹⁸ Like Polgar, Kauder identifies the origins of the Girl with the chorus, but then insists that the still, ornamental, and replicable image in the illustrated magazine conveys the power of this figure's image so much better than the actual dance performance itself:

Twelve pairs of unendingly long bare legs, above them twelve white top hats, twelve monocles, twelve canes tucked under the arms, all of this varied a thousandfold and yet a thousandfold identical repeats through all the image works of our time.¹⁹

The modern magazines operate as perfect multipliers. They bring forth visual arrangements that are always almost the same but not quite — and slyly work their ways from one magazine to the next, from one country to the other, onto the bodies of women all over the world. Finally, the Girl is everywhere, and every young woman is a Girl: 'And if it is students, or athletes, swimmers, or ice skaters or girl groups at

16 Ibid. On the idea of imitation as a core principle of femininity and fandom, see also Diana W. Anselmo, 'Made in Movieland: Imitation, Agency, and Girl Movie Fandom in the 1910s', *Camera Obscura*, 32.1 (2017), 129–65.

17 'Girls sind ein sogenanntes "plurale tantum". Das heißt, der Begriff erscheint sprachlich nur in der Mehrzahlform. Ein Girl gibt es nicht [...]. [Aber] Girls neben Girls gestellt wie die Posten einer Summe machen noch lange keine "Girls", das macht erst die vollzogene Addition, die Verschmelzung der Einzelwesen zum Kollektivum'. Alfred Polgar, 'Girls', *Die Dame*, 53.14 (1926), 2–3 (p. 2).

18 'Von den Eskimos bis zu den Zulukaffern [...]'. Gustav Kauder, 'Die Goldgräberinnen (in den Taschen der Männer): Zur Naturgeschichte des Girls', *Uhu*, 2.9 (June 1926), 58–67 (p. 58).

19 'Zwölf Paar unendlich lange nackte Beine, darüber zwölf weiße Zylinderhüte, zwölf Monokel, zwölf untergeklemmte Spazierstöckchen, dies tausendfach variiert und doch tausendfach gleich wiederholt sich durch alle Bilderwerke unserer Zeit'. Kauder, p. 58.



Fig. 2 ‘Miss America’: Illustration of Gustav Kauder’s ‘Gold-Diggers’ in *Uhu*, 2.9 (June 1926), 65.

a costume ball — they too look like revue girls, dressed, grouped, photographed in exactly the same way.²⁰

Following Kauder, the orchestrated and synchronized girl clusters inscribe themselves through the power of their image into the ways in which young women are perceived (and perceive themselves) as collective presences on the modern scene. Be that as it may, what certainly surfaces simultaneously in all sorts of cultural scenes is the discourse on girls as the machinelike emblems of modernity. Siegfried Kracauer’s felicitous formulation of the ‘mass ornament’, put forth first in a periodical (the *Frankfurter Zeitung*), would serve to hone the critical implications of this discourse. The essay ‘The mass Ornament’ turns the revue girls into icons of the capitalist system of production, which both express and obfuscate the workings of this system. Yet in this analysis of the processes of alienation, Kracauer also totalizes the reification of the Girls. He does not have to insist on their inherent multiplicity, because the Girl as an individual is of no significance for his writing. For Kracauer, Girls have long been an integral part of a relentless system of economic streamlining and instrumentalization

20 ‘Und wenn es Studentinnen sind oder Athletinnen, Schwimmerinnen oder Schlittschuhläuferinnen oder Mädchengruppen von einem Kostümball – auch die sehen aus wie Revuegirls, genau so kostümiert, gruppiert, fotografiert.’ Ibid.

that is about to also take over on the political front.²¹ His writing in the late 1920s foreshadows, thus, the fascist redeployment of the dance revue and the fashioning of ‘troupes into troops from which the soldiers of art were supposed to sally forth’.²² At the same time, in keeping with other authors of the *feuilleton*, Kracauer makes invisible the complexity and diversity of the dance revues touring the world in the 1920s.

