Between Identity and Commodity
Female Urban Experience in Vicki Baum's Menschen im Hotel

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Vicki Baum’s *Menschen im Hotel*

- Originally serialized in *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, April through June 1929
- English title: *Grand Hotel* (1931)
Vicki Baum in Context

• Historical context
  – Germany’s Weimar Republic, 1919 – 1933
  – Changing roles of women

• Reception of Baum’s Works
  – Dismissed as Kitsch or Trivialliteratur

Political poster appealing to German women voters, 1924
Vicki Baum in Recent Scholarship

- Reevaluation of female authors
- Cultural relevance
  - *die Neue Sachlichkeit* (the New Objectivity)
  - Portrayal of modernity
  - Baum’s avoidance of politics
- Reception theory
- Narratology
A Feminist Textual Analysis

• Intra-textual analysis
• Feminist theoretical basis
• Focus of analysis
  – Flämmchen, young female protagonist
  – Pursuit of autonomy in the city
  – Emancipation or confirmation of patriarchal value system?

“Hello! I’m looking for work!”
Unemployed Stenotypist Seeks Work
(December 1931)
Flämmchen as the New Woman

- Cultural construct of the New Woman
- Progressive portrayal of female sexuality
- Critique of bourgeois morality

Photo by August Sander of a “New Woman”
Woman as a Commodity

• Barriers to professional success as Angestelltin, female white-collar worker
• Marketability of the female body
• Financial dependence on men

Joan Crawford as Flämmchen
Wallace Beery as Preysing
*Grand Hotel* (1932)
Commodity Character and Self-Image

- Impact of advertising
- Resistance against objectification
- Self-worth based on market value
- Adoption of alternative objectifying self-image, defined by men

Crawford’s Flämmchen: sexualized Angestelltin
The Male City Experience

- Men become consumers
- Baron von Gaigern: master of modernity
- Kringelein masters modernity
- Preysing defeated by modernity
- Masculine characteristics:
  - Kraft (power, energy)
  - Lebensmut (courage to face life)
The Female City Experience

- Feminine characteristic: *das Schöne* (beauty)
- Retreat into mothering role
- Mother/whore dichotomy

Flämmchen with Kringelein (Lionel Barrymore)
A Satire of the New Woman

- Ironic contrast
- Appearance of autonomy versus desire for security
- Questions women’s desire for emancipation

Images of the New Woman
Women’s Biological Destiny

- Fate as determined by body
- Two destinies:
  - Physical beauty: whore
  - Ability to bear children: mother
- Grusinskaja’s fate reveals Flämmchen’s future

Greta Garbo as Grusinskaja
Poster advertising film’s release in Germany
Conclusions

• Apparently progressive elements
• Subversive male characters
• Female characters affirm traditional roles for women

Vicki Baum

Recent reprint of Menschen im Hotel
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