The Americanization of Entertainment: Jazz and Black Performers

The years of so-called "relative stabilization" (1924–1929), between the end of the German inflation and the beginning of the global depression, were the golden age of the Weimar revue. This distinctive form of entertainment was associated primarily with three men: Herman Haller (Hermann Freund, 1871–1943), Erik Charell (Erich Karl Löwenberg, 1894–1973), and James Klein (1886–early 1940s; assumed to have been killed in the Holocaust). Klein, who had mounted variety shows in the prewar era, produced revues for the longest time span (1921–1929). He was considered the least respectable of these directors, given his excessive penchant for staging female nudity. Charell, a dancer, was known for his extravagant choreography and expensive sets and costumes, but he created only three revues in as many years (1924–1926). The most esteemed of the three was Haller, formerly an operetta director, whose six annual revues mounted between 1923 and 1929 epitomized the genre in the minds of contemporary observers, not least because they featured the famous Tiller Girls.19

The Klein, Charell, and Haller revues differed greatly from those presented by Nelson in the early Weimar years. Nelson addressed the "Kur-
fürstendamm public," a rather select, elite audience from the western neighborhoods of Berlin. His works pretended to a degree of sophistication, inasmuch as their effect was based upon a witty and intelligent combination of music and text, performed by exceptional entertainers. In contrast, the other revues were mounted in enormous theaters, seating up to three thousand spectators. Klein managed the Komische Oper, Haller directed the Theater am Admiralspalast, and Charell took over the Grosses Schauspielhaus after the financial failure of Reinhardt's monster spectacles. Unlike Nelson's new venue, these theaters were located on or near the Friedrichstrasse, the traditional entertainment district which continued to attract German and foreign tourists. The size and linguistic mix of the audience necessitated a type of performance that emphasized "show." It featured extravagant costumes, exotic sets, and what the parlance of the day called "Girls, Girls, Girls." If there was a point of comparison for the Weimar revues, it would have been the prewar performances at the Metropol-Theater, which likewise staged extravagant spectacles for a large and mixed public. In fact, the two were frequently contrasted, and always to the detriment of the later shows. Leaving questions of quality aside, a comparison of the Metropol revues with those of Klein, Charell, and Haller provides a means of assessing the tremendous changes that occurred in the realm of German popular entertainment after the Great War.

In both form and content the prewar Metropol revues had been considered ideal expressions of Berlin's metropolitan modernity. Formally, they replicated the fragmented diversity of urban experience; thematically, they evoked the self-confidence of the Imperial capital, the hub of the greatest power on the European continent as well as the world's second greatest industrial nation. This particular combination obviously could not survive the war. Germany's defeat and the economic catastrophe brought about by the blockade and the inflation meant that Berlin could no longer claim to be a model of modernity, at least not in any positive sense. We have seen that in 1919 Rudolf Nelson composed a song that depicted the provincialization of Berlin. That same year, Tucholsky's "Old Motor," sung by Graetz, no longer considered Paris and London worthy of emulation: people there "danced around golden calves," but the singer disdained such activities and told Berliners to remain true to their better natures. Of course, it was rhetorically easy to reject a fashionable lifestyle that many citizens could no longer afford. Tucholsky was clearly trying to make the best of a bad situation.

Given such circumstances, it was to be expected that the early Weimar revues had no upbeat numbers about contemporary Berlin. Instead, they harked back to the "good old days" before the military and economic traumas. Walter Kollo, who composed much of the music featured in the

The Weimar Revue

Haller revues, was perhaps the major cultivator of that theme. His famous "Linden-March" in Under and Over (Dranter und Driiber), which premiered in September 1923, at the height of the inflation, remains the epitome of Berlin nostalgia:

As long as lindens greet us
There where they've always been,
Then nothing can defeat us.
Berlin, you're still Berlin.

So lang noch Unten Linden
Die alten Bäume blüh'n
Kann nichts uns überwinden,
Berlin, du bleibst Berlin. 21

Marlene Dietrich was to revive that song after 1945. By then, it was the 1920s that seemed like the Golden Years.

