The Roaring Twenties: Cabaret and Urban Entertainment

The tremors of war, revolution, and inflation shook the foundations of the Wilhelmine Empire and weakened the walls that kept German high culture protected from the onslaughts of the modern entertainment industry. The dadaists had begun as early as 1916 to poke fun at the humanistic ideals and institutional conventions of classical art and literature, arguing that the idealism of both German classicism and expressionism amounted to nothing when confronted with the inhumanity of the war. German culture, which has always felt superior toward Western civilization, suddenly seemed implicated in a cruel war that, ironically, had been fought to protect Kultur against the threat of Zivilisation. The early 1920s witnessed a Germany eagerly opening its borders to foreign influences that had been kept at bay during the war years. Trying to forget the past and enjoy the present, many intellectuals embraced American mass culture precisely because it represented the epitome of what conservative cultural critics called Zivilisation. As a radical countermodel to German culture—both classical and avant-garde—mass culture swept through the major cities, making traditional concepts of art appear isolated, elitist, and even undemocratic. For the growing urban population as well as for the younger generation of writers and intellectuals—and especially for Brecht and the Berlin avant-garde of the early 1920s—American mass culture promised to make German culture and life both modern and less aristocratic. Mass culture encompassed Charlie Chaplin, Josephine Baker, movies, jazz, and boxing, but, above all, it represented modernity and the ideal of living in the present. The infatuation with America implied a rejection of the recent German military past and disillusion with humanistic values. With the demise of the Kaiser’s authoritarian rule all traditional aristocratic notions of culture inherent in the old political system were also called into question. German avant-garde writers and intellectuals understood American mass culture in its original sense as a modern folk culture that responded to the needs of large urban masses. America—more so than the Soviet Union—was consistently held up as the cultural model of the future.

The enthusiastic German reception of American jazz and American dances such as the Charleston and the Shimmy was fueled by the frenzy of those who had survived the bloodshed of the war and the “great collapse of the world and humanity,” as Alice Gerstel put it in 1922. The Charleston, which by 1926
was the most popular dance in Germany, became an expression of "the mechanization and democratization of life." Showgirl troupes such as the Tiller Girls performed in elaborate revues to the applause of Berlin's intellectuals who saw in the synchronicity and exactness of the troupe's energetic movements a fitting symbol of the industrial process. German entrepreneurs such as Erik Charell, Hermann Haller, James Klein, and Rudolf Nelson developed their own revues into increasingly lavish Moulin Rouge-type shows featuring hundreds of nude female dancers (the so-called "girls"), singers, and musicians, as well as extravagant sets and costumes. By the mid-1920s revues had become the most popular form of live entertainment in Berlin. Consisting of a large variety of quick-paced numbers (songs, skits, dances), they had a structural affinity to the fragmented urban experience; their juxtaposition of sights and sounds seemed to express modernity more directly than classical theater ever could. During the 1926–1927 theater season Berlin offered no fewer than nine revues that were seen by a total of 11,000 spectators. The opulent productions tried to outdo each other in their technical perfection and their promise of visual pleasure—truly monuments to the giddy mass consumerism that took hold of Berlin in the 1920s. The American Revue Nègre—starring Josephine Baker—that toured Paris, London, and Berlin added a touch of the exotic to the amusement; its phenomenal success was seen by Ivan Goll as a challenge to Europe's drained and desiccated cultural identity. He reported from Paris in an article containing blatantly racial stereotypes prevalent at the time. Despite her enthusiastic reception in Europe, Baker did not escape being stereotyped as the embodiment of untamed and primitive (female) nature out to conquer Western civilization. The revue craze lasted as long as the prosperity did: from 1924 to 1929. By 1931, in the face of rising unemployment and social unrest, the popularity of revues had dropped noticeably. The Roaring Twenties were over.

