

Faces of the Weimar Republic

Ian Buruma

For those of us born after World War II there is one face that best conjures up the spirit of Berlin about 1930, and that belongs to a man who was born in 1932, in Cleveland of all places: Joel Grey, master of ceremonies and androgynous host of the Kit Kat Club in the 1972 film *Cabaret*. Grey managed to personify everything we now associate with the end of that giddy, sinister, brilliant decade between the two world wars, when Berlin was the capital of sex, art, and violence. The sunken cheeks, the curled bloodred lips, the rouge and death-white powder, the lacquered black hair, the little dark eyes, darting about like malevolent black insects, and all this combined with that unforgettable voice—whining, lisping, sneering. He is the sum of everything we find repellent yet deeply intriguing about Berlin at the dawn of the Third Reich.

What is so brilliant and disturbing about Joel Grey's act is its air of boundless cynicism. Nothing is real about his character. He is utterly without feeling. Or rather all his sentiment is false. He trades in sexual innuendo but is sexless himself. He is a hollow man who knows that survival rests on people's worst instincts, and this he conveys with a sense of deep loathing under his leering smile.

Cabaret was of course a favorite subject of European artists in the Roaring Twenties. The pumped-up naughtiness of "erotic reviews," the lines of naked women kicking their legs in a frenzy to syncopated music, were typical of a decade when everything appeared to have become unhinged after a monstrous war that mutilated a generation. This atmosphere was especially intense in Berlin, the capital of a country that was reeling from the shock of mass slaughter, defeat in war, failed revolution, economic catastrophe, and hyperinflation. With the brutal destruction of the old order—the class system, the authority of monarchy and church, the discipline of the parade ground—anything seemed possible. This provided fertile ground for sexual adventure and artistic experimentation but was also the source of social panic, from which the hedonism of the brothel and the dance hall—and, a few years later, massive rallies to worship the Führer—offered a temporary escape.

It might seem ironic that this era of urban sophistication and political violence should bear the name of a provincial town in Thuringia, whose main distinction, apart from some fine eighteenth-century architecture, is that Goethe and Schiller once ran a theater there. The German republic, which lasted from 1919 to 1933, was named after the town of Weimar because that is where the government was formed and the constitution written. The Weimar National Theater was thought to be a safer place to found a democracy than the center of unruly Berlin. The setting was anything but grand. Theodor Wolff, politician

and editor of a liberal paper, recalled that the main hall was “decorated with flowers as if for a modest middle-class wedding reception.”¹

This was not an auspicious time for liberal politics. The humiliating defeat in the war had caused great bitterness, not only among the poor workingmen who had to survive in a ruined nation but also among the many soldiers (including one Corporal Hitler) who felt they had been tricked out of their promised victory. Communist revolution appealed to the former, and right-wing revolution, led by disaffected military men, to the latter. The democratic founders of the republic were caught in between. When a left-wing revolt threatened to turn Munich and Berlin into bastions of a proletarian dictatorship in 1919, even such staunch Social Democrats as Friedrich Ebert, the Reich president, were prepared to use a right-wing militia, the Freikorps, to crush it. The Communist defeat came at a high price, for it gave the right-wing enemies of parliamentary democracy their first taste of blood. And the Communists would never trust the Social Democrats again.

When, little more than a decade later, the Social Democrats could barely hold the tottering republic together, the Left, and especially the powerful Communist Party, did nothing to help them shore it up. The Nazis may have been a serious threat, but word came from Moscow that Communists should not support the lesser evil. From the beginning of his career in national politics, Hitler had cleverly exploited the rifts that fatally weakened his most dangerous opponents, and he took full advantage now.

In the early 1920s, however, things did not yet look so grim. Brave and able democrats, such as Ebert, Gustav Stresemann, and Walther Rathenau, tried their best to keep the republic afloat, despite accusations from revanchist army officers, Freikorps thugs, reactionary Junkers, and proto-Nazis of various kinds that they had stabbed Germany in the back. These men of the world understood the weakness of Germany’s position and realized that only a very deft foreign policy, involving many compromises, could possibly lighten the burdens imposed on the nation by the victors of the Great War. To be able to renegotiate war reparations and other punishments, Germany needed much goodwill. It probably was outrageous of the French to occupy the industrial Ruhr area in 1923, but the strike that shut down the factories and mines that year almost brought down the entire German state. Alas, however, the enemies of the republic saw every necessary compromise as another stab in the back.