Although the shows of the early- and mid-twenties could not portray Berlin in a positive light, revues were even more popular after the war than before. The 1926–27 Berlin theater season saw no less than nine revues, playing to nightly audiences totaling eleven thousand spectators. Faced with such statistics, social theorists continued to contend that the variegated form of revue was most appropriate to that city, whose mutability was even more pronounced owing to the postwar dislocations. Siegfried Kracauer and Ernst Bloch noted the congruence between Berlin and the formal aspects of revue. For Bloch, that metropolis appeared to be "a city that is perennially new, a city built around a hollow space, in which not even the mortar becomes or remains hard." Revues seemed to correspond to Berlin's protean nature, since they were "one of the most open and unintentionally honest forms of the present, a cast of that hollow space... The appeal of the revue comes precisely from the sensual power and turbulence of scenes strung loosely together, from their ability to change and to transform themselves into one another." Kracauer praised the ability of revues (as well as cinema) to convey "precisely and openly the disorder of society... In the streets of Berlin one is, not infrequently, struck by the realization that all of a sudden everything might split apart one day. The amusements to which the public throngs also should have that effect." He believed that "the Berlin public behaves in a profoundly truthful manner when it increasingly shuns [conventional forms of high art]... and shows its preference for the superficial luster of stars, films, revues, and production numbers. Here, in pure externality, it finds itself; the dismembered succession of splendid sensory perceptions brings to light its own reality." 22
Just as Bloch's and Kracauer's comments echoed those of Simmel a generation earlier, spokesmen for the Weimar revues updated the assertions of Wolzogen and Bierbaum. Writing in the program book for Charrell's For Everyone (An Alle!, 1924), Maximilian Sladek, the manager of the Große Schauspielhaus, contended that "the life of the big-city dweller is a multifarious interlacing of surfaces. And every life demands the art in which it recognizes itself." Predictably, Sladek concluded that the revue, along with film, was the art most adequate to the urbanite's condition. Whereas variety shows and cabaret had been linked in the discourse of the fin de siècle, now the pairing was film and revue. Cinema had replaced vaudeville as the major form of popular entertainment. This was paradoxical, inasmuch as the first film had been screened in the Wintergarten in 1895, and short films had been part of many variety shows in the ensuing decade. Thereafter, however, the rapid spread of cinemas devoted exclusively to film screenings drove hundreds of vaudeviels out of business in neighborhoods throughout Germany. In the twenties, even managers of regular theaters were worried that they were losing customers to cinema, just as they had complained about vaudeville in the 1890s. In 1924 Monty Jacobs, a respected drama critic of the Weimar era, suggested that the postwar proliferation of revues was an attempt to halt that hemorrhage: "At the moment nothing merits closer attention from theater critics than the development of revue. For with this art form the directors are trying to intercept the departing audience, which is streaming from the stage to the cinema."

Weimar revues tried to compete with cinema by mounting increasingly longer and more spectacular shows. Consequently, the revues of the twenties were distinctly more heterogeneous than those of the Wilhelmine era. The visual effects were not only more stunning but more numerous: there could be up to sixty different scenes or numbers in an evening. To mount such excessive shows, the directors had to draw upon a wide assortment of genres. Frank Warschauer, a writer for the Weltsbühne, noted that the revue "lived in wanton, truly wanton conchabination with variety shows, waxworks, cabaret, operetta, also film, in short, with everything that could possibly come into question for its purposes." Such wild couplings required a wide assortment of partners. Whereas each Metropol revue had been scripted by a single author (Julius Freund) and composed by a single musician (Viktor Hollaender, Nelson, or Lincke), several people contributed texts and music to each of the revues produced by Klein, Charrell, and Haller. In addition, a broad assortment of actors, comedians, singers, dancers, and vaudeville performers had to be assembled. Since Germany, let alone Berlin, could not provide enough talent to fill the evenings of three major and several minor revue stages, many entertainers and much music had to be imported from abroad. Reviewing For Everyone, Warshawer noted that Charrell had brought together talent "from Russia, Scandinavia, England, France, and America. And from Berlin. The result is a coy confusion of languages, which gives the gaping spectator the impression (or the illusion, I don't know for sure) that we are living in a cosmopolis [Weltstadt]."

In the 1920s Berlin was still very concerned with maintaining its world-city image. Before the war it could lay claim to this distinction by touting its own qualifications as a capital of modernity, a global leader in industry, commerce, and consumerism. The disasters of the war and the inflation deprived the city of this distinction, and popular entertainment was forced to reformulate its metropolitan image. In the Weimar era the revues demonstrated their cosmopolitan allure not by touting Berlin, but rather by presenting an array of foreign numbers. This accounted for the major difference between prewar and postwar revues. In both the Wilhelmine and the Weimar eras, the revue form was deemed appropriate to the fast-changing and ever-changing nature of Berlin life. In terms of content, however, postwar revues could no longer turn to Berlin itself for positive thematic images of modernity. They had to look abroad for such icons, and more often than not they turned to the United States. What Berlin claimed to be before the war, New York seemed to be thereafter: a hectic and mighty metropolis, a global center of production, finance, commerce, and consumerism.

