ADVERTISING, WOMEN, AND THE SPACES OF CHANGE IN WILHELMINE GERMANY

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 1897, an advertising poster for Boro-Ubrigin soap appeared in Berlin, plastered to the *Litfasssäulen*, or advertising pillars, that had sprung up in cities throughout Germany in the closing decades of the nineteenth century.[1] The poster used a trope that appeared frequently throughout the 1890s: a female subject was shown reading an advertisement within the advertising poster itself [Fig. 1]. Positioned between the advertisement and the viewer, the woman in the Boro-Ubrigin poster was intended to convey the benefits of a modern consumer good – brand-name soap – to the many Germans who traveled throughout Berlin. At the same time, this visual trope presented women as a whole as privileged interpreters (and potential consumers) of a new stage in Germany's economic development. Beginning in the 1880s, the *Litfasssäulen* had accompanied an explosion of retail stores in German cities and a growing number of illustrated mass newspapers and magazines in guiding an emerging consumer culture in Wilhelmine Germany.[2] With their welter of public-facing commercial imagery, the advertising pillars quickly became metonyms for Germany's growing cities and the newly mass-based culture that they facilitated. Indeed, the advertising posters produced

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[1] In 1855, a Berlin printer named Ernst Litfass received a permit to erect a structure that would serve as an organized public display for advertising posters. The *Litfasssäulen,* as they came to be called, soon proliferated throughout Berlin and other German cities, and by 1914 there were nearly 20,000 such pillars throughout Germany. See Anthony McElligott, ed., *The German Urban Experience 1900-1945* (London: Routledge, 2001), 156; and Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 150.

[2] Most historians agree that a full-blown consumer society, in which individual identities are determined in large part through consumption and consumer goods, did not exist in Germany until at least the 1950s, when a majority of Germans were finally able to function above a subsistence level. However, many of the institutions of consumer and mass culture, including the advertising industry and the department store, were consolidated during the 1890s. See Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer, "In Pursuit of Happiness: Consumption, Mass Culture, and Consumerism," in their *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), and Paul Lerner, "An All-Consuming History? Recent Works on Consumer Culture in Modern Germany," *Central European History* 42 (2009).

in Wilhelmine Germany are sources from a society in transition: they shaped and in turn themselves were affected by the convergence of a number of historical developments, including industrialization, rapid urbanization, and the increasing calls for the participation of women in public life following Germany's unification in 1871.

Fig. 1. Boro-Ubrigen Plant-Based Soap, Berlin, 1897. *Das Frühe Plakat* no. 1823.

Within these advertisements, female figures like the one in the Boro-Ubrigin poster served as both subjects and objects in representations of consumer culture and modern life, espressing the benefits of such diverse products and places as soap, electricity, craft exhibitions, cafes, and department stores. Of course, this tactic was not unique to Germany. Scholars have long recognized the frequent discursive and representational connection made by commercial and intellectual discourses between women and acts of consumption in a variety of societies and time periods.[3] The precise function of such imagery, however – the "cultural work" it performed and the meanings that it attached to different genders, spaces, and commodities – is culturally constructed, a product of specific historical contexts. As Erika Rappaport has argued, the task of the historian is then to "examine how and why individuals were constructed as consumers within specific historical settings."[4]

This paper examines the particular form that such gendered representations of consumption took in the context of imperial Germany, and centers on my analysis of images of women in advertising posters and their connection to two spaces at the forefront of change in Wilhelmine Germany: the home and the street, the spaces of domesticity and urban discovery. Art historian Griselda Pollock influentially argued that the spaces of "modernity," as defined by many artists and later scholars, excluded women

[3] Victoria de Grazia, introduction to *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 1. For an excellent overview of some of the literature on French and British women as consumers, see Mary Louise Roberts, "Gender, Consumption, and Commodity Culture,"*The American Historical Review,* Vol. 103, No. 3 (1998). Literary scholar Rita Felski provides a nuanced literary analysis of the ways that an association of women with consumerism in literature provided opportunities for liberation as well as for the implementation of new networks of social control over women. Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).
[4] Erika Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 12.

themselves while drawing attention to the sexualized female body: in her words, "the literature of modernity describes the experience of men."[5] In this paper, I will counter Pollock's argument by showing that in Wilhelmine Germany, discourses of consumption, originating from cultural critics as well as advertisers, frequently positioned women as the primary mediators of modern technologies and consumption practices. By calling on advertising posters as rich sources that have much to tell us about the seismic cultural shifts occurring in Wilhelmine society, I also implicitly question the claim by historians like Volker Berghahn that the study of "language and symbols," and indeed the study of women, cannot contribute usefully to "the really taxing questions about the inner condition and trajectory of the German Empire in the years before 1914."[6] Certainly one of the essential, and essentially unstable, elements of the "inner condition" of Wilhelmine society was the collision between conceptions of tradition and modernity brought to the fore through changing consumer practices. Advertisements associated women with both the best and worst that consumer society had to offer, inviting praise as well as belittlement and even severe censure from cultural critics. Whether positive or negative, however, this discourse reveals that women – or at least representations of women as consuming subjects – were central to the troubled construction of a German modernity.[7] My research confirms the importance of women's roles in the home in this period, but

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[5] Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, femininity and the histories of art* (London: Routledge Classics, 2003), 93.

[6] Volker R. Berghahn, "The German Empire, 1871-1914: Reflections on the Direction of Recent Research." *Central European History* Vol. 35, No. 1 (2002), 81.

[7] By "modernity," I mean primarily not modernist art movements but what Suzanne Marchand and David Lindenfield define as "belief in reason, science, and progress, exemplified by technological innovation, industrialization, and urbanization." As Marchand and Lindenfield note, and the advertisements and cultural commentary I have analyzed confirm, Germans themselves frequently applied the term "modern" to the changing pace and possibilities of the time in which they lived. Suzanne Marchand and David Lindenfeld, "Germany at the Fin de Siècle: An Introduction," in their edited volume, *Germany at the Fin de Siècle: Culture, Politics, and Ideas* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 4.

suggests that these roles should not be narrowly conceived of as old-fashioned or traditional, out-of-sync with other developments in German economic and cultural life. Instead, I argue that through consumer imagery, women's roles in the home were connected to modern innovations in very direct ways. In addition, consumer imagery and broader cultural discourses fostered a female identity constituted by the more liminal space of the modern urban street, one that was intimately connected with transformations in retailing and urban mobility. To be sure, the development of aspects of a consumer culture between 1890 and 1914 did not radically transform the position of women in German society, though women did make some political gains in this period. But it did promote new spaces for feminine pleasure and exploration, lay the foundation for articulations of female citizenship during and after World War I, and assert women's centrality to German urban modernity.

Advertising posters present a unique but not unproblematic opportunity for historians to uncover the underlying sentiments and preoccupations of a society. In general, advertisements rely on the readability of certain visual and textual signs in order to sell the things they advertise; their primary function is as a means of communication that must keep pace with the churning urban environment around them. At the same time, however, each poster contributes to and subtly shifts the growing corpus of public knowledge about what certain signs mean and which signs are appropriate in a given context.[8] This implies that the value of a poster as a source for historians resides not necessarily in the visual techniques employed by any single poster, but rather in the

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[8] I have found the historical and analytical frameworks presented in John Barnicoat, *A Concise History of Posters* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972); Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (London: Sage Publications, 2001) and Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978) to be helpful in developing my interpretations of Wilhelmine advertisements.

patterns and connections created by many posters in their particular context – in the collective visuality of the *Litfasssäulen*.[9] In this case, it was the accumulated representations of women that likely played an important role in shaping perceptions of modern urban life and, more specifically, of consumerism. Of the over 5,000 posters collected in *Das frühe Plakat in Europa und den USA*, the largest printed collection of posters I have found covering the period before 1914, roughly 15% contain images of women. *Das frühe Plakat* is a particularly rich source for the study of the everyday commercial imagery that confronted urban Germans between 1880 and 1914 because it contains a broad range of posters, from the masterpieces of graphic design that have graced subsequent art history texts and exhibits, to the less sophisticated posters that clearly represent the earliest forays of many businesses into the world of advertising. In fact, advertising posters produced between 1890 and 1914 offer such an exciting window through which to study the emergence of mass and consumer culture in part *because* they represent early attempts to develop a comprehensible advertising language that would appeal to a wide swathe of Germans and shape their perceptions of the objects and institutions of consumption. This large collection thus provides ample visual texts through which to observe changes in the style, content, and strategies of commercial imagery with respect to women between 1890 and 1914.[10]

