



Georg Wilhelm
Pabst, *Abwege*
(1928). Screen grab
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Physiognomic typage and the construction of the archetypal Weimar-Era *Hausfrau* in Georg Wilhelm Pabst's *Abwege/The Devious Path*

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ABSTRACT

Georg Wilhelm Pabst's 1928 film *Abwege/The Devious Path* underscores psycho-sexual tensions prevalent in the social climate of 1920s Germany and Austria. Under Pabst's direction, the actors in *The Devious Path* exaggerated their performances to amplify reality, playing to self-conscious character archetypes, such as the sexually frustrated bourgeois *hausfrau*. Pabst's interest in physical types also echoes the early twentieth-century revival of physiognomy in the German-speaking world, wherein ethnic and class-based characteristics were increasingly categorized according to a taxonomic system. His use of physiognomy can be said to resemble Soviet typage due to his focus on pure physical appearance. However, unlike Eisenstein, Pabst cast well-known actors and actresses, such as Brigitte Helm who had starred in the film *Metropolis* the previous year. Helm's exaggerated expressions and bodily contortions bring to life the archetype of the irrational *hausfrau* oscillating between lust and remorse. Her portrayal provides commentary on the emergence of the New Woman in the German-speaking world of the 1920s, but also suggests a satirical critique of bourgeois society's complex, and perhaps hypocritical, relationship with the club-going subculture that existed in Weimar culture at that time.

KEYWORDS

Georg Wilhelm Pabst
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The Devious Path
Brigitte Helm
Béla Balázs

Certain class-, race- and gender-based anxieties that blossomed in 1920s Austria bore the distinct imprint of the permissive subculture emerging in neighbouring Weimar Germany. There was perhaps no greater expression of this trend than in the films of the Viennese director Georg Wilhelm Pabst, who was active in the silent era. He got his start in *Kammerspielfilm*, a genre also known as the ‘chamber drama’, which featured minimal sets and created a portrait of lower middle-class life with a central focus on character psychology (Atwell 1977: 35). His films from the late 1920s have been described by the scholar Barthélemy Amengual as exemplary of the New Objectivity aesthetic, due to his determination for truth-seeking, characterized by naturalistic film sets and lighting (Amengual 1966: 26).¹ Working within the parameters of this aesthetic tendency, Pabst recurrently probed themes of vice and excess prevalent in Weimar culture, becoming known for his portrayals of ‘lost girl’ character types. Defined by their sexuality, Pabst’s female leads served as embodiments of castration anxiety, a popular psychoanalytic theory permeating the consciousness of socially liberal 1920s Vienna due to the influence of the renowned local neurologist Sigmund Freud.

Pabst’s articulation of the New Objectivity style derived variously from Soviet *typage*, American archetypes, and character physiognomy to produce a heightened version of reality, as I will discuss in greater detail below. Although his better-known films *Die Büchse der Pandora/Pandora’s Box* (1929) and *Tagesbuch einer Verlorenen/ Diary of a Lost Girl* (1929) also employ many of the standard New Objectivity themes and techniques, *The Devious Path* preceded these films and is the only one of the three to focus specifically on the Austrian bourgeois *hausfrau*, distinguished by both her place within the confines of the domestic realm and her affluent socio-economic status. Curiously, this is a work that has been largely overlooked in the existing literature. Although Siegfried Kracauer describes the film as exemplifying a typically German cinematic style, it is worth noting that he dismisses everything but the nightclub scene as ‘negligible’ (Kracauer 1947: 178).² I will examine *The Devious Path* and Brigitte Helm’s portrayal of Irene Beck, its female protagonist, in more depth, and argue that Pabst grounded his critique of rigid feminine roles in inter-war Austrian middle-class culture in his populist caricatural style. By emphasizing the physiognomic characteristics of his actors, Pabst confounded gender identities and challenged a stalwart archetype in an era when social norms were loosening across central Europe: namely, the bourgeois *hausfrau*. Culture may have dictated that a married woman exhibit strict adherence to traditional gender roles, but in *The Devious Path* the character of Irene Beck openly expresses her repressed libertine desires.

At the earliest stages in the narrative, the film establishes Irene’s dissatisfaction with her cold, workaholic and seemingly asexual husband Thomas and her desire to cultivate a more exciting social life. In the opening scene she begs Thomas to go out with her to a nightclub, but he rejects her pleas, indicating the burden of his heavy work schedule and making plain his disapproval of her friend Liane and the artist Walter Frank. Thomas’s refusal provokes Irene to engage in a series of rebellious acts betraying her underlying sexual frustration. She seduces and subsequently rejects a series of men, adopting the image of the sexually aggressive female, a personality type that existed outside of social norms, and that signified liberation from bourgeois morality. Despite her heavy-handed attempts, Irene does not achieve the results that she desires, and ultimately returns to the safety and comfort of her marriage. The film concludes with the couple’s divorce, and immediate reconciliation in the courtroom lobby, where they decide to remarry and begin the cycle all over again. By highlighting the insurmountability of Austria’s patriarchal norms, Pabst lays bare the social underpinnings guiding, and essentially confining, the couple’s behaviour. However, prior to this cynical *dénouement*, the film points to fissures in the established order of the married couple’s roles. The marital frustration exhibited in this film speaks to the demands for autonomy made by progressive women during Pabst’s era.

1. New Objectivity refers to an inter-war movement in painting, literature and cinema that presented an image of the modern world marked by visual sobriety. It is often discussed as a rejection of Expressionism’s sentimentality and idealism, though both movements communicated a fear of new technologies. The style allowed for distanced and sometimes cynical reflections on contemporary social issues such as prostitution, addiction, greed and changing gender relations.

