

Text and the City: George Grosz, *Neue Jugend*, and the Political Power of Popular Media

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In mid-1917, an unfamiliar newspaper appeared on kiosks throughout Berlin.¹ It did not stay there long: according to Franz Jung, any copies of this paper that were not sold within an hour were confiscated by the police, so the majority of the print run was either surreptitiously given away or sent by mail, disguised in German Navy envelopes (113). If the shelf-life of each issue was short, the career of the paper as a whole was not much longer: introduced as a weekly on 23 May 1917 (with the qualification “currently appearing biweekly”), the newspaper reached the end of its run with the next issue, which appeared in June 1917. Despite the brevity of its existence, though, this short-lived newspaper is memorable not only for its challenge to the standards of the mainstream German press, but also for its radical demand that art adapt to the conditions of the modern city, embracing the press, advertising, and popular art forms such as the circus and the variété.

Neue Jugend (*New Youth*), as this new publication was called, was no ordinary newspaper. The two “weekly” issues that appeared in May and June 1917 were in fact the continuation of an expressionist monthly journal of the same title edited by Wieland Herzfelde, and most of the collaborators on these issues—including Herzfelde, Franz Jung, John Heartfield, Richard Huelsenbeck, and George Grosz—would go on to play central roles in Berlin Dada. By publishing these two issues in newspaper format, the collaborators expressed a belief that art should engage with a broader public, extending beyond the limited audience of conventional literary journals. This belief was made particularly clear in two pieces that Grosz contributed to the June issue. These unsigned pieces—“Kannst du radfahren?” (“Can you ride a bicycle?”; hereafter “Radfahren”) and “Man muß Kautschukmann sein!” (“You’ve got to be a rubber man!”; hereafter “Kautschukmann”)—acknowledged the shocks of the modern city, but they also depicted the new artist as someone capable of withstanding or even mastering these shocks and transforming them into instruments of political action. Appearing as they did in the newspaper format of *Neue Jugend*, accompanied by photographs and advertising engravings

and enhanced by John Heartfield's striking typography, these pieces made the case that popular entertainment and mass media were the proper instruments of the new, politically engaged artist. In making this argument, Grosz led by example: he not only advocated the artistic employment of popular media for political ends, he also demonstrated, with Heartfield's help, how techniques borrowed from mass media and advertising could be employed in the service of political critique. This article will analyze the formal transformation of *Neue Jugend* before turning to a consideration of how Grosz's works, like *Neue Jugend* itself, paired the tools of commercial media with the political aims of engaged art.²

***Neue Jugend* and the Berliner Blätterwald**

To better understand the radical departure that *Neue Jugend* represented, it will be helpful to briefly position this new paper in relation to the Berlin newspaper world of its day. In a city already flooded with newspapers—there were at least 80 published in Berlin alone in 1917 (cf. Michel)—the appearance of one more paper at the local kiosk may well have gone unnoticed by many readers. Nevertheless, even in the midst of the “Berliner Blätterwald” (Mendelssohn 216) (“Berlin’s forest of papers”), there were reasons that this debut merited attention. To begin with, the circumstances of the First World War made the conditions for launching any new paper less than ideal: aside from the shortage of printing materials such as paper and lead, and the absence of many journalists, who had been sent to the front (Mendelssohn 257), wartime restrictions required military approval for the founding of any new paper, magazine, or publishing house (Herzfelde, “Jugendzeit” 7; Jung 113). Wieland Herzfelde devised a clever means of circumventing this restriction when he founded his monthly journal in 1916: he simply paid 200 marks to Heinz Barger, the young editor of a journal called *Neue Jugend* that had ceased publication in 1914. In order to maintain the illusion that the new *Neue Jugend* was simply a continuation of the old, Barger was initially listed as the journal’s publisher, but in fact Herzfelde had editorial control. Despite this legal maneuver, though, the journal was banned in April 1917 while Herzfelde was away at war. The publication of the two “weekly” issues, then, which took place under Jung’s leadership in Herzfelde’s absence, was technically illegal (Herzfelde, *Zur Sache* 447; McCloskey 36).

The most remarkable thing about *Neue Jugend*, though, was not its mere existence in the face of wartime restrictions, but rather its visual appearance, specifically its layout and typography. Whereas most Berlin newspapers appeared in the small “Berliner” format (31.5 x 47 cm), *Neue Jugend* was published in the significantly larger “American” format (52 x 64 cm) (cf. Hermann 135). These dimensions alone were enough to suggest a greater

affinity for the international—particularly American and British—press than for Germany's domestic publications. Even more striking was the use throughout *Neue Jugend* of Roman fonts, rather than the Fraktur still employed by other German newspapers. While Roman fonts were common in the advertisements of German papers, and were sometimes even used for the business sections, the remaining articles continued to be printed in Fraktur (Mendelssohn 305–6). Particularly in the war years, when an article in *Die Woche* (*The Week*) railed against the incursion of “English” fonts, insisting that “Wir müssen deutsch schreiben” (“We must write in German”), *Neue Jugend*'s break from the conventional use of Fraktur was indicative of its oppositional stance, its rejection of German nationalism and war fever, and its even more provocative enthusiasm for the aesthetics of American advertising and mass media.



Figure 1: Neue Jugend, June 1917, p. 1. Reproduction courtesy of Das Rote Antiquariat, Berlin.

This enthusiasm was evident not only in John Heartfield's choice of fonts, but also in his use of colors and images, and in his overall page designs. The 23 May issue of *Neue Jugend* was still relatively conservative in this regard: it used only red and black ink, and contained only a few advertisements, all of them text-based. These included, on the back page, an in-house advertisement for "Neue Jugend Reklameberatung" ("New Youth Advertising Consulting") that proclaimed, "WORTreklame schlägt BILDreklame" ("WORD advertising beats PICTURE advertising"). The June issue (Fig. 1), however, put this claim to the test: printed in four colors, it made extensive use of engravings and photographs, including a front-page image of New York's Flatiron Building, overprinted in red with the word "Reklameberatung" ("Advertising Consulting"). At first glance, the effect of this issue's format, layout, typography, and images was not only to set it apart from most "serious" German papers, which had not yet begun to publish photographs at the time, but also to indicate *Neue Jugend's* embrace of an international, and above all a commercial, style in which editorial and advertising content were nearly indistinguishable from one another (McCloskey 36). As Sherwin Simmons has written, "The journal's revised newspaper format signalled its reconception as a competitor in the information industry. The inclusion of small ads for alcoholic spirits, its own publications, lecture evenings, and advertising consultation made clear its awareness of the way advertising drove the publication industry" (Simmons 130). As Simmons indicates, the adoption of these commercial strategies was significant on several levels: on the one hand, it was a pragmatic decision calculated to sell more papers and generate advertising income. But beyond this, it was a commentary on the commercial nature of mass media and on the relationship between art and commerce, an argument that politically critical art could reach a larger audience by adopting the techniques of mass media.