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[9] David Ciarlo makes a similar methodological argument in the introduction to his brilliant study of the racialization of black figures in German advertisements. David Ciarlo, *Advertising Empire: Race and Visual Culture in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

[10] This paper draws primarily on my analysis of the over 5,000 posters catalogued in Helga Hollmann et al., eds., *Das frühe Plakat in Europa und den USA: Band 3: Deutschland* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1980). Also useful are the posters collected in Michael Weisser, ed., *Die Frau in der Reklame: Bild- und Textdokumente aus den Jahren 1827-1930* (Münster: F. Coppenrath Verlag, 1981); Hellmut Rademacher and René Grohnert, eds., *Kunst! Kommerz! Visionen!: deutsche Plakate, 1888-1933* (Berlin: Deutsches Historisches Museum, 1992); and Hellmut Rademacher, ed., *Das deutsche Plakat: Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1965).

Like any text, period advertisements offer advantages as well as disadvantages for a historian. Certainly, advertising posters cannot reveal the innermost thoughts or feelings of their creators nor of their target viewers and consumers. But such sources do cast light on the way that consumption as a form of participation in modern and urban life was publicized and presented in Germany. They reveal how a visual commercial language using the figures of women evolved in a period of great cultural and economic transformation, attaching varied and sometimes conflicting meanings to the female form. Analysis of advertising posters also can help illuminate the connections between certain visual tropes and the commodities with which they were paired and made to represent.

This paper builds on a rich literature regarding the formation of many institutions of modern consumer culture between roughly 1880 and 1914, especially the department store, the advertising industry, and the mass press. Historians have shown how these institutions were formed in the crucible of Germany's rapid entry into the world economy and how discussions about their rise were integrated into larger bourgeois debates about knowledge, luxury, and public space.[11] Yet despite the recent flurry of interest in the

[11] For an analysis of the debates about luxury and consumption in bourgeois intellectual circles, see Warren G. Breckman, "Disciplining Consumption: The Debate about Luxury in Wilhelmine Germany, 1890-1914," *Journal of Social History,* Vol. 24, No. 3 (1991), as well as David Hamlin, "Romanticism, Spectacle, and a Critique of Wilhelmine Consumer Capitalism," *Central European History,* Vol. 38, No. 2 (2005). For the advertising industry and the department store, see the essays collected in *Advertising and the European City: Historical Perspectives,* ed. Clemens Wischermann and Elliott Shore (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2000) and in *Selling Modernity: Advertising in Twentieth-Century Germany,* ed. Pamela Swett, et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), and the two essays treating Germany in *Cathedrals of Consumption: The European Department Store, 1850-1939,* ed. Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumain (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999). Useful histories of the German advertising industry and its selective appropriation of American and British advertising tactics are found in Victoria de Grazia, "The Arts of Purchase: How American Publicity Subverted the European Poster, 1920-1940," in *Remaking History,* ed. Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989); and in Ciarlo, *Advertising Empire,* especially pp. 108-147. The mass press in this period has garnered less scholarly attention, but see Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900.* A useful synthesis of recent work in German and English on the mass press, recorded music, early films, and other media that emerged during the Kaiserreich can be found in Corey Ross, *Media and the Making of Modern Germany: Mass Communications, Society, and Politics from the Empire to the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

history of consumer and mass culture, surprisingly few historians have mined posters and images themselves to construct analyses of German society and the various social, economic, and cultural changes that transpired before World War I. With respect to women's and gender history, this absence is particularly glaring in comparison with the vast body of literature discussing the rise of the so-called "New Woman" in post-World War I Weimar Germany and her connection to debates about women's roles in the context of modernity and consumer culture during the interwar period.[12] By privileging Weimar and post-WWI visual and textual discourses, historians risk losing sight of continuities with those discourses already in play before WWI. At the same time, however, the period between 1890 and 1914 must be seen as a unique stage of modernity in its own right, not merely a precursor to Weimar.

[12] The scholarship is voluminous, but see, for example, Marsha Meskimmon and Shearer West, eds., *Visions of the 'Neue Frau': Women and the Visual Arts in Weimar Germany* (Aldershot, England: Scholar Press, 1995), and Katharina Von Ankum, ed., *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

II. SPACES OF CHANGE

Advertising, in the years before radio and film, was a spatial as well as an economic practice. The advertising posters covering the *Litfasssäulen* as well as the walls of buildings literally took up space in Germany's burgeoning cities, and in doing so commanded the attention of millions of commuters and passersby, becoming an integral (if not always appreciated) part of the modern urban experience. In addition, these posters sold goods and services related to particular spaces: spaces of domesticity, leisure, labor, and, of course, fantasy. As these spaces were filled with new objects, ideals, and restrictions, they also took on novel meanings and relationships to society as a whole. They thus became sites for competing articulations of self and community, and emblems of a society in transition.

After German unification in 1871, the nation underwent a dramatic demographic and economic transformation. In 1880, only fourteen cities in Germany had populations of over 100,000. By 1914, that number had jumped to forty-eight.[13] Berlin was at the forefront of this demographic shift, expanding from a provincial Prussian town to a true *Weltstadt* in this period and growing from a population of less than 1,000,000 in 1870 to nearly four times that in 1914.[14] In addition, Germany emerged as a global economic force at this time.[15] Germany-based multinational corporations like Siemens-Schuckert,

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[13] Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 220. This process of urbanization was largely driven by internal migration, as poor rural Germans made their way to better-paying manufacturing jobs in larger towns.

[14] John Mander, *Berlin: The Eagle and the Bear* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1959), 115. By 1920, Berlin was the third largest city in the world, behind only New York City and London.

[15] Some historians have argued that Germany's high level of economic globalization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was only reached again in the 1970s. See Cornelius Torp, *Die Herausforderung der Globalisierung: Wirtschaft und Politik in Deutschland 1860-1914* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005).

Liebig, and AEG were important economic actors, driving innovations in production, distribution, and marketing. And in 1884, Germany entered the race for colonial territories, eventually acquiring several colonies and protectorates in Africa and Asia. What countries like England and France had accomplished over nearly a century thus occurred in Germany within the span of a few decades. The unprecedented pace of Germany's rise and expansion has since become the focus of many debates about the country's troubled engagement with modernity. Andrew Lees, among others, has argued that reactions to urbanization in particular often took on a more negative cast in Germany than they did in other advanced western nations.[16] Yet it is important to recognize the ways that Germans also actively engaged with, and profited from, this onslaught of modernity. The processes of urbanization, industrialization, and massification of culture in Wilhelmine Germany certainly had their detractors, but they also had boosters and optimistic reformers who sought to harness these processes to improve individual experiences as well as Germany's own position on the global stage.[17]

The modern German advertising industry developed in concert with the sweeping economic and social changes after unification. Though *Litfasssaülen* had existed since the 1850s, they only gained prominence as hubs of publicity in the 1880s, when advances in printing technology made it possible to produce full-color posters quickly and cheaply. Germany's streets were flooded with color, image, and text, and advertisers realized that

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[16] Andrew Lees, *Cities Perceived: Urban Society in European and American Thought, 1820-1940* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). Many of these negative reactions initially were justified through biological discourse: Lees writes, "Fears concerning the physiological and demographic impact of city life found expression in an especially extreme manner in Germany. A large number of German authors displayed an almost obsessive anxiety about the likely impact of continued urban growth on health and especially on the size of the population of the country." Lees, 142. Later, such criticism took on an increasingly moral tone as well.
[17] Maiken Umbach, *German Cities and Bourgeois Modernism, 1890-1924* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); *Germany at the Fin de Siècle: Culture, Politics, and Ideas,* ed. Suzanne Marchand and David Lindenfeld.