The 1920s witnessed an Americanization of popular entertainment in Berlin. The music of the prewar revues had derived from waltzes, polkas, mazurkas, folk songs, and marches. Only occasionally would the tango, the Boston, the two-step, the cakewalk, or ragtime be added as exotic interludes. Paul Lincke, for example, wrote an "American Cake-Walk" with the unfortunate title, "Coon's Birthday" (1903), and it will be recalled that "Niggersongs" were performed at the Hungry Pegasus in 1901. Such works were inspired by the occasional appearance of black American troupes in Berlin variety shows at the turn of the century. After the war, however, American music flooded the stages. The specifically Central European musical elements receded, and the melodies of revues came to be dominated increasingly by fox trot and jazz rhythms. Even successful popular composers like Nelson had to adopt the new idiom. An observer noted in 1926: "Just as operetta is defined musically by the three-quarter time of the waltz, the revue is characterized by two-quarter time, and more precisely by syncopation. A revue without syncopation seems almost unthinkable to us today."

Although musical purists might dispute the degree to which Germany produced any true jazz, the shift in popular musical style was radically
meaning Germans insensitive to the denigration and abuse embedded in those words, they also failed to note the more fundamental problems in their disquisitions on the “Africaness” of American blacks. Many liberal German observers attributed a primitive savagery to blacks, whose blood supposedly boiled from the heat of the ancestral jungle. A reviewer for the Berliner Tageblatt, who applauded the “victory of negroid dance culture over the Viennese waltz,” said of Josephine Baker: “In her the wildness of her forefathers, who were transplanted from the Congo Basin to the Mississippi, is preserved most authentically; she breathes life, the power of nature, a wantonness that can hardly be contained.” Oscar Bie, the respected dance critic of the Berliner Börsen-Courier, saw in her troupe “the remains of genuine paganism, of idol worship, of grotesque orgies.” He imputed a similar chthonic feeling to the Chocolate Kiddies, who expressed a “true joy of the earth in drumming, shouting, dancing, singing, and jumping, totally devoid of a message, just as the earth itself.” He considered their music “barbarically beautiful, full of primitive improvisations.”

At the same time that the black entertainers were considered primally primitive, they somehow seemed to be paradigmatically modern. Bie believed that their performances could serve as a model for the revitalization of Germany: “They have brought us our culture. Humanity has returned to its origins in the niggersteps, in the shaking and loosened bodies. Only that can help us, we who have become too erratic. It is the deepest expression of our innermost longing.” Such words echoed the works of the Expressionist artists a generation earlier, who had displayed their desire for primitive authenticity by painting imaginary scenes of African dancers. While Bie imputed to blacks a vitality that Germans lacked, Fred Hildenbrandt, a noted critic for the Berliner Tageblatt, contended that their performances gave perfect expression to the actual condition of European civilization: “What is it other than the tempo of our times, these fast-paced, wild times, whose symbol is truly embodied best of all in a rollicking negro theater.” Hildenbrandt here echoed another cliché: that industrial and metropolitan civilization had stripped away cultural constraints and returned its citizens to a primitive wantonness. Count Harry Kessler, whose diaries provide one of the most perceptive accounts of Weimar Berlin, imagined a connection between “Africaness” and modernity. After seeing Baker’s troupe at Nelson’s theater on February 17, 1926, he wrote: “They are a cross between primeval forests and skyscrapers; likewise their music, jazz, in its color and rhythms. Ultramodern and ultraprimitive.”

Josephine Baker was nonchalant about such verbiage. In her memoirs of 1928, she wrote: “In Berlin’s journals and newspapers they wrote that I was the embodiment of the German ‘Expressionism’ of today, of German
'Primitivism' etc... Why not? And anyway, what is the meaning of all that?" Despite such dismissive words, black entertainers were at least partially complicit in sustaining the belief that they represented primitive vitality. In the United States generations of black performers had been forced to conform to comic stereotypes expected by white audiences. When black troupes crossed the Atlantic, they had to take prevailing prejudices there into account. The Chocolate Kiddies and the Baker-Douglas revue were commercial ventures that toured Europe and presented clichés about America in general, and American blacks in particular. The show starring Baker and Douglas, for example, featured scenes entitled "Steamboat Race on the Mississippi," "New York Skyscrapers," "Wedding in Charleston," "Florida Cabaret," "The Strutting Babies," and "Shake, Rattle, and Roll." The Chocolate Kiddies also exhibited cliché-ridden scenes of black American life (fig. 22).

