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New Women in the Weimar Republic: Hannah Höch

Following a devastating loss in World War I, Germany faced a period of social, economic, and cultural change. Post war Germany, better known as the Weimar Republic, strove to strengthen and reconstruct the country to its former glory. Progressive ideas pertaining to gender, sexuality, and education arose as the Weimar republic embraced a new modern, technologically advanced society. But with such drastic changes, “old and new life” in Germany seemed to be in “unsolved competition”(Biro 75). Women in particular felt pressure to stick to traditional values all while the image of the New Women of Germany became increasing prevalent in mass media. This New Woman rejected the old patriarchal pre-war society and started to adapt to modern ideals about gender roles. This transition after World War I inspired a group of artists to form Dada in Switzerland and quickly spread the movement to Berlin; this art form rejected order, logic, and classical art forms in order to reflect the turbulent changing society brought about by the brutality of the war (Biro 27). One Dada artist, Hannah Höch, stood out from her male counterparts by directly referencing politics, the New Women stereotype and shifting gender roles that she herself dealt with during the Weimar Republic. The following will discuss how Höch, using photomontage, juxtaposed recognizable objects, mechanized structures, and people in order to express the initial excitement then criticism of the New Women and feminist movement in post war Germany. By looking at the “connection between... avant garde photomontage and the fractured experience of everyday life in Weimar Germany,” Höch explores the growing and rapid modernization in relation to women’s suffrage and their role in society (Hemus 106).

As the male driven workforce left to fight in World War I starting in 1914, the gap began to be filled by women. The pressure to help out the war effort as an act of nationalism allowed

women greater opportunities than ever before, especially in Germany. Traditional and old fashioned roles of prewar housewives switched to the liberal and modern New Women (Graf 661). After a destructive loss, Germany needed to drastically change in order to win back its power as well as the support of the people, resulting in the formation of the Weimar Republic in 1919. This government “appealed to actors on all sides” of the political spectrum as a viable solution to fix the postwar problems of Germany (Biro 75). Radical reforms sprang up during this republic, including a new constitution, dual system parliamentary democracy, and most importantly, women’s right to vote (Biro 83). This breakthrough in gender equality brought hope to every New Woman in Germany that by accepting this contemporary society would “dissolve traditional hierarchies” expected for women (Biro 76). Thus, the stereotype of a young, unmarried, androgynous female appeared all throughout the media, portraying this character as a smoker with an athletic build and a masculine hairstyle (Biro 205). With their short bob, the New Women symbolized “the spirit of the revolt” and the ideals originally implemented by the Weimar Republic (Von Ankum 199). But although progressive, equality between the genders was “only equal in principle,” as “the Weimar-era women’s emancipation remained contradictory and incomplete” (Biro 204; Roos 5).

World War I left millions of women without viable marriage options as their potential suitors joined the military cause. As most of the young, male population went off to fight as soldiers, the birthrate in Germany fell to an all-time low. When the war ended, the appearance of the New Women failed to help the growing problem of increasing the population as these women typically remained childless or had fewer children than previous generations (Hales 302). Women started to utilize scientific strides in birth control as postwar Germany became mechanized and more technologically advanced (Von Ankum 107). Because women now

juggled both work and families, this stress increased birth control use across the country.

Abortions “remained criminalized during the Weimar period,” as the government stuck to prewar notions of birth control as these “scientifically managed” females dashed the goal of increasing the birth rate (Roos 5; Von Ankum 107). The Weimar Republic actually criticized the equality of women and their modern roles in Germany by victimizing any methods of birth control.

As the war ended, men came home to find their jobs replaced by women as well as their wives occupying a new position as a provider, bruising the ego of the returning veterans. The war “was a proving ground for masculinity;” the combination of their loss as well as transition in gender roles made many men repeal the ideals of the New Women (Von Ankum 213). Even “when women did enter the traditionally masculine occupations they were neither paid nor treated equally,” giving women another reason to doubt the emancipation efforts of the Weimar Republic (Von Ankum 5). The media also set standards for females, portraying the “efficient housewife” versus the “sexually ambiguous *garçonne*, a boyish figure that in certain contexts came to represent lesbianism” (Biro 205-06). As more people questioned sexual norms, homosexuals in Germany “mostly kept quiet, sticking to remote clubs” (Von Ankum 98). Later on in the Weimar Republic, as the “New Women” began to be portrayed in a negative light in the media, resentment grew for the government for offering a glimmer of freedom but discontinuing the promises made toward women’s equality. Resentment from women failed to be the only problem straining the power of the republic. Massive debt from reparations of World War I, hyperinflation, unemployment, and an increased shift from country to urban living all put stress on the Weimar Republic and opened the door for other political parties to rise (Biro 85). Eventually, after a fourteen year reign, Hitler and the Nazi party rose to power in 1933.