Alongside the new America-inspired mass culture of movies, jazz concerts, and revues, the German tradition of the political-satirical cabaret continued to flourish in the Weimar Republic. Following the mixture of theatrical skits, recitations, music, songs, and comedy—first experimented with in Paris during the 1880s—the German cabarets tended to be literary, politically aggressive, and often mercilessly satirical. In 1919 Max Reinhardt once again started up his literary cabaret Schall und Rauch, which had enjoyed short-lived success back in 1901. It opened with a parody of Reinhardt's own production of Aeschylus's Oresteia at the Grobes Schauspielhaus and ended in 1921 with Reinhardt's departure from Berlin. Numerous other cabarets—Rosa Valtiti's Cabaret Größenwahn, Kurt Robitschek's Kabarett der Komiker, and Trude Hesterberg's Wilde Bühne, among others—featured biting lyrics by Kurt Tucholsky, Walter Mehring, and Erich Kästner. Friedrich Hollaender, one
of the most prolific and popular songwriters and composers in the Weimar Republic, started his own cabaret, Tingeltangel, a proletarian version of the cabaret later immortalized in the film *The Blue Angel* in which Marlene Dietrich sang Hollaender’s memorable tunes.

There were, of course, various types of cabaret. From 1921 to 1931, one of the most popular was *Der Blaue Vogel*. This folkloristic cabaret of Russian emigrés presented, in their own tongue, highly stylized, romantic, and amusing genre scenes from their homeland. *Der Blaue Vogel* easily found an audience among the 300,000 Russians who had been lured to Berlin by the strength of the ruble during the inflation. Berliners fell in love with the uncanny simplicity and naïveté of these performances. On a different artistic level, the Cabaret of the Nameless deserves mention as a forerunner of the American television “Gong Show,” in which exhibitionists performed to the ridicule of an audience which enjoyed the obvious lack of talent. Kästner’s description of this ostensibly humiliating show is flavored with the cynicism and high-strung chaos—he compares the show to a padded cell—that was typical for Berlin in the 1920s. Curt Moreck’s guide to Berlin’s nightlife is directed at tourists hungry for the thrills of the metropolis, which in the 1920s was justly called the amusement capital of the world. From the far right, Joseph Goebbels, commentator on the Berlin scene in his own periodical, *Der Angriff*, showed his contempt for such decadence and vowed to put an early end to what he saw as a dangerous disintegration of morals.
The Negroes are conquering Paris. They are conquering Berlin. They have already filled the whole continent with their howls, with their laughter. And we are not shocked, we are not amazed; on the contrary, the old world calls on its failing strength to applaud them.

Yesterday some of us were still saying, art is dead!—the terrible confession of a lifeless, enervated, hopeless age. Art dead? Then original art, superior art, lives again! The last art was: disintegration of the ego; disintegration of the world; despair over the world in the ego; the constant, mad revolution of the ego about itself. We experience that in all the twenty-year-old novelists finding fame in Paris just now—and there are dozens of them. Benn wrests the one bloody book in his life from his torment and calls it—still young—Epilog. That is almost more tragic than [Heinrich von] Kleist’s suicide. And what otherwise is not the product of such pain remains precious and fin-de-siècle, thin and frivolous.

And yet, why complain? The Negroes are here. All of Europe is dancing to their banjo. It cannot help itself. Some say it is the rhythm of Sodom and Gomorrah.... Why should it not be from paradise? In this case, rise and fall are one.

The Revue Nègre, which is rousing the tired public in the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées to thrills and madness as otherwise only a boxing match can do, is symbolic.

Negroes dance with their senses. (While Europeans can only dance with their minds.) They dance with their legs, breasts, and bellies. This was the dance of the Egyptians, the whole of antiquity, the Orient. This is the dance of the Negroes. One can only envy them, for this is life, sun, primeval forests, the singing of birds and the roar of a leopard, earth. They never dance naked: and yet, how naked is the dance! They have put on clothes only to show that clothes do not exist for them.

