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“In der Zwickmühle der Zeit”: Marieluise Fleißer’s *Mehltreisende Frieda Geier* (1931) and the Non-Simultaneities of Gendered Subjectivity

In *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (1935), Ernst Bloch elaborated the concept of “Ungleichzeitigkeit,” a temporal-sociocultural dissonance between different classes, social groups, and individuals who inhabit, embody, and move in differing temporal layers and their accordant mentalities; while they physically exist in the same present, they do not reside “im selben Jetzt” (104). As these temporal frameworks and those that live within them diverge, the tensions between them become increasingly untenable, leading to personal and social strife. Writing after the National Socialist rise to power, Bloch postulates that these contradictions were emblematic and explanatory for the course which the Weimar Republic took, its exhilarating promise and tragic end. In subsequent scholarship, these thoughts have been expanded to encompass a broader history of German modernity and modern culture. Perry Anderson and Fredric Jameson identify in pre-Nazi Germany an “incomplete” and “uneven” (Jameson 600) penetration of urban modernity, producing an “indeterminate” present state caught between the “still usable classical past” and “the still unpredictable political future” (Anderson 105). Detlev Peukert likewise characterizes this period—which he considers paradigmatic for the “Krisenzeit der klassischen Moderne” (11) in the West—by the contradictions between various temporalities, temporal consciousnesses, experiential velocities, and the conflicting lifeworlds created by them.

Denizens of the 1920s and 1930s experienced this temporal discordance in their daily lives and sense of self, particularly in and through gender. Robert Musil, for example, tracked the emergence of new types of men and women as confused temporal beings, transitional figures unsure of their footing and nature (1193). The Dadaist Richard Huelsenbeck remarked that the modern period was the first to produce a “Frauentypus, den man als eine besondere Schöpfung der Zeit empfand,” who “existiert zwar noch in großen Umrissen” (18) and lingered, following Kerstin Barndt, between old and new in a “status nascendi” (*Sentiment* 9). Else Herrmann identified types of women according to their temporal positioning, such as the “Frau von gestern” dedicated to her progeny or “die Frau von heute” living for her own present (32–43). As Herrmann and others like Alice Rühle-Gerstel observed, women in particular struggled to navigate the temporal disharmonies between the

new opportunities of emancipation and the legacy of a still-appealing “Frauensicksal” as housewife and mother (5). Alongside a perception of residing in a period of epochal transition after World War One, these voices attest to the ways in which a societal phenomenon of non-simultaneity became uniquely fraught when impacted by gender. In moments of disharmony between older and newer ways of defining the self, they reveal how temporality and gender form a nexus that shapes our subjectivity. With one foot in the past and one marching toward a future of unprecedented possibilities and, for women, legal and social liberties, Weimar subjects were ambivalently caught between history and novelty, continuity and rupture, with intense ramifications for their subjectivities.

Usefully revealing the dynamic imbrication of time, the social, history, and personal experience, I bring Bloch’s notion of “Ungleichzeitigkeit” into dialogue with *Mehltreisende Frieda Geier. Roman vom Rauchen, Sporteln, Lieben und Verkaufen* (1931) by Marieluise Fleißer (1901–1974).¹ Fleißer, a native of the small Bavarian city Ingolstadt, was well-known during the Weimar Republic, having made her name with two provocative plays, *Fegefeuer in Ingolstadt* (1926) and *Pioniere in Ingolstadt* (1929), as well as a collection of short stories, *Ein Pfund Orangen* (1929). Working closely with Bertolt Brecht and Lion Feuchtwanger, Fleißer’s oeuvre depicts the mundane lives of and hardscrabble relationships between the young men and women of the provincial petite bourgeoisie, mixing melodramatic conventions with a “Neue Sachlichkeit” style to effect biting social criticism. Her first novel, *Mehltreisende Frieda Geier*, follows the failed relationship between Frieda Geier, a traveling flour saleswoman, and Gustl Amricht, a local swimming star in Ingolstadt.

I interpret how the novel portrays the process in which shifting non-simultaneities interact and fuse with notions of gender to decisively influence individuals, their subjectivities, and their social worlds in ways both liberating and threatening. Extrapolating from the personal consequences of these frictions for one couple’s story, I read Frieda, Gustl, and their relationship as both sites and cipher for larger societal conflicts; they function as a battlefield upon which antagonistic actors, modes of time, gender, and their shifting normative values arise, make claims, and compete. Whereas Gustl, transitioning from the prototype of the Weimar “neuer Mann” as self-made athlete to traditional shopkeeper and back to celebrated town hero, is imbued at the end of the novel with futurity in his embodiment of a communal, violent masculinity, Frieda, representative of the individualist “neue Frau” and perhaps the most prominent medial figure of Weimar modernity, is shorn of her futurity, physically threatened, and run out of town and narrative.

The text, ironizing and criticizing this turn of events, leaves us with a disturbing depiction of the real implications for gendered subjects of intangible concepts like “time.” My reading, following Elizabeth Grosz and Julia Kristeva, illustrates how such a concept is not an abstract environment in which we reside but rather a dynamic agent in shaping our subjectivities; as such, each shifting in one

prompts change in the other, calling forth new subject positions and temporal-social constellations (Grosz 181; Kristeva 36). In Fleißer's novel, the personal negotiation of time and gender appears ambivalent, indeterminate, and, in extreme moments, downright hazardous. I work with its innovative doubled narrative voice, one that combines elements of "Neue Sachlichkeit" irony, coldness, and distance with what she called a feminine, "mitbeteiligt" closeness to her characters (4: 407), to argue for the novel's incisive insight into these antagonistic temporal and gendered structures of subjectivity under Weimar modernity.

