Visions in the Crowd: Gendering the Masses in Interwar German Art

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In Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s 1914 painting Friedrichstrasse [Friedrich Street], two slender women walk across the street towards the viewer (Fig. 1). A dog howls to the sky, while a car speeds past it and the night refracts the electric lights of Berlin, a city that never sleeps. A third woman appears behind the two main figures, and a shadow on the far left-hand side suggests the presence of a fourth woman. The two women in the foreground meet the viewer’s gaze, and their self-confident, almost provocative poses imply that they are sex workers. Cold blue and black hues make them look like shadows, and the fragmented lines and angular forms that shape their figures convey a sense of aggressiveness. Like Kirchner’s other street scenes painted between 1913 and 1915, Friedrichstrasse encapsulates the themes of the femme fatale and the dazzling metropolis.¹

Indeed, the prostitutes’ haunting looks, monumental size, and centrality to the composition have made them the protagonists of this work in many art historical accounts.² The figures behind them are dwarfed in comparison. They highlight the prostitutes’ towering presence, emphasize their domination of the street, and imitate their forward movement. Through the pictorial duplication of the streetwalkers’ limbs, the artist imbues them with a sense of dynamism that recalls Marcel Duchamp’s 1912 Nude Descending a Staircase or the works of the Italian Futurists. This repetition emphasizes the menace posed by the two main women, who walk erectly and confrontationally with ineluctable momentum.

However, upon closer inspection the figures in the background are not so much formal echoes of the women’s movement as evocations of male passersby. Their top hats, black suits, and rigid white collars identify them as urban men, who are either intentionally following the women or simply reveling in Berlin’s nightlife. This visual effect of reverberation serves to situate Kirchner’s representation of a dangerous female sexuality within the realm of the urban masses. Both the density and homogeneity of the background figures evoke a metropolitan crowd.

Kirchner’s jagged and loose brushstrokes, which he uses to depict both the foreground and the background figures, reduce all of their forms to an undifferentiated mass. Their formal affinity echoes German non-fiction writer Elias Canetti’s notion of the disintegrating crowd, in which “the individual feels that he is transcending the limits of his own person.”³ Consistent
Fig. 1. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Friedrichstrasse* [Friedrich Street], 1914, oil on canvas, 49 1/5 x 35 4/5 in. (125 x 91 cm), Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart. Photo credit: bpk Bildagentur / Staatsgalerie / Art Resource, NY.
with Canetti’s description of the urban crowd as a realm that suppresses individuality, the two women in the foreground of Kirchner’s painting not only have the same facial features and fashionable garments, but also appear to share a body, such that their welded figures form a dicephalous monster. Similarly, the people behind them fuse into a dark cluster devoid of any personalized traits. The further they recede into the background, the more their faces become ghostly dashes and their clothes lose any gender-specific character: the distinction between feathered bonnets and top hats, or between furry coats and masculine suits, gradually blurs. The passersby’s long legs and pointed heads are almost identical, suggesting that Kirchner’s anxiety about the metropolis stemmed from its potential to subsume individuals into a leveling multitude.

Kirchner’s evocation of an overwhelming urban crowd alongside the gendered bodies of the prostitutes goes well beyond the artist’s troubled relation with both women and urban modernity. Indeed, Friedrichstrasse exemplifies a trend that recurs with disturbing frequency in paintings, drawings, films, and photomontages produced by German artists during the Weimar Republic. Many of these images explore the relationship between women and crowds, often characterizing them as mutually dependent social groups with equally negative connotations. In this essay, I argue that visual representations of the masses produced in Germany between the two World Wars consistently incorporated female figures and gendered attributes in order to underscore the instability and irrationality of crowds. By analyzing four works in different media, I demonstrate that Weimar-era depictions of the crowd utilized gendered imagery to portray the masses as alternately uncontrollable and manipulable—connotations that clashed with Weimar women’s newly gained right to vote.

Alongside Kirchner’s Friedrichstrasse, I will explore works by George Grosz, Walter Ruttmann, and László Moholy-Nagy, all of which point to a broader phenomenon that pervades the cultural politics of the Weimar Republic, namely the feminization of the urban masses. That all four artists depicted the urban masses is noteworthy, both visually and ideologically, and much has been written about Kirchner’s and Grosz’s numerous crowded street scenes and Ruttmann’s and Moholy-Nagy’s use of technology to introduce new modes of seeing to the masses. What has not been thoroughly explored in art historical scholarship is the gendered character with which Kirchner, Grosz, Ruttmann, and Moholy-Nagy invested the masses. In what follows, I analyze these artists’ compositional, stylistic, and technical strategies for depicting two fluid notions: femininity and crowds. Femininity encompasses a variety of stereotypes, from the fallen woman with her insatiably sexual appetite to the demure wife who defers to male authority. Crowds are conceptually unstable, because they are composed of single subjects whose individuality is subsumed by the multitude.
My case studies show the pervasiveness of similar gender stereotypes across drastically different media and throughout the Weimar Republic (1918 – 1933), a period characterized by urban expansion, social turmoil, and increasingly fluid gender roles. By analyzing works that vary not only in their materiality and technique, but also in their aesthetics and politics, I demonstrate the prevalence of the feminized masses as a trope in Weimar imagery. This thematic lens allows me to expose the multifaceted ways in which the artists under consideration each sought to revendicate modern experience as a masculine prerogative threatened by allegedly feminine forces, despite their different media and viewpoints. Far from providing a comprehensive survey of the gendered crowd in interwar German art, this essay provides a framework for assessing other artworks that exhibit gender bias in their depictions of the social texture of Weimar modernity.