Of course, *Neue Jugend's* change of format marked a contrast not only to Berlin's mainstream newspapers, but also to the more conventional journal format in which *Neue Jugend* had previously appeared. Five monthly issues of *Neue Jugend* had been published under Herzfelde's leadership (one of them a double issue), numbered 7 through 11/12 to maintain the illusion of continuity with Barger's publication. In format, these monthly issues were similar to many other expressionist art and literary journals: the text-only covers were laid out symmetrically, visual art appeared on separate pages from literary work, and all notices and advertisements were consigned to the back of the journal. These issues were not free of politically controversial subject matter: *Neue Jugend's* pacifist orientation was proclaimed with the publication of Johannes R. Becher's poem "An den Frieden" ("Ode to Peace") at the beginning of issue 7, and socially critical drawings or poems by George Grosz appeared in every issue. In addition, the editors' afterword

to issue 7 expressly indicated their wish for greater political engagement, and rejected the desire to be a purely literary and artistic publication. Despite this declaration, though, the monthly issues continued to consist primarily of literary work and visual art, and the journal's format marked it as a primarily aesthetic undertaking, rather than an active intervention into popular political discourse (Hermann 112).

As Herzfelde would later write, neatly summing up the transition from the monthly to the "weekly" format:

Fünf vornehm gedruckte Hefte und zwei Blätter in schreienden Farben und Schlagzeilen mit dem Sprung aus einer in Ton und Form zahmen Opposition in eine provozierende Traditionsfeindlichkeit. [...] Es war der Weg vom Expressionismus mit seinem Ahnen und Prophezeien [...] zur radikalen Absage an die mörderische Politik und die Salonkultur der Herrschenden. [...] Wir wußten, weder Gedichte noch Bilder, nur die Revolte der Massen konnte den Frieden erzwingen. (Herzfelde, *Der Malik-Verlag* 23)

(Five finely printed issues and two broadsheets in screaming colors and headlines, with the leap from an opposition tame in tone and form to a provocative antagonism to tradition. [...] It was the path from Expressionism with its divinations and prophecies [...] to a radical rejection of the murderous politics and salon culture of the rulers. [...] We knew that neither poems nor pictures, but only the revolt of the masses could impose peace.)

The replacement of the expressionist-influenced monthly journal by a "weekly" newspaper full of photos, engravings, and advertisements thus not only constituted a decisive rejection of the separation between the aesthetic and the political; it also challenged the separation of art from popular and commercial culture. Implicit in this dual rejection was the possibility that popular and commercial means could be artistically adapted for political ends. The two newspaper issues of *Neue Jugend*—and particularly the two Grosz pieces that will be the focus of this article—suggested that artists who sought to define an autonomous aesthetic realm free of popular and commercial influence thereby condemned themselves to political inefficacy. Against the elite world of art galleries and literary salons, Grosz juxtaposed forms of art and entertainment associated with the masses: advertisements, bicycling, and circuses. Like the change from journal to broadsheet format, these oppositions helped to create an image of a new, socially and politically engaged artist who did not hesitate to employ commercial means to communicate a political message.

In doing so, Grosz and the other *Neue Jugend* collaborators both built upon and went beyond the works of other modern artists who had also employed the newspaper in negotiating the relationship between art and mass culture.

Some poets had paid homage to newspapers and advertising as the voice of the modern city. Apollinaire, for instance, had written in his 1912 poem "Zone": "You read prospectuses catalogues and posters which shout aloud / Here is poetry this morning and for prose there are the newspapers / [...] / Lettering on signs and walls / Announcements and billboards shriek like parrots / I love the charm of this industrial street" (qtd. in Poggi 147). And a number of visual artists—most notably the Cubists and the Futurists—had incorporated scraps of newspaper into their collages. This use of materials drawn from mass media in works of art has frequently been portrayed by authors such as Peter Bürger as an attempt to break down the divide between an autonomous aesthetic sphere and the reality external to it, thus calling into question the institution of art and its conventions.³ Christine Poggi has specifically described "the eruption of newspaper fragments within the previously homogeneous and pure domain of painting [...] as a critique of Symbolist ideals and, indeed, of Symbolist theories of representation" (Poggi 148). While there are parallels between the Cubists' critique of Symbolism and *Neue Jugend's* attack on expressionism, though, the publication of *Neue Jugend* in newspaper format took this critique a step further. Rather than inserting the materials of mass culture into a work that remained effectively ensconced within art institutions such as museums and galleries, the newspaper issues of *Neue Jugend* brought oppositional art fully into the sphere of mass culture.

Advertising and Critique: George Grosz in *Neue Jugend*

The critique of traditional high culture had already been articulated at certain points in the May issue of *Neue Jugend*, the first to appear in the broadsheet format. Huelsenbeck, for instance, wrote in his manifesto "Der Neue Mensch" ("The New Man"), "am trügsten aber sind die Dichter. Mit Versen lässt sich keine Welt erobern" (Huelsenbeck 3). ("but the laziest are the poets. Verses will never conquer a world.") This attack was continued in the June issue, which was billed as the "Prospekt zur Kleinen Grosz-Mappe" ("Prospectus for the Small Grosz Portfolio") and thus functioned in its entirety as a sort of advertisement for Grosz's recently published collection of lithographs. A large advertisement for the portfolio, designed by Heartfield, appeared on the back page of the paper. Grosz's own (uncredited) contributions to the issue included several variety reviews on the back page, as well as two pieces on the front page: "Radfahren" and "Kautschukmann."

