

Kramer, Andreas

## The Traffic of Gender in Expressionist Prose Writing

You may cite this version as: Kramer, Andreas. 2009. The Traffic of Gender in Expressionist Prose Writing. In: Frank Krause, ed. Expressionism and Gender / Expressionismus und Geschlecht. Göttingen: V & R unipress, pp. 45-60. ISBN 9783899717174 [Book Section] : Goldsmiths Research Online.

Available at: <http://eprints.gold.ac.uk/6194/>

### **COPYRIGHT**

All material supplied via Goldsmiths Library and Goldsmiths Research Online (GRO) is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights. You may use this copy for personal study or research, or for educational purposes, as defined by UK copyright law. Other specific conditions may apply to individual items.

This copy has been supplied on the understanding that it is copyright material. Duplication or sale of all or part of any of the GRO Data Collections is not permitted, and no quotation or excerpt from the work may be published without the prior written consent of the copyright holder/s.

*Sonderdruck aus*

Frank Krause (Hg.)

Expressionism and Gender /  
Expressionismus und Geschlecht

V&R unipress

ISBN 978-3-89971-717-4 ©V&R unipress GmbH, Göttingen 2010

---

Andreas Kramer

## The Traffic of Gender in Expressionist Prose Writing

In a recent essay devoted to the long-overdue recovery of »Women in German Expressionism«, Barbara Wright observes, among other things, that many male Expressionist writers and artists, for all their artistic innovations and their opposition to the bourgeois world, remained caught in traditional ways of thinking about gender identity and gender difference.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, numerous texts within the Expressionist repertoire deal in depressingly familiar stereotypes of men and women, playing off the one against the other and apparently adopting the full range of dichotomies that lie at the heart of essentialist gender discourse. As Wright suggests, such conservative attitudes towards gender among the predominantly male Expressionists would inevitably have implications for their project of social and cultural change, a project encapsulated in their demand for a »New Man«. If this assessment is broadly correct, then Expressionist writing can be seen to reinforce, rather than question, existing stereotypes about the male / female binary. In effect then, by refusing to see how gender is constructed socially and culturally, and by not interrogating such constructions, Expressionist writers might be accused of perpetuating patriarchal discourses.

Without wishing to refute this broad view, I'd like to add nuance to it. My argument is that there are prose texts by both male and female Expressionist writers which suggest a more ambiguous view of gender identity and destabilise, at least for a moment, the conventional binary and hierarchy. I've organised my discussion around the issue of traffic, *Verkehr*, as both a thematic and formal feature of these texts which enables them to question essentialist views of gender. In much Modernist city writing, »traffic« has become a powerful emblem of a new experience associated with urban modernity, the experience of a social and spatial reality that has become so inchoately kinetic and dynamic that the old parameters of description and definition become inadequate. This literary and cultural preoccupation with traffic would be unthinkable without the new transportation and communication infrastructure

---

1 Wright, *Intimate Strangers: Women in German Expressionism*, p. 291.

that emerged in the major European cities during the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. An important emblem also of mass society, these urban networks enabled individuals and crowds to become vastly more mobile than before, and crucially, they connected them to the new sites of production (such as factories), consumption and leisure. If urban transport systems provided new modes of mobility as well new zones of mobility, then they also created entirely new forms of social interaction, which is preserved in an older meaning of the German word *Verkehr* (social intercourse). Enhanced mobility therefore led to the establishment of new, more mobile and more vulnerable relationships between self and other, and between individual and the crowd, and between an older natural environment and a man-made one characterised by technology and new modes of production and consumption. In a broader sense, then, traffic can also refer to the more abstract and more transitory systems of social and economic circulation. This essay looks at how the theme of traffic in Expressionist prose becomes associated with gender.

One of the first writers to properly respond to this sense of mobility was of course Baudelaire, who famously identified the novel experience of urban modernity with the transitory. The transitory quality of urban modernity is a hallmark also of Rilke's *Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910), which more or less virtually begins with a traffic scene:

Dass ich es nicht lassen kann, bei offenem Fenster zu schlafen. Elektrische Bahnen rasen läutend durch meine Stube. Automobile gehen über mich hin. Eine Tür fällt zu. [...]. Und wieder die Straße. Ein Mädchen kreischt: Ah tais-toi, je ne veux plus. Die Elektrische rennt ganz erregt heran, darüber fort, fort über alles. Jemand ruft. Leute laufen, überholen sich. [...]

In short sentences which mimic the speed and breathlessness of traffic, the narrator is compulsively drawn to the noises and sounds of urban and human *Verkehr*, so much so that the boundary between interior and exterior appears to become blurred. Moreover, the depiction tends to animate and personify traffic, and in the process, questions the notion of a stable, identical self. Urban space is beginning to mesh with a kind of inner life that both enriches and destabilizes the self. In the course of Rilke's novel, *Verkehr* suggests not only Modernist alienation and fragmentation, but a new conception of a multiple self as well. This includes the self's gender identity, for following this initial trauma, Rilke's novel explores Malte's gender identity by charting the roles sexual and gender

---

2 Rilke, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, pp. 455–56.

difference played in his childhood and early adulthood prior to his arrival in Paris.