Mehltreisende Frieda Geier is structured in two halves, corresponding to the rise and fall of Frieda and Gustl's relationship. When they first meet, both are presented as emblematic figures of the new, gendered subjectivities of Weimar modernity. Frieda typifies the "neue Frau," breaking with models of passive femininity, androgynous with shortly-cropped hair and men's leather jackets, and shoes fashionable in the metropolis, while her assertive, almost masculine bearing and scanning, "kalte [...] Blicke" (30) intimidate the men of her hometown. Frieda inverts patriarchal positions of power by treating the men in her life as a "Mittel zu einem anderen Zweck" (32)—her sexual pleasure, happiness, and independence—manipulating their trite expectations when she dons traditional Bavarian costume to appear as a "schwaches Weib" (31) to win orders for her business. Her sexual openness with Gustl and refusal to lose her "schöne Selbständigkeit" (191) in marriage confirm Frieda's wariness in preserving her independence, encapsulated in her worldly-wise tenet, "[d]ie Männer muss man zugrunde richten, sonst richten sie einen selber zugrunde" (86). Looking like she's ready to dance the "Shimmy" (27) at all times, her appearance and attitude signify the modern, urban culture of Berlin, one of amusement associated with both unbridled female sexuality and (erotic) autonomy—Berlin as the "Hure Babylon" (Anselm 256)—and the America of the Roaring Twenties, land of the modern woman *par excellence*. Frieda's self-fashioning positions her as a "vermittelndes Wesen" of modernity with one foot in the modern metropolis and the other in sleepy, small-town Bavaria (Barndt, "Engel oder Megäre" 32). Her outlier status within a traditional setting expresses the ambivalent prospects of modernity vis-à-vis a threatened, cherished past for some and promises of a bright, radical future for others.

For his part, Gustl is presented as the heroic swimmer, a figure prominent in Weimar mass culture and heralded by Fleißer as the "Repräsentant des modernen Zeitgefühls" (2: 317). Contemporaries found in the athlete a "neuer Typ" and "eins der bemerkenswertesten Phänomene des modernen Lebens" (Thiess, "Sport" 295), the cutting-edge development of the ideal, vital postwar man in whom "etwas von dem Nerv der Zeit selber zu spüren ist" (Kasack 558). In the wake of the humiliation of masculinity resulting from defeat in World War One, male athletes figured as a rejuvenation of the German nation through their powerful physical performances and embodiment of a "modern" attitude of efficiency, rationalization, and optimization. The athlete was held up in the press as "nichts anderes als der sichtbare Exponent einer geistigen Neugruppierung" (Thiess, "Sport" 303). As such,

Gustl's subjectivity and social reputation are grounded in the symbolic, steely power of his muscular body. He has trained himself to be both physically and emotionally independent, having written off earthly delights such as "Seitensprünge" with women so as to fully dedicate himself to the perfecting of his body and skills (37). When he does fall for Frieda, he is both flummoxed by and attracted to her self-possession and resistance to traditional gender expectations, while she is erotically drawn to his physical prowess and what it signifies: an overhauled postwar masculinity and subjectivity and a general societal *esprit* of action and vitality.

What is at first depicted as a harmonious simultaneity of these two paragons of Weimar subjectivity—modern, soberly cool toward the facts of life, and individualistic—begins in the second half of the novel to increasingly diverge as Gustl gives up his sports career and opens up a tobacco shop to prepare for his proposal of marriage. Signaled by a literal narrative restart that repeats verbatim the opening pages of the novel and thus emphasizes the two possible trajectories of subjecthood they could follow, Gustl inaugurates this turning point by abandoning a subjectivity of self-improvement and self-reliance.² He remakes himself as a paterfamilias predicated on traditional gender relations, the stability of social customs, and the subordination of women—a still-existent "past" seemingly incongruous with the present age of female emancipation. Instead of ruthlessly training his body, Gustl, his "Knie so weich" (8), now slavishly awaits his customers from dawn until dusk. No longer the athlete-hero aflush with that verve that fascinated Weimar observers and Frieda herself, he is subordinated to serving his customers with "Frömmigkeit" and "Ehrerbietung" (9). Enveloped by this Christian vocabulary of self-sacrifice, the mismatch between the narrator's hyperbolic-hagiographic description of a banal moment in the day of a small business satirizes Gustl's earnestness as a shopkeeper. This move distances the reader from him, alerting us to critically scrutinize this new phase in Gustl's life.

It is here in the opening scene and its recapitulation—they depict the same moment in the diegesis—that we can develop most clearly how the text's formal properties and specifically Fleißer's innovative narrative doublings, these seemingly contradictory combinations of distance and nearness, "erlebte Rede" and authorial narration, irony and sincerity, lend the novel its incisive social commentary about time, gender, and subjectivity.