In the event, it was the Weimar Republic itself that was stabbed, by the Left and the Right. When Rathenau was murdered by right-wing assassins in 1922, some already saw the writing on the wall. When Ebert died only three years later, he was replaced as Reich president by Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, an old warhorse with no democratic credentials. Stresemann, the last Weimar politician of any stature, died in October 1929, just weeks before the crash on Wall Street, which would lead to the wrecking of the long-awaited beginning of an economic recovery. But instead of supporting democracy despite the economic hardships, as happened in Britain and the United States, Germans tended to blame the republic for all their misfortunes.

Nazi Brownshirts and Communists murdered each other in the streets of Berlin, as unemployment soared and the political center lost its grip. A sorry bunch of autocratic media moguls, disaffected generals, dim-witted aristocrats, Catholic reactionaries, and ultranationalist schemers took over the government of the dying republic, while Hitler bided his time. Finally, the most dim-witted aristocrat, Franz von Papen, made one shabby deal too many, and as a result Hitler was made Reich chancellor. The right-wing schemers who served in Hitler’s cabinet thought they would soon knock the rough edges off the ex-corporal and make him do what they wanted. Little did they know.

But this was in 1933. Until then, while the Weimar Republic lasted, Berlin saw a cultural renaissance whose echoes resonate to this day in music, science, art, literature, film, and entertainment. For about ten years Berlin epitomized modernity, daring, dangerous glamour, and worldliness.

Of course, Berlin always was a cynical town. Berliners were proud of their *Berliner Schnauze*, their quick sardonic wit, which can strike outsiders as impertinent. If it is impertinent, it is a bracing kind of impertinence that I much prefer to the ingratiating manners of, say, the Viennese. Joel Grey's MC was only partly an invention. Outrageous MCs did exist, and people flocked to certain cabarets to see them. The most cynical one was Erwin Lowinsky (Elow), host of the Weisse Maus. His schtick was to encourage the most hopelessly untalented amateur performers—dreamy housewives, deluded bank clerks, and the like—to make fools of themselves onstage, where they were exposed like specimens in a freak show.

Some cabarets were venues for literary acts and clever satirical sketches. Others offered more erotic entertainments. One notorious production, eventually banned, took place at an establishment named the Black Cat Cabaret, run by Celly de Reidt and her husband, Seveloh, a former army lieutenant. It featured nude girls in sacrificial Aztec ceremonies, or mock bullfights, or scenes of naked novices being humiliated by lesbian nuns in strange rituals involving silver crucifixes.²

Sex was what drew large numbers of foreigners to Berlin. Christopher Isherwood, author of *The Berlin Stories*, upon which *Cabaret* was based, moved there in 1929. Berlin, as he saw it, meant boys. He was actually following his friend W. H. Auden, who had already discovered the delights of such establishments as the Cozy Corner, where working-class boys in tight leather shorts could be had for a warm meal and a glass of beer. Sex with proletarian Germans was a great attraction for inhibited Englishmen from the upper middle class.

Berlin, capital of the former enemy, had the pull of the illicit and the banned. Homosexuality was actually proscribed by Prussian law, but, like pornography, it was in the culture, so to speak. The German fashion for nude bathing, the worship of nature and the sun, and for young men trekking through the hills celebrating male camaraderie, were not necessarily homosexual, but contained a homoerotic element that Isherwood and his friends certainly took to. Berlin allowed them to live out fantasies that were harder to fulfill at home. This fulfillment could involve real love. More often it was love for sale.

