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## Consuming Beauty in the Weimar Republic: A Discussion of Youth, Cosmetics, and Power in Vicki Baum's play *Pariser Platz 13* (1930)

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## Consuming Beauty in the Weimar Republic: A Discussion of Youth, Cosmetics, and Power in Vicki Baum's play *Pariser Platz 13* (1930)

### Abstract

Published in 1930, Vicki Baum's play *Pariser Platz 13: Eine Komödie aus dem Schönheitssalon* engaged the readership with an unorthodox and thoroughly modern heroine: the successful owner of international beauty salons Helen Bross. Helen personified the wishes and dreams of Baum's readers: Helen's autonomy, both personal and financial, allowed her to be an active consumer of modernity and its pleasures: travel, interaction with celebrities, and luxurious lodging.

My paper studies a (fictional) beauty salon on Pariser Platz in Berlin as an enclave of female power and explores Vicki Baum's portrayal of beauty, youth, and fashion as commodities. I place my reading of *Pariser Platz 13* into the context of Baum's own career; the Weimar Republic's national and ethnic identities and its social and economic tensions, focusing on the role that the Austrian-Jewish author herself and her female heroines played as producers, transmitters, and consumers of contemporary beauty ideals. While looking at Baum's heroines, I examine their possible historical prototypes, the cosmetics gurus Helena Rubenstein and Elizabeth Arden, analyzing the impact that their marketing strategies may have had on Baum and her readership.

In addition to *Pariser Platz 13*, I delve into Baum's novel *Der Große Ausverkauf* (A Big Sale 1937), written seven years later in the USA, in which the protagonists participate in conspicuous consumption at a New York department store, both as agents and objects. I argue that the department store and beauty salon embody quintessential metaphors for the experience of modern life in the 1920s and the 1930s. On the one hand, these sites provided opportunities for the construction of a modern female identity; on the other, they exposed the limits of female agency and disclosed how popular press and cosmetics advertisements disseminated the cultural icon of the new woman.

### Keywords

New Woman, beauty salon, Vicki Baum, cosmetics, department store, Weimar Republic

Consuming Beauty in the Weimar Republic: A Discussion of Youth, Cosmetics,  
and Feminine Power in Vicki Baum's *Pariser Platz 13* (1930)

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“Eine zu hell gepuderte Nase kann das Lebensglück kosten” (46) ‘A nose that is powdered too lightly can cost you happiness in life!’ warns the protagonist Helen Bross in Vicki Baum’s 1930 play *Pariser Platz 13: Eine Komödie aus dem Schönheitssalon* (‘13 Paris Square: A Comedy from a Beauty Parlor’). With humor and well-positioned exaggeration, the popular Austrian Jewish author alludes to the growing social significance of makeup in the Weimar Republic. As seen in the phenomena of the cosmetics industry and beauty pageants, both of which proliferated in Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s, the desire to look beautiful and young far from being labeled as trivial and vain, became a part of modern lifestyle and a means of self-expression. Monopolizing on social anxieties and insecurities, or, to use Georg Gaugusch’s term, “vanities and perceived deficits,” contemporary advertisements touted appearance-enhancing and youth-preserving products as a means to avoid social embarrassment and marginalization, and to obtain success (77). The investment in one’s appearance was increasingly seen as “symbolic capital” (in Pierre Bourdieu’s words), or as a resource to establish, enhance or assert social identity.

My paper studies a (fictional) beauty salon on *Pariser Platz* in Berlin as an enclave of female power and explores Vicki Baum’s portrayal of beauty, youth, and fashion as commodities. I place my reading of *Pariser Platz 13* into the context of Baum’s own career; the Weimar Republic’s national and ethnic identities and its social and economic tensions, focusing on the role that the Austrian-Jewish author herself and her female heroines played as producers, transmitters, and consumers of contemporary beauty ideals. In addition to Baum’s heroines, I examine their possible historical prototypes, the cosmetics gurus Helena Rubenstein and Elizabeth Arden, analyzing the impact that their marketing strategies may have had on Baum and her readership. In my interpretation, the lavishly furnished beauty parlor stands as a venue where the beautification of self is viewed as a necessary and socially acceptable pursuit for women, where desirable identities are assigned and supported, and where gender roles and relationships are reformulated and defined.