As well as being influenced by Baudelaire, Rilke was also an adept reader of Georg Simmel, author of the famous essay on »Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben« (1903). In Simmel's account, modern city-dwellers are constantly exposed to a rapid succession of visual and auditory stimuli and in turn are prompted to create psychic defence mechanisms in order to protect themselves against the potentially overbearing power of such stimuli and the possibility of a psychic breakdown. Simmel theorises the urban experience as traveling between the two poles of attraction and alienation, fascination and repulsion, entrancement and destabilisation. In this context, Simmel introduces the notion of *Verkehrsleben* as a general term for living in the modern metropolis. The term encompasses not just the psychic »traffic« and conflict that individuals may experience when confronted with the material reality of the metropolis, but the new forms of economic, social and financial exchange as well.<sup>3</sup> If individual and social life in the city takes the form of *Verkehr*, then the old distinctions between inner and outer, subject and object are beginning to evaporate. The extract from Rilke's *Malte* provided an instructive example of this, though some of Kafka's earliest published prose writings, such as »Der Fahrgast« and »Die Abweisung« (from *Betrachtung*, 1912) are similarly instructive for their depiction of male anomie in relation to a traffic situation.<sup>4</sup> For Simmel, the modern *Verkehrsleben* consists in new cultures of movement and mobility, which manifest themselves, on the one hand, in a disturbingly immediate kind of experience, and on the other, in abstract forms of organisation (e. g. of the management of traffic flows of various kinds). These cultures come to the fore especially on the city's transport and communication lines, taking the form of human and vehicular traffic as well as the circulation of images, goods and objects.

This essay has so far attempted to situate *Verkehr* historically, as a phenomenon of urban modernity, and structurally, as a social form which affects human experience in fundamentally new ways. In addition, I propose to regard *Verkehr* as a textual form as well, as a mode whereby literary texts capture something of modernity's immense mobility and circulation. If Expressionist texts participate in these mobile kinds of urban *Verkehrsleben*, then their textual form may suggest how images, discourses and ideas about gender are »trafficked«, thrown into circulation, and at the same time, become *verkehrt* (literally: turned on their head), with their usual meaning becoming inverted or subverted. This is a

---

3 Simmel, *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben*, in: Kramme et. al. (eds), p. 123. The term *Verkehrsleben* recurs several times in Simmel's essay.

4 Kafka, *Ein Landarzt und andere Drucke zu Lebzeiten*, pp. 26–28.

proposal, then, to read Expressionist prose writings on the traffic / gender interface as revealing something, not about the auto-deconstructive nature of texts, but about the cultural poetics of urban Modernism. It is perhaps no accident that the tropes of »traffic« and »circulation« are resonant of a key way in which New Historicism constructs literary and cultural history, looking to the circulation of images, metaphors and discourses to investigate »how collective beliefs and experiences were shaped, moved from one medium to another«.<sup>5</sup> Literary texts, too, traffic images, ideas and assumptions, and in tracking the various configurations of traffic and gender in the Expressionist imagination, we might be able to discover more mobile and shifting gender constructions than are conventionally attributed to Expressionism.

Within that broader historical and social framework, the new mobility associated with *Verkehr* became gendered in different ways. The Italian Futurists, who noisily arrived in Berlin in the spring of 1912, offered a masculinist blueprint for the violent revolution of art and culture to be based on the intoxicating experience of speed. Driving a car, and later on: piloting an aeroplane, became associated with transgressing the boundaries of the human and inevitably: male body and with energising or animating the abstract power of the machine. The Expressionists, although they shared the Futurist celebration of speed and violence, and certainly adopted some of their provocative hyperbolism, were much more ambivalent about the prospect of a wholesale mechanisation of life and the potentially liberating powers of mobility.

For most Expressionists, the new social form of *Verkehr* was – like the broader phenomenon of the modern metropolis and its new experiences – cause for both fascination and repulsion. Some saw the new *Verkehrsleben* of the big city as symptoms of a superficiality and a debasement of spiritual values, while others embraced traffic as an emblem of a dynamic modernity and celebrated its potential for engendering a reinvigorated, more authentic life. In addition, these polarised stances became gendered: on the one hand, the weakening and standardisation of individual life was associated with the feminine, via key discourses such as neurasthenia and hysteria; on the other, the slim possibility of individual transgression and indeed a deeper penetration of the new material and psychic reality was almost invariably gendered as powerfully male / masculine. Specific value was attached to the motorcar, which to this day has remained emblematic of an individualistic, quasi-private form of mobility. The feminist writer Marie Holzer, who was a contributor to Franz Pfemfert's Expressionist journal *Die Aktion*, specifically associated the motorcar with anarchism, with the idea of a progressive breaking-down of old society:

---

5 Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, p. 5.