This chauvinistic disregard for the actual Girls informing the writing of the *feuilleton* may have been another reason for a feminist author like Leitich to announce in 1928 that ‘*Das Girl hat ausgespielt*’ [‘*The Girl has reached the end of her game*’; italics in the original], thus giving the deathblow to the Girl.²³ But at the same time, the periodicals of the period also exemplified that there was so much more to the Girl than what the *feuilleton*-discourse suggested. The Girl was a polymorphous phenomenon, and the exact same feature that had induced writers such as Polgar, Kauder, and Kracauer to turn her into an emblematic figure also allowed for other readings. There is, indeed, not only one Girl, there are many — yet the principle of multiplication does not only produce more of the same, but also introduces variation. Once we turn to the magazine(s) themselves and trace the actual unfolding of *Girlkultur* on (and across) their pages and as a periodical principle, the creative potential of polysemy comes to the fore — especially in the dynamic crosscurrents between texts and images.

Multimodal Girlhood

On stage and screen, revue girls fascinate because of their synchronicity and sameness. The magazines go beyond this effect in switching masterfully not only between ensembles and soloists, as on the revue stage, or between staged performance and backstage life, as in the musical film, but between different modes of observation and engagement. *Uhu*, thus, displays synchronized perfection, as in the many photographs that show girls in glamorous replication, ‘sisterlike’ symmetry or mirrored sameness (Figs 3–5), while simultaneously zooming in on individual performers, chorines, and artists, and presenting them in glamorous singularity.

Girls are everywhere in the magazine: in background stories and reportages, as well as in an unending series of fictional enactments, caricatures, advertisements, and reviews.²⁴ The illustrated magazine thus presents the theatrical and cinematic aesthetic of multiplication by way of a kind of second-order multiplication — girls next to girls next to girls next to girls. This principle of proliferation is exemplified in the use of photographs in *Uhu*: as illustrations, they contribute to the meaning-making of reportage and stories, and in photo series and stand-alone displays, they signal a larger magazine aesthetic, and, ultimately, an aesthetic of modernity. In their alternation

21 For critical readings of Kracauer, which also take issue with the misogyny of the ‘mass ornament’, see Heide Schlüppmann, ‘Die nebensächliche Frau: Geschlechterdifferenz in Siegfried Kracauers Essayistik der zwanziger Jahre,’ *Feministische Studien*, 1 (1993), 38–47; Sabine Hake, ‘Girls and Crisis — The Other Side of Diversion’, *New German Critique*, 40 (Winter 1987), 147–64; Anne Fleig, ‘Tanzmaschinen: Girls im Revuetheater der Weimarer Republik’, in *Puppen, Huren, Roboter: Körper der Moderne in der Musik zwischen 1900 und 1930*, ed. by Sabine Meine and Katharina Hottmann (Schliengen: Edition Argus, 2005), pp. 102–17; Ruth Mayer, ‘Endless Deferral: Theories of Mass Culture and the Aesthetics of Affect’, *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* (2020), 81–102.

22 Witte, p. 242.

23 Leitich, p. 29.

24 For instance Eric Charell, ‘Wie eine Revue entsteht’, *Uhu*, 2.3 (December 1925), 8–15; Marie-Therese Hemmer, ‘Das Leben einer Tänzerin in New York: Ein Beitrag zur Amerika-Dämmerung’, *Uhu*, 6.6 (March 1930), 65–67; Bella Spewack, ‘Auf den Zehenspitzen in die große Welt: Von der Choristin zum Star’, *Uhu*, 1.5 (February 1925), 19–22.



Fig. 3 'Jogging at the Beach: The Sisters June and Ilona Marlow, Two Fledgling Film Stars, at the Beach of Universal City (California)'. Stand-alone photo page, *Uhu*, 2.11 (August 1926), 89.



Fig. 4 'One of the Most Charming Takes of the Dolly Sisters'. Stand-alone photo page, *Uhu*, 4.2 (November 1927), 109.



Fig. 5 'In the Cabinet of Mirrors. The Actress Erika Dannhoff'. Stand-alone photo page, *Uhu*, 8.12 (September 1932), 58.

between indexicality and iconicity, the photographs evoke modernity as a choreography of female bodies not only on stage or screen.²⁵

Every new issue of *Uhu* reliably features photographs of dancers, actresses, or athletes who are depicted in exotic poses, daring outfits, or self-assured physicality, and while the captions identify them as individuals, they also turn them into elements of a never-ending sequence, an ensemble of modern urban existence or performance culture. At the same time, through this principle of seriality, diversity enters the larger picture almost in camouflage. Next to the images of white, young, long-legged Girls, we see, inadvertently, Black, Asian or cross-dressed girls, lined up as parts of a larger pattern, which becomes increasingly ambivalent in the serial expansion (Figs 6–8). There is, therefore, something about the cultural presence of the Girl that points beyond her iconic femininity, her whiteness, her straightness, even her able-bodied beauty and her youth, in ways that make her a *passé-partout* of possibilities in the illustrated magazines in the 1920s, at least for a while — until the Nazis came to power.²⁶