These two works defy neat genre categorization: each combines elements borrowed from the formal repertoire of poetry, such as figurative language, line breaks, parallelism, and repetition, with elements native to the world of journalism or advertising, such as a direct address to the reader, as well

as variations in color and font and the use of images. While they have been referred to variously as poems, prose, and commentaries, Grosz himself called these pieces “essays” (cf. Hermann 135; Herzfelde, *Zur Sache* 447; Maier-Metz 147; Grosz, *Ein kleines Ja und ein großes Nein* 183).

However, when viewed in *Neue Jugend*’s newspaper format, “Radfahren” in particular takes on the appearance of an advertisement thanks to the stock engravings that illustrate it, as well as the brand names that appear in a variety of fonts and colors in the work itself. These typographic choices prevent any attempt to isolate “Radfahren” as a literary work from the commercial world that surrounds it. In this, Heartfield’s typography follows the polemical lead of Grosz’s text. In both “Radfahren” and “Kautschukmann,” Grosz argues that popular and commercial art play a vital role in modern urban life. Art that seeks to isolate itself from the commercial life of the city streets, on the other hand, appears in these pieces as both irrelevant and politically reactionary.

In developing these arguments, Grosz borrows heavily from the rhetoric of the expressionists and other poets whose *Großstadtlyrik* (city poetry) had attempted to capture—often in more negative terms—the experience of the modern city. In “Radfahren” Grosz describes the shocks of the city, the rapid succession or simultaneity of sensations that inundate a passenger traveling by *Stadtbahn* (elevated train) through Berlin. In “Kautschukmann” he depicts a figure caught off guard by advertising and by the rapid changes of the modern city. But these two pieces ultimately move beyond the familiar expressionist tropes, indicating what Barbara McCloskey identifies as Grosz’s rejection of “Expressionism’s psychological introspection and aesthetic escapism” (McCloskey 11). Grosz does not merely evoke the disorientation of a city-dweller amidst an overwhelming flood of stimuli. Rather than simply registering these shocks, he suggests that they can be transformed into instruments of political action. This principle is put into practice in Grosz’s works, and in Heartfield’s typography as well. Grosz and Heartfield adopt the techniques of shock and sensation that the boulevard press and advertisers used to sell papers and attract customers, but in their hands these techniques become tools of political critique.

The Writing on the Walls: “Kannst du radfahren?”

Grosz’s “Kannst du radfahren” (Fig. 2) celebrates the sensory experience of the city as a revolutionary alternative to the stagnation of high culture. In this piece, the large-scale wall advertisements seen through the window of the *Stadtbahn* prove to be more compelling than traditional paintings hung in galleries. Grosz’s speaker asserts the greater social relevance and the strong psychological impact of advertisements, praising them as the true art of the



Figure 2: George Grosz, "Kannst du radfahren?" Detail from *Neue Jugend*, June 1917, p. 1. Reproduction courtesy of Das Rote Antiquariat, Berlin.

present day. At the same time, these advertisements appear as a sort of shock, comparable not only to the other shocks of the city, but also, arguably, to the shocks of war. If the association of advertising with these other shocks threatens to give it a negative valence, though, this is not Grosz's final judgment; rather, the more subtle shocks of advertising appear as a sort of

training for the greater shocks of modernity. Instead of retreating from the shocks of the city into the insulated domain of high art, the city-dweller in Grosz's "Radfahren" is called upon to actively engage with new forms of popular art and entertainment.

In the introductory paragraph of "Radfahren," the tension between the allure of advertising and the implicit threat of its power is clearly on display. Grosz writes:

Zu den reinsten unverbildeten Erklärungen und Dokumenten unseres Lebens gehören jene Bilder an den Rückfronten der Häuser, diese Erlasse des Kaufmanns (des wahren Herrn dieser Zeit) – von unerhörter Sachlichkeit [...] pressen sie das psychologische und formale Leben des in knallendem Stadtbahnzug Dahinrollenden. Fabelhaft bunt und klar, wie nie ein Tafelbildchen – von kosmischer Komik, brutal, materiell, bleichsüchtig, verwaschen – drohend und mahnend gleich Ragtime stepptanzmelodie immer wieder sich ins Gehirn bohrend – Das gröhlt in einem fort! (Grosz, "Kannst du radfahren?" 1)⁴

(Among the purest unspoiled accounts and documents of our lives are those images on the sides of houses, these decrees of the businessman (the true lord of the age) – of unprecedented practicality [...] they impress themselves upon the psychological and formal life of anyone rolling through the city in a clattering train car. Fantastically colorful and clear, like nary a panel painting – cosmically comical, brutal, material, anemic, washed-out – threatening and admonishing, boring themselves into the brain like a ragtime step-dance melody – That will rumble on in your head!)

In this passage, Grosz imagines the impact of advertisements on a passenger who sees them flash past through the window of the *Stadtbahn*. While these images are unquestionably powerful, the speaker seems to equivocate between praise and alarm. On the one hand, these advertisements are "Fantastically colorful and clear, like nary a panel painting"; but on the other hand, they are "threatening and admonishing, boring themselves into the brain" – a description that suggests greater malevolence on the part of the advertisements themselves, or of the businessman whose power they represent. In order to understand this apparent ambivalence, it will be helpful to consider how Grosz situates advertising with respect to other shocks of modernity, and how the ability to adapt to or master these shocks ultimately proves indispensable to the modern city-dweller.

One striking aspect of this passage is Grosz's conflation of multiple aspects of the urban experience: the passenger's sensation of being jostled by the clattering train car blends with the visual stimulation of a rapid flood of images on the buildings rushing by outside the window. These various shocks and stimuli combine into a single experience that takes root in the

passenger's psyche: "That will rumble on in your head!" This paragraph not only evokes the multiple jarring experiences that confront a passenger traveling through the city, it also hints at the way that these phenomena are interrelated: the bright colors and bold images of the wall advertisements are calculated to leave an impression even on a passenger who only glimpses them for a moment.