Das Automobil ist der Anarchist unter den Gefährten. Es rast, Schrecken verbreitend, durch die Welt, losgelöst von althergebrachten Gesetzen. Kein Schienenstrang schreibt ihm die Wege vor; keine Pferdelunge zwingt ihn zu einem vorgeschriebenen Tempo [...] Es ist der Herr der unbegrenzten Möglichkeiten.

Embodying both individual will and vitalist power, the car becomes a vehicle of individual freedom and social revolution.

Es [das Automobil, A.K.] ist die Versinnbildlichung des Gedankens, der keine Wege braucht, keine Radabweiser, keine Bahnschranken, Leuchtkörper, Wächterhäuser, Stationen, Fahrpläne; es bahnt sich einen Weg mitten durch das alltägliche Getriebe, über Marktplätze, Straßen, zwischen Spaziergängern und an Leiterwagen vorbei, immer vorbei seinem weiten Ziele entgegen.<sup>6</sup>

Holzer's motor-car occupies a curious time-space. It need not follow any particular route, nor is it synchronised to the rhythms of the road or a railway track. As a quasi-private form of mobility, it operates in individualistic, instantaneous time, rather than conform to the timetabling of other forms of transport. Driving here becomes a metaphor for taking the road to freedom from social order and external authority. Written at a time when the number of accidents caused by motorcars led to calls for the regulation of motorized traffic through signage and speed limits, Holzer's text celebrates the transgressive power of the individual in violating social norms, and although the motorcar in this text is curiously lacking in detail about the driver (the text only once refers to an abstract »Lenker«), Holzer's anarchic drive may be constructed as a feminist intervention against the dictates of patriarchal authority. In other contributions to *Die Aktion* Holzer consistently criticised the discrepancy between the needs of modern women and what patriarchal society is prepared to grant them.<sup>7</sup>

In its progressive and indeed utopian thrust, Holzer's text contains a number of lapses which render it more problematic. One such lapse can be identified in the word *Getriebe*, which denotes not just the hustle and bustle of urban life, but the car's gear-box as well. Playing on the two meanings, Holzer, like Simmel, seems to render modern *Verkehrsleben* as a form of abstract organization. At the same time, however, she envisages the anonymised drive in the motor-car as a way out of that empty, lifeless form. The German term, however, suggests also *Triebe*, which indicates the working also of drives on a more sub-

---

<sup>6</sup> Holzer, *Das Automobil*.

<sup>7</sup> Holzer's writings are discussed in Müller, *Gefährliche Fahrten: Das Automobil in Literatur und Film um 1900*, pp. 104–08.

conscious level. Traveling through modernity, then, with the mobility both granted and constricted by the *Verkehrslieben*, individual needs and desires have to be negotiated as well. Such equivocations and resonances as here in Holzer's essay may suggest something of the upside-down nature of *Verkehr* as a social and textual form.

Carl Sternheim's story »Busekow« (1913) is a traffic text in the moderately satirical mode. Sternheim's eponymous character is middle-aged, stuck in a loveless, childless marriage. Having been rejected by the army on account of his puny physique and his short-sightedness, he fulfills his royalist enthusiasm as a traffic policeman working on one of Berlin's busiest squares. Having just avoided a collision between a motorised bus and a milk cart, he encounters a young prostitute called Gesine. This encounter leads to a lasting relationship, and he is beginning to gain in confidence and vitality. His promotion to sergeant, significantly on the Kaiser's birthday, coincides with him learning about Gesine's pregnancy, and he celebrates both events with a rousing rendition of the Prussian anthem. Seconded to direct the traffic in front of the Royal Theatre, he arrives to work still in ecstatic mood and becomes lost in reverie in which he relives the events of the previous night. The story ends with his being knocked down by a car:

Dann plötzlich, als ein Rufen in der Menge scholl, hob Begeisterung ihn gegen die Wolken. [...] Man sah, wie er die Arme mit herrlicher Gebärde gen Osten rundete, hörte aus seinem Munde einen siegreichen Schrei – und hob ihn unter einem Automobil herauf, das sanft anfahrend ihn schnell getötet hatte.<sup>8</sup>

*Verkehr*, then, turns out to be a key trope in Sternheim's story as it first enables, then puts an end to, Busekow's obsession with order and loyalty. Sternheim's text suggests an affinity between the forms of vehicular traffic that is Busekow's job to regulate, and the forms of human »traffic« or intercourse which both invite and resist regulation. This affinity ultimately undoes his authority at the very moment he thinks it is at its highest. In this latter category of traffic, Sternheim alludes to the theme of sexual intercourse; the German word for sexual intercourse is, after all, *Geschlechtsverkehr*. In his portrayal of Gesine and Busekow's wife, Sternheim deploys the stereotypically male strategy of splitting »woman« between the poles of asexual, infertile wife and sexualised prostitute. There's also the extended metaphor of money or *Kapital*. The three main protagonists are of course part of modernity's circulation of money – the wife brought into the marriage a great deal of money which enables her to assert