Dies ist der vierte Tag, seitdem Gustl Amricht, Genußmittel, aus frommem Eigensinn seinen eigenen Laden am Bitteren Stein aufgemacht hat. Vergangen sind die drei bangen Tage, in denen kein Christenmensch über seine Schwelle trat. Gustl Amricht steht hinter dem Ladentisch in seinem Sonntagsanzug mit weichen Knien. [...] Die Knie sind hinter dem Ladentisch versteckt; sichtbar ist nur die obere Gegend des Sonntagsanzuges und auf dem eisernen kleinen Kopf sein rechtschaffenes Lächeln. Gustl lächelt rechtschaffen von sieben Uhr morgens bis sieben Uhr abends und steht dabei auf ein und demselben Fleck der atemlosen Erwartung. [...] Sind denn die Menschen wahnsinnig, dass sie nicht eintreten, um sich anlächeln zu lassen? Besitzen sie die Schamlosigkeit, überhaupt nie einzutreten, mit keiner flüchtigen Miene? [...] Mag denn sein Eifer hinausstrahlen ins All, in dem nichts verlorenght! (7–9)

The novel begins with a jumble of perspectives and registers. What initially appears to be a conventional third-person narrator is qualified in several steps. The deictic “Dies” dilutes the distanced omniscience of the narrator, implying a common reference of understanding between text, Gustl, and reader. Through the deployment of adjectives and folksy nouns that betray a deeper familiarity with Gustl’s emotional state and personal idiom—“bang,” “Christenmensch,” “weich”—as well as questions that mimic his anxiety, the narration nears free indirect speech. Yet it is a speech that grows increasingly ironic toward Gustl’s self-righteous efforts to fashion himself as a shopkeeper, linked to the awakening of a masculine subjectivity divergent from that of the modern athlete. In the next fragment, we receive a sardonic description of Gustl standing at the ready: his “eisernen kleinen Kopf” suggests a hardheadedness unfit for the bigger demands of the job, while the repetition of “rechtschaffenes Lächeln” highlights the ridiculousness of his pose. The irony here, however, is produced not through the explicit judgments of an authorial third-person narrator but rather immanently through a manipulation of the characters themselves. What makes Gustl an object of irony is the (self)-exaggeration of otherwise positive virtues espoused by him: conscientiousness, diligence, and solicitousness. While it is not contemptuous to greet customers with a smile, it surely is so if one does not cease from morning to night. The same applies to the next round of questions (origin uncertain: are they a reproduction of Gustl’s thoughts? An adaptation via “erlebte Rede”? The narrator’s own?). It is reasonable to ask why customers stay away; what makes this question risible is asking why they do not come to be smiled at by a maniacal Gustl. This repeated distension of sensible and genuine desires, fears, and emotions reaches its culmination in this scene’s final sentence. An unidentified apostrophe implores an unknown audience that Gustl’s “Eifer” may radiate out and touch all corners of the universe so that he may finally earn a few marks. These moments of bathos and hyperbole satirize Gustl’s idea of himself as a self-made man. The narrator adopts Gustl’s consciousness in masquerade, serving a complex irony that mockingly unravels his new subjectivity, done subtly as if unwittingly targeting himself.

Formally representative of the text, scholars of Fleißer such as Sabina Becker have called this narrative process a “subjektiver Bericht,” mixing the proximity of “erlebte Rede” with the distance of “sachliche Berichtsform” to portray the characters (229). A provocative idea, it fleshes out what others have observed as paradoxical of Fleißer’s narrator insofar as it is both authorial—neither a character nor involved in the narrated events—and non-authorial in adopting figures’ perspectives and opinions (Süßmann 77). Indeed, I find it apposite to view this mixture of near and far, partiality and omniscience, as a crucial component of what Fleißer described as a “mitbeteiligt” narrator. Coined in a short study of one of her favorite authors, Heinrich von Kleist, she praises this narrative voice for balancing a critical capacity in moments of immediacy and intimacy as it adopts the “Schicksal” and “den ganzen unmittelbaren Ablauf von Empfindungen” of a character (4: 405). This interplay is key to Fleißer’s distinctive style. The narrator can

provide “einen sachlichen und auffallend umfassenden Bericht” of the story, for it does not *become* the characters in its masquerade and thereby retains an element of narrative objectivity (4: 406). Nevertheless, the narrator’s “Teilnahme an seinen Personen” is not “eine von außen betrachtende” but rather “eine sehr mitbeteiligte, von innen nachspürende,” which “sich ihrer Muskelgefühle bemächtigt” (4: 407). Like a costume in a masquerade, the narrator takes on a character’s apperceptive covering, a form of habitation so to speak, in order to artfully juxtapose his or her thoughts, feelings, and actions to generate moments of social criticism without, however, identifying as the character or being engulfed by his or her partiality.

The text’s language further facilitates this critical effect by harmonizing the ambiguities of Fleißer’s doubled narrative voice. There is little difference in the manner of speaking between it and the characters—the former imitating the latter’s demotic vocabulary, colloquial style, and laconic delivery. This mimicry is furthered by a frequent absence of firm indicators of speech, which blurs the text’s various registers and voices; it thereby lends the text a preternatural reality effect. Yet this ostensibly naïve mode of speaking is deceiving; it is in fact “ein Verfahren der Komplexitätssteigerung” that adds heft to the text’s irony (Müller and Vedder 10). Its seemingly authentic language actually undermines itself by facilitating the aforementioned process of juxtaposition, caustic to its own very “realness.” What purports to a reality effect is in fact a constructed language akin to Brecht’s “Verfremdungseffekt.” Like the narrative voice it serves, Fleißer’s language garbs itself in masquerade, self-aware and citational in a manner far from the desired authenticity of a naturalist reproduction of working-class idiom, for example, or the posed, smarmy meanness of colloquialisms in the work of contemporaries like Erich Kästner.