In addition to *Pariser Platz 13*, I look at Baum’s novel *Der Große Ausverkauf* (A Big Sale 1937), written seven years later in the USA, in which the protagonists participate in conspicuous consumption at a New York department store, both as agents and objects. I view the department store as a location of female modernity where youth and beauty are increasingly commodified and where the

boundary between the salesgirl and the girl for sale becomes increasingly blurred. Considered together, these lesser known Baum works, written in different geographical locations and years apart, illuminate not only Baum's changed political, cultural, and economic realities, but also her own approach to beauty, the cultural icon of the new woman, and conscious consumption.

I argue that the department store and beauty salon embody quintessential metaphors for the experience of modern life in the 1920s and the 1930s. On the one hand, these sites provided opportunities for the construction of a modern female identity; on the other, they exposed the limits of female agency and disclosed how popular press and cosmetics advertisements disseminated the cultural icon of the new woman: Questions I seek to answer are: 1) What facts from Baum's life and career does *Pariser Platz 13* and *Der Große Ausverkauf* evoke and why? 2) How do *Pariser Platz 13* and *Der große Ausverkauf* differ from popular illustrated press in their portrayal of the beauty industry and culture? 3) What differentiates the beauty parlor from other venues of consumerism such as the department store? 4) How do these texts comment on the beauty ideals promoted by the international cosmetics entrepreneurs Helena Rubenstein and Elizabeth Arden and their marketing strategies, namely, homogenization and diversification? And, finally, 5) What myths about the new woman do these texts reproduce and expose?

#### Vicki Baum and the emerging consumer society

Born Hedwig Baum 24 January 1888 in Vienna, Vicki Baum, who grew up in an affluent family of assimilated Austrian Jews, first pursued a career in music as a harpist. Baum ventured into writing for creative but also commercial reasons, becoming a household name in Germany and an international literary star in the early 1930s. Baum and her family emigrated in 1932, settling in Hollywood.

Baum's phenomenal success is tied largely to her collaboration with Ullstein (1926-1932), one of the largest publishing houses in Germany at the time, which created a niche for both Baum and her novels, turning her, according to Nottelman, into "die erste multimedial vermarktete Persönlichkeit des deutschen Literaturmarkts," (133) "the first personality of the German literary market to be promoted via multimedia."<sup>1</sup> Of the five Baum novels that Ullstein serialized and later published, two became international bestsellers and four were turned into films with one film receiving an Oscar.<sup>2</sup> In Baum's own words, Ullstein's marketing

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<sup>1</sup> Here and further, translations from the German are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Austrian director Richard Oswald filmed Baum's *Feme* in 1927, while the American Edmund Goulding of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer brought *Menschen im Hotel* (People in a Hotel) to US audiences as *Grand Hotel* in 1932. Two other Baum novels were transferred to the widescreen as well: *Stud. chem. Helene Willfüer* (Helene Willfüer, a Student of Chemistry) in 1930, (by the director Fred Sauer) and *Hotel Berlin* in 1945, (by the director Peter Godfrey). MGM's production

strategy, in addition to promoting her books, also included the commercialization of “ihrer Person, ihres Gesichts und ihrer Ansichten” (Weng 223) ‘of her person, her face and her views.’ Ullstein’s stylization of Baum as an embodiment of the New Woman turned the popular author into an Ullstein product, similar to other national brands such as Melissengeist (syrup) or Leibnizkekse (crackers) (Weng 230). “Person as brand” is one of the topics Baum explores and satirizes in *Pariser Platz 13*.

Even before Ullstein’s marketing of Baum as a representative of modern femininity, Baum’s (first) professional career as a musician as well as her divorce and second marriage cast her as a woman who defied traditional gender roles and societal expectations. Baum’s memoir *It Was All Quite Different* (1964), for example, reveals her affinity for traditionally male sports such as boxing. The open display of the natural body in athletic and leisure activities, according to Esther Bauer, “characterized Weimar German society at large” (15), yet, in Baum’s case, grueling workouts under the tutelage of the Turkish prizefighter Sabri Mahir (whose co-ed studio included Marlene Dietrich among its members), allowed her to develop stamina and discipline as a writer in addition to “a pretty mean straight left, a quick one-two” (Baum 179). Besides boxing, the indefatigable Baum mastered a rope-jumping routine that was designed for the German heavyweight champion Franz Diener, and she attended modern dance classes (Gammel 372).