2. In *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of German Film*, Kracauer defined the ‘German cinematic style’ as one that featured expressive camerawork, emphasizing movement. It was also inflected by a director and production team’s highly organized collaboration (Kracauer 1947: 3–11).

Pabst's 'lost girl' pictures and the femme fatale

Like Lulu from Pabst's better-known film *Pandora's Box*, Irene's character explores the social ramifications of new roles for women in German-speaking Europe. Lulu and Irene represent different manifestations of the femme fatale, an anti-heroine figure who Mary Ann Doane describes as possessing enticing feminine allure and unmaternal qualities that stand in opposition to the ideal woman.³ While the femme fatale as a trope has taken on different forms since the Biblical Salome of antiquity, she adopted a specific identity during the Weimar era, derived from the emergence of the 'New Woman'.⁴ In the 1920s, the liberal nature of Weimar culture provided the conditions in which unrestrained decadence became conflated with female sexuality. The New Woman was an archetypal modern female of the twentieth century who was financially and sexually liberated, and engaged in masculine behaviours such as smoking and cross-dressing. This socially emancipated figure came to signify a confusion of gender roles as well as a dissolution of class differences in the modern urban environment. She embodied the comingling of bourgeois housewives and demimonde figures.⁵ In many of his films from the late 1920s, Pabst would explore the subtext of bourgeois society's simultaneous disapproval of and fascination with Weimar's liberal subculture.

In his trio of 'lost girl' films Pabst casts his female protagonists' plight in a stridently sympathetic light. Lulu, the female protagonist from his 1929 film *Pandora's Box* is a prostitute and seductress whose wilful caprices provoke the moral downfall of her male entourage. Film theorist Thomas Elsaesser noted that Lulu exists 'outside of the social order' because her origins are unknown. He identified her as the only character in the film who lives honestly and without guilt (1986: 40–41), not unlike Anita Haldern in *The Devious Path* who will be discussed below. Because Lulu openly indulges her libido, she is the object of the bourgeois male's desire, itself restricted by the sexual repression inherent to his class. At the same time, as a sexually liberated woman, Lulu's sensuous image also bears the spectre of syphilis, a legitimate risk that threatened to punish hedonistic fulfilment with a physical illness and its stigma.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, the character Thymian from *Diary of a Lost Girl* falls victim to bourgeois society's unyielding Puritanism. At an early point in the film, Thymian's life takes on a tragic trajectory when she becomes pregnant by her father's assistant Meinert and is sent to a reformatory school. Thymian escapes from the school and goes to a party where she is introduced to alcohol, and in an intoxicated state she unwittingly enters prostitution. Thymian's story is that of a fall from grace. Her unfortunate circumstances determine the path that her life must take, hindering her potential to achieve bourgeois respectability.

In contrast to these women, Irene is a well-to-do *hausfrau* enjoying economic stability and well-moored social standing. As a woman who stays at home, her character does not exhibit the requisite traits of the 'New Woman'. Instead, Irene is financially dependent and erotically constrained: the institution of marriage has put a damper on her ambitions for sexual and social liberation. One major advantage that Irene's lifestyle of relative ease affords her is the freedom to pursue idle pleasures for immediate gratification. Benefitting from spare time and access to her husband's pocket book, Irene sets out to explore the uninhibited excitement of the demimonde. Alas, when she attempts to enter this world, Irene becomes vulnerable to the consequences of her own behaviour. The seduction of a male suitor becomes her ultimate goal, although her attempts consistently result in failure, as I will discuss in greater detail below.

All three of these films explore female stereotypes that were common in German-language inter-war cinema, and they also conform to the psycho-social binary that separated women into categories of virgin or whore.⁶ At the extra-diegetic level, we know that the portrayals of these women must submit to the control of a male director, Pabst. As such, their presence on film echoes the traditional Hollywood cinematic

3. See Mary Anne Doane (1991), *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*, New York: Routledge.

4. In 1894, Sarah Grand coined the term 'New Woman' in her article 'The new aspect of the woman question' published in the *North American Review*. In her text Grand questioned the relegation of women to the domestic sphere and conjured the image of a new turn-of-the-century woman who would challenge these norms.

5. See Vibeke Rützou Petersen (2001), *Women and Modernity in Weimar Germany: Reality and Representation in Popular Fiction*, New York: Berghahn Books.

6. The virgin-whore complex originates in Freudian psychoanalytic theory and posits that the inability of males to view the women they love as sexual beings, and their tendency to denigrate the women they desire as whores, is the result of a sexual dysfunction. See Sigmund Freud, (1912), 'On the universal tendency to debase-ment in the sphere of love', *Standard Edition*, 11, pp. 179–90.

7. See Laura Mulvey (1975), 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', *Screen*, 16: 3, pp. 6–18.

8. Before Hitler's rise to power in 1933, Germany was a bastion of homosexual advocacy, dating back to 1897 with the founding of the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee in Berlin. Around the same time, the New Morality movement, led by Helen Stöcker, declared that traditional feminine roles were the consequence of socialization rather than nature. In the late 1920s, the committee joined with other organizations to promote access to contraceptives, abortion and to overturn legal penalties for homosexuals. See Barry Adam (1987), *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, pp. 17–25.

9. Weininger is said to have influenced later iterations of Freud's theory of castration anxiety. In a 1909 text, the psychoanalyst mentions circumcision as a potential explanation for the prevalence of self-hatred among Jewish men, citing Weininger in his footnotes. See Nancy Harowitz and Barbara Hyams (1995), *Jews and Gender: Responses to Otto Weininger*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

10. See Stanley Suval (1974), *The Anschluss Question of the Weimar Era: A Study of Nationalism in Germany and Austria, 1918–1932*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.

apparatus, which, as Laura Mulvey has argued, places the feminine subject in the role of the object to be looked at or fetishized.⁷ In these films, however, Pabst scrutinizes the stereotypes often exploited by male directors in the context of the finite number choices available to women in early twentieth-century Austria. The male protagonists in this trio of films serve as foils for the character development of Lulu, Thymian and Irene, and appear one-dimensional in comparison to the women. The men's shallowness, their minimal character development, typifies Pabst's New Objectivity aesthetic, which emphasizes surface appearance and gives his male leads an object-like disposition.