The emotional, political, and turbulent transition between World War I and World War II influenced a new group of artists, ones who rejected traditional art techniques. This anti-movement, or Dada, became a platform to express the outrage and anger caused by the war. Using satire, humor, and mixed media, Berlin Dada artists criticized the bourgeois, nationalism, social issues, and German society. One of the most prominent Dada artists was Hannah Höch, who perfected photomontage as a solution to explaining the more mechanized and modern society in relation to women. Photomontage took familiar images and faces, transposing them into unusual and unrecognizable content in order to mirror the political chaos of the time. This method allowed her the chance to show her hatred of the war as well as her support of women's rights by "[shocking] viewers out of complacency and [forcing] them to question conventional assumptions about the media and its construction of 'reality'" (Von Ankum 108).

Hannah Höch, born in 1889, grew up in "bourgeois origins" in a five child household (Biro 199). As she decided to pursue art as a career, a ban on women artists studying at fine art school as well as pressure from her parents to learn valuable skills caused her to decide to enroll in applied arts school. After briefly leaving school at the start of World War I, she continued her schooling in graphic arts (Von Ankum 107). In 1915, Höch met a fellow dada artist named Raoul Hausmann who later became her lover. Their relationship spanned seven years even though Hausmann refused to leave his wife. Höch became heavily involved with the dada movement in Berlin while working at the Ullstein Press as a designer, positioning her "to capitalize on the delicate medium of photomontage" (Von Ankum 108). As one of the only women artists involved in the Dada movement, Höch received criticism and exclusion from her male counterparts; these Dadaists appeared "outwardly radical" but in reality remained just as close minded about changing gender roles as the government (Kimmelman). Artists such as George

Grosz, John Heartfield, and Hausmann downplayed her involvement with Dada, forcing Höch to work harder in order to be known as a serious artist. As the “good girl” of Dada, many saw her only as an asset to the group when she “managed to conjure up... sandwiches, beer and coffee” (Hemus 92).

Her battle to be seen as more than a nurturing, submissive female lead her to support the “New Women “ ideals of Germany, especially sexual freedom outside of marriage and heterosexual norms. While dating Hausmann, Höch underwent two abortions when Hausmann turned violent as she felt their turbulent relationship would not be a suitable environment for children (Von Ankum 121). After leaving Hausmann, Höch explored her sexual identity by entering a lesbian relationship with Til Brugman lasting until the early 1930s. Her last long term lover, Heinz Kurt Matthies, was a younger man 21 years her junior that she married but later divorced in 1944 (Biro 200). Her life as a “New Women” of the Weimar Republic influenced all of her art work, but resonates mostly in her photomontages. Works such as *Cut with a Kitchen Knife Dada Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany* (1919-1920), *The Beautiful Girls* (1919-1920), *Marlene* (1930), *Untitled* (1921), and *The Coquette I* (1923-1925) all utilize contorted images as a way for Höch to express her life in Germany as a “New Women” as well as commentate on the social progress (or lack thereof) of women’s rights in the Weimar Republic.

Cut with a Kitchen Knife Dada Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany is a photomontage made of newspaper images, photos, and text, that are layered, cut, and positioned to express the growing political and social turmoil of post war Europe. Höch uses images of machinery to represent the modern world as well as mixes the heads of political figures and dada artists with satirical bodies; this “collage is a virtual representation of every

important political, military, and cultural figure in early Weimar era Germany” (Von Ankum 113). *Cut with a Kitchen Knife Dad Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany* is broken up into a various sections, including an anti-dada corner in the top right and a pro-dada corner in the bottom right (West 122). In the anti-dada section, there are politicians and communist leaders, such as Kaiser Wilhelm II and General Hindenberg, who caused and helped start World War I (West 122). The images are heavily dense and unclear, representing again the idea of disorder within the government. She contrasts the serious heads of the political figures with babies and women’s bodies. She seems to want to humiliate and poke fun at these leaders while putting women into new and influential positions of power. In the dada section of the work, Höch uses the heads of her colleagues as well as herself in order to represent a movement that is not as heavily burdened by the government and one that supports women’s rights (Blythe 20). The other two sections of the artwork signify dada as propaganda and the dada appeal to the masses, mocking the ideals that propaganda is needed in order to influence others (Blythe 20).