they needed new strategies to help potential consumers interpret the visual cacophony. As many still associated it with the garish and often duplicitous work of early peddlers and hucksters, the German advertising industry also had to find a way to prove its value to society as a whole, while simultaneously establishing its credentials as a modern, forward-thinking profession. Spurred on by such considerations, German graphic design rose to global prominence at the beginning of the twentieth century on the wings of a new style universally described as "modern," many examples of which were then presented as "art." The posters collected in *Das frühe Plakat* illustrate a clear stylistic shift around 1900, with clearer, more minimalist images (as in the celebrated *Sachplakat,* or Object Poster) replacing the more delicate and ornate styles (*Jugendstil* or Art Nouveau) of the earlier period. Posters before the early-1900s contained detailed allegorical and mythical elements, often featuring idealized female figures with long, flowing hair and Grecian robes. This style gradually declined throughout the early twentieth century. In part, this shift seems to reflect a maturation of urban advertising strategies: in order to catch the eye of busy Berliners and Hamburgers as they crisscrossed the city on their way to work, it was necessary to reduce the message of the advertisement down to its essence, into a snapshot that could convey the benefit of the product or service in only a few moments. Increasingly confident in their ability to create meaningful and captivating (yet inoffensive) visual symbols, advertisers seem to have begun to cater their designs to a uniquely "urban gaze" that demanded clear, bold imagery. The journalist Herman Scheffauer described this new visual discourse in a tone that was half-admiring, half-dismayed, and certainly overwhelmed: posters in the new style, he wrote, were "striking," they "shout and gesticulate, and hypnotise the eye in the Untergrund Stations."[18]

[18] Hermann Scheffauer, "The City Without Night: Berlin 'Twixt Dusk and Dawn," *The Pall Mall*

III. THE MODERNIZATION OF DOMESTIC SPACES

The bold, modern posters that so arrested Scheffauer in 1914 increasingly sought to illustrate the new products and experiences designed for that most sacred and idealized of German spaces: the home. Indeed, it is in this realm that the shift from *Jugendstil* to a more distinctive commercial style is most evident. Posters for domestic products in the 1880s and 1890s – such as an 1888 advertising poster for the Allgemeine Elektricitäts-Gesellschaft (AEG) Berlin – placed female figures in idyllic, pastoral landscapes or otherworldly, dreamlike settings detached from reality [fig. 2].[19] The AEG poster is dominated by a pale-skinned female figure, her lower body draped in gauzy threads of fabric that bring to mind Grecian robes, perched upon a winged wheel. The right hand of the woman (perhaps more goddess than human) thrusts a glowing lightbulb upward past layers of blue and white clouds into an inky black night sky, while her eyes stare defiantly and proudly at the viewer. The woman, the embodiment of electricity and its power, is pictured with the traditional symbols of the god Mercury, a messenger of ingenuity. Yet her flowing hair and curvaceous body also bring to mind images of Aphrodite: her power comes from her fecundity and generativity, concretized in the ad in the form of the white lightbulb, which is literally lifted from her white body. Despite the directness of the figure's gaze, this is patently *not* an enlightened image of female independence and agency. The goddess at the center of the poster is clearly not the

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Magazine, No. 251, Vol. 53 (March) 1914, 280-1. Reprinted in Anthony McElligott, ed., *The German Urban Experience 1900-1945,* 129.

[19] For additional examples of posters that included ornately decorated goddess-like female figures, see, among others, nos. 881, 2167, 3032 and 4811 in *Das frühe Plakat.*

intended recipient or consumer of the AEG brand promise; she is merely its conveyor, and a purely fantastical one at that.

Fig. 2. Allgemeine Elektricitäts-Gesellschaft Berlin, 1888. *Kunst! Kommerz! Visionen!* no. 427.

The tableau in the AEG poster could not be more different than that presented in most domestic-related advertisements of the 1910s, by which time German advertisers had begun to master the art of melding reality and fantasy. A poster for Prometheus Electric Kitchen appliances, produced in 1913 or 1914, provides an instructive contrast [fig. 3]. Of course, the Prometheus brand name itself refers to an ancient myth. But the female figure taking up the right third of the poster is rendered much more realistically than AEG's goddess of electricity. With her hair cut into a short, fashionable, dark bob, the woman appears to be smiling to herself as she stirs a pot on top of her modern stove, which allows her to cook with "no soot, no smoke, no flame." To express the benefits of the stove, the designer of this poster does not rely on an imaginary dreamscape. Instead, he spotlights the very real, physical engagement between the woman and the product to transmit a vision of capability, efficiency, and pride. The setting for the poster is not a starry sky or idyllic countryside, but a spotless, modernized, and efficient domestic space.

In order to understand this shift, and the visual strategies with which advertisements of the Wilhelmine era attempted to sell new consumer products and services into bourgeois homes using female figures, some discussion of the status of women in German society as a whole is necessary. For amidst all of the spatial and economic change and flux of the post-unification decades, most scholars agree that women's roles remained, officially at least, largely unchanged. The German Civil Code of 1900, for example, codified husbands' right to economic and physical mastery over their wives.[20] Women in Germany were denied formal opportunities to participate in the bourgeois public sphere – what Jürgen Habermas has defined as a site of rational critical

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[20] Ute Frevert's *Women in German History: From Bourgeois Emancipation to Sexual Liberation* (New York: Berg Publishers, 1989) is still the most comprehensive overview of the history of women in modern Germany.

debate mediating "the tension-charged field of state-society relations"[21] – until relatively recently. Important turning points in this regard came in 1894, when the Federation of German Women's Associations was created; and in 1908, when women were legally allowed to participate in political organizations and associations. The changes of 1908 were met with anxiety on the part of those who believed that a functional, civilized society required a clear separation of male and female roles, despite the fact that such a clear division was rarely, if ever, attained by most Germans. Yet, however much these boundaries were blurred in practice, a rhetoric of feminine private and masculine public spheres remained pervasive.

Fig. 3. "Prometheus Electric Kitchen: no soot, no smoke, no flame." Hamburg, undated; likely 1913 or 1914. *Das frühe Plakat* no. 2771.

[21] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989), 29.

An active women's movement developed throughout the nineteenth century in response to the consistent treatment of women as inferiors. However, the efficacy of this movement was hindered by its own internal divisions, whether between workers and bourgeois matrons, between socialists and liberals, or between Catholics, Protestants, and Jews.[22] The large bourgeois faction of the movement generally couched its demands for reforms in a language of traditional female values and duties. Such rhetoric often stressed that a woman's power and value to society rested in her maternal attributes. The editors of *Die Frau,* a publication of the more conservative part of the women's movement, declared in 1893 that "One thing remains unassailable even in the new age: the thought that the *ultimate* profession for women is that of *mother."* In this vein, feminist reformers demanded not a transformation of gender relations in German society but an increase in the educational opportunities available to the mothers and wives of Germany's male citizens. It was women's very role as mothers in an age of accelerating change that made improvements in women's education necessary: *Die Frau* declared that "a renewal and ennobling of family life, which our time so urgently needs, is indivisibly linked to a deepening of women's perspective on the world, a broadening of intellectual horizons for mothers."[23] Women, and mothers in particular, were presented as the keys to Germany's global success and internal cohesion as the nation approached the twentieth century.

Such language appealed to a growing belief in bourgeois German society that the domestic sphere – and its prime guardian, the mother – would play an important role in

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[22] See, for example, Amy Hackett, "Feminism and Liberalism in Wilhelmine Germany, 1890-1918," in *Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays,* ed. Berenice A. Carroll (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), pp. 127-136.