Weimar culture in Vienna

Pabst was a film-maker based in Vienna, a city that was often implicated in the discourse on Weimar culture. Although Austria as a nation was politically distinct from the German Weimar Republic, the First Austrian Republic is sometimes described as its cultural equivalent. Both countries were home to flourishing intellectual and artistic communities and fostered a high level of interchange between their capitals. Like Germany, Austria suffered hyperinflation during the 1920s, which imbued Weimar culture with an overriding sense of insecurity. Like other New Objectivity visual artists, in his work Pabst touched upon the widespread fear of economic instability and the suspicion aroused by the progressive social movements promoting women's and gay rights that flourished in the period (McCormick 1994: 7).⁸

In 1903, 25 years prior to *The Devious Path's* release, the Austrian philosopher Otto Weininger published *Sex and Character*, a text that was a precursor to many of the themes surrounding gender identity and sexuality that Pabst would explore in the 1920s. In his book, Weininger attributes negative associations to feminine traits, which he views as having a corrupting influence on personal character. Moreover, he conflates Jewishness and femininity into a single socially corrosive identity (although he was Jewish himself), describing women as materialistic and soulless. Despite his feelings about the female gender, he acknowledges the fluidity of sexual orientation as a natural condition, believing that everyone falls within the spectrum of bisexuality. Weininger attributes to women who seek emancipation the desire for a man's character ([1903] 1906: 315–16). In retrospect, Weininger's book has been widely regarded as both misogynistic and anti-Semitic, but his work would have a major impact internationally on intellectuals such as Sigmund Freud, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Franz Kafka, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence and Gertrude Stein.⁹

The intellectual tendency that leaned towards conservatism, which Weininger exemplifies in his 1903 text, gained renewed currency during the inter-war period with the advent of 'Austrian anthropologists'. This movement of intellectuals included Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Hermann Bahr and Richard von Kralik, and promoted the concept of an independent Austrian identity. They sought to establish a unique national character drawn from its specific cultural milieu, which consisted of archetypes including the bourgeoisie, bohemians and alpine peasantry – all of whom upheld ideals antithetical to the prevailing Weimar progressivism.¹⁰ Negotiating these divergent social forces, Pabst engaged in an exploration of themes pertaining to modern cultural liberalism and the fears surrounding it.

The new woman and subverting gender stereotypes

One cultural stereotype in circulation that Pabst featured in his films was the gender-bending female, whose implied rivalry with the male sex signified Freudian penis

envy and threatened traditionally defined roles for women. According to Freud, upon her first experience of intercourse, a woman may experience the desire to castrate her sexual partner for having revived memories of her lost phallus. This experience causes the woman to return to an immature sexual state, evoking memories of a time when she was more competitive with men. Freud sees this tendency as an explanation for the drive among some contemporary women towards emancipation (1918: 205). Like many of Freud's theories, this convoluted and certainly outdated perspective on female psychology has no grounding in empirical evidence and is now obsolete among scientific circles; its currency in the context of late 1920s Vienna, however, should not be underestimated.

Alice Roberts's role as the Countess Augusta Geschwitz in *Pandora's Box* epitomizes the masculine type described by Weininger and Freud. In the wedding reception scene the Countess dances with Lulu and takes the lead, thus assuming the dominant 'butch' role in the couple. Augusta wears a modern drop waist dress, which hides her feminine form, and adopts an overtly masculine posture that strikes a conspicuous contrast with the more passive movements of Lulu, who is always attired in virginal white. In *The Devious Path*, Irene (as played by Helm) fluctuates between male- and female-coded tendencies in a manner that appears schizophrenic, for she contains them in a single character. At given moments in the film she exhibits stereotypically male characteristics, including demonstrations of sexual aggression. Conversely, she occasionally behaves passively and pleads for her husband's affection. Two scenes best illustrate her movement towards a masculine persona as theorized by Weininger: the dance scene in the club when she tries to inspire envy in the painter, Walter (the object of her desire), and the confrontation with her husband in Walter's apartment.

After arriving at the nightclub, Irene begins her transformation from virgin to whore with the assistance of another woman, Anita Haldern (played by Ilse Bachmann), who abets Irene in her shedding of her good *hausfrau* persona. It is Haldern who coerces our protagonist into taking an illicit substance behind closed doors, one which releases Irene's inhibitions and drastically alters her behaviour. Following a brief moment off-screen, Irene returns intoxicated and her facial expression suggests that she has entered a state of otherworldly possession. Caught up in the club's atmosphere, she begins to dance with an unidentified, tuxedoed gentleman. Her half-closed eyes and abandoned gestures convey her submission to the entire experience: the rhythm, the movement and the man with whom she is dancing. Reduced to a docile state induced by the drugs, her body echoes her partner's every move. When she sees Walter drinking alone at the bar, however, her demeanour rapidly changes. Channeling a newfound 'masculine' energy, Irene's gaze becomes focused and serpent-like. Although she is fixated on Walter, she grabs the nearest available dance partner: a greying older man with a handlebar moustache. It is at this point that her body language shifts. He takes the lead, but Irene pushes back, forcing his movements with a vice-like grip. This sequence demonstrates the extremes of manipulation that Irene is prepared to deploy; her sense of empowerment is nevertheless short-lived, for it becomes clear that Walter is resistant to her advances. The mood dramatically shifts when Irene learns that Haldern is a recent widow whose debauched behaviour is rumoured to have led to her husband's suicide. The effects of the drug now dissipated, a look of fright erupts on Irene's face as she becomes cognizant of her resemblance to Haldern, the fallen wife, now living on the 'whore' side of the traditional female binary. Overcome with guilt and fear, Irene immediately returns home and begs her husband's forgiveness. This oscillation between defiance and submissiveness aligns Irene with late nineteenth-century stereotypes of women defined as hysterical and subject to irrational outbursts. Irene, however, is an updated version of this trope: she is caught between tradition and the arrival of the New Woman, and it is for this reason that her experience speaks directly to the condition of the bourgeois *hausfrau* in inter-war Austria.