Studies like Patrice Petro’s *Joyless Streets* (1989), Janet Ward’s *Weimar Surfaces* (2001), and Bern Widdig’s *Culture and Inflation in Weimar Germany* (2001), among others, investigate the representational devices through which the female body became the predominant site for structuring, negotiating, and visualizing the tensions and anxieties related to the phenomenon of the masses. Weimar modernity was articulated through gendered terms in various aspects of culture, ranging from shop windows and advertising to literature and philosophy, which rendered the issues of urban migration, mass consumption, and women’s economic emancipation conceptually and visually inextricable from one another. The ways in which interwar German artists adopted avant-garde techniques and innovative media to produce feminized images of the masses deserve close analysis.

As Petro, Ward, and Widdig recognize, the relation between femininity and urban crowds is particularly relevant given the centrality of the masses to German aesthetics, politics, and economics between the two World Wars. The rapid industrialization of Berlin and other German cities resulted in the vertiginous growth of metropolitan populations, forcing Germans to renegotiate their ideas about the role and importance of the individual vis-à-vis public space. Indeed, the question of whose bodies constituted the body politic acquired exceptional urgency after the successful campaign for women’s suffrage in 1918 and the socialist uprisings of 1919. This renegotiation pervaded the works of German artists from the inception of the First World War to the consolidation of Nazi power, and it persistently drew on the distinctions between mass and individual, femininity and masculinity. These distinctions produced a discourse through which modernity was imaged.

It is this dimension of modernity that Kirchner pictures in *Friedrichstrasse*. The painting appears to combine two important German thinkers’ conceptualizations of the masses: Friedrich Nietzsche’s notion of a Dionysian dissolution of subjective boundaries and Georg Simmel’s discussion of
the metropolis as the site of excessive sensorial bombardment. The uniform mass of streetwalkers recalls the primordial ecstasy that Nietzsche describes in *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* [The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music]. According to the philosopher, this ecstasy leads to a unity of being that inevitably erases the individual’s identity by fusing it with that of the multitude.9 In turn, the explicitly urban environment that Kirchner depicts echoes Simmel’s essay “Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben” [“The Metropolis and Mental Life”], according to which “the resistance of the individual to being leveled, swallowed up in the social-technological mechanism” causes people to build psychic barriers to shield their minds from a world saturated with sensorial stimuli.10 Encompassing both Nietzsche and Simmel’s understandings of the masses, *Friedrichstrasse* communicates a deep anxiety about the relationship between the individual and the crowd. On the one hand, the crowd appears to move toward the viewer, its dynamism emphasizing its potential for engulfment. On the other hand, Kirchner’s emotionally charged colors and rough brushwork impose his individual vision upon the crowd, as if to resist the crowd’s onslaught.

It is important to remark that Kirchner does not depict a completely generic mass. Rather, he gives the threatening urban crowd a face by placing prostitutes in its front line. While Kirchner represents the streetwalkers as generalized types rather than distinct individuals, he interposes them between the viewer and the anonymous mob in the background. The prostitutes’ bodies are gendered, and the connotations attached to their gender cast the surrounding crowd as a pluralized *femme fatale*: a mass that is both destructive and sexually alluring. The streetwalkers’ promise of sexual gratification mirrors the orgiastic feeling that, according to Nietzsche and Canetti, one experiences in the crowd. Through the symbolic presence of both the prostitutes and the dog, which thrusts its flesh-colored hindquarters in the air at the center of the painting, the leveling mass acquires an erotic quality alongside its potential for destruction. Eros and Thanatos intertwine in Kirchner’s representation of the urban crowd, so that the painting’s violent primary colors, abundance of black, and jagged lines add a sense of unrestrained desire to the general impression of aggression.11

In *Friedrichstrasse*, the mass appears simultaneously as a sexually menacing monster and a victim of the hallucinatory powers of female sexuality. The ghostly masculine shadows that follow the prostitutes seem to participate in a deadly procession in which the viewer, too, is implicated. At the same time, this seemingly infinite procession hints at the ubiquity of prostitutes and the dangers that they pose to society, dangers that Kirchner inscribes in their very bodies. The skinny prostitutes look sickly, recalling the emaciating consequences of venereal diseases, and their narrow hips and small breasts reflect a sterile sexuality that contrasts with the supposed fecundity of respectable German matrons. As art historian Sherwin Simmons
has suggested, Kirchner was terrified of syphilis and may have contracted
the pathology himself.\textsuperscript{12} Given this likelihood, sociologist Klaus Theweleit’s
argument that syphilis functions as an operative metaphor for the annihilat-
ing effects of the masses on individual bodies and psyches is relevant:

The...human mass gathering in the street is both an incarnation of
all contagious diseases spawned by life-producing desire, and an
incarnation of all the...masses into which the man sinks and is lost:
the embodiment both of pleasures that tempt and pleasures that are
dead.\textsuperscript{13}

A disease that not only corrupts the body but also the mind, syphilis func-
tions as a subtext in \textit{Friedrichstrasse}, one that the prostitutes embody and
that Kirchner exposes through his distinctive style. Compellingly, Kirchner’s
visual idiom evokes the disfiguration and psychic delirium that could occur
in extreme syphilis cases, emphasizing a metaphorical link between the
contagious female body and the potential of the crowd to annihilate an in-
dividual’s subjectivity.\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Friedrichstrasse} suggests that the artist, like Nietzsche
and Canetti, was both fascinated with and terrified by the possibility of the
disintegration of the self.

In this work, Kirchner establishes a tension between subject and mul-
titude, conveying an existential anxiety with respect to the metropolis and
its inhabitants. The artist makes this tension manifest in his representation
of demonized prostitutes, whose sinister sex-appeal threatens the physical
and mental integrity of German men. I argue that the multiplicity of similar
figures evokes a homogeneous urban crowd in which individuals disappear,
and that this crowd acquires negative connotations precisely through Kirch-
ners’s reference to female sexuality. The prostitute is interposed between the
viewer and the faceless crowd, bridging the monstrous ecstasy of a de-indi-
nvidualizing mass with the self-preserving anxiety of an individual clinging
to his subjectivity.