This socio-critical element at the core of Fleißer’s narrative allows us to situate the novel in relation to “Neue Sachlichkeit.” This cultural mentality entailed a sober outlook toward the hard facts of life, pragmatic and oriented to the present world as well as invested in the future, with an echo of a better world implied in the blank focus on the flawed underbelly of society. Its Janus-faced nature manifested itself in what Martin Lindner calls “kathartische Reduktion,” a critical “Bestandsaufnahme” of society that corrodes its sedimented, outdated myths and shibboleths to reveal the “true” (and thus potentially better) face of life (159–62). In this sense, I view Fleißer’s doubled narrative voice at home in both “Neue Sachlichkeit” and a longer modernist tradition since at least Nietzsche, as well as among the popular “Lebensreform” movements of the period, which strove for a life stripped of bourgeois convention. Yet, these kinships have crucial differences mediated by gender, underscoring Fleißer’s unique literary position. Her ideal of a “mitbeteiligt” narration trades in traditional notions of femininity: physical and emotional intimacy, a powerful sense of empathy, the attenuation of removed contemplation. This narrative “Teilnahme,” one that “geht ihnen [the characters] mitschwingend von innen nach” (4: 407), is akin to what she considered the “dramatische Empfinden bei den Frauen” (4: 409). For Fleißer, the “Spezialbega-

bung” of writing women lies in their faculty to see “bis in die Einzelheiten” of their characters, “gewissermaßen vollständig um den Menschen herum[zu]geh[en],” with a specific “Witterung für menschliche Eigenheiten” (4: 409). This willingness to touch her characters, even if to criticize them, differentiates Fleißer from what has been seen as the masculinity of “Neue Sachlichkeit” in its hard “Teilnahmslosigkeit” against the “verweichlichenden Tendenzen” of modern civilization (Baureithel 4). Rather than the strategic management of emotions through what Helmut Lethen famously called “Verhaltenslehre der Kälte” (4), Fleißer is at her incisive best in those “warm,” emotionally vivacious moments of (inter)personal feelings, in which Frieda and especially Gustl are confronted with the bankruptcy of their beliefs in a voluntarist subject unveiled as a socialized product of gender-temporal complexes rather than pure self-determination.

This revelation becomes increasingly potent as the novel progresses past our protagonists’ initial simultaneity. The first major indication of their discord occurs as Gustl and Frieda return home from a trip to Nuremburg, clumsily grappling with the nature of their relationship after having slept together for the first time. Frieda despairs at Gustl’s discomfort in her post-coital presence. He feels trapped, “als hinge er an einem Strick,” at the thought that he has awoken in Frieda the “falsche Hoffnung” of marriage (85). However, in attempting to distance himself by using once more the formal “Sie” to address Frieda, he reveals his ignorance of her real intentions and their mutual miscommunication. She is stung by his panic, for being made to suffer the consequences of his cowardice: “Auf irgendeine Weise tragen sie es einem nach, wenn man sich ihnen hingegeben hat,” she darkly intuits (84). Composing herself, she is icily dogged in staking her grounds against Gustl’s machinations:

Nein, Frieda ist ohne Verständnis für seine Zwangslage geschaffen. [...] Was sie von ihm will, fragt Gustl weich wie Wachs. [...] “Alles oder gar nichts”, sagt Frieda langsam. Eine Wucht steht hinter ihren Worten, der große Zug. [...] Der Pfeil fliegt. Dann hängt er zitternd in seinem Bewusstsein an einem schmerzenden Häkchen. Die Stelle bleibt fortan wund. “Aber ich kann keine Frau heiraten, die kein Vermögen hat”. “Von Heiraten ist nicht die Rede”. [...] Sie weiß selbst nicht, was daraus werden soll. Jedenfalls kommt er ihr nicht so leicht weg. Sie hat sich an keinen geworfen, der sie wie eine Bagatelle behandelt, sie nicht! [...] Erst jetzt habe ich ihn ganz zu mir herübergezogen denkt Frieda Geier. Sie grämt sich nicht mehr. Wenn es mir nicht mehr passt, kann ich ja jederzeit wieder ausspringen, denkt Gustl. (87–89)

In this duel of wills, Frieda exudes unbending dignity as an erotic agent. Associated with the hardness of force—“Wucht,” “schonungslos,” a sharp “Pfeil”—against Gustl’s waxiness, she parries his maneuvering, setting the terms of her autonomy and claiming a right to respect and happiness, amorous or otherwise: either they negotiate an egalitarian relationship or they part ways. Yet, amidst Frieda’s righteousness we glimpse ironic shadows and slivers of doubt, a reminder of the orchestrating narrator’s own subjectivity. One of the rare scenes in which Frieda’s subjectivity is a subject of this narrative masquerade, her and Gustl’s final,

contradictory thoughts are juxtaposed by the narrator, alluding to the shaky grounds upon which their senses of self and other stand. While she thinks she has drawn him over to her side, he comforts himself with the prospect of jumping ship if things become unpleasant. This suggested simultaneity heightens the comic irony of incongruity in a moment where one, or at least Frieda, believes to be in concordance with the other. Frieda, confident in her powers of judgment and control regarding men, is perhaps less apt than she thinks. Frieda and Gustl do not understand each other and, more importantly, they cannot set the terms of their lives and those around them by the singular force of their individual wills alone, foreboding the violent disharmonies that follow in the novel.