The prostitute, like the cabaret, is an essential fixture of the period, the living symbol of desire and corruption, of a world where feelings are faked for the right price, where every pleasure is available, where everything and everyone is for sale. In the art of George Grosz, Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, and others, the prostitute, with all that she represents, is the source of both erotic fascination and disgust. This underlying seam of loathing is one of the distinctions of Weimar Period art, what makes it different from Parisian depictions of sexual subjects.

There is an element of this attitude in German art of earlier periods, too, a taste for the morbid and the grotesque: think of Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece. For a generation that left millions of dead in the mud of France and Belgium, only to live on in a society corrupted by greed and hunger for power, disgust is an understandable response. One would have had to be inhuman not to feel it. The disgust in the works of Dix and Grosz, embodied in those monstrous women and their porcine, lecherous patrons, is a sign of the artists' humanity. Injecting their bile into their paintings was a way of coming back from the dead.

German artists of the Weimar Period were past masters at depicting Hell. Otto Dix's drawings, some of them on postcards sent from the battlefield, his woodcuts, and his oil

paintings of bomb explosions, of bodies mutilated by bayonets or machine-gun fire, of rotting corpses in rat-infested trenches, are visions of horror that are as powerful as Goya's Disasters of War. Dix and many of his colleagues actually witnessed these scenes, were indeed part of them. Some, like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, who was in the infantry, never recovered from the experience. He had a nervous breakdown in 1915 and committed suicide in 1938, when the Nazi regime had destroyed what residual hope he might have had.

The total helplessness of the human individual was horribly revealed by the war. In a clash of massive armies the individual was reduced to nothing more than a tiny cog in a huge war machine. Ernst Jünger, who served as a young officer on the western front, wrote about how this affected the way people looked. He described the faces of soldiers, peering from their steel helmets, faces that had lost much of their individual distinction but were nonetheless sharply defined, as though molded from steel. This, he continued, "is the face of a race that is beginning to develop under the peculiar demands of a new landscape, a race that no longer represents the lone figure as a person or individual, but as a type."³

This was a notion of a new machine age that was celebrated by some and deeply feared, and resisted, by others. The metropolis, as a giant machine, with its own mechanical rhythms, reducing humans to helpless antlike creatures, became a popular subject of filmmakers (Fritz Lang's 1927 *Metropolis*, for example). Mechanical movement also inspired chorus lines in nude revues, pioneered by Florenz Ziegfeld in New York but perfected in Berlin. Fernand Léger, a French Communist, created a painterly vision of machinelike people in a mechanized world. Like the Italian Futurists, he saw beauty in a world of this kind. There was still an almost fetishistic belief in the benign qualities of speed, efficiency, and mass movement, a belief that was shared by many Communists and Fascists alike.

Most artists of the time were not utopians like the Futurists but were more ambivalent about the machine age, if not hostile to it. Grosz, for one, accepted the proposition that "line has become a photographic and not a personal fact."⁴ Photography "objectifies the features of the subject and renders them legible as external objects; it strips the sign from any autobiographical substance by placing it at the same level of realistic appearances."⁵ In some pictures by Grosz, people are literally faceless, blank figures identified simply as the Boxer, or the Gymnast, or, in one famous painting of 1920, *Republican Automatons* (The Museum of Modern Art, New York), machine men, clanking and whirring and mechanically waving the national flag. Grosz did not celebrate anonymity. If anything, he used it to express his disgust. Even when they have faces, the subjects of many Weimar Period portraits are types, not as described by Ernst Jünger but stereotypes in exaggerated, typical settings, suggesting that people are all actors in a great stage play. Perhaps this is where the Weimar fascination for cabaret and circus meets the cool, quasi-objective response to an age dominated by mechanical reproduction.

It was not only fear of a mechanized world gone mad that inspired the loss of faith in humanity. The experience of the battlefield was crucial. Men who had seen the worst brutality that man is capable of inflicting on fellow human beings are used to observing life reduced to the basest human instincts. The sentimental Romanticism that sweetened (or poisoned) so much German culture of the nineteenth century could hardly survive the carnage of a modern war. Fine patriotic sentiments of men marching off to die for Kaiser and country had become obscene slogans of senseless murder and death. If anything defines the art of Weimar Germany it is an attitude of deliberate anti-Romanticism, a hatred of sentimentality and pretense. Morality, patriotism, authority, all had been debased by the catastrophic war

and thus were to be despised. And yet this attitude could be as overblown as the highest German Romanticism.