When in 1926 Baum was hired as editor for fashion and beauty and editorial manager for *Die Dame*, *Uhu*, and *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* (sic), all of which targeted different social groups,<sup>3</sup> Ullstein initiated the “optische Verjüngung” (‘optical rejuvenation’) of the then thirty-eight-year-old writer as part of their marketing campaign for Baum (Weng 224). The mystique and preservation of youth, which Baum later explored in articles and *Pariser Platz 13*, Peukert explains, was “a more pervasive part of public consciousness in the Weimar Republic than it was in other contemporary societies or than it had been in other periods of German history” (quoted in Ramsbrock 119). Most Ullstein publications included photos of Baum,<sup>4</sup> capturing her as youthful, stylish, sporty, and efficient at combining motherhood with career: the “prototypische Vertreterin der Neuen Frau” (Weng 225) ‘a prototypical representative of the New Woman.’

The cultural icon of the New Woman, reproduced in Baum’s writings and reinforced within her media persona, remained a fluid, unsettled phenomenon over

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of Baum’s novel *Menschen in Hotel* (released in the US under the title *Grand Hotel*) received an Oscar for outstanding production in 1932 (King *Bestsellers by Design* 85).

<sup>3</sup> Modeled on *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Die Dame* targeted affluent women, offering articles on high society, fashion, cosmetics, cars, dogs, etc. *Uhu*, on the other hand, aimed at educated middle-class public and featured articles with “substance” (King *Best-Sellers by Design* 85).

<sup>4</sup> *Die Dame*, however, did not feature a photo of Baum in order to avoid the possibly unfavorable comparisons between the author and the featured models and movie stars (Weng 225).

the course of the 1920s and early 1930s. Women's greater presence in the public sphere as office and department store employees, multiplied by their portrayals in the popular press, in window displays, and in movies became associated with Weimar modernity and emancipation. The ethos of the professionally employed – made-up, short-haired, androgynously clad, and increasingly childless – New Woman who demanded equality in love and marriage sharply contrasted with pre-war femininity, which was associated with self-sacrifice, domesticity and motherhood. To conservative politicians and intellectuals, this modern femininity represented a sign of decline and decay, both of national culture and of the nation. Writing in the popular tabloid *8-Uhr-Abendblatt* in 1927 (three years before Baum would publish her play), social commentator Manfred Georg outlined and castigated the three leading contemporary female types—the masculine and rational “Garçonne,” the superficial and wanton “Girl,” and the maternal and plain “Gretchen” (Manfred 55). Georg viewed the “Girl” as a signifier of American consumerism and “dumbed” down mass culture and the “Garçonne” as an aggressive and sober intruder into formerly male-dominated spheres. (qtd. in Hung 53).

In Baum's interpretation, however, the New Woman emerged more as a projection of female desires than a reflection of male anxieties. In reality, Esther Bauer writes, the fears and hopes associated with the New Woman were often exaggerated, since only a few middle- and upper-class women had the financial freedom to realize fully the image promoted in the contemporary visual and printed media (Bauer 16-17). The images of Vicki Baum as the New Woman and the New Women described in her fiction were both managed by Ullstein's marketing, reinforcing each other. In the popular literature of the era, the New Woman represented a collectively designed and negotiated phenomenon, by editors, liberal urban authors such as Baum *and* the intended audience (Hung 52). Ullstein's campaign and Baum's goals as a writer complemented each other in responding to readers' desires. Echoing popular demand, Baum's *Pariser Platz 13* and *Der große Ausverkauf* reflected contemporary women's aspirations while humorously and sometimes critically commenting on new phenomena important for female readers: women's entry into gainful employment, the professionalization of cosmetics and fashion, the emergence of the beauty industry and culture; and the changing feminine ideal.