Gustl's metamorphosis from athlete to shopkeeper continues this trajectory, the servile figure that he cuts at odds with what Fleißer identified as the "Wesentliche" of the modern man: the "Sportgeist, eine bestimmte Kampfeinstellung des Lebensgefühls" (2: 317). He is cast from his position at the "Spitze des heutigen Zeitgefühls" (2: 317) and marked as unmodern and out-of-time by his social world. Preoccupied with his relationship and business obligations, his fighting spirit fades, appearing "müde" in the eyes of a "junge Generation" of swimmers (158–59). His athletic decline culminates in his shocking defeat by an amateur competitor, stripping him of that "Nimbus des Stars" constitutive of his self-understanding (162). The attributes that had previously defined him are inverted: modern to has-been, young to old, winner to loser, and authority figure to mockery. These coverings of his former subjectivity are shorn from his being like those of an "Zwiebelschößling": as "[e]ine Haut nach der anderen [ab]fiel," Gustl "merkt es erst, als sie ihm fehlen" (317); ultimately, "[e]ine Leere ist bei ihm entstanden" (166). Adopting his own rustic language, the text's irony eviscerates away the layers of his subjectivity, both its personal instantiation and as a paradigm. Predicated on the individual's drive to forge one's ideal self against all obstacles, be it "natürlichen Körperwiderstandes" or the desiccated life forms "eines zurückliegenden Zeitgefühls," Fleißer esteemed this way of being as the spirit of modernity itself (2: 317–19). It is a voluntarist, almost parthenogenetic concept of the subject, a creation of the self with little to no fertilization by external factors. Gustl's athletic defeat, then, implicates the very foundation of this subjectivity, revealing the determining importance of external social factors. The onion metaphor exposes the violence inflicted on the subject by a temporal normativity inflected by maleness when its prized attributes of youth and strength are withdrawn by a community disinclined to acknowledge him as such. The fallibility of Gustl-as-athlete instigates frantic temporal-gender revolutions to fill this void, increasingly hostile to Frieda.

As Gustl tries to redeem his loss of social status and identity by adopting the ostensibly no-longer-new subjectivities of a traditional shopkeeper and male family figure, he blames Frieda for his shortcomings. This shock forces her to see him "plötzlich in anderer Beleuchtung": "War der Sport nicht jene Eigenschaft, die eine tiefe Unzufriedenheit zwischen ihnen überbrückte?" (167), she asks herself, wondering how their relationship can continue with this yawning subjective-tem-

poral divide between them, one that Frieda already intimates as dangerously incompatible with her own modernity as a New Woman. She seems to have a inchoate sense of the deeper meaning this pivotal scene holds for her now-threatened subjectivity. “Plötzlich geht ihr ein Licht auf, warum Größen dieser Art nie ganz nach oben kommen”: they are a phony type of “Helden, die nur dann etwas wagen, solange die Anlagen dafür günstig sind [...] von der stärksten Art ist sie nicht” (168). Frieda sees Gustl’s fall on the one hand as a failure of willpower; on the other, her disbelief at the insufficiency of Gustl’s prowess attests to an acknowledgement that there are other, more determinate factors at play. Confirming her fears, Gustl admits that he no longer has what it takes to be “Nurmi,” the Finnish Olympic star and one of the most famous representatives of this modern subjectivity during the 1920s; instead, he settles for becoming a “Fachmann und nicht mehr” (167). Although he may choose which manifestations of male subjectivity he leaves or embraces, thereby preserving an element of agency, his choices are conditioned by the shifting societal tectonics of time and gender.

Accordingly, Frieda and Gustl’s personal differences take on an existential, social flavor as they come to represent differing temporal-political camps. As Gustl adopts seemingly old-fashioned forms of male subjectivity founded upon his superiority over woman-as-wife, “[s]o gering macht er sich in ihren Augen” (170–71). Frieda’s previous image of him as the archetype of the modern athlete, premised on the equality of individuals, no longer matches his unwillingness to understand Frieda outside of the two mythical roles he grants women—“Engel” or “Megäre” (70)—and is equally hostile to her feminism, its accent on what observers claimed as the battlefield for emancipated women in the late 1920s: “die Beziehungen der Geschlechter” and “die erotische Freiheit” (Thiess, “Krise” 172). In an essay from 1933, Fleißer agreed, detecting the “wahre Kampf [...] um die persönliche Würde der schaffenden Frau” as being fought “zwischen den Allernächsten” in romantic relationships (4: 427–28). In this context, Frieda fights for a comradely relationship, where women live side by side with their partners as “Freie an Stelle der Fron des Sklaven” (4: 428). Her aim is idealized in the figure of America. “In Amerika helfen Männer und Frauen auch zusammen,” she explains; Gustl’s response: “Hier ist nicht Amerika” (191). He cannot project himself into Frieda’s imagined world, represented by her freedom, mobility, and autonomy—elements commonly associated in Weimar with the United States as an “imaginativ aufgeladenen Topos” of possibility, not only a symbol for economic or technological progress but also the “Geburtsort” of the modern woman herself (Schumacher 260–63). “America,” then, functions as a key ingredient in the construction of Frieda’s subjectivity, for it combines issues of gender and time with the myth of the New World as a space of unbridled individuality in ways that bestow on her modernity and futurity against Gustl’s pastness: in this historical moment, to “envision [...] America involved imagining modernity” (Nolan 74).

If Frieda’s vision of modern female subjectivity leaves no place for Gustl as “Friedas Patriarch”—and it surely does not—he believes he will have failed as a

man (140). Frieda resists his attempts to expropriate her savings and labor for his business, which would make him her superior in work and love. Threatening her with beatings and confronted with the obstinacy of whom he now calls “Luzifers Tochter” (192), Gustl realizes he needs a different woman who will acquiesce to his “Recht” over her (213). Seeing herself as a “weiblicher Pionier”—an allusion to her American fascination and its mythic ethos of possibility and self-actualization in the spirit of “the Wild West”—Frieda asks herself: “Was nützt der Frau alle eigene Entwicklung, wenn sie letzten Endes auf die patriarchalischen Methoden einer Lebensgemeinschaft angewiesen bleibt, die eine rückläufige Bewegung bei ihr erzwingen?” (212). She reaches the conclusion that against his “primitiven Lehrsatz [...] Weib ist Weib” she must end their relationship, for they are a “zu ungleiches Paar” (214). Here, I would like to emphasize the temporal connotations of “ungleich,” of being temporally unequal or dissimilar, or not of or at the same time. This word highlights the “Ungleichzeitigkeit” that has arisen between their divergent subjectivities. In embracing America, Frieda starkly distinguishes herself from Gustl’s reactionary challenge. Moreover, the narrator’s use of descriptors such as “primitiv” for Gustl’s beliefs, “Pionier” for Frieda’s ideals, and “rückläufig” for the threat of a patriarchal life serves to sharpen the discordant directions each character follows: the woman as a metonym for the fulfillment of Enlightenment modernity—*liberté, égalité, fraternité*—while the man is seemingly sliding backward toward a retrograde communal traditionalism (138). It is an issue of both inhabiting different temporalities and moving differently through time. An “Ungleichzeitigkeit” has arisen between the lovers due to both personal decisions and societal influences, following the contemporaneous pattern as to who and where is the modern: the New Woman and America.