In February 1925, *Uhu* illustrated an article titled 'On Tiptoes into the Big World: From Chorus Girl to Star' with a portrait photograph of the actress Julanne

25 On the principles of photo journalism of the day see Dorothy Rowe, 'Desiring Berlin: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Germany', in *Visions of the "Neue Frau": Women and the Visual Arts in Weimar Germany*, ed. by Marsha Meskimmon and Shearer West (Menston: Scolar Press, 1995), pp. 143–64; Habbo Knoch, 'Living Pictures: Photojournalism in Germany, 1900 to the 1930s', in *Mass Media, Culture and Society in Twentieth-Century Germany*, ed. by Karl Christian Führer and Corey Ross (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 217–33.

26 Uta Poiger, 'Fantasies of Universality? *Neue Frauen*, Race, and Nation in Weimar and Nazi Germany', in *The Modern Girl around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, ed. by Alys Eve Weinbaum et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 317–44.



Fig. 6 'No Country Without Tiller Girls. Japanese "Girl-Kultur": Dance Girls in a Revue in Tokio'. Stand-alone photo page, *Uhu*, 2.9 (June 1926), 78.



Fig. 7 'The Black Star: Miss Anderson of the 'Black People Troupe'. Stand-alone photo page, *Uhu*, 3.2 (November 1926), 29.



Fig. 8 'Identical Brothers, Identical Hats. Costume Group at a Montessori Ball', *Uhu*, 4.5 (February 1928), 26.

Johnston, captioned 'Julanne Johnston: once a chorus girl — today a popular film star and partner of Douglas Fairbanks'.²⁷ The photograph is one of three illustrations for the piece, all of them showing glamorous American stars — chorus girls who made it. The text is authored by Bella Spewack, who lived at the time in Berlin with her husband Samuel Spewack, foreign correspondent for the *New York World*. Bella Spewack had immigrated to the US in 1902 from Transylvania, and after her stint in Berlin she became a successful musical librettist for Broadway and Hollywood. Her entire career illustrates the arbitrariness and transience of categories such as 'American' and 'European'. Spewack's *Uhu* article opens with the observation that chorus girls may look the same but stem from all walks of life — 'from little hamlets, from big cities with ever-smoking chimneys, [...] from roaming gypsies, from emigrant ships, from the aristocracy'.²⁸ Mirroring their past, their future, too, is hazy:

What will become of them?
 'Most of them will marry!' said an expert. Ah, he was an optimist and a bachelor.
 'Most of them won't marry!' said another. (He was above fifty).
 'Most of them will be stuck in the chorus!' said a third one.
 'And the rest?'
 'There is no rest in the chorus!' —²⁹

27 'Julanne Johnston: Einst Chorgirl — heute beliebter Filmstern und Partnerin Douglas Fairbanks'. Caption in Spewack, p. 19.

28 'Aus kleinen Nestern, aus großen Städten mit ewig rauchenden Schornsteinen [...], von vagabundierenden Zigeunern, von Auswandererschiffen, aus der Aristokratie'. Spewack, p. 19.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Spewack agrees and does not agree at the same time. She moves on to track the careers of girls who leave the chorus to become stars, although at the same time she acknowledges that they just move from one ensemble into another. Listing name after name of American and German stars that started in the chorus and then made it big, Spewack evokes a fantastic performance in unending multiplication: 'This is the first row, behind it march uncounted lines: Chorus girls who became famous! Famous as actresses on the stage or the screen: the goal and the desire of every chorus girl; and of course also of every stenographer, manicurist, milliner and seamstress.'³⁰ In a strangely circular movement, this passage turns from the anonymity of the chorus to the spotlight of stardom and back again to the anonymous masses of urban women, suspending the distinction between the star and the chorine on which the notion of a career rests in the first place: Girls, all.