[23] Lisa Roetzel, trans. "Our Goals" (Excerpt from *Die Frau*), 1893. Reprinted in *German Feminist Writings,* ed. Patricia A. Herminghouse and Magda Mueller (New York: Continuum, 2001), pp. 130-32.

the appropriate socialization and nationalization of future Germans. Nationalist-minded reformers launched campaigns to educate all Germans about appropriate domestic objects and often emphasized the role of mothers in creating domestic spaces that furthered bourgeois and German nationalist values.[24] The private sphere had become a matter of explicit public consequence and concern, and the spaces of the home and the body of the mother (and the values sustained by these spaces) had become crucial sites at which reformers and manufacturers developed strategies to control and shepherd change.

Yet, far from being a sealed chamber of tradition, the home in this period often was represented in advertisements as a space of technological and material transformation – but transformation that nevertheless supported many of the most fundamental and deeply-ingrained values of bourgeois German society. The rapid increase in advertisements for household products and appliances, such as the poster for the Prometheus stove, attests to the attempts by advertisers and manufacturers to create new domestic ideals and fantasies by building on traditional tropes. This strategy was in part an attempt to navigate the tricky relationship between advertisers and mass manufacturers and a small but influential bourgeoisie. Members of the *Bildungsburgertum* were the greatest critics of advertisements (especially publicly-placed ones, like the posters analyzed here) and the increasingly mass-produced goods that they peddled; yet, they also represented the most lucrative potential consumer segment for such goods.[25] Indeed, many domestic items advertised on the *Litfasssaülen* – including

[24] Nancy Reagin, *Sweeping the German Nation: Domesticity and National Identity in Germany, 1870-1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[25] Kevin Repp discusses bourgeois resistance to mass marketing and corresponding attempts by the Wilhelmine advertising industry to "persuade the public that in Germany culture and commerce did go hand in hand." Kevin Repp, "Marketing, Modernity, and 'The German People's Soul': Advertising and Its Enemies in Late Imperial Germany, 1896-1914," in *Selling Modernity,* 36.

gas and electric stoves, vacuums, cleaning products, and central heating – were generally found only in the homes of the middle and upper classes until after World War I, when reformers vigorously applied the principals of Taylorism to working class German households.[26] But through the publicly-consumed media of Wilhelmine advertising posters, all urban Germans were exposed to the potential reality of the efficient, ordered, and hygienic modern home – a traditional fantasy now made possible through cutting-edge products and appliances. Further, when posters depicting women's domestic duties, from cleaning to cooking to caring for children, appeared in public spaces like that of the *Litfasssäulen,* they elevated such duties in value, confirming that the supposedly "private" was in fact a matter of public consequence and a potential source of prestige and distinction. They also highlighted the changing dimensions of household management, which now required a new breed of specialized skills: the capability to navigate the increasing variety of products (and their advertisements) available in a global marketplace, and the ability to determine the optimal balance of price and quality.

Within the genre of domestic-technology advertisements, there were variations in the way that modern products were presented. A few posters emphasized the way that modern technologies facilitated the bond between mother and child, promoting a particular image of the good German mother. In an advertisement for National Boilers and Radiators [Fig.4], a woman is shown tenderly cradling an infant, the rich blankets and folds of her clothing evoking the sense of coziness and warmth described in the advertising copy. Her body is coextensive with her well-heated surroundings: the lines of

[26] Mary Nolan, *Visions of Modernity: American Business and the Modernization of Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 206-226.

the woman's dress mimic the curtains that frame her and her child, enveloping the child in a cocoon of safety and love.

Fig. 4. "Pleasant, healthy warmth through Central Heating with National boilers – National radiators." Berlin and Munich, 1910. *Das frühe Plakat* no. 1385.

More commonly, however, especially in the posters for electric and gas stoves and utilities, the subject and conveyor of consumption is presented not as the good mother but rather as the good homemaker [Figs. 5-7]. In these posters, all from 1910 and later, a central female figure is shown as the mistress of a kitchen or other domestic space

that is sparkling, well-ordered, and modern – all points of feminine domestic pride enabled by gas and electric appliances. These posters use realistic, minimalist styles to ground their messages in lived experience and practical needs, while also utilizing specific visual strategies to layer a deeper emotional dimension onto their depictions. In figure 5, for example, the woman's bright white apron mirrors the white kitchen that she cooks in, a visual confirmation of the poster's textual association of the figure's pride and success as a woman with her ability to maintain a productive kitchen ("My pride and the secret of my success as a housewife is the gas stove"). Notably, no man is to be seen in any advertisements for these domestic technologies. In commercial imagery, the home is indeed the domain of women – but of modern, clever, and satisfied women. Their position within the home is one of authority, not demure submission. These women even look modern: notably, many of the female figures wear the shortened hairstyle more commonly associated with the fashionable "New Woman" of the post-WWI period. Further, the figure of a child is only present in one poster [Fig. 6]. Even in this scene, however, the relationship between the primary female figure and her daughter is not one of tenderness; there is no suggestion of the mother's provision of spiritual or material sustenance to her child, as in the poster for National Boilers and Radiators. Instead, the child seems to be aiding her mother, perhaps following her mother's orders, by hanging up clothing to dry. The implicit message of this scene is that the female child is learning about the skills and tools (in this case, gas-powered domestic technologies) required to maintain a household.

These advertisements thus reveal an appropriation and transformation of the rhetorical strategies used by the late-nineteenth century German women's movement. In

the 1890s, as we have seen, bourgeois feminist publications like *Die Frau* had demanded reforms in light of women's primary role as *mothers,* nurturers and instructors who were to inculcate specific values in their children. Posters for domestic technologies sometimes maintained the second half of that equation – the centrality of the mother as instructor – but radically altered the first half by emphasizing that women could contribute to modern society as the guardians of appropriately modernized homes, with this role facilitated principally through consumption of novel products and technologies. Through consumption, these advertisements suggested, women would be promoted from mothers to female heads of household.

Fig. 5. "My pride and the secret of my success as a housewife is the gas stove." 1910. *Die Frau in der Reklame* no. 51.

Fig. 6. "Wash and iron with gas." Berlin, 1910. *Das frühe Plakat* no. 2138.

Fig. 7. Jajag Bathtub with methyl- or gas-heating. Very cheap, light enough to set up in any room. Stuttgart, 1914. *Das frühe Plakat* no. 4775.

IV. MEDIATORS OF CHANGING SPACES, TRANSLATORS OF CONSUMER CULTURE

On the Wilhelmine *Litfasssaülen*, women were not simply depicted as the passive recipients of modernization, figures who let modern amenities gradually filter down to the kitchen: in several posters from the late nineteenth century, women were shown as the primary mediators between factory and home, between production and consumption. The 1897 advertising poster for Boro-Ubrigin soap that opened this paper is a particularly interesting example of this genre because the ad within the ad is depicted as an enormous newspaper, an element that in turn invites the viewer to read the ad as analogous to the many illustrated periodicals that were gaining mass audiences throughout Germany at this time. Notably, the advertisement within the poster is affixed along its left side to a long rod, similar to those found in cafes to facilitate reading. This detail, along with the woman's shawl, indicates that the woman is reading in a public, urban space. The woman points at the ad while glancing back towards the audience, inviting others to follow her lead and read about the brand's product benefits. It is the woman's body that mediates between the observer and the advertisement, between active consumption of the new technologies and goods of modernity and passive acknowledgement of their existence: her extended hand even seems to mimic the series of hands depicted within the advertisement to which she points. Of the posters using the trope of an advertisement within the advertisement during the 1890s, nearly all featured women. [27] Sometimes, more provocatively, the female figure within this genre of posters points to the

[27] For additional examples of this trope, see *Das deutsche Plakat,* 74 and *Das frühe Plakat* nos. 158, 1792, 2227, 3289, 4372 and 4453.

advertisement within the poster for the benefit of a male figure at her side. Clearly, women were deemed as important communicators of both the value of advertising and the importance of purchasing modern products. Equally important to advertisers, especially in the 1890s as the advertising industry sought bourgeois affirmation as a legitimate profession, placing the unintimidating figures of women between the viewer and the advertising copy could help soften the delivery of the message, since women were traditionally seen as less intimidating and authoritative figures than men. Women's bodies thus acted as buffers between bourgeois values of respectability and the "striking" and sometimes unwelcome flood of commercial imagery.[28]