The feminine masquerade and the virgin/whore complex

This wavering between the gendered stereotypes of masculine aggression and feminine frailty reflects the complexity of socially ascribed roles within modernity. While financial independence and the mantle of authority still eluded them, women negotiating their desire for power had to avoid inspiring fear and distrust in the male sex. They were thus required to conceal their strengths and abilities as part of the female masquerade. Irene's behaviour in *The Devious Path* evokes the concept of 'womanliness as a masquerade' that psychoanalyst Joan Riviere discusses in a 1929 text. She examines the neuroses of a high-performing female patient, an intellectual adept at speaking and writing who felt compelled to over-exaggerate her feminine characteristics so as to avert the criticism of her male colleagues. Riviere reads this behaviour as an act of compensation, which allowed her patient to atone for the guilt of symbolically castrating her father with her intellect and taking possession of his masculinity (Riviere 1929: 305). Unlike Riviere's patient, who was extremely skilled at operating on an undetectable level, Irene nakedly displays her desire to seduce the men in her entourage. Her stereotypically weak feminine persona is utterly at odds with her assertive masculine side, and is thus inadequate as a disguise.¹¹

The final example of Irene's failed feminine disguise comes at the point of the film's climax when she attempts to instigate a conflict between Walter and a new lover. In a bid to incite Walter's jealousy, she stages a romantic liaison in his apartment with the boxer Sam Taylor, who she lures away from a practise match at the gym. Rather than fighting Taylor, Walter symbolically banishes her from his imagination by throwing his portraits of her on the ground. These pencil drawings convey Walter's image of her as the object of his desire, which he was forced to relinquish when he realized that pursuing her would mean uprooting her from a position of wealth and comfort. Irene's husband Thomas eventually arrives at the door. She removes her dress to create a compromising scene and instructs him to enter the room. Thomas does not fight with Walter for her affection as she had hoped and anticipated, but instead looks at her with an expression of disappointment and revulsion. At this point Irene comes to terms with her miscalculation of Thomas's reaction and quickly reverts to the demure, virginal posturing that would be expected of a woman of her class. Her inability to effectively harness the whore identity in Thomas's presence is at the root of her failure. Irene's quandary represents the nascent entry of the New Woman into respectable bourgeois society, one whose desire is more complexly rendered than prior stereotypes would have allowed.

Pabst was certainly not the first director to deal with the virgin/whore binary in the image of a single woman, nor was this the first such portrayal for Helm. She played a similar split personality the year before in *Metropolis* (Lang, 1927) where she portrayed the innocent, virginal Maria, whose image was purloined for nefarious purposes by the industrialist Joh Fredersen (Alfred Abel). Fearing Maria's influence on the proletariat and the impact of her prophecies that the ruling and working classes would one day unite and threaten his position, Fredersen commissions a robot in her likeness so as to undermine her reputation. Andreas Huyssen argues that the Maria robot recalled an eighteenth-century trope of the automaton *maschinenmensch* woman, who embodied male castration anxieties and sublimated sexual desires (1986: 70–71). Like Irene in *The Devious Path*, Maria simultaneously inhabits the two positions traditionally ascribed to women in literature, painting and film: the virgin and the vamp. However, in this case Maria and her evil likeness are divided into separate physical entities, the latter being a vessel created by a man. As Huyssen remarks, by building the Maria robot, Fredersen and his inventor Rotwang replicate female reproductive powers in technological and thus masculine terms. Acting on behalf of her male master to carry out his desires, the Maria-robot represents the ultimate in male domination over the female sex (Huyssen 1986: 71–73).

11. Mary Ann Doane views the masquerading tendency as having a complex relationship with the patriarchal social structure. She argues that this compensatory strategy allows women to gain a degree of distance from their own image and in so doing occupy both subject and object positions. See Mary Anne Doane (1991), *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*, New York: Routledge.



Georg Wilhelm
Pabst, *Abwege*
(1928). Screen grab
(Creative
Commons).

In *The Devious Path*, Irene attempts to engineer her image as a vessel designed to fulfil her suitors' fantasies; however, she can only fashion her appearance according to her faulty conception of male desire. Left to her own devices she struggles to construct a sexualized persona capable of inciting her husband's passion. Ultimately, Pabst's film underscores the impossibility of her situation. Irene cannot escape her socially prescribed role as *hausfrau*, for as tradition dictates, she is antithetical to the image of the vamp. The couple's divorce and subsequent reconciliation at the end of the film attests to the inescapability of her predicament and the weight of tradition.¹²

This theatre of conflicting pressures gives human form to Pabst's critique of the incompatibility of contemporary sexuality and bourgeois morality. It is the acting itself that conveys Pabst's sardonic tone, particularly in the performance of the principal actress Brigitte Helm. Her portrayals of a split character necessitates a degree of physical exaggeration, sometimes widening her eyes for extended periods, so as to draw out the distinctions between Irene's meek and aggressive sides. Suited to the silent film format, Helm's acting style also illustrates Pabst's heightened interest in physiognomy, a field of study gaining currency during the Weimar era.