In *Cut with a Kitchen Knife Dad Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany*, the central image is the head of German Expressionist Kathe Kollwitz floating near the image of a dancer (West 123). This centralized representation of female movement kicks off the overall changing atmosphere of the Weimar Republic, helped by the images of modernized mechanics, such as a wheel and tires. Women in this work appear energized and active, with figures such as ice skaters, dancers, and actresses all gracing the photomontage (Ankum 114). Höch uses her own head to appear above a map detailing which countries in Europe finally implemented women’s rights policies, showing her happiness that the Weimar Republic gave women the right to vote as well as her hope that in the future women will continue to receive more equality. Even though the Weimar Republic loosened traditional gender hierarchies, Höch

kept the head of the artist slightly out of reach of the dancer's body, signifying that "society continues to separate a woman's mind from her body" (Biro 76).

Just based on the name, *Cut with a Kitchen Knife Dada Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany*, Höch shows just how outraged she feels toward the communist party of Germany and well as the culture of the Weimar Republic (Blythe 15). After the war, Germany was left in utter chaos, both politically and socially. Her referencing the last of the beer bellied culture signifies the end of the male driven, heavily controlled German government, one where women are seen as merely objects. The kitchen knife, a very symbolic reference to the domestication of women, is able to cut through the mess that male driven politics has caused in Germany (West 122). With the emergence of the New Women, "energetic and active women" could help end the "bourgeois patriarchal, "beer belly" epoch" that plagued Germany (Von Ankum 114).

In *Marlene*, a pair of larger than life legs outfitted with stockings and high heels appear sticking straight up in the air on top of a pedestal. Multiple males are positioned in the bottom right hand corner, gawking at the scantily clad female. In the top right corner, Hannah layered a face with only bright red lips and a chin to be directly in the line of sight of the viewer. Also, the name Marlene occupies the middle of the photomontage, giving the illusion of a signature. With "sexual signs and its deliberate allusion to... an actress well known for ambiguous sexual identity," Höch creates an image representing the complex concept of changing sexual norms and androgyny (Lavin 63). The German actress, Marlene Dietrich, starred in many popular movies during the Weimar Republic but was known for blurring gender lines in clothing, opting to wear a more masculine style of dress. The direct reference to Marlene highlights the representation of the androgynous identity of the New Women in the media. Celebrities like

Dietrich helped spread the “enormous proliferation of images of androgyny” to the masses (Lavin 63). The intentional positioning of the lips, which tantalizes the viewer as an “object of desire,” hides the gender of the face (Lavin 63). Without knowing whether the face is a male or female allows the observer to choose its own sexual desires, mimicking the greater opportunities available to women in the modernization of Germany. Although still prevent in society, the female objectification shown in the photomontage by the male crowd looking at the nearly naked legs is surrounded by symbols representing a new sexual freedom for women. By using a reference to Dietrich and the androgynous lips, Höch creates an image of the New Women struggling to break free from traditional roles while expressing an eagerness to determine their own sexual identity.

In *The Beautiful Girl*, Höch tries to reject the typical stereotypes of women that are influenced by modern advancements, advertisements, and typical gender stereotypes. The photos are centralized on the canvas and contain such objects like a stopwatch, a light bulb, a boxer, industrial equipment, and the body and hair of woman. The BMW ads overtake the background, as all the rest of the images cannot escape the effect of propaganda and media on shaping gender roles (Edwards and Wood 416). A female figure, with a light bulb replacing her head, “is so dominated by the technological world around her that she is art mechanical herself” (Von Ankum 114). The overwhelming influence of the modernization and industry “now seem[s] not liberating but constricting” (Von Ankum 114). Instead of thinking independently, the mechanized culture controls and influences the actions of women, just like one would turn on and off a light bulb. At the beginning of the Weimar Republic, Höch believed that the efforts made toward women’s emancipation would pay off. But as time proved, the more modern society actually hindered the New Women movement. Behind all of the ads and mechanized

structures lies a woman's face, signifying "the beautiful cyborg's consciousness being left behind as she explores pleasure and consumption in the modern world" (Biro 217). The New Women, as suggested by the hidden face, are hopeless to be heard over the traditional perspectives of female objectification and mass media's cultural outlook on women. The layering of a boxer with an arm outstretched near the female figure represents Höch trying to "knock some sense" into the female in order for her to wake up from the façade of equality made by the Weimar Republic (Von Ankum 115). Instead of growing into positions of power and receiving more freedom, the women of Germany remained "two dimensional" (Biro 217).