Grosz suggests in this passage that there is a connection between the shocks associated with rapid motion and city traffic, on the one hand, and those intentionally created by advertisers in order to generate attention, on the other. This connection is in part a pragmatic one, given that advertisements were created with an eye to the conditions under which they would be viewed: as the poster designer Paul Mahlberg wrote in 1913, "Zum Erzählen von Geschichten, z. B. daß ein Verkäufer einer Kundin Ware vorlegt, ist das Plakat nicht da. Davon bleibt im Autobusfenster bei der Vorüberfahrt nichts hängen" (Mahlberg 200). ("The poster isn't there to tell a story, e.g. how a salesman presents a product to a [female] customer. That won't leave an impression when it's seen from the window of a passing bus.") The advertisement, Mahlberg argued, should make a quick impression, and not depend upon any sustained effort or concentration on the part of the viewer. This rapid perception is reflected roughly halfway through Grosz's "Radfahren," where the words "Ho! ho! schon wieder brüllen die Häuserwände" ("Ho! ho! the walls of the houses bellow once again") introduce a series of brand names, set by Heartfield in a variety of fonts and printed in red, green, and black to approximate the wide range of lettering encountered in urban advertisements. This passage simulates the experience of the viewer watching ads flash by outside the window of the moving train, who retains little more than the brand names in their iconic lettering.

Beyond the practical necessity of making a quick impression on the passing traveler, there was a deeper similarity between the shocks induced by rapid transit and the sensations produced by advertising. Walter Benjamin would later link these sensations, referring in one breath to the optic experiences "wie der Inseratenteil einer Zeitung sie mit sich bringt, aber auch der Verkehr in der großen Stadt" (Benjamin, "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire" 630). ("such as are supplied by the advertising pages of a newspaper or the traffic of a big city"; Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" 328.) As Frederic J. Schwartz has noted, Benjamin was acutely aware of "the new commercial and vehicular conditions of reading" (Schwartz 406). Reading not only took place on the street—and especially in the streetcar or train, which had created an ideal audience for newspapers among daily commuters (Fritzsche 144)—the practices of reading and writing also had to compete with the distractions and shocks of city traffic, and this often meant imitating those very shocks. In the opening passage of "Radfahren" Grosz, too, draws attention to the new conditions of reading and viewing as experienced by a passenger

traveling through the city in the *Stadtbahn*, and suggests a certain similarity between the effects of advertising and those of high-speed travel: like the rapid motion of the train, advertising can be destabilizing and disorienting, and it requires a new kind of reflexive, rather than reflective, perception.

Like the shocks experienced by the urban traveler, though, those induced by advertisements at times take on a nefarious quality in “Radfahren,” “boring themselves into the brain.” Here the shocks of the city, and of advertising in particular, seem to induce a sort of neurosis, occupying the mind of the unwitting viewer. In her analysis of other works by Grosz, Brigid Doherty has suggested that this neurosis is linked not only to the obvious shocks of the city, but also to the traumata of war. Noting that Grosz’s second brief period of military duty ended with his consignment to a mental hospital where he was treated for “shattered nerves” (as Grosz wrote at the time, “meine Nerven gingen entzwei”—“my nerves came apart”), Doherty argues that Grosz’s poem “Kaffeehaus” (“Coffeehouse”) links the trauma of the front to that of the city: “The shocks of the trenches are simulated by the shocks of the metropolis” (Doherty 93–95). “Radfahren,” like “Kaffeehaus,” was written shortly after Grosz’s return to Berlin following this period of hospitalization. It is not unreasonable, then, to suggest that the shocks depicted in “Radfahren” also serve to some extent as proxies for the shocks of war. While “Radfahren” lacks any specific reference to the war (with the possible exception of the Winchester rifle, which seems better understood here as an emblem of the American West than of the European trenches), a parallel to war neurosis can be seen in Grosz’s train passenger, an urban neurotic who risks being overwhelmed by the shocks of the city.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the passenger’s reaction to these shocks is entirely negative: as Doherty argues, “Berlin dadaists were traumatophiles, too” (89). Drawing on the work of the psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi, who dealt first-hand with war neurotics in the First World War, Doherty suggests that traumatophilia, the constant search for shocks and stimulation, can be understood as a means of building up one’s defenses against even greater shocks. Doherty sees this traumatophilic inclination manifested in Dada montages, of which she writes that “both the making and the viewing of montage should themselves be seen as traumatophilic,” citing Heartfield’s montages in particular as a “cure that itself mimics the traumatic experience of shock” (128–29). The same could be said of Heartfield’s work—and Grosz’s—in “Radfahren.” The abrupt shifts in this text, on both semantic and typographic levels, mimic the shocks of the city street, but they also prepare the reader for more such encounters. If this text is read as a training in trauma, the message is that the urban-dweller can only survive and compete in the modern, urban world if he does not allow himself to be overwhelmed by the overstimulation of the city—and specifically by the sensory overload of advertising, which the critic and architect Bruno Taut

described in 1922 as a “Nervenangriff” (“attack on the nerves”) (91). Rather than withdrawing from these shocks, the artist must engage in precisely the same kind of overstimulation, creating a work that defends against these larger shocks by producing shocks of its own.

Grosz’s praise for wall advertisements can perhaps be better understood in light of this traumatophilic disposition, though it still seems to equivocate between sarcasm and sincerity. Are these advertisements truly among the purest documents of our lives? Grosz would not have been the only writer of his day to make that claim. Benjamin wrote (likewise equivocally) in *Einbahnstrasse* (*One-Way Street*):

Der heute wesenhafteste, der merkantile Blick ins Herz der Dinge heißt Reklame. [...] vor den Riesenbildern an den Häuserwänden, wo “Chlorodont” und “Sleipnir” für Giganten handlich liegen, wird die gesundete Sentimentalität amerikanisch frei, wie Menschen, welche nichts mehr rührt und anrührt, im Kino wieder das Weinen lernen. (“Einbahnstrasse” 131–32)

(Today the most real, the mercantile gaze into the heart of things is the advertisement. [...] in face of the huge images across the walls of houses, where [“Chlorodont”] toothpaste and [“Sleipnir”] cosmetics lie handy for giants, sentimentality is restored to health and liberated in American style, just as people whom nothing moves or touches any longer are taught to cry again by films.) (“One-Way Street” 89)⁵

Like Grosz, Benjamin sees a certain honesty in these advertising paintings, which blatantly flaunt their commercial motives. But while Benjamin expresses skepticism about the sentimental responses evoked by these scenes, Grosz contrasts wall advertisements favorably to panel paintings, describing the advertisements as more colorful, clearer, more vivid. This contrast between wall advertisements and traditional art introduces a theme that will be picked up again, and reinforced, towards the conclusion of “Radfahren,” as well as in “Kautschukmann”: advertising appears here as the art of the modern age, more eye-catching, more relevant, and potentially more politically effective than traditional forms of artistic production.