Carl Saltzmann's commemorative print of the first electric streetlamp in Berlin in 1884 similarly spotlighted – literally – the close relationship between women (in this case, a mother and her daughter), the commercial messages of the *Litfasssäulen,* and the urban manifestations of Germany's progress [Fig. 8]. Saltzmann placed a mother-child pair at the center of the composition; the duo stand in front of a densely papered *Litfasssäule,* and their journey into the city is itself illuminated and made possible by the modern electric light. But why position female bodies so centrally within this scene? Perhaps Saltzmann wished to emphasize how the electric street lamp made urban spaces safe enough even for defenseless women and children to enjoy a casual evening stroll. But perhaps he also concurred with the many cultural observers who saw women as the special embodiment of a society's values and essence. In 1911 the journalist Hans Ostwald, who had edited and contributed to the *Großstadt Dokumente,* a series of fifty pamphlets exploring various aspects of Germany's cities written between 1904 and 1908,

[28] David Ciarlo notes that the figures of diminutive black figures as well as children could serve a similar function in Wilhelmine advertisements. See Ciarlo, *Advertising Empire,* 280.

thoughtfully observed, "Whenever there is a report written about a city, the writer seldom forgets to discuss the women of the city. The woman is indeed in a way the embodiment of the particular nature of a city. Whoever wants to describe a city needs only to correctly show one of its female inhabitants, and he will have created a symbol that everyone will understand."[29] From this perspective, it is also no surprise that Saltzmann would then attempt to link women – the symbols of Berlin, according to Ostwald's logic – to the electric streetlamps and advertising pillars that were beginning to reshape urban spaces and identities. All were grouped together in Saltzmann's vision of metropolitan modernity.

[29] Hans Ostwald, *Berlin und die Berlinerin,* 1911, 15. "Wenn irgendein Bericht über eine Stadt geschrieben wurde, so vergaß der Schreiber selten, von den Frauen der Stadt zu erzählen. Ist doch die Frau gewissermaßen die Verkörperung des eigentlichen Wesens einer Stadt. Wer eine Stadt darstellen will, braucht eigentlich nur eine von seinen Bewohnerinnen richtig zu zeichnen – und er wird ein Symbol geschaffen haben, das jeder verstehen wird."

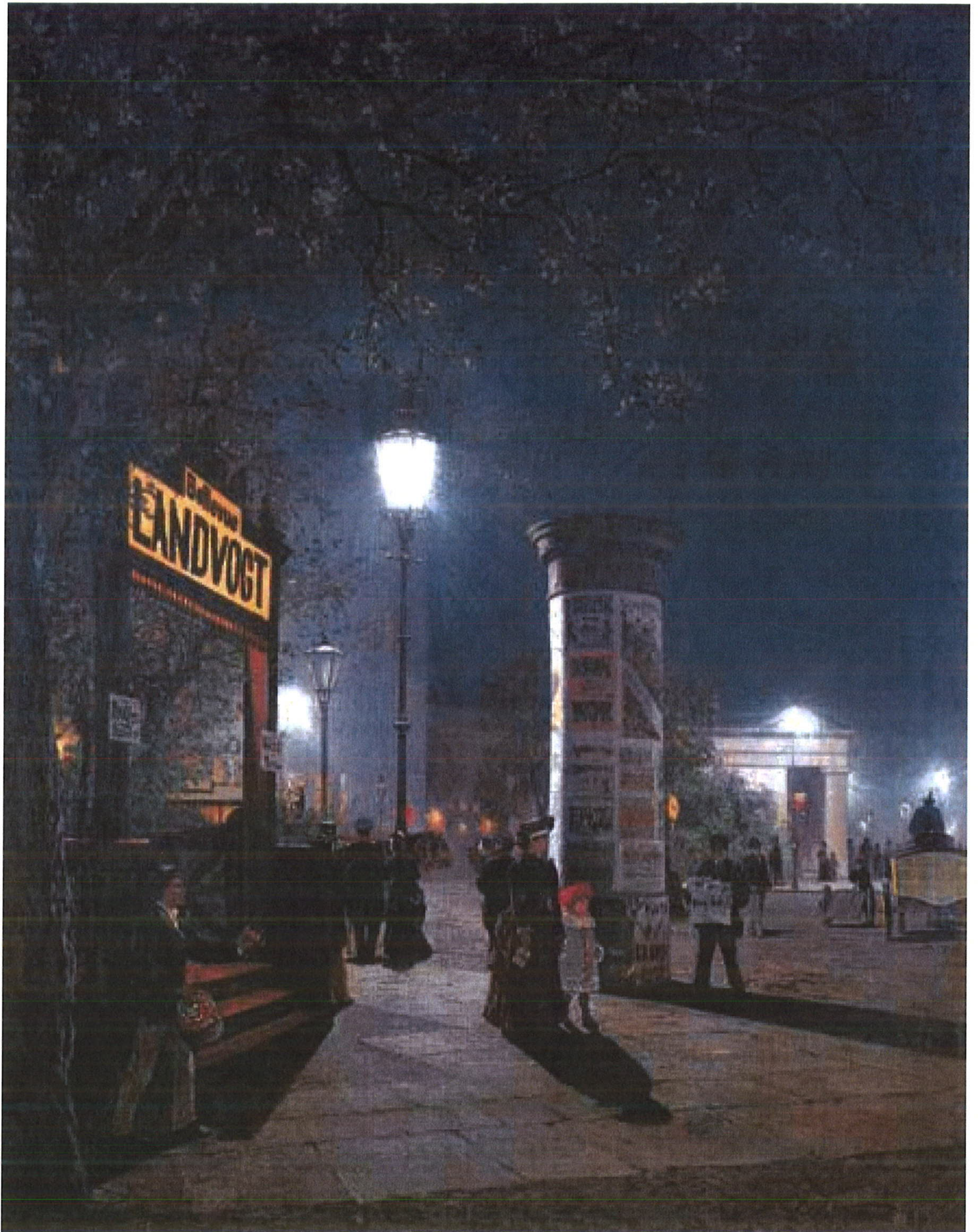

Fig. 8. Carl Saltzmann, "Erste electrische Straßenbeleuchtung in Berlin," 1884.

And yet, just as in the advertising posters for domestic technologies, images of urban mother-daughter pairs were increasingly overtaken by either the image of the solitary, independent female figure or of the sexually suggestive male-female pair. In this way, the intersection of women and urban life was profoundly problematic for many German observers. Newspapers were filled with articles that "emphasized the many temptations and dangers to which country maidens were exposed after they migrated to the big city … 'Women's natural conservatism could flourish only in a domestic situation supported by strong morality.' Unfortunately, the big city destroyed 'the foundations of feminine character.'"[30] Women, many believed, were naturally weaker than men, both physically and emotionally. Contemporaries feared that this biological frailty, combined with the economic demands of the *Großstadt,* would inevitably lead to prostitution, which was seen as one of the major ills of modern urban society.[31] It was also, however, a source of popular fascination. Of the fifty pamphlets published in the widely-read *Großstadt Dokumente* series edited by Hans Ostwald, the majority focused on some aspect of the German underworld, often highlighting the role that female sexuality played in the dark corners of Berlin and other cities.[32]

This fascination with the illicit opportunities for pleasure and the flouting of moral codes in the modern city became a staple of advertising posters in this period, particularly those marketing the many new urban bars, cafes, and dancehalls. Such

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[30] Lees, 161.

[31] Lynn Abrams, "Prostitutes in Imperial Germany, 1870-1918: Working Girls or Social Outcasts?" in *The German Underworld,* ed. Richard Evans (New York: Routledge, 1988).