Indeed, turning to the chapter directly prior to the narrative restart, in which an overview of Ingolstadt and the sorry state of its citizenry is given, we can develop more explicitly the connection between uneven layers of geography, time, gender, and subjectivity on a personal and societal level, mirroring the microcosm of the couple’s relationship. Like our protagonists, the “Mystik” of the old world and the new of “Amerika liegen dicht nebeneinander” (24) in this city, with medieval churches competing with flashing advertisements. The historic old town, with its Catholic traditions and ancient architecture, has been similarly overshadowed by new working-class districts and factories. The physical manifestations of different eras and their dissimilar worldviews inhabit the same place, concretizing the abstract dissonances that imbue the lives of the city’s residents. Important here is that individual stories are not singled out. Rather, the view is of an aggregate population whose members are molded *en masse* by the same socioeconomic forces; their influential, even determinate force is granted superiority over the futile efforts of the individual. Industrious citizens, they strive in vain against the inflationary loss of their “Vermögen,” while their children, educated as white-collar professionals, cannot establish themselves as bourgeois subjects due to a lack of employment opportunities (178–79). It is a city in which the economy is

in severe crisis, caught between old market structures and the disruption of industrial rationalization. Zombie-like in its position between two times, the city, “aus den Voraussetzungen des Mittelalters entstanden,” is one “die nicht leben und nicht sterben kann” (180), caught in an untenable and corrosive “Zwickmühle” (4: 427) of discordant times.

These drastic developments, of course, are a double-edged sword. As Bloch observes, “Ungleichzeitigkeiten” can both inflame social tensions and serve as spaces of potential transformation. They have brought opportunities with it, such as an evolution of labor and its gender politics that provides Frieda her sustenance and hard-won freedom. But these socioeconomic transitions, linked as they are by both contemporaries and the narrator to the emancipation of women and the reordering of relations between the sexes, also compound a sense of severe disorientation for people like Gustl who try to ground themselves in the stability of traditional patterns of life and work. As these various non-simultaneities are exacerbated, what they have known to be “true,” their “Erfahrungsraum,” becomes increasingly detached from and insufficient for explaining the present and near future, their “Erwartungshorizont” (Koselleck 350–52). This divergence is felt on multiple levels, leading to strife within the self and the social body. The narrator paints a picture of men and women increasingly desperate for clarity and foundation, drawing a line from these larger socioeconomic-temporal shifts to the fraught relationship between our protagonists. Gustl and the restless townspeople, sharpening their knives against Frieda—that now suspect embodiment of a disenchanted modernity made responsible for these dizzying changes—fall prey to thoughts that “an Anarchie und Verbrechen streifen” (180). As such, Gustl’s and Frieda’s personal journeys become harbingers for larger societal and political trends in late Weimar.

This descriptive interlude marks the moment of shifting normative value invested in certain socio-temporal figures narratively and within the social world of the novel. Frieda’s modernity and futurity as a New Woman, previously heralded by the narrator as a “Pionier” and by Gustl in his attraction to her, loses its cachet in the eyes of her ex-partner and the community. Those dislocating processes of modernization and resultant convulsions at the nexus of time and gender transform the protagonists’ identities, both in how they are perceived by others and how they understand themselves. For Frieda, this process is ambiguous: it is striking how constant her subjectivity and its progressive temporality remain throughout the story. While her character remains the same, it is German society as represented by Gustl that moves on in ways anathema to her. Taking place between 1926 and 1928, the zenith and tail end of Weimar’s fascination with radically autonomous “Neue Fraulichkeit,” the novel attests to what contemporaneous feminists like Rühle-Gerstel shrewdly noticed: by the end of the 1920s, the New Woman, both as medial image-ideal and lived reality, had stalled and become “müde,” unable to “erobern” the masses, and thus “mit leiser, trotzig versteckter Enttäuschung” she fell “in die Reihen der Rückwärtsgewandten” (5), delegated to

the past as newer, more conservative ideals of femininity and gender relations are socially esteemed at the expense of Frieda's now "old" model of subjectivity.³