Grosz’s assessment of these images can also be understood in part as an early manifestation of the scopophilia that Janet Ward has identified as a key ingredient in the advertising of the Weimar era:

Part of the attraction that brought people to gaze upon modern advertising—for all its structural shock-tactics as a traumatic, dislocating experience that split open the unity of the subject—was, of course, an intense scopophilia. The visual pleasure of Weimar advertising occurred (then as now) within a sphere of sexually charged stimulation. (128)

Grosz certainly acknowledged the close relationship between the visual stimulation of advertising and the sexual stimulation that some city streets also promised, as evidenced by the appearance of nude or nearly nude women amidst streets filled with signs and advertisements in Grosz's visual works, such as the painting *Widmung an Oskar Panizza* (*Dedicated to Oskar Panizza*, 1917–18) and the drawing *Selbstportrait (für Charlie Chaplin)* (*Self-portrait [for Charlie Chaplin]*, 1919). If this connection is not yet made explicit in "Radfahren," there is at least an unabashed pleasure in the vivid colors of the wall advertisements and the intense sensations that they provoke.

Grosz's comparison of advertisements to "a ragtime step-dance melody" also ties them to another source of hedonistic gratification—namely, American popular culture. Grosz's fascination with American media and entertainment, and with ragtime in particular, is well documented (see e.g. Grosz, *Ein kleines Ja und ein großes Nein* 26; Bergius 166–75). As McCloskey writes, "Although Grosz was not to visit the United States until 1932, he, along with other members of the *Neue Jugend* circle, elaborated a positive vision of the U.S. during the war years as an implicit indictment of Germany's despised traditionalism, high culture, and stifling civil order" (24). The comparison of advertising to ragtime should thus be understood as a form of praise. Grosz's glorification of advertising suggests both an affective pleasure in the flood of disparate stimuli provided by popular and commercial media, and a politically motivated rejection of the more conservative aesthetic standards of high culture.

This politicized rejection of high culture becomes more pronounced towards the end of the piece. After the passage in which brand names appear to flash by outside the train window, a series of fantasy scenes emerge, apparently inspired by these advertisements. But these brand name-infused reveries are cut off by a series of direct questions:

Sag mal? – **graults Dir da nicht** in den
Kunstsalons? in den
Ölgemädegalerien. ?
in den literarische [*sic*] Soiréen ?
Lieber Leser! Ein guter Fußballspieler enthält immerhin
eine ganze Menge Wert – obwohl er nicht dichtet, malt und
Töne setzt!
Bleibt die Frage?
Kennst Du Schiller und Goethe – ? – ja!
Aber kannst Du radfahren?
(Tell me? – **don't you think it's awful** in the
art salons? in the
oil painting galleries. ?
in the literary soirées ?

Dear Reader! A good soccer player still has
a great deal of value – even though he doesn't write, paint, or
compose!

The question remains?

Do you know Schiller and Goethe – ? – yes!

But can you ride a bicycle?)

As mentioned above, the direct address to the reader brings to mind the rhetoric of advertising, particularly appearing as it does alongside an engraving of a bicyclist. What's more, this impression is entirely consistent with the message of this passage, which presents a challenge to the superior status of salons, art galleries, literary soirées, and classics such as Schiller and Goethe, suggesting that popular entertainments—such as soccer and bicycling, but also advertising—have greater contemporary relevance.

In this critique of high culture, bicycling represents a counterpoint: physical rather than intellectual, mobile rather than stationary, popular rather than elite, modern rather than traditional, and certainly closer to the world of mass media than to that of the salon. Indeed, since the bicycle boom of the 1890s, bicycling had grown “fast zu einem Synonym für die Tempobegeisterung und Nervosität der Zeit” (Borscheid 187) (“almost into a synonym for the enthusiasm for speed and the nervousness of the times”) serving not only as a means of transportation for individuals, but also as a key means of distribution for newspapers, as well as a spectator sport in the form of the *Sechs-Tage-Rennen* (Six-Day Race) and other competitions, many of which were sponsored by newspapers as a means of advertising (cf. Fritzsche 107, 183). Grosz's appeal for greater engagement with popular media and entertainment thus culminates in the bicycle as a symbol that is inseparable from the cultural dominance of the newspaper. The question “Kannst du radfahren?” encompasses an overall attitude towards modernity, an embrace of mass media and a new, fast, physical, commercial culture that stands in opposition to a stagnating traditional culture.

Of course, there is an element of hyperbole in this passage, and the address to the reader can easily be read as satirical. Nevertheless, Grosz's hyperbole should not be mistaken for irony: the challenge that he poses to high culture is sincere. As he would later write:

Was taten die Dadaisten? Sie sagten, es ist egal, ob man irgend ein
Gepuste von sich gibt – oder ein Sonett von Petrarca – oder Rilke – ob
man Stiefelabsätze vergoldet oder Madonnen schnitzt – geschossen
wird doch, gewuchert wird doch, gehungert wird doch, gelogen
wird doch, wozu die ganze Kunst. (Grosz, “Abwicklung” 37)

(What did the dadaists do? They said it doesn't matter if you're just
puffing air – or a sonnet by Petrarch – or Rilke – whether you're

gilding boot heels or carving Madonnas – people are shooting, people are profiteering, people are starving, people are lying, what’s all this art for anyway.)

Implicit in the challenge that popular culture poses to high culture is the charge that the latter has become politically irrelevant, incapable of confronting the circumstances of the present day.

In “Radfahren,” then, advertising and popular entertainment are presented as aspects of the modern world with which any politically-minded artist must engage. As Franz Jung wrote of this piece, “George Grosz verbreitete sich darin über die psychologische Notwendigkeit des Radfahrens: Ohne Radfahren keine Politik” (Jung 113). (“There George Grosz expanded upon the psychological necessity of bicycling: No politics without bicycling.”) Of course, this embrace of commercial culture as a political instrument was not without its complications. As McCloskey writes, “While prewar expressionist critics had worried over the avant-garde’s engulfment by pulp novels, film, cabaret, and variété, left-wing critics raised the alarm over mass culture’s subversion of the German workers’ necessary self-recognition as a class and awareness of their shared oppression” (48). If “Radfahren” pushes against this critical trend by endorsing mass culture as a political instrument, it risks glossing over the political and economic forces that give rise to mass culture in the first place.⁶ Although Grosz refers to the wall advertisements as “these decrees of the businessman (the true lord of the age),” class consciousness is hardly the primary aim of this piece: the critical moments in “Radfahren” are directed primarily against high culture (to which advertising is favorably contrasted), rather than against the commercial interests that these advertisements serve.