In the German-speaking world, Kirchner was not alone in articulat-
ing an opposition between a singular subject and a de-individualized mass
within a gendered framework. Early twentieth-century social critics often
summoned the female body in their appraisals of living conditions in Ger-
man cities, especially in the context of urban degeneration. A 1909 newspa-
per article by Protestant clergyman Christian Rogge, for instance, recounts
how the metropolis “becomes the dwelling place for masses of criminals” as
“an army of prostitutes and pimps eats away at its foundations.”\textsuperscript{15} Further,
in his 1921 essay \textit{Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse: Die Zukunft einer Illusion}
[Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego: The Future of an Illusion],
Sigmund Freud presents the behavior of the masses as inherently “impul-
sive, changeable, and irritable”—three terms strikingly similar to those that
he and Josef Breuer employed to describe the symptoms of hysteria, an allegedly feminine disorder. Similarly, as literary critic Stefan Jonsson has demonstrated, important dramas such as Ernst Toller’s 1919 *Masse-Mensch* [Masses Man], Berthold Brecht’s 1927 *Die heilige Johanna der Schlachthöfe* [Saint Joan of the Stockyards], and Fritz Lang’s 1927 *Metropolis* built upon this premise, associating crowds with unruly and even malevolent female figures.

These intellectuals drew upon a common gendered trope established in French and Italian discourses on the crowd a few decades earlier. Since the rise of mass sociology in the late nineteenth century, theorists had described the supposed irrationality and uncontrollability of the crowd as inherently feminine attributes. The writings of some early commentators of the crowd, particularly French sociologists Gustave LeBon and Gabriel Tarde, as well as Italian criminologist Scipio Sighele, provide evidence for this claim. In *La Psychologie des Foules* [The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind] (1895), LeBon directly compared the crowd’s behavior to that of a woman:

> Among the special characteristics of crowds there are many, such as impulsiveness, irritability, inability to reason, the absence of judgment and of critical spirit, the exaggeration of sentiments, and others, that we observe in those beings who belong to inferior forms of evolution, such as the woman....

Sighele, in *L’Intelligenza della Folla* [The Intelligence of the Crowd] (1903), reinforced this notion:

> The crowd—like the woman—possesses an extreme psychology, capable of all excess, perhaps capable only of excess, sometimes admirable for its abnegation, often terrifying for its ferocity, never or hardly ever measured in its feelings.

Similarly, in *L’Opinion et la Foule* [Opinion and the Crowd] (1901), Tarde gendered the crowd in relation to its alleged propensity for spectacle and lack of imagination:

> The crowd attracts and admires the crowd....We can notice in [it] two characteristics that have something feminine: a remarkably expressive symbolism, together with a great poverty of imagination for inventing symbols that are always the same and are repeated over and over.

In different ways, these three early theorists associated the crowd with a particular psychology, both feared as destructive and dismissed as superficial,
which they also ascribed to femininity.

In doing so, LeBon, Sighele, and Tarde not only minimized the political potential of the masses by casting them as a feminine phenomenon, they also linked the supposed dangers of crowds to the psychology of women. Similar claims were made about consumer behavior: not only the physical masses, but also the cultural products that they consumed were feminized by period commentators. As literary critic Andreas Huyssen has argued in his essay “Mass Culture as Woman,” in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “mass culture [was] somehow associated with woman while real, authentic culture remain[ed] the prerogative of men.” Huyssen’s analysis suggests that the rhetoric gendering the masses is multilayered and far-reaching, such that it encompasses the cultural behaviors of particular social groups.

Kirchner may have been familiar with LeBon, Sighele, and Tarde’s writings, as they had been translated into German and immediately triggered discussions among German-speaking sociologists. For example, Simmel had already reviewed Tarde’s Les Lois de l’Imitation [The Laws of Imitation] in 1890, Sighele’s La Folla Delinquente [The Criminal Crowd] in 1891, and LeBon’s La Psychologie des Foules in 1895, right after the texts were published. The language that these writers use to gender the masses resonates with Kirchner’s misogynist rendition of the crowd in Friedrichstrasse, and is consistent with his patronizing depictions of female subjects throughout his oeuvre.

As art historian Christine Poggi’s analysis of the Italian Futurist Umberto Boccioni’s 1910 painting Rissa in Galleria [Riot in the Galleria] shows, the inclusion of gendered visions in the crowd—in this case, two women fighting in Milan’s shopping arcade Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II—often suffices to construct an image of the masses along the axis of sexual difference (Fig. 2). These dynamics equally apply to Boccioni’s representation of a hysterical fight between prostitutes in the center.
of the crowd and to Kirchner’s placement of streetwalkers between the viewer and a procession of men in _Friedrichstrasse_. Like Boccioni and Kirchner, albeit in very different ways, the three visual artists to whom I now turn projected the shadow of femininity over their representations of the masses through oblique evocations, allegories, and juxtapositions.

Significantly, George Grosz, Walter Ruttmann, and László Moholy-Nagy embraced the formal possibilities of their media to characterize the crowd as gendered. If Kirchner and Boccioni exploited the fluid materiality of paint to represent their female figures as blending into the rest of the crowd, then Grosz, Ruttmann, and Moholy-Nagy similarly capitalized on the properties of drawing, film, and photomontage, respectively, to present the crowd as more than the sum of its parts. As I will show, these artists’ manipulation of their media reflects the engulfing, hysterical, and ornamental connotations that they attributed to the crowd.