In his piece on the Girl as a global phenomenon, Gustav Kauder characterized the modern girl as an American invention, inscribed with the American idea of profitable self-making (or gold-digging). He debunks the claim that Girls work hard to be successful as a stock formula of 'sentimental advertising stories' for which the people ('das Volk') does not fall.³¹ Elsewhere in the periodical, however, the idea of 'Girlhood' as a product of labour is very much confirmed — Spewack, for one, insists that fame is 'hard work'.³² While it may be difficult to distinguish between a first, second, and third row in the ever-growing Girl performances that inform modern life, there is no doubt that it is not easy to hang on, let alone make it to the front.

The insistence that performance is labor also informs the contributions of other female writers of *Uhu*. Thus, in the April issue of the periodical of the same year, 1925, an article by the Ufa star Asta Nielsen titled 'A Day in My Life' depicts a backbreaking routine of self-exploitation in a vocabulary that calls to mind the alienating grind of factory work so much more than the glamour of the screen. In this machinery, fans with their unending need to tell their own stories appear as an integral part of the exhausting entertainment business:

New films, new crews, new directors, new people who pour out their troubles. Uninterruptedly, outfits have to be changed, incessantly, the lamps are rattling, the spotlights are scorching, the saws are screaming, commandoes are shouted across each other, different orchestras produce their sounds [...].³³

Here, not even the star is a singularity, but part of an ensemble, or rather, a production site.

The emphasis on work rather than frivolous self-indulgence resonates through many of the articles in *Uhu*, although most of them do not sound quite as negative and exhausted as Nielsen's piece. Time and again, these narratives emphasize the effort required to become and function as a part of this Girl force (exemplarily so in the report 'I'm Becoming a Model to Finance My Studies' by Hanna Helm in *Uhu* of January 1929). It is not only in the texts by female authors that this dimension of the life of

30 'Das ist das erste Glied, hinter ihm marschieren ungezählte Reihen: Choristinnen, die berühmt wurden! Berühmt wurden als Schauspielerinnen auf der Bühne oder auf der Leinwand: dem Ziel und der Sehnsucht jedes Chormädels; und natürlich auch jeder Stenotypistin, Maniküre, Putzmacherin und Nähmamsell'. Ibid.

31 'sentimentale Reklame-Geschichten'. Kauder, p. 64.

32 Spewack, p. 20.

33 'Neue Filme, neue Mitwirkende, neue Regisseure, neue Menschen, die ihre Not klagen. Ununterbrochen wird umgekleidet, unaufhörlich rasseln die Lampen, kochen die Scheinwerfer, kreischen die Sägen, schreien Kommandos durcheinander, klingen die Töne verschiedener Orchester [...]'. Asta Nielsen, 'Ein Tag aus meinem Leben', *Uhu*, 1.7 (April 1925), 75–79 (p. 79).

the modern Girl is highlighted, but here it is particularly frequent. Whereas Polgar, Kauder, Kracauer, and Giese — as different as their readings of the Girl phenomenon may be — all take on the Girl as an ornamental configuration of modernity, the storytelling and reporting of many female authors is differently accentuated. Particularly in the writing of the magazine's star authors — Vicki Baum, Gina Kaus, or Marie Leitner — to be a young, single working girl in the modern city means to be part of a collective, but the shapes and contours of this collectivity are constantly changing and asking for unending adjustment, balance, recalibration: work. In doing so, these texts invert, as it were, the logic of the mass ornament, focusing on its production and maintenance rather than its effect.

For all of these authors — male and female — the Girls are a fabrication, a fantasy. Increasingly, however, the narrative focus is no longer on the product, but on the producer — on the conscious crafting of careers and professional lives, on stars and performer personalities, and also on the authors, photographers, directors, and illustrators who *make* Girls, along with the techniques and media they use. This goes along with the medial self-reflexivity that is characteristic of all sorts of modern media (film, the modernist novel, photography), but manifests most impressively in the multi-modal medium of the modern periodical. In the course of this, the periodical is transformed conceptually into a testing ground or fantasy space that may point to real spaces elsewhere, but can just as well stand on its own, as a signal of ideas, ideals, and possibilities.