The other side of this coin can be seen in Gustl's return to athletic prowess and his violent reintegration into an increasingly masculinist community. Admitting that he and Frieda inhabit "eben zwei Welten," he vows two things post-breakup: first, that he will become a new person and, second, that Frieda will carry the costs for his metamorphosis; on both counts, he succeeds (276). Gustl reinvents himself in affinity with the natural world—forests, meadows, water—his "wahre Adam" emerging now that he is rid of Frieda (295). The new Gustl embraces an idea of "natural" or "organic" masculinity opposed to the intellectuality and artificiality of civilization as represented by Frieda-as-woman, a telling inversion of the traditional notion of "woman" as a natural antidote to the alienation of masculine rationality and civilization. Emphasizing this reversed gender dichotomy, Gustl, in one particularly abhorrent case, endeavors to assert his biological power over Frieda by acquainting her with "die natürlichen Machtmittel des Mannes," that is, by unsuccessfully trying to impregnate her without her consent and thus reduce her to pure physicality, a vessel for man's virile authority (279). We should not understand this return to an Edenic maleness, however, as an archaism per se; tied as it is to modern sports culture, I view it as retooled to figure the emergence of a different form of modern male existence—one misogynist and violent and, importantly, naturally part of a unified community. Manically rededicated to swimming "um die Wunde in seinem Selbstbewusstsein zu heilen," he reaches new heights of success (316). Celebrated by his townspeople, Gustl's rebirth occurs in tandem with his rehabilitation into his sports club and the community. This second coming of athletic subjectivity is different. Whereas the first iteration's strong sense of individuality is explicit, its markers of self-generation are missing in this second instance. Rather, he heals his wound of subjectivity by his incorporation into the social entities of his swimming club and the town as an inexorably social being, the townsfolk's support for Gustl in his feud with Frieda filling the emptiness he once felt. Together, they demonize her as a "Hexe" (279), who had bewitched their hero, and push her out of the community, now "in Verruf gekommen" and an outsider deemed "vogelfrei" (310). In the end, her "crimes" against Gustl are interpreted as against the social body.

In the face of such a dramatic turning of the tables, Frieda vanishes from the narrative. She leaves Ingolstadt to save her livelihood and her life from a ruined reputation and vigilante violence; the last glimpse of our heroine we receive is of a defiant "Frauensperson" with a pure "Blick der Verachtung" for her former friends and business partners (305–06). Frieda and her status as the ultra-modern New Woman in a conservative milieu, the "unbewusste Bereiterin der Entwicklung im Alltagskleid," is pushed out of town and story against the pressures of an incompatible model of (masculine) social subjectivity (311). Although she retains her conviction of superiority over the frantic jerking of the collapsing voluntarist myth, she must reflect on what she has always already intuited: her drive to live

an emancipated female subjectivity must halt before the eternal “Vorurteil” of her environment—that is, the determinate role played by social forces in shaping the subject (311). Frieda, striving to lead “den fortschreitenden Weg ins Dickicht der vorgefassten Meinungen,” ultimately pays the price for her obdurate individuality (311). Her unbending dedication to modern womanhood places her in a position to suffer the vicissitudes of shifting social-temporal coordinates. The cachet of a desired future now attaches itself to Gustl as an explicitly social subject: “Er ist so berauscht von der Wiederkehr des besseren Selbst” resulting from renewed social legitimation—“Jetzt findet er sich wieder zurecht” (295). His type of masculine subjecthood is integrable into the community. Indeed, it draws its power from being of this “Volkskörper” and its future, while Frieda’s female subjectivity figures as their opposite, an undesirable “Fremdkörper” (Vedder 61).

The structuring non-simultaneity between the two protagonists is reversed as Gustl now functions as the herald of modernity, laden with the semantics of futurity and reinvested with high social standing. Indeed, this outlook reaches its risible apotheosis in the drunken melee between Gustl, his sports club, and the masons’ guild that closes the novel. As the two groups of men bash each other at a local bar, Gustl emerges victorious and, spitting out the four front teeth he has lost, he smiles and exclaims, “Schön war’s doch,” and then orders a “Siegerrunde” for his own men and their opponents, some of whom he wishes to now recruit for his club after their show of belligerent masculinity (342). Violence, rather than deepening the fault lines of animosity, helps to “integrate men into the larger male community” and to “restore a man’s bruised self-esteem” (Schumann 247–48). This is especially so when this violence arises vis-à-vis the feared woman—in this case: Frieda—in a world of unsettling gender developments as brought to light by Klaus Theweleit’s *Männerphantasien*. Gustl’s exultant comeback—an entirely male affair: for Gustl, “[a]lles, was Weib heißt, hat er verschworen” (316)—and the text’s ironic yet grave placement of his subjectivity within this absurd moment of communal unity is shown to be hardly a solo achievement of the deliberate, determined self. Rather, it is one molded by external social validation and the normative investment of value in a resurgent masculinity. After all, the battle has a communal origin: sensitive to the whispering crowd around them, many of whom had just come from the club’s latest public extravaganza, Gustl and his teammates pick up the circulating rumor that “es heute noch was gibt” between his team and the masons’ guild; the men become increasingly “kribbelig,” eager to perform the finale to their afternoon athletic performances (337). This last act proceeds in front of a large audience of titillated townsfolk, who hurry from person to person to “verkünden” that the men are beating each other (340–41). We depart from a scene laid out “wie in einem Lazarett” as the teammates tend to each other with ripped bits of clothing, “mit dem sie die diversen Löcher vernageln,” a fitting image for the healing of social wounds and the harmonizing of dissonances in a cohesive community now rid of irritants like Frieda (342).

This show of joyful brotherly reconciliation, coming as it does on the heel of Gustl’s latest reinvention, is the culmination of a successful campaign to subordi-

nate and excise female subjectivity as represented by Frieda—urban, rationalized, egalitarian modernity for and of the individual—on behalf of a new, male, communal identity of the provinces, a re-subjugation of those “outsiders” that Peter Gay termed the “insiders” of Weimar culture (vi, xiv). As such, Gustl’s subjectivity is a social irredentism of the masculine, reclaiming its supremacy and social “territory.” Though reactionary, Gustl, rather than the pathological last breath of an outdated patriarchy, is a dangerous novelty, a strain of male modernity stimulated by the modernization undergone by its female counterpart. Fleißer’s novel is invaluable for understanding individuals’ negotiations of potent social forces and their impact on one’s self at the experiential levels of the body, sex, love, and labor.