[32] Dorothy Rowe provides a detailed overview of the pamphlets in the *Grosstadt-Dokumente* series focusing on the relationship between (primarily feminine) sexuality and urban spaces. See Dorothy Rowe, *Representing Berlin: Sexuality and the city in Imperial and Weimar Germany* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003). Peter Fritzsche presents a more general overview of the motivations and narrative style of Ostwald's project in "Vagabond in the Fugitive City: Hans Ostwald, Imperial Berlin and the Grossstadt-Dokumente," *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 29, No. 3 (1994). Fritzsche notes that these pamphlets went through up to fifteen editions in the span of three years, attesting to their popularity. Fritzsche, 389.

posters frequently depicted a well-dressed woman (or two), with the fashionably short hair more commonly associated with the interwar period, either sitting at a table beside a man wearing a top hat, or standing on the arm of a similar male figure. In a 1912 advertisement for Problem cigarettes, this trope was appropriated to market a consumer product [Fig. 9]. Here a man wearing a top hat and a monocle, a cigarette dangling suggestively from his lips, leers at the woman directly in front of him. Problem cigarettes, the poster implies, granted this man the confidence to approach this woman and view her as an object (just like a cigarette) ripe for purchase, or perhaps lent him an aura of danger and seduction that draws the woman's attention to the perfect oval of smoke emitted from his cigarette. Either way, the power relationship between the two figures is clear: the man is the active consumer, while the woman is passively consumed.[33] The specter of this female "other" would not have been far from the minds of many Germans as they viewed the many posters that depicted women exploring and interpreting the modern city. However, the consumer visuality of Wilhelmine Germany extended in many directions, and the figure of the prostitute was only one articulation of the female form. In order to sell a larger variety of products and experiences to as broad of an audience as possible, Wilhelmine advertisers could not always rely on simplistic equations between sex and the product for sale, especially since women themselves increasingly constituted an important consumer segment as active users and agents of the new products and experiences available in the modern city.

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[33] It is likely that such images also built upon (perhaps unconsciously) a pictorial tradition that associated cigarettes with colonial fantasies, and particularly those of an exoticized East, replete with idle, turbaned men and their harems of scantily clad women. Such images of an exotic Orient reached their peak around the turn of the century; perhaps the increase in images of Caucasian women fulfilling a similar role speaks to an attempt to Germanize such exotic experiences and connect them directly to the lives of everyday Germans.

Fig. 9. Problem Cigarettes, Berlin, 1912. *Das frühe Plakat* no. 824.

V. OUT AND ABOUT: FEMALE CYCLISTS AND STREETCAR RIDERS

Indeed, contrary to claims by theorists like Griselda Pollock that women could only be present in the traditional spaces of modernity primarily as objects of male desire, another image of women proliferated in the 1890s, this one emphasizing the modern city as a space facilitating movement and speed yet also casual enjoyment: the female cyclist. In a 1901 poster for Opel Bicycles [Fig. 10], an exuberant young woman stands proudly, almost defiantly, in front of a sleek black and white bicycle. Her fashionable puffed sleeves and bloomers (necessary in order to ride a bicycle comfortably) were emblems of a progressive vision of femininity, while her rosy cheeks indicate the health and youthfulness fostered through outdoor activities like cycling. She is "Die Siegerin" – the victor (in this case, the victorious consumer). She brings the benefits of the product to life, translating them for an urban audience. The combination of her womanly figure (broad hips and bosom, accentuated by her red bow and tiny waist, as well as glowing skin and full cheeks), the accoutrements of liberated femininity (bloomers and bicycle), and the bright colors of the poster creates a composition that is eye-catching and bold yet does not come across as an impudent challenge to bourgeois sensibilities.

Fig. 10. Opel: Die Siegerin, Leipzig, 1901. *Das frühe Plakat* no. 3393.

A 1900 poster for Excelsior bicycle tires, produced in Berlin in 1900, explicitly links bicycles, women, and the spaces of the modern city [Fig. 11]. The woman in the center of the poster seems to be on a casual evening ride through the city with a male companion (or perhaps a male interloper). The woman and her bicycle are the center of the scene; in fact, the triangle of light emitting from the upper right hand corner of the image pulls the viewer's eyes toward her white hat, which in turn leads up to the brand

name of the product advertised. The man's head also is turned toward her, as if trying to capture her attention. In contrast, the woman stares directly ahead, a picture of confidence and self-possession. Her subjectivity in this case is not determined by the man's gaze, but by her own movement through the city. The background of the poster is also filled with female figures, all elegantly dressed, wandering self-assuredly along the illuminated streets of Berlin. This poster offers a vision of female mobility made possible through the modern technologies of lighting (which helps to keep women safe even at night) and the bicycle. It also offers a message of empowerment – on a bicycle, it suggests, women are physically equal, if not superior, to men: the woman and the man's hats are at the same height, and it is clear that in this scene, the woman is in a position to either acknowledge or disregard the man. In fact, the ostensible products advertised – Excelsior bicycle tires – are barely visible. The focus of the advertisement is not actually the product itself, but the emancipatory experience facilitated by the product. Of course, bicycle companies had a vested economic interest in emphasizing the liberating, modern qualities of their products. The fact that they often used images of women to convey these qualities suggests that women increasingly constituted a lucrative consumer segment for advertisers – by 1896, factories were producing more bicycles for women than for men – but also that the female form served as a frame through which to transmit to all potential consumers a certain interpretation of new products and experiences.[34] Whereas bicycle advertisements featuring men often evoked the speed and competition of the velodrome,

[34] This statistic is found in David Ehrenpreis, "Cyclists and Amazons: Representing the New Woman in Wilhelmine Germany," *Woman's Art Journal,* Vol. 20, No. 1 (1999), 29. My research supports this statistic: advertisements for bicycle-related products and services that featured images of female cyclists were ubiquitous during the 1890s, when bicycle components became cheaper and thus accessible to most classes because of mass manufacturing processes. In *Das frühe Plakat,* I counted 29 such advertisements – outnumbering the posters for bicycle manufacturers featuring men.

the more common female images invited consumers to enjoy the process of riding through the city, and to let the pace of the city wash over them.

Fig. 11. Excelsior Pneumatics, 1900. *Das frühe Plakat* no. 2912.

When observers described the new urban transportation networks, again their attention seemed inevitably drawn to women, and to the modern urban spaces that they appeared to infuse with their presence. The *Straßenbahn,* in particular, was a conduit of female urban activity. One writer described the space of the Berlin *Straßenbahn* as a

feminine pleasure zone: "often, particularly on sunny winter mornings, one is treated to the following sight: a streetcar interior cozily warmed by heaters under one row of benches, the scent of Patchouli, groups of the most elegant women laughing and conversing."[35] Of course, millions of Berlin residents used the streetcar network, and many of these passengers were not women. Yet these other male passengers, even the ubiquitous Prussian soldiers, seemed to blend into the background, while the city's women (or at least its elegantly-dressed women) leapt to the forefront. As the same observer noted, on the *Straßenbahn*, "for the most part one sees women. They seem to have discovered that the modern interior suits them well; and whereas the residents of other large cities get spruced up *(Toilette macht)* for a city stroll, the residents of Berlin, this city of modesty and electricity, do so for a ride on the subway."[36] In generally ignoring working-class passengers and others not simply out for a leisurely ride on the tram, this observer contributed to the increasing emphasis on middle- and upper-class female consumers as the primary (but not unproblematic, as we shall see) representatives of contemporary German urban life.

Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that a 1900 poster advertising the Strassburg *Straßenbahn* would foreground an immaculately-dressed woman. [Fig. 12]. As in the Excelsior Tires advertisement, she appears oblivious or at least unconcerned by the man who is turned toward her. Her focus is unclear, but her posture suggests that she is

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[35] Anonymous author, *Berlin und die Berliner. Leute. Dinge. Sitten. Winke.* Karlsruhe: Bielefelds Verlag, 1905, pp. 466-71. Reprinted in *Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Deutschen 1871-1914,* ed. Jens Flemming, Klaus Saul, and Peter-Christian Witt (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997), 44. "... nicht selten, zumal an sonnigen Wintervormittagen, ist das Bild: ein durch Heizkörper unter den einen Bank wohlig durchwärmtes Wageninnere, eine starke Welle von Patchouli, ein paar laachende und konversiende Gruppen der elegantesten Frauen."