Like Kirchner’s _Friedrichstrasse_, George Grosz’s 1919 watercolor _Panorama (Nieder mit Liebknecht)_ depicts a crowded urban environment at night (Fig. 3). In the background, Grosz shows a confused aerial view of a city street, while in the foreground he displays the metropolitan masses floating in colorful intersecting planes. The distant...
street view, reminiscent of the boulevard scenes that the Impressionists painted from the vantage point of elevated balconies, seems to spill forth before the viewer’s eyes, regurgitating its pedestrians. At the same time, the aerial perspective establishes a visual hierarchy between the crowd and the viewer that reiterates the fundamental contrast between the irrationality and unruliness of the crowd and the self-control of the viewer. Overall, the watercolor conveys a sense of collective hysteria consistent with LeBon’s description of urban crowds, emphasized by Grosz’s use of contrasting primary colors and sharp lines.

At the bottom of the image, four bust-length male figures wearing suits and glasses evoke different versions of the bourgeois type. Above them, a man rises up and yells to the sky. Written words and the symbols of a dissonant melody flow from his mouth, as if he were singing and crying out of drunkenness or madness. Another male figure, situated behind the legs of the man with upraised arms, wears a military uniform. The fat, naked buttocks of a woman recede on the left-hand side of the image, as a disembodied hand creeps under her skirt. On top of this detail, another man in a suit, whose body is simplified to the point of resembling a silhouette or a cut-out paper figure, is helplessly suspended in the air. He might have fallen from the open window at the top-left corner of the image, from which nightmarish figures observe the chaotic spectacle of the street. The vulgar behaviors of the people in the city, who seem to have lost any self-control, communicate social degeneration.

Several scholars have noted that Grosz’s representations of urban crowds visually enact the loss of individuality that one allegedly experiences when subsumed by a mob. Jonsson’s description of Grosz’s street scenes is here particularly apt: “This society is no longer a society of individuals, but of partial selves—swinging legs, heads, and arms without bodies, a mass of passions and interests.” Not only does the artist tend to depict types rather than individualized figures, evoking a lack of subjectivity and humanity, he also graphically merges his figures through a system of overlapping lines and watercolor planes. Exploiting the transparency of watercolor, Grosz superimposes different figures, irrespective of their position in society, so that they are recognizable as distinct social types, yet visually inextricable. These disorienting layers intermingle bodies, architectural elements, text, and geometric lines to form an eerie picture in which space appears simultaneously flat and three-dimensional, and in which time is both frozen and accelerated by the presence of three moons spread over the upper register of the image. The vacuous eyes of some of the figures, as well as the skeleton behind the man in yellow, warn the viewer that people become dehumanized in the crowd and lose themselves in a mesh of stimuli.

Only one figure appears triumphantly isolated from this visual orgy: at the center of the composition, elevated above the crowd, a woman on a
crimson pillow remains detached from the intersecting lines that connect all the other bodies. Her calmness contrasts with the sense of anguish and drama of the scene. The woman’s naked body looks oddly mutilated: Grosz crops her legs in a way that highlights her sexual attributes and severs her right arm below the shoulder. These anatomical interventions on the female body recall Grosz’s recurrent representations of dismembered and disfigured women, which he began in 1912–1913 and fully embraced after the end of the First World War.²⁸

But although the woman’s pink flesh is stained by liquid red paint, her figure differs from the brutalized corpses typical of Grosz’s Lustmord [sex-murder] works, a genre articulated around the theme of male violence. For example, the 1918 painting John, der Frauenmörder [John, the Woman Killer] presents a decapitated female body lying lifeless on a sidewalk, an image that both evokes and contrasts with the woman in Panorama (Fig. 4). Unlike the former’s gruesome wounds, the latter’s blood-like blotches recall Theweleit’s description of the masses as “the belly of the menstruating woman or ruptured in childbirth,” an analogy that centers on the idea that the crowd destroys the boundaries of the singular body and homogenizes individuality into an abject conglomeration.²⁹ Far from a passive victim, the woman dominates the scene, standing above the crowd in a position of authority even if she is deprived of legs. Her eyes are directed down towards the masses, and her large mouth curves into a smile. Her nakedness, sensual pose, and supporting pillow evoke a prostitute about to perform her trade, but she looks nothing like the misshapen women whom Grosz usually identifies with this social type. This distinction becomes clear when we compare the woman’s voluptuous limbs with the repulsive buttocks floating at the bottom left-hand side of the image. While the latter figure is explicitly violated by the hand grooping its cheeks, the
former calls to mind a deity or sphynx who, from the secure height of her velvety pedestal, delights in the degeneration of the crowd.

Indeed, *Panorama* starkly contrasts with the harmony promised by the socialist ideals that guided the Spartacist uprising of 1919. Grosz directly references this failed revolt in his title by mentioning the murdered activist Karl Liebknecht, who was killed in its aftermath. The fact that a provocative, naked woman in *Panorama* embodies Grosz’s dissatisfaction with the world is hardly coincidental. An allegory of the Weimar Republic, the central female figure emblematizes a degenerate underworld that inevitably compromises the political potential of the masses.

In this respect, Grosz’s attitude towards women, both as socio-political actors and in visual representations, is illuminating. Art historian Beth Irwin Lewis convincingly argues in her analysis of Grosz’s writings that “Grosz not only was unsympathetic to the women’s movement but...even while he was fascinated by woman, he saw her as a creature of the city who demonstrated various degrees of sexually degenerate behavior.” In other words, Grosz identified the elements of modernity that he found disturbing with prostitutes and other women who did not conform to bourgeois morality and social roles. His decision to reference Liebknecht rather than Rosa Luxemburg, the other leader and co-founder of the *Spartakusbund* [Spartacus League] who was executed alongside Liebknecht on January 15, 1919, reveals his bias. Grosz’s images of prostitutes allegorized society’s degeneracy and allowed the artist to concentrate his disgust and angst into single figures whom he felt entitled to visually control and dismember.