While the black performers may have reinforced some stereotypes about their race, at times they succeeded in subverting those same images. Iwan Goll, a talented Expressionist writer, took note of the self-parody involved in Baker's "African" numbers. He believed that there was something intentionally ludicrous in the fact that an urban black woman performed a "Dance of Savages" while wearing a loincloth. Baker's most obvious send-


23. Josephine Baker shakes her banana skirt at Berlin's Theater des Westens (1928). The curtain was drawn by Benno von Arent, who had no further use for such "degenerate Negro art" after becoming the official Reich Set Designer (Reichsbühnenbildner) and a Hitler protégé during the Nazi years.

up of African clichés was also her most famous number: the dance in a banana skirt, which she performed during an appearance at the Theater des Westens in 1928 (fig. 23). At the same time that black entertainers exploded stereotyped images of Africa, they also parodied European society and culture. Douglas performed what he considered "German" ways of talking and walking, to the delight of his audience. He also danced a
number that parodied Pavlova’s rendition of Tchaikovsky’s dying swan. Such acts underscored the stiffness of Europeans and the artificiality of their culture.  

Not all responses to black culture were sympathetic. Conservative defenders of European high culture like Pfitzer were horrified by Americanization in general and “negritification” in particular. Right-wing hostility to blacks dated back to Imperial times, when the Reich had large colonial holdings in Africa. German rule was particularly harsh and provoked the Herero and Hottentot uprising in German Southwest Africa and the Maori-Mau revolt in German East Africa. Both were suppressed with tremendous bloodshed; tens of thousands of Hereros were massacred in what became the first instance of genocide in modern German history. Complaints in the Reichstag about such brutalities led to the famous parliamentary campaign of 1907, the so-called Hottentot election, in which Chancellor Bülow rallied nationalist support behind the colonial policies. It will be recalled that the popular soldiers’ song, “Annenmarie,” was written for the Metropol revue in the wake of that campaign.

The colonial experience generated a discourse on the necessity of protecting German culture from black barbarism. That ideology was resurrected in World War I, when German illustrated newspapers mocked the French use of black colonial troops. Photographs of African soldiers on the Western front were accompanied by captions implying that the French were importing barbarism onto European soil. After the war, hostility to those colonial troops burst forth with a vengeance when the French stationed Senegalese and other black soldiers in the occupied Rhineland. Conservative Germans regarded that as an impossible humiliation, and spread rumors that the African troops were systematically seducing, even raping German women. This story, dubbed the “black outrage” (die schwarze Schmach), gained credence in many circles.  

Rumors of the “black outrage” even affected the cabaret stage. In early 1922 the police banned two nude-show numbers involving black men with white women. The Lola Bach Ballet, appearing in the Potpourri and Weisse Maus cabarets, included a dance duet with a black man and a white woman. Although the police conceded that the number was not sexually indecent, they prohibited it because they feared it might provoke disturbances. The police took passing note of the private travails of the black dancer, who was born in Cameroon, married to a German woman, and father of a three-year-old girl: “In light of the conditions in the western parts of our country, he has already been subjected to the most unpleasant molestations when he has taken his wife on trips and gone out with her. In Dresden he and his wife were literally spit upon, even by workers.” The police also prohibited the performance of a dance entitled “Erotik” by the

Erna Offeney Ballet, because it involved a scene in which four black men forced a white woman to dance herself to death. Again, this number was not banned on account of obscenity, but because the police feared for “public order.” Rather disingenuously, the lawyer for the troupe argued that the work should be permitted precisely because it presented “to the German people, in an eye-catching and frightening manner, the black outrage [schwarze Schmach].” The USPD’s Freiheit called that assertion a piece of “impudence,” inasmuch as “well-known members of the bourgeois parties and doctors in the occupied territories have reported repeatedly in the press that one cannot speak of a black outrage.”

Against such a background, it is understandable why opinion was so polarized over the spread of jazz and the appearance of black revues in the capital. For the right-wing mindset, black arts (or what passed for black arts) became a primary symbol of cultural degeneration. When Wilhelm Frick became the Thuringian minister of education in 1930—the first time a Nazi was appointed to a state cabinet—he promulgated a law entitled “Against Negro Culture,” which was used to suppress all forms of avant-garde art. Likewise, when the Nazis mounted a “Degenerate Music” exhibition in 1938, the poster featured a caricature of a black saxophonist sporting a star of David. Paradoxically, however, the Nazis who equated “Negro art” with degeneration shared some of the assumptions of liberal and avant-garde artists, who envisioned black culture as a form of healthy primitivism. Both Nazis and their opponents made ideological statements about black culture, and in both cases, blackness was equated with barbarism—a racially degenerate and corrupt barbarism for the Nazis, a humane and liberating barbarism for the avant-garde.