Grosz would later acknowledge that his fondness for commercial culture, and particularly for American mass culture, did not always harmonize with his political aims and alliances. As he wrote in 1929, reflecting on his childhood fascination with American adventure and detective novels: “Jedenfalls war damals Amerika das Land meiner Sehnsucht und ist es sonderbarerweise, zum Ärger meiner orthodoxen marxistischen Freunde, bis heute geblieben” (Grosz, “Jugenderinnerungen” 174). (“Anyway America was the land of my yearnings and so it has remained curiously enough until today, to the anger of my orthodox Marxist friends”; qtd. in Adkins 286.) But without denying these contradictions, it is possible to see in Grosz’s “Radfahren” a powerful argument that advertising and popular entertainment, as part of the urban world of shocks and sensations, speak to modern city-dwellers in a way that traditional culture cannot, and consequently offer greater political potential. “Radfahren” lays out a new approach to political art that not only recognizes, but also embraces the media and the shocks of the city street.

Elasti-City Berlin: "Man muß Kautschukmann sein!"

Man muß Kautschukmann sein!

Ja, Kautschukmann sein — eventuell den Kopf zwischen die Beine stecken oder durchs Faß springen — und spiralgig in die Luft schnellen! sieh, ein Paragraph rempelt Dich an,
eine Affiche,
ein Flohzyklus . . .
.....
(sämtliche Flöhe liegen an Schlingen — desertieren ausgeschlossen — Springen von Flöhen auf Kommando, Parademarsch der Flöhe)

Immerhin wichtig ist, das Gleichgewicht zu behalten!
Wo vordem die gotische Kirche, messelt sich heute das Warenhaus hoch —

Ein „Marsias“ interessant

— Die Fahrstühle sausen . . . Eisenbahnunglücks, Explosionskatastrophen . . .
— quer durchrast der Balkanzug Mitteleuropa, doch gibts auch Baumbäume und Edelmarmeladenrationierung

Wie gesagt, Kautschukmann sein beweglich in allen Knochen nicht bloß im Dichter-Sessel dösen oder vor der Staffelei schön getönte Bildchen pinseln.

Den Bequemen gilt's zu stören beim Verdauungsschlafchen ihm den pazifistischen Popo zu kitzeln, rumort! explodiert! zerplatzt! — oder hängt euch ans Fensterkreuz

Laßt euren Kadaver in die Brantweingasse baumeln!
Ja! Wieder elastisch werden, nach allen Seiten höchst federnd — sich verbiegen — anboxen! Kinn- oder Herzgrubenhieb!

**Ladies and gentlemen! !
jeder hat Zutritt!**

Nur nähertreten!! . . . nur nähertreten!! . . .
Schon beulen sie den Weihrauchkessel ein.
Nervös rutscht das weiche Gesäß hin und her!
.....
Ja! Wenn nicht sämtliche Flöhe an Schlingen lägen!



Figure 3: George Grosz, "Man muss Kautschukmann sein!" Detail from *Neue Jugend*, June 1917, p. 1. Reproduction courtesy of Das Rote Antiquariat, Berlin.

Appearing in the left-hand column of the same page, Grosz's "Man muß Kautschukmann sein!" (Fig. 3) takes up many of the same themes addressed in "Radfahren." Like "Radfahren," "Kautschukmann" constructs a reader who is confronted by the shocks of the city, and must adapt to them in order to survive: "Ja, Kautschukmann sein — eventuell den Kopf zwischen die Beine stecken oder durchs Faß springen — und spiralig in die Luft schnellen! sieh, ein Paragraph rempelt Dich an, / eine Affiche." ("Yes, be a rubber man — maybe stick your head between your legs or jump through a barrel — and spiral swiftly up into the air! look, a paragraph jostles you, / a poster.") Notably, these first shocks are textually induced—a paragraph or a poster is a sufficient affront to unsettle the sensitive reader. But the section that follows introduces additional shocks of modernity and war:

ein Flohzirkus . . .
.
(sämtliche Flöhe liegen an Schlingen —
desertieren ausgeschossen — Springen von
Flöhen auf Kommando,
Parademarsch der Flöhe
.)
Immerhin wichtig
ist, das Gleichgewicht zu [sic] behalten!
Wo vordem die gotische Kirche,
messelt sich heute
das Warenhaus hoch —!)
— Die Fahrstühle sausen . . . Eisenbahnunglücks,
Explosionskatastrophen . . .
— quer durchrast der Balkanzug Mitteleuropa

(a flea circus . . .
.
(all the fleas are lying on nooses —
deserting is impossible — fleas jump
on command,
parade march of the fleas
.)
Still it's important
to maintain

equilibrium!
Where once the go-
thic church
drew masses, today
the warehouse rises – !)
– The elevators rush . . . railway accident,
catastrophic explosion . . .
– the Balkan train races across Central Europe)

Like “Radfahren,” this passage brings together a number of shocks of modernity, from the railway accident (with which the medical discourse of shock in fact originated in the nineteenth century; cf. Killen 12) to the replacement of religion by commerce. Perhaps most remarkable, though, are the two figures used to represent the war: first, the “Balkanzug,” which ties the shock of war to the jolts of modern transportation; and second, the flea circus (cleverly employing periods to represent fleas), with its immediate evocation of soldiers, trained to jump on command and unable to desert. All of these shocks, the piece suggests, are part of the world in the face of which the modern individual – and particularly the modern artist – must “maintain equilibrium.”

Indeed, whereas “Radfahren” addresses the man on the street (or in the train) who is confronted by the shocks of the modern city, the emphasis in “Kautschukmann” is on the modern artist, who is prodded to engage more fully with the contemporary world. In Grosz’s text, this address to the artist becomes clear in the following passage:

Wie gesagt, Kautschukmann sein
beweglich in allen Knochen
nicht blos im Dichter-Sessel dösen
oder vor der Staffelei schön getönte Bildchen pinseln.

(Be a rubber man, as stated
flexible in every bone
don’t just doze in your poet’s armchair
or paint nicely shaded little pictures at the easel.)