Spaces of Possibility

The depiction of and fascination with Girls in the Weimar illustrated magazine obviously engages with mass-cultural processes of serialization and streamlining. But the fact that female bodies are on display is far from arbitrary, and Siegfried Kracauer's verdict of a 'desexing' quality of the mass ornament only manages to capture one facet of a much more complex formation of social aesthetics. I would like to end with one last example that interestingly correlates a male and a female perspective, image and text, collectivity and singularity, all framed in scenery that flaunts urban modernity: the 'image story' (*Bildgeschichte*) 'Lieschen Neumann will Karriere machen: Das Scheindasein vor der Kamera' ['Lieschen Neumann Wants to Have a Career: The Illusory Existence in Front of the Camera'], which appeared in *Uhu* in March 1930.³⁴ The format of the image story or photo novella had been designed by the star photographer Yva (Else Neuländer-Simon) in collaboration with the *Uhu* editor Friedrich Kroner, and Yva's image stories appeared regularly in the magazine after 1929, along with image stories by other photographers. 'Lieschen Neumann' combines Yva's signature photographs — mixing portrait style and fashion photography — with a poem by Erich Kästner. In contrast to the usual practice in the magazine, the photographer is identified prominently at the outset — 'Aufnahmen Yva' ['photographs by Yva'] (see Fig. 9). Erich Kästner's poem strikes a misogynist tone similar to that in his earlier writing on Girls. A year before, in 'Chor der Girls', he had reduced a troupe of revue dancers to their synchronized performance — echoing the *feuilleton* writers' concern with a robotic *Girllkultur*. The text of the image story addresses, equally, the phenomenon of female expressivity and ambition as a collective craze:

34 On the larger experimentation of the Weimar period with photography and narrative in photo essays and photo stories see Daniel H. Magilow, *The Photography of Crisis: The Photo Essays of Weimar Germany* (Philadelphia, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012).

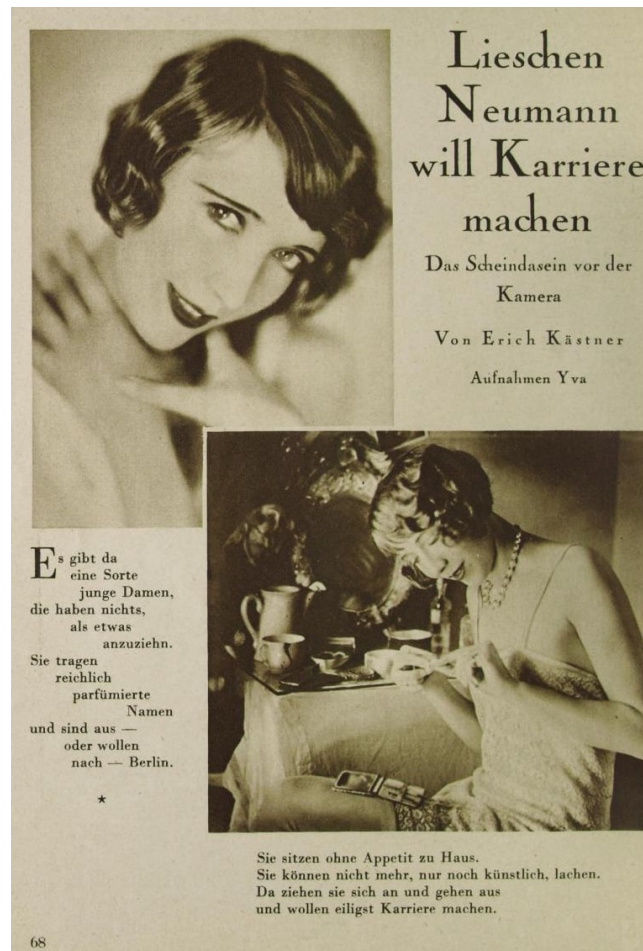


Fig. 9 The Girl in Text and Image: 'Lieschen Neumann' in *Uhu*, 6.6 (March 1930), 68.

Es gibt die eine Sorte junge Damen,
die haben nichts, als etwas anzuziehen.
Sie tragen reichlich parfümierte Namen
und sind aus — oder wollen nach — Berlin.³⁵

The young ladies evoked here may be ambitious, but they fail to have a realistic idea of life, and are brushed down in the course of the poem for being naïve and silly. The name Lieschen Neumann, which epitomizes this foolishness in its small-town-sound, appears only in the image story's title. The poem itself does not afford a name to its main protagonist besides the phony pseudonym of 'Ramona Silvaré' — a 'perfumed name' promising paradoxical singularity to the entire cluster of misguided Girls.³⁶

35 'There is one sort of young ladies, / who has nothing, but something to wear. / They bear amply perfumed names / and stem from — or want to move to — Berlin.' Erich Kästner and Yva, 'Lieschen Neumann will Karriere machen', *Uhu*, 6.6 (March 1930), 68–73 (p. 68).