The inter-war interest in 'types': the physiognomy revival and Soviet *typage*

12. Her ambivalence gestures towards the impossibility of satisfying feminine desire, which, as Stephen Heath has noted, is recreated in cinematic portrayals. In this irresolvable predicament, the woman must submit to the implicit demand to sacrifice her own desire in order to embody that of her male partner, and consequently maintain his love. See Stephen Heath (1981), *Questions of Cinema*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

13. Following World War I, Germany and Austria were plagued by economic instability due to high rates of inflation, economic restructuring and a distrust of foreign wartime enemies. See Wolfgang Maderthaner (2008), '12 February 1934: Social democracy and Civil War', *Austria in the Twentieth Century*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers. Visual culture also displayed a trend towards rationalization and standardization.

Pabst constructed archetypal Weimar era characters partly through his selection of actors and actresses whose features corresponded with ethnic- and class-based stereotypes. This practice paralleled the overarching tendency in German and Austrian society to classify people according to their appearance. Physiognomy, or the interpretation of character and temperament based on the analysis of physical attributes, experienced a revival in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. Although it had been rejected as a pseudoscience well before 1928, the discipline's continued popularity during this period coincided with a heightened sense of insecurity about national identity following the World War I, a period marked by a general need to re-establish economic, political and aesthetic order.¹³ This preoccupation with the taxonomic categorization of physical traits became fodder for the eugenics movement as well as the scientific racism underlying German social policy during the rise of the National Socialist Party. As a result, the study of physiognomy became tainted with negative connotations, which still cling to it today.

However, as Daniel Magilow has noted, the application of physiognomic principles during the 1920s touched both sides of the political spectrum, particularly in photography and film. The right wing supported the production of Germanic folk pictures, such as the photography of Erna Lendvai-Dirksen, who constructed essentialized racial typographies of rural, primarily Aryan individuals. As I will discuss more fully in due course, *tipazh/typage*, or the casting of actors for their resemblance to a particular character type, allowed far left directors in the Soviet Union such as Sergei Eisenstein to focus on issues of social class (Magilow 2012: 92–96). Photo essays, such as New Objectivity photographer August Sander's *Face of Our Time: Sixty Photographs of German People of the Twentieth Century*, represent a middle ground between the political extremes. Published in 1929, this series of photographs categorizes the people of Weimar Germany within seven social, professional and economic milieus. Using crisp focus and a standardized compositional format, Sander's typographies provide visual support for the idea that membership of a given class or ethnic group can be deduced from an individual's physical qualities. One example from the series depicts a pair of young boxers in a full-length shot, standing side-by-side against a neutral background, each with gloved hands at his sides as if posing for an identification

photograph. Attention is drawn to the boxers' athletic physiques and coarse facial features, which signify their position at the lower end of the social scale.

As a result of this revived interest in Physiognomy, many intellectuals associated with German and Austrian culture such as the Hungarian film critic Béla Balázs incorporated the practice into their theoretical writings. Although he does not apply his ideas to any specific films, in his book *The Visible Man* (1924), Balázs proposes several physiognomic theories that resonate with the characters in *The Devious Path*. When considering the actors selected for a given film, Balázs claims that a director's primary goal should be to find a character rather than a performer. He advocates casting according to superficial physical qualities and mannerisms that an actor already possesses rather than on his or her ability to mimic others.¹⁴ However, he provides the caveat that the actor need not be too stringently type-cast so that the character can develop. By embodying the character rather than performing it, Balázs argues, the actor's portrayal becomes representative not only of the individual but also of the family, race or class of people to which he or she belongs (Balázs 2010: 27–30). This essentialist focus on character types is characteristic of Pabst's casting strategies during the late 1920s and suggests that Pabst may have been aware of Balázs, who was living in Vienna when he wrote *The Visible Man*.¹⁴

Balázs's discussion of physiognomy was not dissimilar to the Soviet system of *typage* in film. The Soviet avant-garde's inherently propagandistic practice involved hiring non-professional actors who exemplified a certain ethnic- or class-based type, one that could provide the proletariat with a physical type with which to identify. *Typage* existed outside of the star system and the use of unknown actors appealed to the Communist Party's sense of egalitarianism. A casting call for Eisenstein's *Bronenosets Potyomkin/Battleship Potemkin* (1925) that appeared in the Odessa newspapers gave detailed physical specifications for each role. Eisenstein provided the following description for one proletarian character: 'Man, height and age unimportant, average drunkard type, insolent facial expression, flaxen-haired, defect in the arrangement of the eyes desirable (slight squint, eyes too far apart, etc.)' (quoted in Taylor 2000: 6). Film scholar Richard Taylor notes a Tsarist deck officer's face in *Potemkin*, which resembles that of a hawk (2000: 17). The officer's aquiline physical attributes help to bring the predatory and domineering aspects of his character to light in a manner reminiscent of historical physiognomic texts.¹⁵ In contrast to the Soviets' interest in creating a face to represent the masses, Balázs advocates typecasting as a way to provide much-needed depth to characters whose voices' tenor and cadence were unavailable in silent film.

Prior to *The Devious Path*, Pabst produced *Die Liebe der Jeanne Ney/The Love of Jeanne Ney* (1927) in which he borrowed Eisenstein's technique of combining shots of his actors' faces with elements that reinforce certain stereotypes, such as expressive gestures and clichéd personal habits and manners of dress. Pabst was capable of fashioning most and sometimes all of his characters into seedy types, who engage in socially unacceptable behaviour. He would frequently employ actors with pronounced facial features, such as Fritz Rasp and Adolf Licho. Rasp, who played the blackmailer and thief Khalibiev in *The Love of Jeanne Ney*, had a distinct widow's peak, a beak-like nose and close-set eyes, the ensemble conforming to a libertine profiteer stereotype. Licho, who in the same film was cast as the private detective and uncle of the female protagonist, had the round, protruding eyes and enlarged features associated with lecherous personalities.