Despite the differences between the woman in *Panorama* and the *Lustmord* victims, Grosz’s attitude towards women conceptually links *Panorama* to other, more violent paintings and drawings from the same period. In works like *John, der Frauenmörder*, Grosz stages a violent devastation of the female body, as if, on the level of representation, he could crush the fatal personifications of modern German society that were so prevalent in Weimar cultural discourse. Grosz portrayed one such personification quite explicitly in his 1916 painting *Selbstmörder* [Suicide], today in the Tate’s collection, in which a naked prostitute looks triumphantly at the corpse of a suicidal man who appears to have killed himself while under her spell. Three years later, in *Panorama*, he reaffirmed the prostitute’s domination of society in spite of all his attempts to brutalize, behead, and destroy her malicious presence.

Exceptionally, in *Panorama* Grosz seems to acknowledge the pointlessness of the recurring violence in his representations of femicides, as if resigning himself to the idea that the corrupting character of urban society, personified as a woman, can never be defeated. Along these lines, the flattened male figure floating under the window in *Panorama* corresponds to the victim of *Suicide*, confirming Grosz’s nihilistic view of modern society. A potentiated version of the *Lustmord* works, *Panorama* shows the fragmented
female body as a monument to the corruption of urban crowds, an allegory for the degradation of the metropolis. Indeed, *Panorama* provides evidence that, after the failure of the 1919 communist revolution, Grosz lost all faith in postwar Germany and projected his contempt for the Weimar Republic onto both the crowd and the female body. By turning a naked woman into an emblem of the morally degenerate crowd, Grosz echoed the gendered descriptions of the masses in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century studies. Further, by condensing the anarchic chaos of the crowd into a disintegrating yet interconnected image of a feminized “other,” Grosz extricated himself from the cobweb of a dissolute society that he despised.

If Grosz communicated the frenzy and enmeshing nature of the crowd through a system of overlapping lines and planes, Walter Ruttmann conveyed his view of the urban masses through moving images. His 1927 film *Berlin: die Sinfonie der Großstadt* [Berlin: Symphony of a Big City] is a dynamic monument to the metropolis for which the crowd provides an organizing principle. Following the temporal structure of a day, *Berlin* juxtaposes discrete shots of objects, architecture, and crowds to establish a sense of order that offsets a tendency to represent the metropolis as chaotic in early twentieth-century films. Specifically, Ruttmann’s careful montage follows the urban crowds to their places of work and leisure, without ever hinting at their potential for political agency. Lacking a straightforward storyline and filmed largely without the subjects’ knowledge, *Berlin* stages only one narrative scene—a disturbed woman’s suicide that, as I will argue, importantly inflects Ruttmann’s image of the masses.

This film portrays the metropolitan masses in a way that recalls philosopher Siegfried Kracauer’s essay “Ornament der Masse” [“The Mass Ornament”], according to which crowds resemble abstract formal spectacles. Kracauer warns his readers that, by being ordered and aestheticized, the masses are subjected to political and economic control: “Even though the masses bring it about, they do not participate in conceiving the ornament.” Ruttmann concretized the ornamental potential of crowds in *Berlin* through a montage of people, machines, animals, and inanimate objects. The people’s lives are structured around a repetitive cycle of labor, rest, and leisure, as though they are simply pieces in a monotonous decorative pattern. It is no surprise that, in another text, Kracauer directly criticizes Ruttmann’s *Berlin* for turning the masses into a subjugated abstraction: “Human beings are forced in [to] the sphere of the inanimate. They seem molecules in a stream of matter...People in *Berlin* assume the character of material not even polished. Used-up material is thrown away.” This idea is central to the suicide scene halfway through the film, which constitutes a dramatic excursus in a work that otherwise celebrates ideal harmony.

In Ruttmann’s film, the ornamental character of the masses and the fact that they are controlled by an overarching authority go hand in hand. For
example, through the technique of parallel editing, Ruttmann equates the legs of a herd of cattle with those of working-class men heading to a factory (Fig. 5). In this way, he stresses the camera’s potential to reduce different living organisms to homogeneous formal patterns and portrays the crowd as a dumb, animal mass that needs directions from a rational leader. The implicit leader could be a cattleman or factory supervisor in this scenario, but he remains outside of the frame. He is replaced by the ordering intelligence of the filmmaker. Ruttmann also visually associates the dynamism and repetitiveness of machines with the organic needs of human beings, whose biological rhythms require them to eat, sleep, and move in cyclical patterns. This equation consolidates the sense that the masses, although chaotic, are controlled and controllable—a vision quite different from the overpowering crowds of Kirchner and Grosz.

Ruttmann’s rapid succession of images does not allow the viewer to focus on single characters, even when people’s faces are clearly visible. Rather, they are perceived as different instantiations of the crowd, some of whom represent particular types. The bourgeois, the bum, the policeman, and the prostitute are all recognizable on the streets of Berlin, but Ruttmann never shows them for more than an instant and locks them into superficial roles. For Ruttmann, the loss of one’s identity in the crowd offers a thrilling opportunity to explore the formal qualities of the metropolitan masses. The detached vision of the camera (or so it was perceived by Neue Sachlichkeit artists) emphasizes the contrast between the objectivity of the filmed crowds and the subjectivity of the viewer.