[36] Ibid, 45. "... vor allem viele Frauen. Die scheinen herausgefunden zu haben, daß die moderne Innenausstattung gut kleidet, und wie man in anderen Großstädten für den Korso Toilette macht, so macht man's hier, in der Stadt der Bescheidenheit und der Elektrizität, für die Untergrundbahn."

expectantly waiting for the *Straßenbahn* to stop in front of her. This sense of expectation and careful attention to the streetcar's arrival creates an aura of urban intelligence around the woman. Perhaps the man is only interested in her as a beautiful young woman; or perhaps he is looking to her for cues to navigating the patterns of urban experience.

Fig. 12. Strassburger Strassenbahnen, Strassburg, 1900. *Das frühe Plakat* no. 2963.

Posters advertising automobiles also frequently featured women in order to imply a sense of exploration and discovery. In fact, as the cost of bicycles decreased and they

became more accessible to the masses after the turn of the century, automobiles took their place as the new aspirational symbol of mobility. In a 1905 advertisement for Hofl. Schad, a Munich automobile and bicycle shop, a man drives the car, but his female passenger's body is thrust forward as if to urge the vehicle onward, past the old crone on the side of the road [Fig. 13]. Youth, but also femininity, appear to be at the forefront of the depicted revolution in transportation. Several other automobile advertisements from the early 1900s featured female drivers, and sometimes even vehicles containing only women.[37] Posters from the early 1900s, like that for Hofl. Schad, placed their drivers in the countryside as frequently as the city. It was only a few years later that the connection between this particular form of transportation was connected, at least for women, more explicitly to urban exploration.

Fig. 13. Hofl. Schad, Munich, 1905. *Das frühe Plakat* no. 574.

[37] See *Das frühe Plakat* nos. 1478 and 4759 and *Das Deutsche Plakat* no. 134.

The frenetic pace and sense of adventure (even moving beyond the confines of the city) suggested by the Hofl. Schad advertisement contrast with the unhurried, markedly metropolitan ambiance of a 1910 poster for Mercedes, in which two women saunter between the viewer and the automobile [Fig. 14]. In this later advertisement, the power relations on view are less straightforward: are the women merely eye candy, or are they sophisticated agents of urbanism and discovery? The clothing worn by the most prominent female figure could be interpreted in several ways. Perhaps she is meant to suggest a prostitute's sexual availability; or perhaps she is simply intended to convey a sense of luxury, leisure, beauty, and openness to urban life. In this sense, we can see the advertiser as extending Oswald's theory that women embodied a city's values to the notion that women could convey the essence of a brand as well. Supporting the latter view is the fact that the women seem to be looking curiously around them, not at the man. Further, the orange-brown tones of the most prominent woman's hat, as well as of the dresses of two other women in the background, echo the color of the Mercedes logo at the top of the poster and the shade of the car wheels and the buildings in the distance. The women in the scene are thus closely linked both to one of Germany's most innovative and technologically advanced consumer products and to the impressive urban monuments that this product has made so easy to investigate. By giving female figures such pride of place in this tableau, the advertiser – as in the Excelsior poster – emphasizes a particular urban experience facilitated by a Mercedes automobile. Though a more systematic study would have to be undertaken to determine the nuances of this opposition between urban and more pastoral scenes, it does seem that after 1910 or so, advertisements for products that promoted mobility, particularly bicycles and

advertisements for products that promoted mobility, particularly bicycles and automobiles, tended to place female figures in more urban settings, thus stressing more directly the experience of consumption and ownership itself rather than the capacity to cover great distances.

Fig. 14. Mercedes, Stuttgart, 1910. *Das Frühe Plakat* no. 3516.

Images of women thus served as prominent visual narrators of the linked themes of marketing practices (as navigated by the woman in the Boro-Ubrigen soap poster) and mobility (exemplified in bicycle, streetcar, and automobile advertisements). In the 1890s and early 1900s, such representations of women within the realms of consumption and mobility evinced an aura of empowerment and independence. But as the technologies and sites of consumption and mobility made dramatic leaps, discussions of their link to women sometimes took on a more negative cast. In the realm of consumption, the department store increasingly claimed center stage in both praise and criticism of Wilhelmine German society. Contemporaries like writer Leo Colze saw the enormous department stores, with their monumental architecture and display strategies that resembled those of world fairs and exhibitions, as the "triumph of the modern economic spirit."[38] Discussions of these new spaces of consumption frequently referenced women, who thus were implicated in the best and worst aspects of Germany's rapid industrialization and urbanization. Often such discussions also linked innovations in consumption and mobility together as mutually constitutive of an expanded modern urban space. Colze, for example, viewed the department stores and other retail shops sprouting up in the western quarters of Berlin as actively reshaping the physical and social character of the city by transforming formerly dirty, closed off, or residential areas into "a play area for Spreewald ladies and nannies pushing baby carriages."[39] He continued, "No one will deny the fact that in the West a new center of a global metropolis is now in the making. It will not be more or less an extension of the old Berlin with its

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[38] Leo Colze, *Berliner Warenhäuser* (Berlin: Fannei & Walz Verlag, 1908), 10. "als Triumph modernen Geschäftsgeiste."
[39] Ibid., 13. "Tummelplatz von Kinderwagen schiebenden Spreewälderinnen und Bonnen."

rush and activity, but rather a completely independent, elegant, refined, [but] no less commercial Berlin is arising here … And unrestricted by physical limitations, it is creating new possibilities for the gratification of needs in grand style."[40] Colze's observation effaced the physical labor that went into the construction of new palaces of consumption and the cleaning of pedestrian thoroughfares. Instead, his words implied that this new space, this "new center of a global metropolis" was not only facilitated by, but actually constructed through, acts of female consumption and bourgeois leisure. The age of German production seemed to be giving way to a new era of conspicuous, globally situated consumption. This alleged transition, however, was feared and opposed as much as it was lauded.

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[40] Ibid., 14. "Did Tatsache nun, daß im Westen ein neues weltstädtisches Zentrum in Bildung begriffen ist, wird wohl kaum noch geleugnet werden. Es wird kein Ausläufer werden, in dem sich das Hasten und Treiben des alten Berlin mehr oder weniger stark widerspiegelt, sondern ein durchaus unabhängiges, elegantes, vornehmes, nicht minder geschäftiges Berlin entsteht hier … und schafft sich hier in größerem Stile, durch keine Platzfrage beengt, neue Möglichkeiten zur Befriedigung seiner Bedürfnisse."

VI. WOMEN AS IRREPRESSIBLE CONSUMERS

As early as 1899, pride in Germany's economic progress and growing abundance of purchasable items was met with fears that this very abundance would lead to the degeneration of traditional bourgeois values. According to Colze, "The department stores are a paradise for kleptomaniacs." As proof for this statement, he noted that in the last few days before Christmas alone, at least 96 such thieves were caught in Berlin department stores.[41] Colze went on to describe how female shoppers were particularly adept at hiding stolen items in their skirts, parasols, and even hair. Paul Dehn, in his pamphlet analyzing the new department stores and retail shops that seemed to be taking over Germany's cities, also turned to women – who were, in his view, naturally weak and easily corrupted by the luxuries proffered in such stores – to describe these dangers. "These great bazaars and chain stores," Dehn railed, "with their enticingly-arranged masses of goods, lure [*verleiten* – literally, lead astray] the customer into not only buying, but also stealing; they have made many a vain woman into a thief. One can read in the daily papers that such thefts frequently take place."[42] Luxury goods as well as lower-priced, mass-produced objects filled store windows and advertisements, tempting all

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[41] Colze, 73. "Die Warenhäuser sind das Paradies der Kleptomanen."