---

8 Sternheim, Busekow, p. 26.



emotional power over him; the myopic policeman used his emasculated vision to capitalise on observing urban traffic; and Gesine, romantically, is free from financial worries and no money ever changes hands between the two. In a sense, then, *Verkehr* in this text also turns things upside down. Much as the notion of the loyal Prussian state official is sent up, the traffic warden is unable to regulate other notions of *Verkehr* that affect his mundane life, and what Sternheim's anti-hero perceives as a quasi-religious form of ecstasy and transgression, turns out to be devoid of any redeeming quality. Another inversion concerns the male gaze and the gendered structure of scopic desire. Far from being the powerful tool of male authority, both privately and publicly, it becomes *verkehrt* as Busekow desires, yet is unable to »invest« metaphorical capital in Gesine, and much of the »capital« (in a pun on »caput«, head) is transferred onto Gesine. As a result, Sternheim tentatively questions conventional ideas of masculinity, marriage and patriarchal order and presents them as being undone by the three aspects of *Verkehr*. In literary-historical terms, Sternheim's text may also be one of the first to highlight the theme of traffic control, its desirability and its impossibility. This theme will become a prominent trope in the literature and intellectual debate of the Weimar Republic, when it will cover positions from Jünger to Döblin, from the right to left, and provide a generalized model of critiquing the structure of modernity.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to Sternheim's satire, Robert Müller's story *Irmelin Rose. Die Mythe der großen Stadt* (1914)<sup>10</sup> treats gender traffic in more disconcerting ways. The first section, entitled »Der Garten«, tells of the sheltered life the female protagonist Anna and her partner, a gardener, lead in their rural idyll away from the big city. Given to reading and day-dreaming, Anna imagines herself as Irmelin Rose, the eponymous princess of a neo-Romantic fairy-tale by the fin-de-siècle writer Jens Peter Jacobsen. However, Anna is aware of the existence of another »world« epitomized by the big city which is attracting her: »jenseits des Bretterzaunes gab es ja auch noch eine Welt, die began bunt zu werden und zu locken [...] Es gab große, lebhaftige Straßen, es roch nach Menschen.«<sup>11</sup> As a result, the couple decide to visit the big city, against her husband's warning that the city will corrupt her.<sup>12</sup> The next section of the story presents the couple's confrontation with the reality of urban *Verkehr*:

---

9 Cf. Lethen, *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte: Lebensversuche zwischen den Kriegen*, pp. 44–49. Adopting Lethen's approach, Johannes Roskothen has produced *Verkehr: Zu einer poetischen Theorie der Moderne*. In its ambition to de-periodise and develop a modernist »genealogy of traffic«, Roskothen largely overlooks creative writings from the Expressionist period.

10 Magill (ed.), *Irmelin Rose und andere verstreute Texte (= IR)*, pp. 7–52. Cf. Roskothen's somewhat scattered commentary on Müller's story, in *Verkehr*, pp. 45–51.

11 IR, p. 12.

12 IR, p. 26.

Es war Nachmittag. Die Stadt zeigte bereits das Gepränge technisch bewaffneten Verkehrs, gehoben durch die wirkungsvollen Stauungen eines untätigen Luxus. Die Zeit schien zu rasen [...] Wer hier nicht mittat, wer nicht darum wußte, der war ein Ausgestoßener.<sup>13</sup>

Accidentally stepping onto the road, Anna is almost caught by a motor car, which the text presents as a »fauchendes Ungetüm«. <sup>14</sup> Her momentary lapse of attention is dealt with at some length, reinforcing the significance of an event which disrupts the smooth flow of human and vehicular traffic. The final part of the story – entitled »Geheimnis der Stadt« – takes the shopping trip to a horrific finale in which the couple are penalized for their inability to adapt to the realities of urban *Verkehr*. Having purchased a red scarf she had seen in one of the shop windows, Anna is once more separated from her male companion. This time, however, she does not escape the traffic. She is hit by an electric streetcar and in front of a crowd of onlookers, slowly dies. Rushing to help her, her companion becomes entangled under the wheels of an electric streetcar and dies also.