There is, however, one instance in which Ruttmann explicitly references the traumatic encounter between an individual with a strong subjectivity and the de-individualizing crowd. In what looks like an expressionistic flash in a film otherwise linked to the movement of New Objectivity, a woman, apparently driven mad by the abundance and variety of stimuli in the metropolis, commits suicide by jumping off a bridge into the river Spree. This sequence in the third act is the only moment featuring an indi-
individual rather than the crowd. The camera focuses on the woman’s eyes, dilated with anguish, and emphasizes her feelings through the abstract image of a swirling spiral, a symbol of dizziness and inner confusion (Fig. 6). By connoting both mental chaos and the frenzied urban environment, the spiral suggests that the woman’s psychic defenses broke down under the inhuman pressure of a world that serves the masses, rather than individuals. The accelerated sequence of images centered on rotational movement culminates in the woman’s plunge and transmits a sense of vertigo to the spectator. This vertigo triggers a perceptual overload that corresponds to the pressure exerted by the metropolis and the crowd on the woman’s psyche. Quickly mapping the motion of revolving doors, windy vortexes, and a frightening rollercoaster, Ruttmann renders the scenes immediately preceding the suicide almost impossible to watch without feeling queasy. In a way that recalls Kirchner’s dramatic rendition of the modern city in *Friedrichstrasse*, the suicide scene in *Berlin* conveys the anxiety that city-dwellers experience when crowds threaten to engulf them.

The fact that Ruttmann centers his narrative about the loss of subjectivity on a woman suggests that she had some inner complexity. Yet, Ruttmann does not film the woman long enough to allow the spectator to identify with her or to mourn her death. In the film, the woman mainly appears as a weak victim of the metropolis, whose mental barriers are too frail to cope with the pressures of her environment—an environment that Ruttmann undoubtedly celebrates. Unlike the erotic female figures depicted by Kirchner and Grosz, the suicidal woman in *Berlin* interrupts the film’s unfolding. If we consider her through the lens of Simmel’s “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” she symbolizes those who cannot cope with the sensorial bombardment of the metropolis, who become “completely atomized internally” and fall “into an unthinkable mental condition.”

**Fig. 6. Walter Ruttmann, Berlin: Sinfonie der Großstadt** [Berlin: Symphony of a Big City], (1927), film still 0:46:17 and film still 0:45:46.
stimuli, or, in Simmel’s words, to demonstrate “an indifference toward the distinction between things.” Similarly, Ruttmann encourages the spectator to perceive the disparate elements of the metropolis as formally equivalent. The only individual whom he portrays with some psychological depth represents an obsolete model of subjectivity and succumbs to pressure from the masses. Overall, Berlin upholds LeBon’s claim that the individual who enters the crowd “is no longer himself, but has become an automaton who has ceased to be guided by his will.” When he attempts to cling to his willpower and resist the crowd, it crushes him, or in this case, her.

According to scholar Katharina Von Ankum, “the suicidal woman may have allowed the contemporary male spectator to project his fears and anxieties onto a female figure of identification as a way of coming to grips with the de-familiarized urban environment.” While some viewers of Berlin may have experienced the film in this manner, catharsis was not Ruttmann’s main goal. The scene of the suicide is certainly melodramatic, but Berlin does not condemn the metropolis as a sterile environment hostile to human life. Rather, Ruttmann celebrates the potential for order inherent in a quasi-automated city, the inhabitants of which follow rationalized lifestyles. For this reason, we should read the woman’s madness not as a death sentence pronounced against the individual who stands out from the crowd, but rather as an invitation to embrace a psychology adequate to the rhythms of the metropolis, one that approximates Simmel’s formulation of a “blasé attitude.”

There is a sense that one cannot resist the urban crowd and should simply adapt to it.

In fact, although the river evokes a natural environment, it can also function as a metaphor for the urban masses. Canetti describes the river as an appropriate symbol for representing an ornamental crowd:

A river is the crowd in its vanity, the crowd exhibiting itself.... All river-like formations, such as processions and demonstrations, want to be seen. They show as much as possible of their surface, extending as far as they can and offering themselves to the largest possible number of spectators.

Because the woman disappears in a body of water, her suicide could signify immersion in the crowd. Ruttmann visually juxtaposes the swarming crowd and its leisurely activities with peaceful shots of the river, stressing their common domestication. If one accepts this symbolic equivalence, the woman’s suicide acquires positive connotations within the ordered “symphony” of Berlin. Under the pressure of Ruttmann’s aestheticized masses, the woman renounces any control over her own psyche, unleashing it into an abstract vortex and vanishing in the symbolic flow of the crowd. Her suicide marks a return to order and normality; once she perishes, Ruttmann’s ornamental
patterns can continue to form, undisturbed by the assertion of individual subjectivity.

Ruttmann, like Sighele in *La Donna Nova* [The New Woman], portrays women as feeble-minded and prone to madness, recalling the negative connotations that turn-of-the-century sociologists attributed to crowds. But it is to express his aesthetic appreciation of the crowd as a mass ornament that Ruttmann stages the death of an uncontrollable woman who so often lends her features to the urban masses. In order to pave the way for the triumph of quasi-mechanized crowds, Ruttmann seeks to quell any residual suspicion about their dangerous instability. In the predictable, repetitive universe of *Berlin*, the masses constitute the only possible form of sociability allowed by urban modernity: a multifaceted but de-individualized mob that is controlled through aesthetic and industrial principles. Ruttmann’s camera thus assumes the role of a maestro who orders the potential chaos of the metropolitan crowd into a “symphony,” functioning much like Canetti’s “orchestral conductor.” In the world described by *Berlin*, LeBon and Sighele’s irrational masses commit suicide only to be resuscitated as Kracauer’s mass ornament. The fireworks display that concludes the film reinforces *Berlin*’s representation of the crowd as a phantasmagoric spectacle.

Ruttmann’s attempt to organize the urban masses into a harmonious, passive ornament resonates with László Moholy-Nagy’s 1930 photomontage *Verantworte!* [Be Responsible!] (Fig. 7). This composite work juxtaposes a swarm of people with the fragmented image of a woman’s jaw line, separating them into horizontal, stripe-like sections. The exhortation expressed in the title crisscrosses the image both horizontally and vertically. The two contrasting photographs do not communicate a clear message: the crowd and the woman occupy different spaces of the photomontage, and their visual appeal is almost conflicting. The crowd is photographed from an aerial point of view that renders it homogeneous, a mass with neither beginning nor end that extends in all directions and, owing to the absence of any spatial reference points, functions as a pictorial ground. By contrast, the woman’s mouth is close to the viewer, as if she were near the camera when her photograph was taken, standing alone against an empty background. Moholy-Nagy crops the woman’s face over her lips, so that her other features are obscured and her glamorous lipstick becomes the main element that distinguishes her.