[42] Paul Dehn, *Die Großbazare und Massenzweiggeschäfte* (Berlin: Trowitzsch & Sohn, 1899), 33. "Diese Großbazare und Massenzweiggeschäfte mit ihren verlockend ausgelegten Warenmassen, sie verleiten nicht nur zum Kaufen, sondern auch zum Stehlen, sie haben manche eitle Frau zur Dieben gemacht. In der Tagespresse kann man gelegentlich lesen, das Diebstähle in solchen Geschäften sehr häufig vorkommen."

Germans to indulge themselves. But according to Dehn, only women were unable to resist such temptation. Economic prosperity, led by German industry, had made such women "vain," tainting their relationships to the new spaces of modernity. The combination of modern retailing strategies and women's innate weaknesses, in the view of Dehn and many other, predominately male, observers, was leading to a potential crisis of morality. References to the unsettling trend of kleptomania would increase in frequency throughout the early 1900s, always centering on this morally destructive combination.[43]

Advertisements for department stores and other retailers often brushed up uneasily against such social commentary. On the one hand, it actually made sense for businesses to exploit fears that the desirability of their wares would lead to a loss of self-control by emphasizing the vast amounts of goods available to women in the new, larger stores. In a 1913 poster for a Berlin clothier [Fig. 15], a woman is depicted pushing a shopping cart overflowing with clothing, boxes, and shoes. While the advertisement conveys the limitless choice and possibility associated with modern retailing sites, it also hints at an aspect that critics like Dehn interpreted as a dangerous development for the human spirit. Unlike the authoritative female figure in the Boro-Ubrigen soap poster, the woman in this advertisement is pushed to the far right of the composition. Her unwieldy cart seems to be overpowering her, clawing at any empty space in the ad. The features of the woman herself are subsumed by her elaborate clothing: she is wrapped in a variety of embellished fabrics and tiered skirts, with an enormous bow tied around her waist. She

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[43] See Paul Lerner, "Consuming Pathologies: Kleptomania, Magazinitis, and the Problem of Female Consumption in Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany," *Werkstatt Geschichte* 42, pp. 45-56 for a useful summary of the pathologizing of mass consumption with respect to women. Lerner does not link concerns around women and department stores to other urban developments.

has become consumption itself, defined by the desire for more of everything. At the same time, the shopping cart that she pushes ahead could be seen as a gaping maw, overfed yet still unsatisfied. This poster highlights a fascination with the abundance offered by modern production and distribution practices, to the point of implying women's insatiable appetite for modern goods. By visualizing the transformation of desires into physical needs, the imagery also suggests a broader social mandate to continually accumulate such goods in order to maintain – or constitute – one's status. Such imagery flew in the face of many ingrained rules of bourgeois German culture, especially a traditional insistence on quality over quantity and thriftiness and frugality over excess.

Fig. 15. J.W. Saltzer, Berlin, 1913. *Das frühe Plakat* no. 827.

In an effort to counteract perceptions that department stores necessarily challenged the values of the *Bildungsburgertum,* other advertisers positioned commercial spaces like department stores as the ideal purveyors of bourgeois culture. In these formulations, such spaces could also be used to advance bourgeois domestic ideals by self-consciously addressing and controlling the very desires that they unleashed. Throughout the early 1900s, for instance, Berlin's Wertheim department store curated a

number of in-house exhibitions of German interior designs and furniture. In doing so, it joined cultural organizations like the Movement for Art Education and the Deutscher Werkbund in the attempt to "overlay the concepts of art and culture onto commerce in their promotion of fashionable, well-made goods to a rapidly expanding middle class."[44] Cultural critic Max Osborn even declared that department stores were crucial intermediaries between the various modern applied arts movements and the masses. Osborn commented that through exhibitions in department stores, the "intrinsically democratic character of the decorative arts movement, which had earlier only been theoretically expressed, had finally gained practical meaning."[45] A poster for another Berlin department store produced between 1912 and 1914 emphasized the store's overpoweringly beautiful wares, which anyone could see and touch [Fig. 16]. But in this advertisement, the female shopper is depicted holding up an item to her face for closer inspection. She is not throwing any item she sees haphazardly into a cart, but deploying a refined and educated eye to evaluate the quality of the item. Successfully – and respectably – navigating the age of mass retailing demanded from women keen powers of perception to differentiate the wheat from the chaff. Piles of clothing that reached nearly to the ceiling, as depicted in a 1910 poster for a Munich department store [Fig. 17] inspired both awe and anxiety. Mrs. Alfred Sidgwick, a German woman living in England, observed that Berlin's famous department stores, especially Wertheim, contained both the best and the worst of consumable goods: "You can buy almost anything you want at Wertheim's, from the furniture of your house to a threepenny pair

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[44] John V. Maciuika, "The Production and Display of Domestic Interiors in Wilhelmine Germany, 1900-1914," *German History* 25/4 (2007), pp. 490-516, 493.
[45] Quoted in Laurie A. Stein, "German Design and National Identity, 1890-1914," in Wendy Kaplan, ed., *Designing Modernity: The Arts of Reform and Persuasion 1885-1945* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 63-64.

of cotton mittens with a thumb and no fingers. You can see tons of the most hideous rubbish there, and you can find a corner reserved for original work, done by two or three artists whose names are well known in Germany."[46]

Fig. 16. I. Koopmann & Co. Department Store. Berlin, undated, likely 1912 - 1914. *Das Frühe Plakat* no. 3015.

[46] Mrs. Alfred Sidgwick, *Home Life in Germany* (London: Methuen & Co., 1908), 167.

Fig. 17. Joh. Horn Department Store. Munich, 1910. *Das Frühe Plakat* no. 2251.

Sidgwick's allusion to the longing and confusion potentially aroused by the accessibility of "almost anything you want" nicely illuminate the contested nature of the

discourse on women and Germany's changing urban spaces. The tension between bourgeois values, mass manufactured goods, and female forays into public (and semi-public) spaces erupted again and again in Wilhelmine Germany. Desire, acquisitiveness, and mobility could be tolerated – even admired at some level – if it remained under control. It was the threat that these features of modernity would veer out of (bourgeois) control that most inspired concern and moral outrage. At the same time, however, the very assumption that only a proper cultural education could provide women with the necessary skills to differentiate worthy items from mass-produced "rubbish" provided bourgeois tastemakers with a justification for their engagement with mass culture.

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In the years before World War I, advertisers began not only to address women as a potentially important consumer demographic, but to portray them as active participants in the construction of a consumption-based modernity and its extension to both the urban landscape and the home, the interior and exterior spaces of a new Germany. Historians of gender and citizenship (among other topics) have typically, and justifiably, seen World War I as a traumatic rupture in German history. In some ways, an analysis of consumer visuality supports this notion of a clear caesura, after which German women and society as a whole would never be the same. Certainly, during World War I, domestic scenes stressing motherhood were used to present women as innocent victims who needed to be protected by their male superiors, and women frequently were asked to conserve and sacrifice rather than consume and enjoy. After World War I, in contrast, feminine consumption, especially with respect to fashion and hair, was often glorified and presented more persuasively than ever as the gateway to modernity. At the same time,

however, the fact that both private and public female consumption remained a key point of societal fascination and concern throughout each period points to the continuity of particular cultural strategies for negotiating change. In this sense, the consumer discourses of World War I and the Weimar Republic were a continuation, though in modified form, of those that had been developed by advertisers in the 1890s and 1900s in order to both target potential female consumers and link the purchase and use of a new range of goods and services to broader conceptions of modern urban life.

Advertisements implied that such goods and their purveyors offered – to those with sufficient monetary resources – a pleasurable space in which to exert female agency and choice, and to experience domestic and metropolitan modernity. In doing so, they laid the foundation for renewed demands for the participation of women in public life and for articulations of citizenship during and after World War I. At the same time, paradoxically, they also provided additional ammunition in the campaign *against* such civic participation. In sum, the collective visuality of the Wilhelmine *Litfasssäulen* forcefully asserted women's place in Germany's new modern urban spaces while also reinforcing the ambiguous and potentially destructive connection between women and unfettered desire.

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