Civilized life cannot be sustained without hypocrisy. A certain moral code and a degree of courtesy and decorum are necessary to keep our instincts under a modicum of control. The unforgettable downfall of Professor Dr. Immanuel Rath, played by Emil Jannings in the 1930 film *The Blue Angel*, warns us about what happens when all social niceties are stripped away, when a man loses all respect. When men and women are reduced to nothing but their lowest appetites, we live in a state of barbarism. Weimar Period artists painted people in this state, for this, in their view, was what society had become. Their honesty would cost them. When the Nazis made barbarism official, these artists were among the first to go—into exile, concentration camps, or inner emigration.

The war had destroyed the old order, but there was a new one. The tragedy of the Weimar Period was that too few people were prepared to defend it. The new order was, in any event, too fragile to withstand its brutal enemies. It has been argued that artists, writers, and journalists of the Left themselves did much to undermine the vulnerable republic. Certainly, the relentless criticism and ridicule of the regime by such brilliant commentators as Kurt Tucholsky did nothing to bolster confidence in it.

Even the staunch liberal Count Harry Kessler, diplomat, aesthete, and chronicler of his times, who supported the republic, could not hide his haughty disdain for what he considered the little men who ran it. Many were incompetent, or worse. There were a few exceptions. But after the deaths of two of them, Rathenau by assassination in 1922 and the brilliant foreign minister Stresemann by a heart attack in 1929, Kessler prophesied the inevitable doom. And yet Berlin of the 1920s evokes a peculiar nostalgia, even, or perhaps especially, in those who did not experience it, possibly because its glory was so short-lived, like that of a *poète maudit* who has died too young.

Hans Sahl, a marvelous Weimar Period journalist who was forced to flee to New York when the Nazis came to power, wrote in retrospect: “Many people now think that living in Berlin in the 1920s must have been an enviable slice of luck. But we must not forget that in Weimar Germany, with Berlin as its artistic capital, it was not just the spirit of the century that took shape, but also its downfall. . . . I experienced that time as provisional, as something unreal. Germany had lost a war and almost sleepwalked into a republic for which it wasn’t prepared. . . . It was a time of great misery, with legless war veterans riding the sidewalks on rolling planks, with a nation that seemed to consist of nothing but beggars, whores, invalids and fat-necked speculators.”⁶

It is these people, as types, who populate the pictures of Grosz, Dix, and the others. They look grotesque, unreal, like nightmarish cartoons, or actors in a Grand Guignol. In a world without pretense or sentiment all women are whores and all men are pimps and lechers. Even clothes cannot disguise our animal instincts. Respectable women in the streets are undressed by men’s eyes, and so through their dresses, as though by X-ray, we can see their chubby thighs and fleshy buttocks. Men’s faces, distorted by lust, are like the faces of pigs, rooting in the dirt. If not inflamed by sexual desire, faces set above bulging necks are flushed with greed for money or power: eyes narrowing, mouths puckering around stumpy cigars.

There, in Grosz’s *Ecce Homo* portfolio, is *The Man of Honor*, depicting the man of the title bursting out of his collar, wearing a frown that is both stupid and malignant. And there is *The Marital Scene*, with its two hideous people trying to batter each other to death. And

The Cock of the Walk, whose dissolute subject is fondling two drunken whores over a bottle of Sekt. And *The Younger Generation* of inbred aristocrats, staring vacantly over their cock-tails, like a bunch of disfigured pedigreed dogs; and the man in *The Absolute Monarchist*, filled with murderous rage; and the client undressing his whore to the music played by a blind war invalid.