Nonetheless, Moholy-Nagy’s use of photomontage links the two images literally and conceptually. The large, easily legible title suggests that this connection may carry political connotations. The exhortation to “be responsible” seems to acknowledge the crowd’s potential for political agency, alluding to the revolutionary events that led to the formation of the Soviet Union and the Weimar Republic. By combining the image of the crowd with that of a woman, Moholy-Nagy implies that the latter controls the former, and that the imperative “Verantworte!” is her direct address to the masses.
If the artist had juxtaposed a crowd with a political leader, this photomontage could be construed as the crowd’s need for top-down guidance. However, unlike the 1934 photomontage *Ja! Führer, wir folgen Dir! [Yes! Führer, We Follow You!]*, *Verantworte!* contains a female figure who is unlikely to rally the masses (Fig. 8).

Although in many of his photographs and photomontages Moholy-Nagy toys with the figure of the New Woman—celebrating women’s access to sports and leisurely activities as typical of their modern, emancipated lifestyles—it is doubtful that he identified this particular female figure as a leader who could instill a sense of responsibility and political awareness in the masses.44 For the contemporary viewer, Moholy-Nagy’s inclusion of this woman would have conferred a degree of irony to
the anonymous woman who purses her lips evokes Weimar-era fashion magazines and advertisements, rather than pompous scenes of political militancy. Her shallow allure starkly clashes with the moralistic utterance “be responsible!” and fails to electrify the crowd, in stark contrast to the demonic automaton Maria in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), a film with which Moholy-Nagy was likely familiar. Moreover, the aerial view portrays the crowd as a vulnerable herd monitored by the all-encompassing gaze of an (unseen) leader elevated above it. The crowd gazes at something or someone outside the picture space, which coincides with the viewer’s position. According to cultural historian Jeffrey T. Schnapp, images like *Verantworte!* construct a superhuman visual field that allows the viewer to assume the imaginary perspective of a leader controlling the masses from atop a hierarchy that is both political and optical. Despite the crowd’s monumental size, its passivity discourages the viewer from identifying with its constituents. Far from implicating viewers in the crowd, Moholy-Nagy establishes a hierarchy between the masses and the viewer, a hierarchy that partially depends, as will emerge from the discussion below, on the gender dynamics at play in this image. Hence, the work’s title amounts to an authoritative utterance, rather than an exhortation pronounced among equals.

Indeed, the crowd in *Verantworte!* prefigures the controlled rallies organized by the Nazi party in the 1930s, in which vast gatherings of people served aesthetic as well as political purposes, embodying Kracauer’s idea of the mass ornament. But unlike Ruttmann’s *Berlin*, this photomontage exposes the artificiality of ordered representations of the masses. For one thing, Moholy-Nagy likely appropriated the propagandistic strategy, employed by totalitarian regimes throughout the twentieth century, of creating a composite image in order to artificially exaggerate the crowd’s size. For another, the black and white stripes that cover portions of the crowd recall the visual experiments of Russian Constructivism and the Bauhaus, as well as the patterns of a flag or diagram. All of these associations highlight the fact that, in this image, the crowd and the woman function as inert formal devices rather than active political subjects. The repeated admonition to demonstrate accountability and political awareness paradoxically contrasts with the crowd’s ornamental appearance.

Of course, by juxtaposing the crowd with a woman, Moholy-Nagy mocks the asymmetrical relationship between the masses and their father-like leaders in the propagandistic photomontages typical of the Weimar Republic. But the woman does not just substitute for a strong, masculine leader. She also associates the crowd with mass culture. Like LeBon and Tarde, Moholy-Nagy implies that the masses are gullible entities who can be controlled through pleasurable images. In this sense, *Verantworte!* warns consumers not to be swayed by the tantalizing publicity fed to them by po-
litical and economic establishments. Moholy-Nagy thus projects the superficiality of the female figure onto the crowd, locking it in the same dangerous state of compliance with a virile ruler.

The connection between mass culture and gendered notions of superficiality and ignorance would have been more direct for Moholy-Nagy’s contemporaries than it is for us today. According to Andreas Huyssen, the gendering of crowds that pervaded cultural theories at the end of the nineteenth century became less explicit in the 1920s, yet this bias survived in discussions of mass culture:

The inscription of the feminine on the notion of mass-culture, which seems to have its primary place in the late 19th century, did not relinquish its hold, even among those critics who did much to overcome the 19th century mystification of mass-culture as woman.

Just as Kracauer discussed the notion of mass ornament by turning to the image of the Tiller Girls (a popular dance troupe formed in the 1890s, known for its synchronized, machine-like movements), Moholy-Nagy communicates the feminized nature of the masses by including a gendered reference to mass culture in this photomontage. Verantwortet!, then, exhorts the crowd to emancipate itself from feminine approaches to public life, approaches that the artist seemed to associate with credulousness, frivolity, and inactivity.