The dangerous lure of urban *Verkehrslieben* is suggested right at the beginning of the final section when the couple are made to compulsively repeat their shopping trip on the next day and become subject to an anonymous collective gaze: »Am nächsten Vormittage erschien ein absonderliches Paar auf den Trottoirs der Hauptverkehrsader der Stadt.« <sup>15</sup> As the section progresses, however, the text focuses more and more on Anna, marginalising her male companion. Exposed to the multitude of isolated impressions and unable to form a coherent narrative, Anna is clearly affected by the »increase in nervous life« that Simmel had analyzed in the city-dweller. In Müller's story, this kind of nervous stimulation is predominantly derived from Anna's window-shopping, from her desirous female gaze at the commodities on display. This mobile visuality is in turn figured as a cycle of attraction and expulsion. Cast in the role of the female *flâneur*, Anna is subject to all sorts of psychic displacements. <sup>16</sup> Her own gaze at the shop-windows renders the products almost cinematic: »In den Auslagen wuchsen herrliche Dinge«, <sup>17</sup> and it's perhaps not too fanciful to read the adjective »herrlich« as a reference also to the masculinist construction of, and male mastery over, the capitalist cycle of desire to which the female window-shopper

---

13 IR, pp. 31–32.

14 IR, p. 38.

15 IR, p. 39.

16 Cf. Anne Friedberg's notion of female *flânerie* as a trope to trace changes in visual representation and aesthetic experience: Friedberg, *Window-Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*.

17 IR, p. 43.

willingly submits. It is here that desire becomes *verkehrt*, twisted and turned upside down, as Anna's response to the goods on display in the shop windows takes the form of a series of physical and psychic shocks: »Man mußte von vorne beginnen und immer wieder staunen, angenehm erschreckt und seltsam berührt«.18 Anna is the victim of compulsive entrancement and violent de-ramentation at the same time. Another psychic effect of this scopic desire is when Anna imagines one of the mannequins coming alive, wishing to befriend and protect them – an ironic reprise of the Romantic motif of the mechanical doll and a perversion of her maternal instincts. And finally, Anna's gaze at a shop-window becomes also a reflection of the pedestrian traffic behind her: »Das Glas überzog sich mit feinem Dampfe und spiegelte. Hinter den Scheiben bewegte sich ein gespenstiger Zug körperloser Gestalten. Mitten in diesen Leibern lebten plötzlich Gegenstände auf«.19 Further reinforcing the link between a destabilising female *flânerie* and urban *Verkehrslieben*, the city itself is figured as a gigantic shop-window, a *Schaufenster*, where traffic is on exhibitionist display and attracts voyeuristic desire. This uncanny experience of splitting and doubling suggests something of the perverse *Getriebe* (to take up Marie Holzer's term), the transmission and circulation of subconscious desires in the public arena of capitalism.

Adopting the Modernist trope of »window-shopping«, Müller's depiction of female *flânerie* ultimately turns against its protagonists whose death becomes a public spectacle. The constant demand for mobility in urban life is not only a self-fulfilling prophecy, but becomes devastating and moves beyond human control. Unlike in Sternheim's story, there is no attempt at traffic regulation. Traffic in Müller's story becomes an abstract, dehumanizing structure, in which pedestrian and vehicular traffic is aligned with the traffic of capitalist desire and the undoing of the female psyche. The general structure of traffic is, for Müller, nothing more and nothing less than a »dichter verwegener Knoten von Nervensystemen«.20 It is this knot which constitutes the new »myth« of the big city. The couple's death is a particularly gruesome version of Expressionist *Ich-Dissoziation*, staged here as a destruction of the human body by the dehumanizing force of traffic:

---

18 Ibid.

19 IR, p. 40.

20 IR, p. 38.

Sein [des Gärtners] mächtiger Körper sah jetzt viel kleiner aus, er lag schlaff und eingeschrumpft. Die kindlich weißen, verbluteten Schenkel des Mädchens, entblößt unter der weißen und weggezerrten Wäsche, waren hochzeitlich geöffnet.<sup>21</sup>

There's nothing here of Sternheim's suggestion of euphoria at the moment of death. Instead, the streetcar's impact has positioned the female body in mock-readiness for a kind of sexual »Verkehr«, a symbolic rape, while rendering the male body (in an obvious allusion to its weakened phallic power) limp and useless. It's likely that Müller was familiar with Freud's proposition whereby dreams about »Überfahrenwerden« were symbolic of »sexuellen Verkehr«.<sup>22</sup> Müller's version, however, apart from being disconcertingly literal, situates such a wish within a more pervasive structure of inescapable needs and desires.

In Müller's urban story, then, *Verkehr* makes itself felt on a psychosomatic level. Müller's big-city myth, as the subtitle has it, is thus akin to another account of modernity as a mythic structure. In his studies on Baudelaire, which form part of his *Passagen-Werk*, Walter Benjamin describes moving through traffic in similar psychosomatic terms:

Durch ihn [i. e. den Verkehr in der großen Stadt, A.K.] sich zu bewegen, bedingt für den einzelnen eine Folge von Chocks und Kollisionen: An den gefährlichen Kreuzungspunkten durchzucken ihn, gleich Stößen einer Batterie, Innervationen in rascher Folge. Baudelaire spricht von dem Mann, der in die Menge eintaucht wie in ein Reservoir elektrischer Energie.<sup>23</sup>

In Müller's story, it is a female body which is expelled by the crowd, rather than a male body who immerses in the crowd. Baudelaire's formulation »reservoir of electric energy« takes a more sinister turn in Müller, as it is under the wheels of an electric streetcar that Anna's body perishes, with the collision producing indeed, as in Benjamin's coy paraphrase of Baudelaire, slow jerking movements symbolic of sexual intercourse.