They look like caricatures, as stylized as Joel Grey presiding over the stage of the Kit Kat Club. Yet the German-born American Hannah Arendt recalled viewing Grosz's drawings "not as satire but as realistic reportage; we knew these types; they were all around us."⁷ The poet Max Herrmann-Neisse, himself the subject of several extraordinary portraits, remarked that Grosz "contrives to express the essence of today's average German type, the incarnation of the German character, the bourgeois German Everyman."⁸ Perhaps the work of Grosz and other Weimar artists should be described as stylized, yet frighteningly real.

The obsession with types assumed many different forms, some more benign than others. The photographs taken by August Sander between the world wars, for example, were part of his *People of the 20th Century*, in which he hoped to record the types of the German people. For this project he concentrated on the population of his native region, the area around Cologne: the High School Graduate, the Police Sergeant, the Bohemian, the Farm Girls, the Railway Officer, the Cleaning Woman, and so on. His point was that we are physically marked by our stations in life.

We now live in a more mixed-up world, but in Europe of the 1920s, even after the turmoil of war, there was still an element of truth in what Sander thought. It was hard to escape from the class in which one was born, and people wore the uniforms of their trades. But at a time of mass unemployment and social disruption, society had become more fluid; the old certainties were slipping. Hence, perhaps, arose Sander's desire to record these German types before they disappeared forever. He did for the German physiognomy what Eugène Atget did for the buildings of Paris.

Few of the earnest provincials in Sander's photographs look much like the grotesques in pictures by Dix or Grosz: the man who comes closest to a Grosz cartoon is a plump, rather earnest-looking pastry chef. There is in much Weimar Period portraiture a tension between typecasting and individual eccentricity. One of the most famous portraits, an icon of the age, used several times as a backdrop in *Cabaret*, is Otto Dix's painting of the journalist Sylvia von Harden. She was a typical denizen of the Berlin demimonde, a late-night habitué of the Romanisches Café, who sported a bobbed haircut and a monocle. Dix placed her squarely in her own milieu, at a marble-topped table, a cocktail and a box of Turkish cigarettes at hand. She is certainly a type: the literary bohemian of the Ku'damm. But she is also a complete individual, with her tobacco-stained buckteeth, her absurdly large hands, her sleep-deprived eyes.

The same can be said about other portraits by Dix and his fellow painters. Like Sander, these artists favored types: the poet in his garret, the dealer with his objects, the actor in costume, the boxer in his shorts, fists clenched for the killer punch. But in the paintings and drawings all these types have exaggerated personal physical characteristics. Alfred Flechtheim, the art dealer, is portrayed by Dix as a kind of clever ape, with his low brow, thick lips, and hooded simian eyes. In different hands—the artists who worked for the Nazi journal *Der Stürmer*, for example—the exaggeration could easily have turned the picture into an anti-Semitic caricature. Dix's picture is actually not without affection, but it is also ruthlessly unsentimental. Dix became sentimental only when he portrayed his wife and

children. Then all his resolute anti-Romanticism turns into pure saccharine, and his art loses its power.

Weimar Period artists, then, tried to do two things at once. They wished to reclaim the individual from the impersonal brutality of the machine age while at the same time they played with roles and stereotypes. Masquerades, of one kind or another, were a feature of cultural life in the 1920s. The trick was to show the face behind the mask, to discover a new equilibrium between character, self-representation, and social roles in an age when everything seemed out of whack.

You see these concerns in the portraits of others but also in the many self-portraits made at the time. Max Beckmann, for one, was forever posing in different costumes: the lounge lizard in dinner jacket, sipping champagne at some grand hotel bar; the pierrot at the circus; the tormented artist. Dix portrayed himself as a sinister guest at a wild jazz dance, as a wounded prisoner of war, as a painter with his whorish, big-breasted muse, as a family man. Then there was Grosz, playacting with his wife, Eva, the nude victim of his Jack the Ripper. Or Grosz in boxing gloves; Grosz the voyeur; or Grosz the pornographer, his monumental erection pointing straight at a naked model, offering up her fleshy bottom to his painterly gaze.