Moholy-Nagy’s attitude toward this image is certainly facetious, but it reveals the gendered misconceptions that, in his time, shaped many representations of the crowd and the perception of women’s participation in politics. Recall that, in 1930, German women had recently obtained the right to vote and many proudly fulfilled their duties as Weimar citizens, challenging the desire of male politicians and stakeholders for control over the adult female population. In contrast, Verantwortet! relegates the female figure to a passive and inconsequential role, obfuscating her political rights with a coquettish attitude that reiterates stereotypes that had historically served to exclude women from the res publica. The fact that the woman’s head is cropped, so that the image focuses on the sexual attribute of the mouth, reduces the female figure to an object of desire and negates her status as a socio-political agent. Through the photomontage’s composition, the same implications extend to the masses—in Schnapp’s words, there is a “fundamental equivalency” between the ornamental masses and the commodified body of a woman, as “both are objects of modern masculine desire” in terms of both political and sexual control. The playful images of women’s emancipation that appear in other photomontages by Moholy-Nagy have no counterpart in Verantwortet! Meekly promising a kiss, the woman represents the crowd’s susceptibility to domination by a leader.

Kirchner, Grosz, Ruttmann, and Moholy-Nagy all project onto female
bodies the connotations of danger, instability, and irrationality that they attributed to the urban masses. At the same time, these artists devised diverse visual strategies for preserving the crowd’s anonymity, as theorized by Nietzsche, Simmel, and Canetti. In Friedrichstrasse, the expressionistic anguish of the artist vis-à-vis the leveling power of the crowd “others” the mass as a feminine entity whose sexuality is both enticing and lethal. In Panorama (Nieder mit Liebknecht), Grosz condenses the crowd’s degeneracy into a single female figure, who symbolically forces society into self-destruction. In Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt, Ruttmann emphasizes the crowd’s ornamental character and simulates a woman’s suicide in order to convey the dizzying experience of losing oneself in a multitude. Finally, in Verantwortete! Moholy-Nagy establishes a visual equivalence between the allure of a magazine model and the masses’ dependence on popular culture, while presenting both women and crowds as subordinate to an unseen leader outside the picture space.

Of course, my interpretation is grounded in abstract notions of femininity and masculinity, individuality and collectivity. And yet, as unstable as these feminized representations of the crowd may look, their implications are alarmingly concrete. Jonsson has argued that the crowd constitutes a particular instance of the social field, the representations of which inevitably dismiss certain groups of people and privilege the cultural and political elite: “To look at the people as a mass, or to depict it as a mass, is the first step toward transforming it into a mass.” Regardless of the actual power held by the crowd, representations that reduce individual figures to anonymous members of a group underscore a process of obliteration via assimilation that undermines the value of certain subjects and questions their right to occupy the public realm. The images analyzed in this essay push one to question the identity of those bodies with whom many fin-de-siècle European intellectuals and Weimar avant-garde artists were reluctant to share the spaces of urban modernity. The consequences of such imagery are sadly familiar, as the history of the government that replaced the Weimar Republic tragically exemplifies. In the crowd, aesthetics and politics become one—especially in interwar Germany.
Notes

1. For more on the trope of the *femme fatale* in the cultural discourse of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe and North America, see Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).


6. Images of the crowd produced by women artists in the same context often elide or explicitly hijack the visual strategies through which artists like Kirchner, Grosz, Ruttmann, and Moholy-Nagy gender the crowd. The case of *Bauhäuslerin* Marianne Brandt’s photomontages provides a brilliant


11. In Greek mythology, Thanatos personifies death while Eros personifies life. These two figures are often used in post-Freudian theory to describe the life and death instincts, respectively, that Freud introduced in 1900 with *Die Traumdeutung* [The Interpretation of Dreams] and later expanded in his 1920 essay “Jenseits des Lustprinzips” [“Beyond the Pleasure Principle”]. Freud did not mention these mythological beings himself, but they appear

12. Simmons, “Ernst Kirchner’s Streetwalkers,” 141.


14. According to Kari Nixon and Lorenzo Servitje, syphilis’s ability to permanently “mark its victims” and induce dementia (especially in the form of general paresis of the nervous system) helped establish it “as a disease that was particularly malleable, and capable of bolstering a wide range of social prejudices, anxieties, and power structures” in *fin-de-siècle* culture. Although neurological symptoms generally emerge in the tertiary stage of the disease many years after contracting it, in the collective imaginary they were as present and threatening as the facial lesions that occur in the first and secondary stages. For an interesting study on the cultural resonances of syphilis, see Kari Nixon and Lorenzo Servitje, eds., *Syphilis and Subjectivity from the Victorians to the Present* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), especially the introduction. For a current medical overview of the disease’s symptoms, see “Syphilis (*Treponema pallidum*): 2018 Case Definition” on the website of the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (https://wwwn.cdc.gov/nndss/conditions/syphilis/case-definition/2018/).


22. For Simmel’s reviews of Tarde, Sighele, and LeBon’s books, see Klaus Christian Köhnke, ed., *Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1 (Frankfort: Suhrkamp, 1999), 248-50; 388-400; and 353-61 respectively.


25. Bridget Alsdorf also makes this point in her analysis of Félix Vallotton’s crowd scenes in “Félix Vallotton’s Murderous Life,” *The Art Bulletin* 97, no. 2
In this article, Alsdorf addresses the ethical imperatives emerging from Vallotton’s visual implication of the viewer in his representations of urban crowds, which remind one of the inevitability of one’s social role and inescapable belonging to the realm of the masses. Although Alsdorf mentions the power dynamics at work in mass-circulating accounts and images of life in the metropolis, her argument ultimately proclaims the democratic levelling of the people constituting and observing the urban masses. In contrast, my discussion of feminized representations of crowds exposes the intrinsic gender hierarchy that cements the relations between the artist and his subject matter, the individual viewer and the masses.


32. Consider, for example, Fritz Lang’s Metropolis, produced in the same year.


37. Ibid., 329. Original German text: “Das Wesen der Balsiertheit ist die Abstumpfung gegen die Unterschiede der Dinge....”


42. Scipio Sighele, La Donna Nova (Rome: E. Voghera, 1898).


45. For more on Maria, see Janet Lungstrum’s essay “Metropolis and the