The traditional painter or poet is contrasted to a flexible new artist who can adapt to the demands of the present. As Theodor Däubler wrote of Grosz’s work, “Eine Großstadt hat ungeahnte Elastizitäten: das Handwerk des Künstlers, der sie darstellt, muß konform sein” (Däubler 153). (“A city has untold elasticities: the same must be true of the handiwork of the artist who represents it.”) What’s more, the artist is called to engagement:

Den Bequemen gilt's zu stören
beim Verdauungsschläfchen
ihm den pazifistischen Popo zu kitzeln,
rumort! explodiert! zerplatzt! – oder hängt euch
ans Fensterkreuz

(The comfortable must be disturbed
in their digestive naps
their pacifist butts must be tickled,
make noise! explode! burst! – or hang yourself
on the window cross)

The pacifism that is criticized here should not be understood simply as opposition to the war (which was, after all, a position strongly advocated by *Neue Jugend*), but rather as the defeatist decision, in the face of war, to withdraw into art rather than engaging actively in radical politics.² The artist, Grosz suggests, needs perseverance and flexibility in order to endure the shocks of war and modernity; but the goal is not merely survival, but also the creation of a new – perhaps shocking – politically engaged art.

The artist, then, must “Wieder elastisch werden” (“Become elastic again”) like the “rubber man” of the circus or variété. In the passage that follows, the full significance of this rubber man becomes clear: “Ladies and gentlemen!! / jeder hat Zutritt!” (“Ladies and gentlemen!! / Everyone is welcome!”). This barker’s call serves as a reminder that the rubber man represents an art form with popular appeal, a contrast to the poet in his armchair or the painter before his easel. This popular emphasis is echoed by the piece’s typography. The title presented as a headline (complete with exclamation point) and the larger type and bright red and green ink of “Ladies and gentlemen!! / Everyone is welcome!” are not only typesetter’s tricks to draw attention; rather, they enact precisely what “Kautschukmann” calls for, a flexibility on the part of the artist and an openness to popular culture. The “elastic” artist, the “rubber man,” is not only prepared for the shocks of modernity (including those of the city and of the war), he is also a popular entertainer with mass appeal that can be utilized for the purposes of political provocation.

The rhetorical thrust of this piece is further reinforced by the caption under the image that accompanies it. Although the photograph appears to depict Grosz himself, the caption, “Ein ‘Marsias’ Interessent” (“A Prospective ‘Marsyas’ Buyer”), is a mocking reference to *Marsyas*, an elitist and exorbitantly priced journal of art and literature that debuted in 1917. The first issue of *Marsyas* did not appear until July/August 1917, but Grosz was presumably familiar with the limited-edition prospectus that had been published in May.⁸ In this prospectus, Theodor Tagger, the magazine’s publisher, characterized *Marsyas* as apolitical, rejecting the attempt to reach

“das Volk” (“the people”) with new art (Tagger 3). As he later wrote in his diary, “Massenwirkungen: ich lehne sie ab. Sie existieren nicht.” (“Effects on the masses: I reject them. They do not exist.”) Tagger was equally dismissive of the techniques of mass reproduction used by many modern periodicals, writing, “weg mit den Klischées. Denn die sind falsch, geben Wirkungen des Originals ganz falsch. Lieber ein Original als tausend falsche Klischées für das selbe Geld” (qtd. in Renner 316). (“Away with the clichés [i.e. cheap reproductions]. For they are false, they falsely reproduce the effects of the original. Rather one original than a thousand false clichés for the same money.”) Accordingly, each copy of the very limited print run of *Marsyas* was accompanied by original etchings, woodcuts, or lithographs.² Tagger’s *Marsyas* thus provided an ideal foil for the “weekly” edition of *Neue Jugend*: whereas Tagger rejected any attempt to appeal to the masses, *Neue Jugend* embraced sensational typography and wide distribution; whereas Tagger rejected mechanical reproductions, *Neue Jugend* made profligate use of them; whereas Tagger charged 100 marks or more per issue, *Neue Jugend* was priced at 20 pfennige. The attack on salon culture in Grosz’s works found its specific target in Tagger’s *Marsyas*.

Conclusion: Engaged Art and Popular Entertainment

Readers who turned to the back page of the June issue of *Neue Jugend* found reviews—unsigned, but apparently also authored by Grosz (cf. Grosz, *Ein kleines Ja und ein großes Nein* 183)—of several variety performances. Like ragtime, the variety represented to Grosz a modern, popular alternative to traditional high culture. Grosz would later write that when he arrived in Berlin in 1912, he discovered “wunderbare Theater, einen Riesenzirkus, Kabarette und Revuen” (Grosz, *Ein kleines Ja und ein großes Nein* 94). (“wonderful theaters, a giant circus, cabarets and revues.”) With this discovery, McCloskey writes, “the stage was set for the encounter between the avant-garde and mass culture that provided the basis for Grosz’s and Berlin Dada’s provocative synthesis of high and low cultural forms in the late war years” (McCloskey 12). This synthesis is well underway in *Neue Jugend*, as a comparison of Grosz’s variety reviews to his pieces on the front page of the June issue reveals. In his review of a show at the Apollo-Theater, Grosz praised the acrobatic achievements of the Ploetz-Larella sisters as “biegsame Kautschukdamen” (“limber rubber ladies”), but regretted that “Arlo und Dolo ... Humor-Radfahrer, haben ihre Nummer noch nicht im ganzen so konzentriert und schlagend durchgearbeitet um als erstklassige Radnummer zu gelten.”¹⁰ (“Arlo and Dolo ... humor bicyclists, have not worked through their performance as a whole with enough concentration and force for it to count as a first-class bike number.”) This thematic overlap can hardly be an accident: rather, it suggests that the bicyclist in “Radfahren” and the rubber

man in "Kautschukmann" are not merely figures drawn from mass culture at large, but are at least familiar from, if not directly inspired by, the popular entertainment of the *variété*.

It is important to emphasize that this synthesis was conceived not only as an artistic, but also as a political employment of popular entertainment and mass media. In both "Radfahren" and "Kautschukmann," Grosz begins with a depiction of the shock experience of the city that requires some sort of adaptation or endurance on the part of the reader. In each case, though, this shock is ultimately transformed into an instrument of critique: street advertising and the sports of bicycling and soccer are opposed to bourgeois salon art, and the rubber man as a figure of the popular artist is opposed to the poet or painter confined to an armchair or easel. It is worth noting, too, that both the bicyclist and the rubber man represent not only popular, but also physical activities: not only the mind, but also the body is engaged in this critique.