In *Untitled*, images of sewing patterns grace the background of the photomontage, with layered pictures of kitchen equipment and automobile engines. The main focus of the artwork is a swimsuit wearing woman, who has an overtly large, melancholy face. With the appearance of the New Women, magazines started to print pictures of the celebrity examples of the "happy modern women" (Von Ankum 116). The body in *Untitled* belongs to Claudia Pavlova, a famous ballerina who took time out of her consuming career to vacation on the beach. The attachment of the very sad, expressionless face makes the celebrity feel ashamed about her body. Representations of the New Women sprang up in the media, but in reality, the majority of females in Germany rarely saw the freedom experienced by the famous. A man on the center right of the photomontage points to the woman as a way of critiquing or ridiculing the New Women of Germany and making them appear on display for the male. Höch, angry at the disillusionment of gender equality, created a forlorn piece that mirrored the discouraging environment that women lived in Germany. Although "the modern women may indeed now have a career, be sporty and physically fit, and even display her legs... she is still controlled by a male, technological world that disregards her achievements" (Von Ankum 116). At the bottom of

Untitled, the kitchen utensils serve as a reminder that society, even with popular representations of the New Women, wants females to stick to the conventional roles of a housewife and caregiver.

In *The Coquette I*, Höch uses a less is more approach in terms of the amount of images layered onto the work. Usually, she fills the background with a variety of machinery or adverts, but this photomontage remains simple in design. Surrounding the photos lays a frame, giving the illusion that this art piece is a picture into life in the Weimar Republic. On the left sits a woman on a desk, towering over two hybrid creatures. The central image merges the head of a dog with the body of a baby, arms outstretched with an offering to the women. The other creature blends an overtly large male head with the body of a canine. The female, donned in New Women attire of pearls and pointed heels, lacks a proper head; in its place stands a plain but sinister mask. Comparing “the two hybrid admirers,” the center construction of half dog, half baby is positioned higher than the man-dog creation (Biro 246). In the top right hand corner sits a sun like circle with a life-size bug crawling around the photomontage. This creates a very creepy and unsettling tone for the piece; the beetle reminding the viewer of the themes’ close ties to reality. The woman wearing a masculine, sneering mask, represents the male driven society dictating how women are supposed to think and act. The mask appears to be floating in midair, giving a feeling of hollowness. Instead of having a brain, the woman’s only outward projection to the world is the objectifying mask. Although wearing New Women fashion, she still cannot control her own actions and desires. This mirrors how the Weimar Republic, promising reform and emancipation, failed to give adequate rights to women and stopped women from progressing as rapidly as they hoped. Just like *Marlene*, Höch puts the women in a position of power, reflecting her desire for women in Germany to finally be able to break free from the traditional patriarchal

society. The hybrid animal in the center draws connections to Höch's opinion on abortion and children, as "the baby could be read as an allegorical figure begging the New Women to give up her modern lifestyle and become a mother" (Biro 248). The offering or gift presented by the figure to the woman signifies the choice New Women had in Germany, either cave in to pressure to increase the birthrate or continue to support birth control methods. Höch herself faced these issues with her two abortions during her time with Hausmann. This photomontage also suggests how sexual expression and freedom began to shift after media representations changed "how Germans viewed and legislated the most intimate aspects of their lives" (Biro 250).

Overall, Hannah Höch detailed the turbulent times of Weimar Germany in her art, as the fragmentation of her photomontages mimicked the fragmentation of power and society caused by the devastation of World War I. As mass media continued to popularize the stereotype of the New Women, the government failed to deliver viable results in gender equality. Höch used her art as a way to express the contradicting and vastly changing world in the perspective of a New Women. Her progressive ideals on birth control, sexuality, and female empowerment influenced the content of her work, as she hoped to show, that by giving women more rights and expanding their gender roles, equality would modernize society just as much as the new mechanized technology.

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