“Girls and Crisis”

Whereas the image of blacks on Weimar stages was controversial, another supposedly American icon garnered nearly unanimous praise: the kickline of “Girls.” They usually consisted of some ten to twenty young women who performed fast, perfectly coordinated dance steps, as the Rockettes of Radio City Music Hall do to this day. In the 1920s the most famous of such troupes was that of the Tiller Girls, who in fact were English. John Tiller had been a cotton magnate in Manchester until he went bankrupt in the 1880s. Seeking a new vocation, he began to drill young women in perfectly synchronized movements. The number drew great attention in the 1890s, and by the 1920s several Tiller troupes were performing in major cities of various nations. Haller hired one of them, the so-called Empire Girls, away from the Ziegfeld Follies in New York. This created some confusion about their nationality, and throughout the twenties many
observers believed that they were an American troupe. The Empire Girls, renamed the Lawrence-Tiller-Girls (after the founder's son) in future seasons, were such a hit in the Haller revues that Charell saw himself compelled to hire his own troupe, the John-Tiller-Girls. Soon other troupes were formed, including the Hoffmann Girls and the Jackson Girls. To proclaim their originality and superiority, Haller's Tiller Girls adopted the slogan: "Often copied—never equaled!" (Oft kopiert—nie erreicht!).

Lineups of pretty women were nothing new. They had been a staple of numerous variety shows, as well as the prewar Metropol. What was novel was the dynamism and precision of the Tiller Girls. From their first performance, in Haller's More and More (Noch und noch, 1924), they garnered rave reviews. Herbert Ihering, arguably the outstanding theater critic of the Weimar era, immediately concluded that they, like the revue form itself, were a perfect expression of the age: "The revue accords with the needs of the modern metropolis... For the audience reacts not to movement, to tempo. The applause for comedians is often weak, but for the Empire Girls it thunders right on into the intermissions. The rhythm, the lightness, the exactness are electrically. The American [sic] Girls are a sight worth seeing and a standard to follow." Ihering concluded: "Beauty on stage, not through nakedness, but through motion." 34

This dichotomy—in essence, between nude shows and kicklines—was apparent to many observers. We have seen that nudity played a prominent role in many postwar cabarets as well as revues. James Klein was particularly notorious in that regard. The titles of many of his revues attest to the prevalence of nudity: The World without Veils, Berlin without a Shirt, Strictly Prohibited, Everyone's Naked, Goddam—1000 Naked Women (Die Welt ohne Schleier, Berlin ohne Hemd, Streng verboren, Alle nackt, Dominerotten—1000 nackte Frauen!). At the Komische Oper and similar venues, such as the Theater des Westens, naked women would be arranged in "artful" tableaux, which made them appear like parts of oversized flowers, jewels, or feathered fans. Not only critics but also the spokesmen for Haller and Charell often made fun of the "meat show" (Fleischschau) at Klein's theater, yet the more respectable revues were not wholly innocent. 35 Although nude tableaux were less common at the Admiralspalast and the Grosses Schauspielhaus, they still had a role to play. One of the most egregious illustrations of the traditional voyeuristic gaze appeared in Charell's For You (Für Dich, 1925). In a scene entitled "What Sailors Dream Of" (Wovon Matrosen träumen), a number of nude women were suspended in hammocks directly above a chorus of men dressed as sailors (fig. 24). The gentlemen in the audience were thus treated to sights about which seamen proverbially fantasized.

Within that context, it is understandable that numerous male critics of the day noted approvingly that the Tiller Girls and similar troupes appeared to be sexless. Their short hair, slim build, and athletic performance differed radically from the more prurient displays, where naked women appeared in total passivity. In contrast, the Girls performed vigorous athletic motions. The Tiller Girls were known for their coordinated kicklines, often moving up and down stairs (fig. 25). The Hoffmann Girls specialized in even more athletic, circuslike stunts, such as synchronized climbing of ropes suspended from the stage ceiling. This radically new image of womanhood, full of strength and energy, negated the picture of passive sexual receptivity that had prevailed until then, and made the Girls seem asexual. Fritz Giese, a professor of "psychotechnics" at the University of Stuttgart and the author of a book entitled GIRLKULT, referred to the Girls' "neutralization of the sexes, the exclusion of the feminine." Theater critics wrote of their "absolutely unerotic dance," which resided "beyond sexuality." Even Kracauer argued that they were not primarily sexual, but rather "a system of lines which no longer has an erotic meaning, but at
25. The Tiller Girls: "Often copied—never equalled!"