Grosz's contributions, like the newspaper format of *Neue Jugend*, make the case for the necessity of an engagement of art with society, an embrace of popular forms, and a rejection of artistic elites that pride themselves on their distance from mass culture. The appearance of brand names and advertising-style slogans within Grosz's works emphasizes this willingness to embrace even commercial culture as a modern and effective means of communication. This does not mean, of course, that Grosz and the other collaborators on *Neue Jugend* exempted these media from critique. In later paintings such as *Stützen der Gesellschaft* (*Pillars of Society*, 1926), Grosz would look critically at the reactionary influence of the mainstream press on German society. But this criticism applied to the particular political aims and methods that these newspapers employed, and not to the nature of mass media as such. Where Grosz and the other *Neue Jugend* collaborators departed from the left-wing critics described by McCloskey above was in their belief that mass media and popular entertainment were not inherently reactionary, but could be employed to revolutionary effect.

Neue Jugend, and Grosz's contributions in particular, represent a significant, if perhaps overly optimistic, moment in the history of engaged art. Soon after the war ended, there would be newspapers with more expressly revolutionary agendas, such as *Die Rote Fahne* (*The Red Flag*), and even a satirical Communist newspaper, *Der Knüppel* (*The Cudgel*) (McCloskey 129). But *Neue Jugend* differed from these papers as well with its mix of satire, literary texts, and political engagement. *Neue Jugend's* newspaper format sent a signal that art and literature must adapt to and employ media suited to the modern age if they are to have any political effect. Grosz's "Radfahren" and "Kautschukmann" likewise emphasized the political power of popular media, while also placing a premium on the artist's ability to respond to the shocks of modernity and to incorporate them into his work. In addition, they

reveled in the hedonistic appeal of advertising and popular entertainment, a step that many artists and media critics were unwilling to take. Short-lived though it was, *Neue Jugend* provided a provocative model for the Berlin Dada movement, both advocating and enacting a radical synthesis of art, politics, and popular culture.

Notes

1. A version of this article was presented at the 2013 conference of the Modern Language Association as part of the panel "Avant-Garde Poetics of Media," sponsored by the Association for the Study of Dada and Surrealism. I am grateful to the organizers, participants, and attendees of that panel for their comments, as well as to Tony Kaes, Robert Kaufman, Elaine Tennant, and Rhiannon Graybill, and to Timothy Shipe and the two anonymous reviewers for *Dada/Surrealism*, whose input has been a great help to me in bringing this article into its final form.

2. In referring to Grosz's contributions to *Neue Jugend* as "political," I do not mean to denote a specific form of intervention into partisan politics or revolutionary action, or to adopt a prescriptive definition of what political art is or ought to be. Certainly much of the work that Grosz produced after joining the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) was more explicit in its political allegiances than the works under consideration here. (Joan Weinstein dates Grosz's entry into the KPD to 31 December 1918, while Barbara McCloskey places it "sometime in early 1919." See Weinstein 233; McCloskey 55.) But the works in *Neue Jugend* clearly reflect a crucial stage in the development of Grosz's understanding of political art. Although the primary *target* of Grosz's critique in these works was the artistic establishment, the central *contention* of that critique was that the artistic establishment had failed to address contemporary political realities. Grosz thus sought to offer an alternative—for which his works in *Neue Jugend* provided both a program and a model.

3. Cf. Bürger 78: "The insertion of reality fragments into the work of art fundamentally transforms that work. [...] They are no longer signs pointing to reality, they *are* reality." Unfortunately, because Bürger identifies the rejection of a divide between the autonomous work of art and the reality external to it as the defining characteristic of avant-garde art, he devotes less attention to the specific significance that any given token of empirical reality, such as the newspaper, might have. This is an oversight that Poggi rightly seeks to correct.

4. All subsequent citations from "Kannst du radfahren?" and "Man muß Kautschukmann sein!" likewise refer to the front page of the June 1917 issue of *Neue Jugend*. This issue can be most easily accessed in electronic form in the archive *Der literarische Expressionismus Online*, De Gruyter Verlag. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

5. The brand names inserted here in brackets are present in the German, but omitted from the published translation.
6. On this point see Harald Maier-Metz, *Expressionismus, Dada, Agitprop*, 150: "Die Ambivalenz dieser Provokationshaltung, nämlich Kunst als Warenangebot zu propagieren, liegt in der zunächst naiven Faszination von ihren eigenen satirischen Mitteln. Amerikanismen und Reklameelemente geraten nicht nur zur Kritik einer nur scheinbar kapitalistischer Kommerzialisierung des Lebens entzogenen Kunst und eines nationalistischen Kunstmythos, sondern auch zur unkritischen Mystifizierung Amerikas zum Eldorado von Moderne, Technik, Abenteuer, Geschäft und Sensation und zur ästhetischen Imitation der Werbung." ("The ambivalence of this provocative position, namely the propagation of art as a commodity, lies in the initially naïve fascination with the satirical means themselves. Americanisms and elements of advertising are employed not only in the critique of art that appears to be withdrawn from the capitalist commercialization of life, and of a nationalist art myth, but also in the uncritical mystification of America as an El Dorado of modernity, technology, adventure, business and sensation, and in the aesthetic imitation of advertising.")
7. On this turn in expressionism, and the dadaists' response, see Weinstein 233: "One of [the Dadaists'] prime targets soon became the expressionists, whose growing success—and 'spiritualization'—they saw as part of an escapist bourgeois culture responsible for the war and its carnage."
8. See Ursula Renner, "Marsyas - Zeitschrift und Pathosformel des Expressionismus," in *Häutung - Lesarten des Marsyas-Mythos*, ed. Ursula Renner and Manfred Schneider (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2006), 299.
9. Each issue appeared in an edition of 235, with 35 copies on Japanese paper and an additional 200 on handmade paper (cf. Tagger 10).
10. Grosz had already paid tribute to the Ploetz-Larellas and other variety performers in his poem "Die Artisten" in the February/March 1917 issue of *Neue Jugend*. See George Grosz, "Die Artisten," *Neue Jugend*, February 1917, 237–40.

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