

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)



Jacket art, first
American edition

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



Vicki Baum in Hollywood

- 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 *Angestellte*, 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



Crawford's Flämmchen:
sexualized *Angestellte*

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

The Male City Experience



Potsdamer Platz, Berlin, 1930
Busiest traffic intersection in Europe

- 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

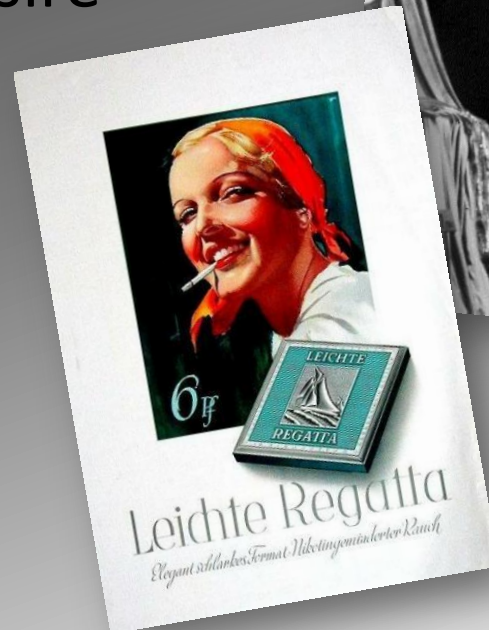


Flämmchen with Kringelein
(Lionel Barrymore)

A Satire of the New Woman

- Ironical 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

Image Credits

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