best signifies the place where the erotic may be found." The sexual inapproachability of troupes like the Tiller Girls was underscored by publicity reports which stressed that they were constantly chaperoned, roomed in pairs, and even traveled with their own pastor. The novelist Joseph Roth complained ironically about the "well-behaved puritanism" and "pro vocative moral purity" of the Girls.69

One may question whether the Girls' appeal was as asexual as some contemporary observers claimed. Copy publicity shots certainly gave the lie to such contentions. Alfred Polgar, an outstanding critic of the day, admitted that he did not understand "why women actually go to revue theaters... in revues the primacy of the male reveals itself still unshaken. There is nothing there for women." Fred Hildenbrandt wondered what the women in the audience must have thought about the fact that "it is always members of their sex that run around on stage with hardly anything on." They must have concluded the obvious: "that's the way the world is, one has to cater to men, since they pay for the whole racket."70

Nevertheless, the persistence of claims that the Girls were asexual suggests that they could not be appropriated easily by more traditional voyeurism. After all, the conventional male gaze continued to be fortified by the persistence of tableaux featuring naked women. Paul Morgan, a comedian who often appeared both in cabarets and at the Haller revue, wrote a supposedly humorous vignette that contrasted the two options offered by the stage: "Olive is an Original-Tiller-Girl, Gerti is a German 'Girl.' Please do not confuse the two. Both are parts of the '300 cast members' in the revue, but the one young woman is a little cog in the 'often copied—never equalled' precision-dance-machine, the other is only capable of displaying a well-shaped bosom. And, as a 'living flower vase,' a bit of ass as well."71 The same dichotomy appeared on the printed page, in the program booklets of the revues. Whereas the Tiller Girls were invariably photographed in costume, the second string of women performers, such as the Haller Girls, would often be shot in the nude. The reproduction of such pictures turned the revues' program books into a form of soft-core pornography.

Given the Tiller Girls' active demonstration of skills, Fritz Giese as well as many commentators in the popular media believed they represented a more general Girlkultur. In this wider sense, a "Girl"—also called, with more respect, the "New Woman"—was paradigmatically young (in her late teens or early twenties) and employed, usually as a secretary, typist, or department-store salesperson. These white-collar jobs had seen an influx of women, and the presence of female employees in what traditionally had been male preserves caused a flurry of speculation—some of it serious and informed, much of it not. On screen, in popular literature, and in advertisements, the employed "New Woman" was touted as being self-assured, "matter-of-fact" (sachlich), and possessing a large degree of independence in her professional and personal life. That image, however, was all too often belied by reality. Sociological inquiries at the time uncovered great discontent among white-collar women, who received low pay, worked long hours at repetitive tasks, had no chance for career advancement, and often were subjected to sexual harassment in the office. Many of them laughed bitterly at the media image of Girlkultur.72

As for the Girls on stage, it is impossible to know how they experienced their own work. In "interviews" for the popular press, Tiller Girls stressed the combination of dedicated work and glamour that their occupation entailed. Simultaneously, however, they claimed that they had become dancers mainly in order to attract wealthy spectators who would lead them to the altar. Since the same cliché saturated popular literature and films dealing with the "office girl" (who invariably ended up marrying her boss), one may surmise that many statements by the dancers were fictitious, or at least dictated according to a prearranged pattern.73

The fact that the stage Girls were rigorously choreographed, worked long hours, and lacked a true career—they often were terminated in their early twenties—belie the notion of independent individuality that Giese attributed to them. The same holds true for their visual impact. After all, the main impression was that of deindividuated performers sub-
merged into a larger mass. Just as the supposedly independent professional woman in reality was buried in the lower reaches of a rigid office hierarchy, the stage Girl performed in lockstep with numerous clones. Polgar contended that “Girls are a so-called plurael tautism.” That means that the concept appears linguistically only in the plural. A row of women became Girls only with “the smelting of each individual entity into a collectivity.” Walter Benjamin contended that the trademark of the Girls was their quantity, which increased every season: “The revue caters to the bourgeois desire for diversity, more in terms of number than in the nature and arrangement of its presentations. It will soon exhaust its store of inspiration. Ever since it undressed the female body to the point of total nudity, its only available mode of variation was quantity, and soon there will be more Girls than spectators.” The lengthening of the kickline entailed a progressive diminution of the individual performer. As the dancer lost her personality, something new resulted—a creation whose allure resided in its precise movements and formal configurations. Oscar Bie spoke of the Tiller Girls’ “uncanny appeal of absolute body-motion.” Kraus referred to the meaning of such displays resided in their form: “The ornament is an end in itself,” and “the constellations have no meaning beyond themselves.”