While Pabst's subjective shots and *typage* may have drawn from Soviet examples, *The Devious Path* adapts these techniques for a German-Austrian context, which was wholly divorced from the communist ideology of Russian revolutionary film. In *The Devious Path*, Pabst focuses on social types that were closer to home – such as the archetypal Weimar-era bourgeois married couple, exemplified by Irene and her husband.

14. Although there is no evidence that Pabst read Balázs's book prior to filming *The Devious Path*, the two men undoubtedly had a professional relationship because they collaborated on a screenplay for Pabst's film *Three Penny Opera* in 1931.

15. In *Physiognomischen Fragmente*, his seminal book on physiognomy, Johann Caspar Lavater describes the nose as an important indicator of countenance, associating the 'hawk nose' with a Jewish type and a person with the capacity to dominate and destroy (Lavater 1826: 391–92). Lavater's book was translated into French, English and Russian, perhaps informing practitioners of *typage* such as Eisenstein.

The physiognomy of Brigitte Helm

Pabst's choice of Helm for the role of Irene is consistent with his increasing tendency to select actors for their physiognomic traits. The role demanded an actress capable of embodying the archetypal bourgeois *hausfrau*. Physically speaking, Helm fitted the Aryan ideal for a marriageable young woman to a tee.¹⁶ She was light-haired, fair-skinned and blue-eyed; she also had a profile that resembled the standard of beauty embodied in classical sculpture: a straight nasal bridge, slightly flared nostrils and a strong chin. More importantly, Helm was able to completely transform her persona with a simple downturn of her small mouth or by raising her fashionably thin eyebrows. Her ability to seamlessly transition between expressions of lust and remorse perfectly suited the role of the *hausfrau* torn between her conflicting identities of virgin and whore.

Helm was better known for playing the vamp character-type in films such as *Araune/A Daughter of Destiny* (Galeen, 1927), *Die Yacht der sieben Sünden/Yacht of the Seven Sins* (Fleck, 1928), *Manolescu – Der König der Hochstapler* (Tourjansky, 1929) and *L'Argent/Money* (L'Herbier, 1929). The press compared her sensuality to that of Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, but commentators also appreciated the physicality of her performances and the way she transformed the image of the vamp in the late 1920s from the dark-haired and curvaceous paradigm to one that was slim and blonde. Mihaela Petrescu claims that Helm honed her femme fatale attributes in her famous striptease from *Metropolis*, and she praises the actress's gestural repertoire including abrupt hip and shoulder movements and fluid bodily gyrations (2007: 72–73). Critic Robert Müller has also remarked upon Helm's skill, particularly her ability to embody dual, paradoxical desires in her postures, in which she uses the technique of thrusting her hips forward, while pulling her upper body away. He argues that this oscillation between desire and revulsion characterizes Helm's manifestation of the vamp (Müller 2003: 275). Enhanced by her facial contortions, Helm's physiognomic traits become an essential aspect of Pabst's amplified reality with her capacity to evince a wide range of psychological states such as contempt, lust, vindictiveness, desperation and dejection.

Irene exhibits drastic shifts in mood and comportment, particularly in her dealings with the male protagonists of the film. When she first confronts Thomas in his office and complains of her frustration, her face undergoes a series of contortions ranging from disdainful downcast glances to sheer fury. Thomas silently implies that he must keep working through the night and Irene responds with the title card, 'Immer Arbeit... Arbeit! (Always working... working!)'. She narrows her eyes and purses her lips, twisting her mouth to the side, while her chest heaves up and down in a physical expression of aggravation.

When Irene enters her seductive mode, she adopts the characteristics of the femme fatale archetype, exaggerating them for comic effect. Helm assumes a fashionably tight-lipped mouth that accentuates her frustrated expression. Her eyes take on the appearance of a snake focused on her prey, while her angular eyebrows 'denote fire and productive activity' (Lavater 1826: 389). Because of the intensity of her gaze and the exoticism of her movements, Helm embodies a femme fatale similar to her portrayal of the dancing whore of Babylon from *Metropolis*. However, in *The Devious Path*, Helm summons other facets of her dual role from the Fritz Lang film, but combines them in the same woman.

The characteristics that Helm exhibits in her performance align with Lavater's description of masculine-coded traits. Lavater regards female physiognomy as a foil for the masculine personality, in which womanly innocence, purity and compliance serve as a counterpoint to man's severity and will. These qualities figure in Lavater's comparative list of quintessentially male and female features. Helm's aggressively stiff

16. By the early 1920s, the German philologist Hans F. K. Günther began to codify racial identity according to a set of measurements, which determined relative superiority. See Daniela Bohde (2012), 'The physiognomics of architecture: Heinrich Wölfflin, Hans Seldmayr and Paul Schultze-Naumburg', in Mitchell B. Frank and Daniel Adler (eds), *German Art History and Scientific Thought. Beyond Formalism*, Burlington: Ashgate. Günther, known as the *Rassenpapst*/Race Pope, became the brain behind the National Socialist eugenics policies. His race-based studies helped shape the prevailing preoccupation with defining 'Germanness'.

posturing and angled eyebrows, however, do not conform to the softness and roundness of the ideal woman. Ruling with ‘passion and threats’ as opposed to tenderness, she resembles the creatures that Lavater describes as ‘no longer women, but abortions’ (1826: 213–22). Pabst’s film does not simply reiterate, but rather critiques Lavater’s misogyny and the ways in which it infiltrated twentieth-century representations of women. Under his direction, Helm’s attempt to embody the femme fatale presents us with a different version of the aberrant woman, one that has been updated for the inter-war Austrian context. Irene’s masculine characteristics reveal her desire to assert her sexuality in a forceful manner. For a short time, by flaunting her body and openly seducing other men, she acts out her fantasy of inciting the jealousy and passion of her husband that she so craves. Unfortunately, these behaviours at this historical moment were unacceptable in the New Woman’s sovereign domain. Ladies of Irene’s social class had to adhere to traditional decorum if they wanted to continue to experience acceptance and love.