My reading thus illustrates how time interfaces with gender to work as a prime agent in subject formation. Analyzing the dynamics of these forces as embodied in our protagonists, we capture a richer understanding of abstract theories of time, subjectivity, and modernity by investigating them in their historical-cultural and lived textures. Indeed, the crisscrossing of our protagonists’ selves with larger social forces demonstrates how the quotidian, intimate aspects of their lives are inseparable from global questions about gendered identities, their placement in society, and their shifting normative worth. As such, gender and its temporal conflicts charge the individual with political meaning and can spark societal change because they determine one’s potential for speaking, acting, and living in a time and place; Frieda’s banishment, her enforced narrative silence, thus speaks volumes.

By centering sexual and temporal difference as an analytic as well as an object of study, we approach the Weimar Republic anew. Joining Walter Benjamin, who identified the “Überzeugung, dass man in der Provinz Erfahrungen macht, die es mit dem großen Leben der Metropolen aufnehmen können” (“Echt” 140) as one of the most important aspects of Fleißer’s fiction, her work captures Weimar’s overlooked cartography—social, aesthetic, and earthly—undergoing epochal transformation (Canning, “Introduction” 19). As illustrated above, hybrid texts such as *Mehltreisende Frieda Geier* work within and push forward in new (and gendered) directions canonically modern styles and techniques like “Neue Sachlichkeit” or “erlebte Rede,” prompting us to view modernist culture from alternative, illuminating angles and otherwise overlooked perspectives and places. The effectiveness of this aesthetic innovation is particularly telling in the novel’s negotiation of modern individuality. On the one hand, the ordeals of Frieda and Gustl indicate that individuality was not a dead letter in Weimar. While many intellectuals and authors of the 1920s diagnosed the obsolescence of an alienated, anomic individuality, large swaths of the population took little notice of these pessimistic proclamations (Föllmer, *Individuality* 1–18). This was especially true for newly emancipated women, for whom the idea of individuality promised unprecedented avenues for self-actualization; in an age of mass politics and collective utopias, women such as Frieda were hardly eager to sacrifice their self-determination for the sake of the family, the nation, or the “Volk” (Föllmer, “Auf der Suche” 287–88). On the other hand, the novel’s masquerading, corrosively ironic

treatment of voluntarist subjectivity is part of a paradigmatic turn in the twentieth century to more structural understandings of the individual as a contested site and partial product of social forces. With varying degrees of success dependent upon their temporal-gender positionings, Frieda and Gustl negotiate this swinging pendulum between agency and impotency. My reading lays bare one of the novel's most profound insights: "das Ich als verdichteten gesellschaftlichen Ort"—the modern subject as a co-creation by one's willpower and social forces, exposing the power and limitations of both (Komfort-Hein 48).

Against the backdrop of this novel's constitutive ambiguity, what to make of the harsh clarity of Frieda's fate? After its publication, Fleißer read the novel pessimistically, as a premonition of that "kleinbürgerlichen Nationalsozialismus" (*Briefwechsel* 597) that she would come to experience as a leftist New Woman "out of time" after her Weimar heyday. Rather than casting the novel and its titular protagonist as role models for the modern woman, it would do better to take them as frosty depictions of the "Mühen und die Ambivalenz der kleinen Schritte" undertaken by women to define themselves in a volatile era (Barndt, "Engel oder Megäre" 25). Fleißer offers us a clear-headed critique of the modern woman's situation instead of feminist utopia, and frustrations instead of redemption. Through a focus on subjectivity and its temporalities, it operates as an "Art Messinstrument" for the "Ungleichzeitigkeiten" that come to determine to a substantial degree life—and especially women's lives—during this period (Komfort-Hein 63). The novel aims to unearth the resultant "Ungerechtigkeit im Alltäglichen"; the melting method of her writing discloses "was anders sein müsste" without, however, providing the cure to these societal and personal "Verletzungen," leaving it to her readers to draw conclusions and act upon these insights (4: 522). This gritty commitment to the pains and pleasures of young, ordinary women reminds us that they, as individuals and as a group, do not fade away in histories of late Weimar often dominated by male warriors in the streets and scheming politicians in the Reichstag (Canning, "Women" 168). We come away with the conviction of how the gendered and particularly female subject figured as a fundamental fulcrum of contention in these dangerous moments of European modernity—histories of which we would be wise to heed, as women and sexual minorities are once again caught in the crossfire of a masculine reassertion in our own troubled century.

Notes

¹ There exist two studies of Fleißer that apply Bloch's notion of "Ungleichzeitigkeit." W. Schmitz (1979) remains with Bloch on a macroeconomic-historical level and reads the novel as a "Zeitroman" about the pathologies of the province vis-à-vis modernization and the rise of Nazism, whereas my argument expands the concept horizontally to issues of gender and vertically to the level of the individual. Barbara Naumann (1987), conversely, does attend to the personal but in a stiflingly biographical manner that interprets Fleißer's writing as a reflection of her discordant life between traditional Bavaria and avant-garde Berlin.

² Like Nietzsche's "ewige Wiederkehr" (99–100) this narrative intervention suggests Frieda's ultimate fate was always already there from the beginning. Her efforts to create herself as an emancipated woman must halt before the inextricable knots of the ambivalent gender-temporal dynamics of Weimar society—she cannot escape the social conditioning of her subjectivity as a modern woman in a patriarchal system, regardless of how much she wills it.

³ Fleißer states in a letter that the novel captures the years 1926–28 (*Briefwechsel* 598).

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