Gender traffic takes another turn in the writings of René Schickele. Having worked as a political journalist in Paris and as editor-in-chief of the liberal *Straßburger Neue Zeitung*, Schickele described political reportage as a form of »Automobilismus in der Literatur«.<sup>24</sup> This statement suggests an analogy, an affinity even between vehicular traffic and the modernization of literary forms. It is precisely this kind of literary automobilism that characterizes Schickele's

---

21 IR, pp. 51–52.

22 Freud, *Die Traumdeutung* [1900], pp. 363–65.

23 Benjamin, *Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire* [1939], pp. 207–08.

24 Schickele, *Schreie auf dem Boulevard*, p. 23.

novella *Benkal der Frauentröster* (1913), whose very title indicates its topicality for the present discussion. In this anti-realist prose, an experimental take on the *Künstlerroman*, Schickele charts the career of his eponymous protagonist from social outsider to political prisoner to celebrated artist, whose large abstract sculptures cause a stir and defy any contemplative reception. Yet despite his apparent transformation to artist, he remains prone to self-destructive acts. Benkal surrounds himself with women, who become his inspiration for his art – and inevitably turn out to be less perfect than the artwork they inspire him to create. Although centered on the male artist, the text explores female expressivity as well, through the figures of Ij, the dancer, and Gugu, a free spirit, who both become his lovers; then also of Kru, Benkal's wife, and the maternal figures of Wan and Hahna, who are immortalized in Benkal's sculptures. In fact, Schickele's colleague Ernst Stadler described the focus of the novella as gradually shifting, with Benkal no more than a mirror to the various women's stories, and the novella as a whole becoming a »klingender, vielstimmiger Hymnus auf die Frau«. <sup>25</sup>

In Schickele's novella, automobility comes to link the text's gender politics and its artistic politics. It is through this link that the text counters the stereotyping of Benkal's women as muses, mothers and lovers. The following excerpt sketches Benkal and Ij's high speed car journeys to a bar in which Ij is due to perform. Drawing on Baudelairean and Futurist ideas and fantasies, it is representative of the way that Schickele connects high-speed driving with ecstatic violence and artistic creativity:

Es waren rasende Fahrten durch mondhelle Nächte, wo die Dörfer, ein Räuberhaufen, sich ihnen entgegenwarfen; nach einem Zusammenprall, der das Herz mit kalten Schauern überrann, stoben die Häuser auseinander... [...] Und Benkal griff sie wie eine Beute, hob sie zu sich, hielt sie da... [...] Sie flogen geduckt, mit allen Fibern in einander verwachsen, auf und ab, schrankenlos mitbebend in der großen Gewalt ...

»Ij!«

Benkal riß sie auf den Boden des Wagens, er mußte sie umarmen, ihre Wärme spüren, sie küßten einander, zu einem Knäuel verstrickt, mit kurzen, zehrenden Bissen. <sup>26</sup>

The sensation of traveling at high speed creates a powerful restructuring of time and space and impacts on the gendering of selves. Again, as in Müller's story, it is a mobile, accelerated vision which leads to acts of violence and transgression

---

<sup>25</sup> Stadler, »Benkal, der Frauentröster«.

<sup>26</sup> Schickele, *Benkal, der Frauentröster*, pp. 109–10.

(»das von Vergewaltigungen vergrößerte Auge«),<sup>27</sup> first within the cocoon of the car and later in the public arena of performance and creativity. The long-recognised libidinal powers of driving and being driven are given here an additional twist. Furthermore, driving is presented here as a struggle against nature, as the landscape that is traveled through at speed, becomes transformed into a stormy sea. Such an image of nature's violence in turn triggers even greater violence emanating from, and acting within, the man / woman / car matrix. As Julie Meyer has observed, Schickele seems to oscillate here between the two poles of asserting the male artist's supremacy over the female co-artists and muse, and of an activist conception of the artist which transcends gender hierarchies and psychological determinism.<sup>28</sup> In such moments the text suggests a momentary undoing of gender fixity, a de-individuation.

Far from sharing Sternheim or Müller's satiric and grotesque hyperbole, Schickele equates the elementary power of vehicular and sexual *Verkehr* with expressive art. Such nocturnal drives are to events where Benkal's women are made to perform their art, singing or dancing, which depend on an audience. By the same token, following these excursions, Benkal's creativity is inevitably at its peak and he creates sculptures that are expressive of the allegorical country's matriarchal past. Unlike in Marinetti's »Founding and Manifesto of Futurism«, for example, where high-speed driving and willful destruction is the domain of an exclusively male clique attracted to the sexual allure of speed, Schickele inserts a female body artist into the scene. In this sense the novella's ending is apposite as it dispatches Benkal from the scene and shows Gugu, his most recent lover, taking the wheel to drive off at speed. Such an ending suggests the possibility of a Marie Holzer-style liberation through anarchic female auto-performance.