Their revue is an unmitigated challenge to moral Europe. There are eight beautiful girls whose figures conjure up a stylized purity, reminiscent of deer and Greek youths. And at their head, the star, Josephine Baker. They have all oiled their curly hair smooth with a process just invented in New York. And on these rounded heads they don hats of manifold fashions, from 1830, 1900, or by the designer Lewis. This mix exudes a glowing irony. A belly dance is performed in a brocade dress by Poiret. In front of a church that could have been painted by Chagall, dressed in bourgeois skirts like women going to market, they dance around a white, bespectacled pastor strumming a banjo (American Negroes are pious and faithful Christians—you only have to listen to their modern songs to know that!). They dance a dance one might expect in a lunatic asylum.

It confronts us all, it confronts everything with the strange impression of a snarling parody. And it is a parody. They make fun of themselves when they perform the “Dance of the Savages” with the same mockery, wearing only the usual loin cloth and—a silk brassiere.
And here we see original art becoming one with the latest. These Negroes come out of the darkest parts of New York. There they were disdained, outlawed; these beautiful women might have been rescued from a miserable ghetto. These magnificent limbs bathed in rinse water. They do not come from the primeval forests at all. We do not want to fool ourselves. But they are a new, unspoiled race. They dance with their blood, with their life, with all the memories in their short history: memories of transport in stinking ships, of early slave labor in America, of much misfortune. Sentimentality breaks through. They become sentimental when they sing “Swanee River” and “Give Me Just a Little Bit”—these universal hits in provincial jazz apply the rouge on civilization. Alas, these primeval people will be used up fast! Will they have the time to express what is in them in an art of their own making? It is doubtful.

The leader, director, and principal dancer of the troupe is Louis Douglas, the equal of the perfect Baker. He is the only one who wears a dark black mask, while all the others are nearly light brown. He has a gigantic white mouth. But his feet! They are what inspires the music. The orchestra takes its lead from them, not the other way around. He walks, he drags, he slips—and the beat rises from the floor, not from the flutes, which merely offer their accompaniment in secret. One number is called “My Feet Are Talking.” And with his feet he tells us of his voyage from New York to Europe: the first day on the boat, the third in the storm, then the trip by railroad and a race at Longchamp.

The musicians play with, they do not merely play along! They are located left of the stage, then soon enough they are following after a dancer or tossing off their remarks in a song. They are genuine actors. They also help to emphasize the parody. They laugh continuously. Whom are they making fun of? No—they aren’t making fun of anyone: they are just enjoying, the playing, the dancing, the beat. They enjoy themselves with their faces, with their legs, with their shoulders; everything shakes and plays its part. It often seems as if they had the leading roles.

But the leading role belongs to Negro blood. Its drops are slowly falling over Europe, a long-since dried-up land that can scarcely breathe. Is that perhaps the cloud that looks so black on the horizon but whose fearsome downpours are capable of so white a shine? [Claire Goll’s] The Negro Jupiter Robs Europe [Der Neger Jupiter raubt Europa] is the name of a modern German novel just now coming out. The Negro question is pressing for our entire civilization. It runs like this: Do the Negroes need us? Or are we not sooner in need of them?
and forgotten. The point is not to have to do everything laboriously. The faculty for performing manual work must perfect itself anew in the all-consuming work to which we must finally apply ourselves. The laws that necessarily form the basis of all labor, of every one of our achievements, dictate that we reinvent validity; the effort must be made to return to our work the fertile soil that it requires to flourish. [. . . ]

The photography expert of the past, in imitating painting, chose the wrong point of departure for the development of the phototype; the displays still found today in the photography ateliers evidence this attempt—but it achieves no more than a lamentable surrogate for painting. The formal consequences of accomplished technological facts always leave the experts behind. [. . . ]

In short, the new visual orientation of modern people results from the unique tempo and disorientation characteristic of our anxious times and will lead to the elaboration of new forms to foster the quickest possible orientation and to take the transformation of physical nature and its psychology into account. Traditions of all sorts are slipping from our hands, for good or ill! We cannot oppose the effects of physical law. We will not be able to stave off these effects, until ultimately the most trifling aspect of work and the last remnant of our previous way of life, the last gesture of the human hand, is permeated by the new spirit.