Although the Girls’ kickline did not refer directly to anything beyond its own abstract configurations, indirectly it seemed to reflect a modern aesthetic—one derived not from the individual body but from the machine. Many writers resorted to mechanistic images: the various Girl troupes appeared to them as a “precision machine,” a “motion machine,” or a “Girl machine” (Präzisionsmaschine, Bewegungsmaschine, Girlishchina). One reviewer wrote approvingly: “The Girls function well!” (Die Girls funktionieren gut). Kraus contended that if the Girls did have a metaphorical meaning after all, it would be “the functioning of a flourishing economy,” namely, that of the United States: “When they formed a line that moved up and down, they radiantly represented the superiority of the conveyor belt; when they step-danced at a rapid pace, it sounded like ‘business, business’; when they tossed their legs into the air with mathematical precision, they joyfully approved the progress of rationalization; and when they continually repeated the same motions, without breaking their line, one imagined an uninterrupted chain of automobiles streaming from the factories of the world.”

German observers conflated the kicklines with images of the United States as a land of technological wonders. Whereas the black entertainers embodied one aspect of America—something spontaneous, primitive, and un civilized, uncumbered by European culture—the Girls represented the flip side of the dollar: energy, efficiency, productivity. In the Weimar era, the heated, often caustic debates about “Americanism” focused not only on mass cultural phenomena like jazz, revues, and Hollywood films (which flooded German cinemas after the stabilization of the mark), but also on new ways of organizing production. “Taylorism” and “Fordism” were the buzzwords of the day. Charles Taylor’s notions of scientific management, based on time/motion studies of workers and piece-rate incentives, were highly controversial, since they entailed rigid labor discipline and (frequently) low pay. In contrast, Henry Ford—who also had a better knack for self-promotion—received much more positive press. His highly efficient moving assembly line, as well as his desire to create a mass market of low-priced commodities for well-paid workers, were generally admired. A mythology about the productive wonders of American industry gained hold among German intellectuals, and invaded the popular press as well. Since America came to be equated with dynamic energy, mechanical precision, and infinite replicability, it was no wonder that many viewers believed that the English Tiller Girls were American products. Paul Sinow wrote, the premier cartoonist of the Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung in the Weimar era, even sketched the Tiller Girls coming off a Ford assembly line (fig. 26).

Whereas the mechanistic overtones of the kicklines gave them an American aura, another aspect appeared to be more distinctly German. The precision of the Girls evoked images not only of machinery but of the military as well. The word “revue” had, after all, originated in the martial sphere, as a designation for the inspection of parading soldiers. The Girls themselves evoked that association on those occasions when they shoul dered arms onstage (fig. 27). This aspect of their appeal was especially clear to Polgar: “Another magic besides that of the erotic emanates from the appearance and the actions of the Girls: the magic of the military. Drilled, parallel, in step, correctly executing handholds and manoeuvres, obeying an unseen but inescapable command . . . —it provides the same appeal that makes soldiers’ play so palatable to the spectator; but of course only as a spectator.” Another critic repeated the common, but erroneous belief that John Tiller had been an officer before becoming a capitalist: “Everything clicks as on a barracks drill-ground . . . Not for nothing was the old Tiller, who first trained the Girls, a sergeant in the English army. However, they no longer appear in the military parade march, but in the rhythm of modern work, to the beat of the machine age.”

In the eyes of contemporaries, the Girls performed a fantastic masquerade: they were cheerful and dynamic signs that signified fundamental forces of order and control. The kickline represented both military precision and economic rationalization, the two keys to domination in the modern world. Moreover, the attenuated femininity—the “magic of the erotic”—obscured, indeed sweetened, the powerful forces of order that the Girls
embodied. They were a form of sexual bait, with a hidden hook: whoever consumed their image also internalized an appreciation for mass production, replicability, and military discipline.

The Girls themselves, as individuals and performers, were subjected directly to these same forces. While they might have been freed from some of the cruder forms of voyeuristic eroticism, they were depersonalized in a more fundamental manner. Not only was the individual subsumed into the collective, but she also was dissected into her constituent appendages. In the kicklines, the unit of composition was no longer the whole person, but the body part. According to Kracauer: “The Tiller Girls cannot be reassembled retrospectively into human beings; the mass gymnastics are never undertaken by total and complete bodies, whose contortions defy rational understanding. Arms, thighs, and other parts are the smallest components of the composition.” Just as the structure of the revue replicated the fragmentation of sensation in the metropolis, the depersonalization of the dancer paralleled the reduction of the worker’s body to economically useful attributes: “the legs of the Tiller Girls correspond to the hands in the factories.” To be sure, the most obvious fragmentation of the body took place among the tableaux of naked women, whose overtly sexual attributes (breasts and pelvis) were emphasized. Nevertheless, the Tiller Girls were equally dismembered, though the knife cut along different lines: arms and especially legs seemed to take on a mass life of their own.