In its counter-phase, during Irene’s descent into despondency, Helm’s face transforms into a wide-eyed, open-mouthed image of innocence, perfectly exemplifying Lavater’s description of ideal feminine physiognomy. Her expression reflects disbelief when her husband rejects her attempts to entangle him in a jealous dispute with Walter. Helm raises her thin, arched brows, maximizing the whites of her eyes. By opening her mouth, she elongates her face, flattening the appearance of her cheekbones. The combined effect gives the impression of youth and innocence, a quality that Helm also projected when portraying the blind Gabrielle in *The Love of Jeanne Ney* and Maria in *Metropolis*. Helm’s consummate skills as a silent-film actress, evidenced by her ability to contort her physical form to fit the mould of virtually any feminine stereotype across the spectrum, reveals her level of agency as a performer. The sheer range of portrayals she was capable of embodying undermines the authority of the single-faceted female identity dictated by patriarchal traditions of her time.

The Devious Path is one of the few Pabst films to fully exploit the physiognomy of the lead actress. Although he would make use of Louise Brooks’s natural attributes in *Pandora’s Box*, particularly her slender, boyish body and the sensuality of her eyes and mouth, the result was much more subdued than in Helm’s performance of the sexually mature vamp. In one of the few texts written on *The Devious Path*, film historian Wolfgang Jacobsen notes Helm’s expressive jerky motions, which the actress exhibits when she is both embracing, or rejecting a potential lover, using different variations of the same bodily movements to establish her unpredictable nature (1997: 20). In contrast to Lulu’s effortless sexual appeal in *Pandora’s Box*, Irene works very hard to carry out her seductions. As a result, Helm’s exaggerated mannerisms veer into the realm of the parodic.

Physiognomic typage as caricature and the feminization of mass media

The film’s absurdist trajectory points to the rationale underlying Pabst’s adoption of the pseudoscience of physiognomy in the inter-war context: its historical relationship to caricature. Aside from its contributions to eugenics and racial theories of the 1920s, physiognomy had a direct influence on caricature in the German-speaking world dating back to the end of the nineteenth-century.¹⁷ Publications such as *Simplicissimus* (1896) or *Kladderadatsch* (1848), depending upon their political leanings, either promoted the nation’s imperialistic ambitions by exaggerating anatomical features in a manner that reinforced racial stereotypes or denounced them by lampooning physiognomic traits associated with evil colonizers.¹⁸ Much like these turn-of-the-century

17. Physiognomy had inspired pictorial satire from the eighteenth century. British caricaturists such as Thomas Rowlandson drew inspiration from Lavater’s comparisons between men and beasts as a way of mocking human subjects. See Constance McPhee and Nadine Orenstein (2011), *Infinite Jest: Caricature and Satire from Leonardo to Levine*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.

18. See Volker Langbehn (ed.) (2010), *German Colonialism, Visual Culture and Modern Memory*, New York: Routledge.

caricaturists, artists demonstrating the New Objectivity tendency, including Otto Dix and George Grosz, began to feature satirical corporeal embellishments in their work as a means to mock the status quo. With *The Devious Path* and its critical evaluation of the contemporary bourgeois marriage, Pabst joined their ranks.

The mode through which caricature was transmitted to the public, the satirical magazine, took on a feminine association at the turn of the twentieth century due to its status as a medium designed for mass consumption. Andreas Huyssen argues that as members of the weaker sex, women were believed to be more susceptible to the seductive powers of mass media, preferring the cheap entertainment of dime-store romance novels and *feuilletons* to classic literary forms. Because of their association with low-cultural forms targeted at the proletariat, women formed an opposing identification to high culture, which belonged to the masculine domain. Huyssen notes that scholarship of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries consistently equates fear of the masses with the fear of women. Both had an unpredictable nature that needed to be brought under control (Huyssen 1986: 50–53).

In *The Devious Path*, Irene and her husband, Thomas, are the ultimate embodiment of this high/low culture dichotomy. As does mass media, Irene attempts to manipulate her husband by cultivating a seductive image designed to overwhelm his visual sense. The performance of her allure, however, is not powerful enough to divert him from his work. Through all of his interactions with his wife, Thomas is the picture of ideal bourgeois restraint, appearing as motionless as a figure sculpted in stone. In contrast to Helm, Gustav Diessl, the actor portraying Thomas has flat, horizontal eyebrows that project an air of unflappable equanimity; always in a resting state, they form a perfect parallel with his expressionless mouth. These features, combined with his straight-bridged, prominent nose and well-developed chin, epitomize Germanic masculinity. Whereas Irene represents the bourgeois ideal during her moments of calm, her husband Thomas exhibits such characteristics at all times. His staid appearance is accentuated by his abstention from conventions of silent film that compensate for the lack of sound with exaggerated expressions and movements.