A more extravagant version of the kind of gender traffic I'm interested in, is provided by Else Lasker-Schüler. Her literary and social performances, often in ethnic and transgender drag, trade on a range of male and female identities. They serve to combine and complicate categories of gender, suggesting modes of identity as theorized by Judith Butler, namely as »gendering« and doing, and resulting in a more plural self than that imposed or tolerated by patriarchal society. Such performances were staged either in the café, which Lasker-Schüler called the *Zigeunerkarren*,<sup>29</sup> a temporary place for the placement and displace-

---

27 Ibid.

28 Meyer, *Vom elsässischen Kunstfrühling zur utopischen Civitas Hominum: Jugendstil und Expressionismus bei René Schickele*, pp. 202–03.

29 Lasker-Schüler, *Mein Herz. Ein Liebes-Roman mit Bildern und wirklich lebenden Menschen* [1912] (= MH), p. 31.

ment of the ethnically Others, subject to enforced mobility, or on the streets of Berlin, and much of her »verstreute Prosa« (scattered and distracted prose) features travelers, nomads and chance encounters on the streets and squares of Berlin, indicating anti-bourgeois as well as more mobile and shifting identities. In a more sustained group of texts, the epistolary novel, *Mein Herz* (first serialized in her husband Herwarth Walden's *Der Sturm* as »Briefe nach Norwegen«), she conflates her own body / physiognomy with that of the city so that »my heart« often becomes that of the pulsating metropolis Berlin. A particularly interesting performative gesture in our context is her use of Berlin's Hoch- und Untergrundbahn, the municipal elevated and underground railway, which had first opened just after the turn of the century and was being massively expanded in the years before the First World War. In *Mein Herz* Lasker-Schüler frequently engages in a metonymical play that inserts the female body into the urban transportation networks. In a particularly resonant scene, she describes the interred condition of the underground travelers and deduces her own melancholic and displaced condition from her traveling with all those »Maulwürfen«. »Ich such nun immer suggestiv nach der hypochondrischen, erdfarbenen Linie in meinem Gesicht – über Knie-Görlitzer Bahnhof.«<sup>30</sup> The underground line alluded to here, was actually represented as an earth-coloured line on contemporary network maps, and it did have a station stop bearing the suggestive name *Knie* (today's Ernst-Reuter-Platz), to indicate a bend in the line. Herself being earth-coloured (»Ich habe selbst schon eine Erdfarbe bekommen«), the melancholy subject projects herself onto the image of the network, the representation of the railway line. It is possible to read this – and numerous other projections of the self onto the transport system – as images of perpetual homelessness, of urban *anomie*.

With regard to gender, however, Lasker-Schüler's acts of performance resonate with Judith Butler's critique of categories of gender and embrace gender as a »practice of improvisation with a scene of constraint«.<sup>31</sup> The Expressionist author's writings at once embody the repetitive power of urban behaviour that supports dominant ideologies, and at the same time they open up an element of critical distance towards the contradictions that those kinds of prescriptive performances conceal. Furthermore, being in transit, within a mobile »scene of constraint«, the gendered self derives new metaphorical energies and can reverse the relation between above and below, individual and crowd, city and

---

30 MH, p. 80. The word »hypochondrischen« refers in the context to the (auto-)suggestion of her looking ill, but also to the *hypochondria*, the soft area below the ribs which had long been considered the seat of melancholia.

31 Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 1. For a persuasive reading of this and other textual performances in Lasker-Schüler, see Webber, *Inside Out: Acts of Displacement in Else Lasker-Schüler*.

nature, throughout using *Verkehr* as a trope to achieve this kind of *verkehren*. Examples in the scene referred to here, are the discovery of a »lachendes Plakat unten im Erdfoyer der Hochbahn« and of flora encroaching onto the railway infrastructure, suggesting metonymically: »das steinerne, harte Herz Berlins rührt sich«. <sup>32</sup> If Lasker-Schüler's prose is indicative of a performative turn of urban writing, then the topical link between gender and traffic becomes, literally, a tropos, a turn, a bendy kind of rhetorical device.

This topical link returns within Berlin Dada. Highly critical of Expressionism's attempt to resist the increasing mechanisation of life and to »recover« a vital essence beneath the levelling effect of modernity, Berlin Dada was precisely attracted by that process of mechanization. The trope of *Verkehr* would here become a supreme signifier of modernity's dynamic qualities. Moreover, in a provocative gesture towards Expressionism, Dada regarded mechanized *Verkehr* as a token of vitality as well. As Hanne Bergius has suggested, the wheel, a key component of machinic modernity and vehicular traffic, would become for Berlin Dada an important symbol of Dionysian excess and transgression. <sup>33</sup> Beyond the iconography, however, Dada embraced *Verkehr* also as a (self-)subversive trope that was perfect for a cultural movement thriving on paradox and contradiction.