The performance of the Girls was marked, in Erich Kästner’s words, by das ewig gleiche Beinerles.41

Not surprisingly, there were women artists and performers who took issue with the Girl troupes. Unfortunately, an “antirevue” planned in 1925 by Hannah Höch, an outstanding Dadaist artist, never was realized. It had been inspired by a Berlin revue that was, in Höch’s words, “one of the kitsch-presentations that is geared only to sexual impact by brutal means.”44 Six years later, at Friedrich Hollaender’s “Tingel-Tangel” cabaret, the sisters Grit and Ina van Elben staged a dance parody of the
Girl troupes. They employed a series of cut-out figures to mock the replicability of women in the kicklines (fig. 28).

The most effective means of criticism was the provision of countermodels. The dancer Valeska Gert (1892–1978), who performed at Sound and Smoke in 1920 and various other venues in ensuing years, was diametrically opposed to the Girl troupes. On the one hand, she danced solo, and her performances often sought to express her own personality. As Hildenbrandt noted, she spoke “only of herself,” and performed “autobiographical dances”—the opposite, in short, of the Girls, who subsumed their personalities into the kickline. On the other hand, Gert also parodied the various popular dance fads of the day, which people imitated unthinkingly (fig. 29). One appreciative critic noted that one might consider her dances obscene, inasmuch as they consisted of “uncovering”: “Yet Valeska Gert does not uncover herself, but rather the sexuality of dance, and it is understandable that when she puts on the cloak of the tango, the Charleston, or the waltz, nothing but shreds remain in the end. It is not simply a parody or travesty of conventional dances, but rather a proof that bourgeois dance is not an expression of dancelike rhythm, but rhythmic non-

28. Grit and Ina van Elben as the “Tingel-Tangel-Girls” (1931).

29. Valeska Gert demolishes the Charleston.
theater, he exclaimed: "One doesn't believe them anymore, those rosy Jackson-Girls! . . . Their smiles are those of masks; their confidence, a leftover from better days; their accuracy, a mockery of the difficulties faced by the powers that they represent. As much as they snake and undulate, as if nothing had happened, the crisis, to which so many enterprises have fallen victim, has also silently liquidated these Girl-machines." In this case, at least, Kracauer's predictions proved false. Granted, some major revue directors had departed from the scene. James Klein had lost ownership of the Komische Oper through bankruptcy as early as 1926, but he continued to direct revues there until 1929, when he was dismissed. That same year witnessed the last performance of a Haller revue. Nevertheless, Girl troupes could still be found on the stages of variety theaters like the Scala and the Wintergarten, and they migrated to other media as well.

By 1927 Charell had ceased staging revues and mounted, instead, "revue-operettas." Since the competition in the revue market had become fierce, with several shows playing simultaneously, Charell developed a new genre that combined the saccharine sentimentality of musicals with the "jazzy" and risqué qualities of revues. He ransacked and rewrote popular operettas, plays, and stories from the past: The Mikado, Casanova, The Three Musketeers, The White Horse Inn, The Merry Widow. Often he arranged for new or "updated" music to be added, and, most incongruously of all, he interspersed kicklines throughout the plots. In Casanova, Girls could even be seen parading as Prussian guards of Frederick the Great. By the end of the twenties, with the advent of sound film, Girl troupes became staples in the cinematic versions of musicals. Charell directed one of the most spectacular of the revue-films, The Congress Dances (Der Kongress tanzt, 1933).

Embedded in musicals and operettas, the kicklines of the Girls could hide more completely their subliminal messages, the paradoxes at the heart of popular distractions. In Weimar Berlin, revues were the most popular form of live entertainment, and the Girls were the highlight of the revues. Yet both the Girls and the revues were products of human destructuring and dehumanized restructuring. The revue sacrificed dramatic unity in favor, as Kracauer said, of "the dismembered succession of splendid sensory perceptions." In turn, the kickline sacrificed bodily wholeness in favor of a dismembered succession of bodily parts. The human fragments were reordered into dynamic visual forms which, on the surface, appeared vital and progressive, a symbol of rational management and achievement. But more fundamentally, they revealed—or perhaps disguised?—an underlying sense of economic and military order that demanded the dissolution of all personality and the dismemberment of the person. The bodies of the Girls embodied a critique of the modernity that they ostensibly represented.