36 On the image story see also Laura Schütz, 'Es gibt da eine Sorte junge Damen', in *Politik und Moral: Die Entwicklungen des politischen Denkens im Werk Erich Kästners*, ed. by Sven Hanuschek and Gideon Stiening (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), pp. 173–201. I share Schütz's critical reading of the poem, but I think that she underestimates the autonomous momentum of Yva's photography and tends to victimize her, instead of acknowledging her as the co-author she was.

Yva's photographs tell a different story. They single out one glamorous Girl in various poses, and the model is identified (and authenticated) at the end of the article in parentheses: 'For the photographs the dancer Beatrice Garga put herself at our disposal.'³⁷ Beatrice Garga was a chorine, who had performed in Eric Charell's 1925 revue *Für Dich*, which combined eroticism and exoticism with a considerable degree of queer aesthetics, and then later had a small part in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*.³⁸ She thus represents the 'second or third row' of chorus performers, in the taxonomy of Bella Spewack: not a star, but well established, and possibly on her way up, especially at this moment of her career, when she was exhibited as the star of an image story in a glossy magazine.

While the poem insists on the artificiality and fake quality of the Girl, the pictures celebrate the figure. Even the pictures showing the Girl's 'true' misery look glamorous (Fig. 10). Arguably however, the most important semantic twist in the complex play around the Girl is performed in the story's third image and stanza:



Fig. 10 Glamorous Misery: 'Lieschen Neumann' in *Uhu*, 6.6 (March 1930), 73.

Sie melden sich (weil es das Bild so will),
bei einer Fotografin namens Yva.

37 Kästner and Yva, p. 73.

38 Kevin Clarke, 'Im Rausch der Genüsse: Erik Charell und die entfesselte Revueoperette im Berlin der 1920er Jahre', in *Glitter and Be Gay: Die authentische Operette und ihre schwulen Verehrer*, ed. by Kevin Clarke (Hamburg: Männerschwarm, 2007), pp. 108–39.



Fig. 11 'A photographer called Yva'. 'Lieschen Neumann' in *Uhu*, 6.6 (March 1930), 69.

Und halten dort in zwanzig Lagen still –
und fühlen sich dabei bereits als Diva.³⁹

³⁹ 'They call upon (because the picture demands it so), / a photographer called Yva / and hold still in twenty positions. / And doing so already feel like a diva.' Kästner and Yva, pp. 68–69.

The accompanying photograph shows the Girl in front of a door with the sign YVA in big letters — the actual entrance of Yva's Berlin studio (Fig. 11). Yva herself is singled out here as a part of the collective who stands apart. She is the true star — and precisely because she is in control of the image, working invisibly behind the scenes.

The poem insists on the separation between drab reality and faked glamour, associating the latter with the illustrated magazines ('Sie lächeln auch aus allen Modeheften') and the former with street culture and urban life. The images, however, merge these spheres and render 'Berlin' a thoroughly modern placeholder of the American dream factory on European ground and the stage of a female story of glamorous self-fashioning. Whilst Kästner may insist on a reality (the 'everyday') behind the image, for Yva (who, we should remember, created a 'perfumed name' for herself too) the two layers are too entangled to pry them apart. Her pictures, like the magazine in which they appear, create a realm of experience that amplifies the real, presenting niches for identification, imagination and fantasy — spatial enclaves rather than temporal prospects. Doubtlessly, all of this is *work* — the result of concerted efforts, carefully crafted performances and rigorous routines. But like many of her female colleagues, Yva acknowledges this work rather than making fun of it, belittling it or denigrating it as akin to prostitution.

The photo essay appeared in 1930, at a time when the Weimar Republic and its culture of possibility and change was about to fall apart. Seen from this vantage point, the futures of the Girl on the pages of the illustrated magazine are not temporal but spatial, fanning out next to each other in endless variation. They display possibilities that should soon be thwarted, disappearing alongside the magazine in which they unfolded, as the Weimar *Girlkultur* was redeployed into a synchronized display of Nazi efficiency in the course of the next decade.

(*Uhu* was discontinued in 1934. Bella Spewack was, by then, long back in the United States. Both Siegfried Kracauer and Alfred Polgar escaped first to Paris then later to the United States, Gustav Kauder died in 1941 in Paris, Erich Kästner stayed in Berlin, his books were the first to be burned. Yva was murdered in the Nazi death camp Sobibor in 1942).

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