The boxer as masculine foil

If Pabst intended to use Irene's appropriation of assertive and hence male traits to parodic ends, his inclusion of the hyper-masculine boxer Sam Taylor underscored the absurdity of her temptress-persona. The boxer is an important character type that corresponds with American archetypes, viewed from the perspective of an Austrian director. Richard McCormick claims that athletes became popular subjects during the Weimar era due to the increased sense of insecurity surrounding gender roles corresponding with the rise of feminist and gay rights' movements. In addition, economic insecurities may have inspired an interest in quintessentially American themes and types, which were considered to epitomize masculine strength (McCormick 1994: 6).¹⁹

The boxer archetype possesses a particular way of expressing and experiencing frustration. Boxers work in a male-dominated field that rewards men for demonstrations of brute force, and so most film depictions of these athletes have characterized them as lacking in sensitivity. The female protagonist in the film normally supplies the heightened emotional development to contrast the boxer's deficiency of feeling (Grindon 2011: 9–10). He vents his pent-up tension and energy in the ring against an opponent, who becomes an indirect target for his underlying sense of powerlessness. Joyce Carol Oates reads the spectacle of two men fighting as a metaphor for the general population's political impotence within modernity (1987: 63). Although

19. The United States developed a boxing subculture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tied to the diverse pool of immigrants entering the country. The image of the boxer became identified with the working classes and marginalized ethnic groups (Grindon 2011: 9). In Weimar Germany and Austria, the American boxer held connotations of racial impurity, because they frequently came from Jewish, Italian and Hispanic ethnic backgrounds.

Oates's assessment seems relevant to the context of *The Devious Path*, the frustration that Sam Taylor experiences is much less universal and more directly sexual in nature. The aggressive bent of his personality is made explicit when he first appears in the nightclub scene, where he is shown leering at Irene. Sam's role in the film marks the breaking point of Irene's moral fear when her erratic behaviour becomes a catalyst for his palpable lust and loss of self-control, an outcome that might have ended in Irene's rape in Walter's apartment, had the painter not returned home.

It is significant that Sam Taylor is the only male character in the film to exhibit an exuberant, unrestrained personality. Brimming with energy, Sam's virile American persona makes the European male protagonists in the film appear feminized in comparison. The boxer's large physical frame, his broad shoulders, wide mouth, close-set eyes and prominent nose seem to herald and amplify the aggressive nature of his comportment. By wearing a consistently self-satisfied smile throughout his scenes, the swarthy actor Nico Turoff completely displaces his true ethnic (Russian) identity with that of an empty-headed, overconfident American oaf. At no point during his scenes does Turoff cease to move. His animated performance exemplifies the boxer's physicality and athletic prowess. In rendering him a completely two-dimensional figure, Pabst aligns the actor's performance to the film's caricatural mode, while also managing to objectify his excessive masculinity. Sam serves as an important prop for Irene, who goads him into a lust-filled rage at Walter's apartment and uses him to incite jealousy in her male target. Rather than illuminating her emotional competency, Sam's lack of sensitivity and boorish behaviour help to highlight her inept attempts at sexual manipulation. As a result, Irene's symbolic threats of castration are thwarted, the veil cloaking her feminine masquerade is pulled back and she is revealed as impotent. The critique implied in her predicament is an indictment of bourgeois marriage wherein the simultaneous attainment of material comfort and sexual satisfaction remains just beyond a woman's reach. Irene may long for the liberty of the counter-culture, but she remains fettered to the trappings of her class.

Conclusion

Irene's desire for personal and sexual agency cannot be satisfied if she wishes to preserve her social station. With this in mind, *The Devious Path* should be viewed as a cultural critique, one which uses physiognomy as a caricatural device to amplify and even overstate the disposition required for the couple to maintain their socially determined roles. It should be recognized, however, that Pabst's development of Irene's character, with the help of the skilful actress who portrayed her, defies the single dimension allotted to female characters of the period, allowing the dual virgin/whore identities to coexist in the same body. In so doing, this film, and the subsequent 'lost girl' pictures that would follow, shed light on and contradict the gender norms that seemed so intractable in 1928 and that continue to reduce women to essentialist stereotypes today.

The Devious Path can now be appreciated for its treatment of a seemingly eternal and self-fulfilling social reality: the persistent authority of fixed gender roles and individuals' undaunted attempts to defy them. Irene is a woman of her class and times, but the tenor of Pabst's film and its underlying critique strikes a resonant chord with the ongoing pressure of gender norms we experience today both in the home and in the workplace. The partitioning of household and childcare responsibilities along gendered lines is a sociological fact that is so pervasive that it transcends both economic and hetero-normative identities.²⁰ Outside the home, women who do manage to penetrate the glass ceiling and achieve success in the world's most prestigious companies

20. According to Cecilia Ridgeway, where a woman earns substantially more than her male partner, the man is less likely to contribute to housework (childcare, cooking and cleaning), which she attributes to a fear of violating gender norms. In gay and lesbian couples, Ridgeway notes that the division of household responsibilities is often determined by the incomes earned by each spouse. See Cecilia Ridgeway (2011), *Framed by Gender: How Gender Inequality Persists in the Modern World*, New York: Oxford University Press.

tend to make personal and professional accommodations that reinforce essentialist notions of feminine duty. Sheryl Sandberg, the technology executive and author of the 2013 bestseller *Lean In* goes to great lengths to explain the tactics that she has developed over the years to project an outward appearance of strength. She dubs one such strategy 'fake it till you feel it' (Sandberg 2013: 34), which describes her ability to adopt a cheerful demeanour at will so as to display an air of confidence in front of her colleagues. The result of her efforts can best be described as a twenty-first century feminine masquerade for the successful career woman. Although she enjoys a degree of autonomy that Irene Beck could only dream of, Sandberg still carries the burden of adhering to a recalcitrant feminine ideal, however evolved it may have become.

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