Role-playing was also the essence of the erotic life of Berlin. Men, boys, girls, and women catered to every fantasy. You had the so-called Boot Girls, prostitutes who hung around cheap hotels, wearing boots in black leather, or green, or blue, or gold patent leather, each color a sign of the wearer's particular sadomasochistic speciality. Then there were the Race Horses, who offered themselves up to be whipped, or the Telephone Girls, often mere children with the names of popular movie stars, or *Nutties*, teenagers from good families, out for spare cash and kicks. Among the males, the names speak for themselves: Doll Boys, Bad Boys, Ladies, Aunties, and Society Men.

The topsy-turvy world of sexual playacting came into being partly as a result of economic necessity. Respectable war widows were sometimes forced to sell themselves in the streets. But it was also a sign of the times, when people played roles, switching them around, perverting them, undermining them, not as an escape from too many social constraints, as in Victorian London, say, or eighteenth-century Japan, but as a symptom of a society that had lost its moorings. Poverty for some provided great license for others. The collapse of moral strictures gave people freedom. Depravity was one consequence, an extraordinary flowering of art and sciences was another.

But there was something else about Berlin, unrelated to the war or economics, that encouraged the art of make-believe, of role-playing in public life. Like Shanghai or Los Angeles, Berlin was a latecomer among the great cities, lacking the ancient pedigree of London, Paris, or Beijing. Much of the dynamism of Berlin was generated in an effort to catch up, by mimicking, or exaggerating, or trying to surpass the styles and manners of other cities. If Vienna was grand, Berlin would be grander; if New York was jazzy, Berlin would be jazzier; if Paris was sexy, Berlin would be sexier. Bertolt Brecht's *Mahagonny* is a dystopian fantasy of Chicago or New York, but it could as easily be Weimar Berlin.

And then, in 1933, the party was over. Not immediately, of course. Many of the cabarets went on doing business for a while, often still featuring Jewish artists. But George Grosz left on January 12, bound for New York. Two months later, as soon as Hitler grabbed total power, storm troopers raided his studio. Gay bars patronized by Auden and Isherwood were closed one after the other and homosexuals were arrested as degenerates. Jews were slowly pushed to the margins, from which there would ultimately be no escape. Mental patients were rounded up and murdered. For the Nazis, too, were obsessed with types and typologies.

At last Ernst Jünger's new race had found its official expression. The ideal Nazi types were as Jünger described them: steely, machinelike, without individual distinction. Or they were a throwback to idealized nineteenth-century tableaux, sentimental and utterly inhuman: heroic farmers, digging the native soil, fertile mothers with big hips who produced the perfectly blond children singing around the family table. Some of this imagery—Adolf Ziegler's paintings of icy female nudes, Arno Breker's sculptures of nude male warriors—looks pornographic even though it was not meant to be. This officially sanctioned art celebrates a type that did not exist. The best art of the 1920s, so full of rage and passion, was denounced as “degenerate” because it showed the dark side of human life, its impurities, its ugliness. Not only Grosz's caricatures but even August Sander's photographs were banned for showing what Germans really looked like, not what they should have looked like. The Nazis unleashed humanity's darkest impulses and institutionalized murder but did so under a facade of false sentiment and morbid physical perfection.

So let us celebrate, once more, the artistic visions of a dangerous decade, the works of artists who had the courage to tear off the veil of respectability and reveal what lurks in the hearts of all women and men. The mirror they held up did not reflect a pretty picture. It was harsh, and often even brutal, but never less than human.

- 1 Torsten Palmér and Hendrik Neubauer, *The Weimar Republic through the Lens of the Press* (Cologne, 2000), p. 66.
- 2 For a fuller description, please turn to Mel Gordon's *Voluptuous Panic: The Erotic World of Weimar Berlin* (Venice, Calif., 2000).
- 3 Ernst Jünger, *Der Arbeiter: Herrschaft und Gestalt* (Hamburg, 1932).
- 4 Grosz, as quoted in Bonito Oliva 1985, p. 19.
- 5 Bonito Oliva 1985, p. 19.
- 6 Hans Sahl, *Memoiren eines Moralisten* (Frankfurt am Main, 1990), pp. 37–38.
- 7 Quoted in Berlin–Düsseldorf 1994–95, p. 33.
- 8 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 177.