The symbolic quality of *Verkehr* as well as its topical link with gender are both found in Richard Huelsenbeck's satirical novella *Doctor Billig am Ende* (1921). The novella charts the progressive decline of its eponymous anti-protagonist from middle-class professional to thief, pimp, gang-leader and racketeer who profits from economic instability in post-war Germany. His name, the German word for »cheap«, symbolically implicates him into the capitalist economy. In addition, there is a moral dimension of *billig*, in the sense of »proper« or »reasonable« which Huelsenbeck subverts with relish. His decidedly improper, if not downright criminal behaviour opens up a different kind of vitality, suggesting a Nietzschean liberation from the shackles of bourgeois masculinity. In this context, traffic takes on a more universal aspect, as the mechanical *Getriebe* of urban life and the psychic economy attached to it, are being irreverently and cynically transgressed. As in Sternheim's story, it is a prostitute who embodies this. Down and out in Berlin, on his last few pennies, Dr Billig glimpses a car which he thinks transports his former lover:

---

<sup>32</sup> MH, p. 80.

<sup>33</sup> Bergius, *Montage und Metamechanik: Dada Berlin, Artistik von Polaritäten*, pp. 112–29.



[...] als er in einem schnell vorbeifahrenden Wagen ein Weib sah mit großem Hut, eleganter Toilette und einem Gesicht, einem Gesicht – »Margot«, schrie er wie wahnsinnig – »Margot!«

Sie mußte es gewesen sein. Sie hatte ihn angelächelt und sie würde ihn retten können; im Augenblick sah er sich als eleganten und wohlhabenden Mann dieser Frau.

»Margot« –

Die Leute blieben stehen.

Er stolperte hinter dem Wagen her, fiel aufs Gesicht und schlug sich den Schädel auf. Eilig kamen zwei Menschen und schafften ihn auf einem Schiebkarren ins Krankenhaus.<sup>34</sup>

His fantasy of achieving »salvation« by glimpsing Margot and consequently being re-inserted into the middle-class is of course deluded, *verkehrt*. Having been knocked down by the car, the dead body of the »Schieber« (racketeer) Dr Billig is man-handled and loaded onto a »Schiebkarren« (wheelbarrow). In many ways *verkehrt*, perverted from his social, gender and moral identity, he has become a victim of urban *Verkehr*.

As a new social form, traffic is one of the powerful emblems of accelerated modernity. In the prose writings examined here, the treatment of traffic is closely bound up with some of the cultural attributes attached to men and women who are moving through modernity. Their masculinities and femininities are always situated with complex social, cultural and historical forces, and I've attempted to identify some of the forces that are at work in these texts. In these prose texts, under the condition of urban *Verkehr*, male and female bodies become sites of vision, attraction and circulation, and more often than not, they also become the subject of violent fantasies. Taken as a textual form, though, *Verkehr* functions also as a rhetorical trope, a figure of movement, and enables us to track in more dialectical fashion, some counter-forces also at work in these texts. As we saw, the trope of *Verkehr* certainly engages with the essentialist assumptions on which so much gender discourse is based, and some of our traffic writings may question the hierarchy of male over female, and related dichotomies such as strong and weak, active and passive, rational and irrational. Although there are stereotypical presentations of masculine transgression and feminine suffering, there are moments in some of the texts which point to a transformation of the basis on which gender hierarchies are operated, and which suggest less stable, more mobile kinds of femininities and masculinities, particularly when combined with artistic performance.

---

34 Huelsenbeck, Doctor Billig am Ende [1921], p. 133.

Perhaps the most famous performance of this kind is in Kafka's »Das Urteil« (written 1912), in which Georg Bendemann is presented as an ambivalent male, his masculinity cast as flexible and (*nomen est omen*) »bendy«. This story, both a psychic case history as well as a pseudo-legal case, culminates in Georg's own fall from a bridge, thereby carrying out his father's sentence to death by drowning. »In diesem Augenblick ging über die Brücke ein geradezu unendlicher Verkehr«. <sup>35</sup> The unlimited traffic with which Kafka ends his story, not only drowns out Georg's fall, returning him to the »Verkehr« of unindividuated existence, it metaphorically alerts us to the fact that Georg's case has become profoundly *verkehr*t, from the grotesque misalignment of the more internal, psychic forces (his desire to become a »man«, a husband and a businessman to replace his father) to the more external, social and quasi-legal forces embodied in his father. Here as in the other pieces under scrutiny here, social and textual forms of *Verkehr*, and the topical links between *Verkehr* and gender do encourage the reader to participate in that never-ending traffic of textual and social meaning.

---

35 Kafka, *Das Urteil*, p. 52. For an instructive reading of the story, see Kanz, *Differente Männlichkeiten*.