### Pariser Platz 13

Cosmetics and anti-age products that Baum explored first in a series of articles<sup>5</sup> and later in *Pariser Platz 13* partially formed and contributed to a vibrant

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<sup>5</sup> *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* published Baum's articles on “Weiblicher Takt” (‘Feminine Tactfulness’) and “Lippenstift, Parfüm, und Spitzenwäsche in Sowjetrussland” (‘Lipstick, Perfume

beauty culture, which emerged after the First World War. Beauty “aids” became more accessible as the result of the industrial manufacture of cosmetics and their retail sale as standardized products in department stores and mail-order catalogs. Between 1907 and 1925 the shift in female employment from private spaces (domestic service, maid) to the service sector (sales clerks, typists, cashiers, etc.) created a new class—the female office employee for whom makeup skills represented a commodity in high demand.<sup>6</sup> A female salaried employee in the Weimar Republic saw a well-groomed appearance as an important professional qualification, as it suggested she could withstand the pressures of work without showing a trace of stress (Ramsrock 143). German discourse on beauty in the 1920s and early 1930s, as illustrated by the contemporary visual media and popular literature, stemmed from the notion—or myth—that beauty (which was understood as a combination of a skillfully made up face, slender figure, and fashionable hairstyle and attire) greatly contributed to one’s social advancement and personal fulfillment.

The rise of the beauty industry in the first quarter of the twentieth century, Geoffrey Jones notes, followed the “logic of industrialization, globalization, and consumerism” (Jones 23). In marketing their brands, cosmetics entrepreneurs the Polish-born Helena Rubenstein (1870-1965) and her chief competitor, the Canadian Elizabeth Arden (1881-1963), asserted the universality of beauty, e.g., the belief in a somewhat generic beauty ideal, which rested on luminescent, young-looking skin and artful use of makeup. In the late 1920s, the beauty industry “established itself by merging a broad range of racial markers into a ‘cosmopolitan aesthetic’ that could be transferred from country to country” (Berghoff and Kühhe 13). Arden’s company, which succeed in catering to a wealthy clientele across Germany, used the same visual materials in the United States, Germany and other markets: a woman with large, dark, round eyes, whose head and hair were concealed under tightly arranged white cloths that were part of her spa treatments (Poiger 196). The process of homogenization was further fueled by the international spread and appeal of Hollywood: many beauty companies innovated in cosmetics for the needs of actors and then sold these innovations on the mass market domestically and abroad (Jones 29). Most importantly, Rubenstein and Arden became not just producers and providers of beauty products and rituals but also ambassadors of a new, compelling concept: that beauty was only partially natural and could be achieved through a certain lifestyle (exercise and diet) and certain rituals (the use of cosmetics and skincare). Baum’s 1930 article in the *Uhu* (passages from which

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and *Lingerie in Soviet Russia*), while *Uhu* featured her “Die Erfahrung mit der Verjüngung: Ein Rundgang durch die Laboratorien einer neuen Wissenschaft” (‘Experience with Rejuvenation: A Tour of Laboratories of the New Science’) (King *Bestsellers by Design* 86).

<sup>6</sup> In 1907 only a third of women were active in industry, crafts and the service sector; by 1925 their share comprised 45 percent (Ramsbrock 111).

would later re-surface in the *Pariser Platz 13*) deftly summarizes the idea both she and her contemporaries wanted to believe: “Die Klasse der ganz und gar unhübschen Frau ist dank Pflege und Kosmetik ausgestorben. ...” ‘The class of the thoroughly unattractive woman has died out thanks to (skin) care and cosmetics’ (14).

Written as a *Lesedrama* (‘reading drama’), to use Julia Bertschik’s term, *Pariser Platz 13* interweaves dialogues, monologues, Baum’s directorial remarks, and quotes from Baum’s previous articles on beauty into the plot to relay the author’s ironic view of urban pop culture of the Weimar Republic and of her own career at Ullstein (196). The depth of Baum’s observations on the beauty industry in the 1920s and 1930s, her self-irony and sober approach to the cultural construct of the New Woman, all apparent to the modern reader, did not receive due attention from the contemporary theater audience. The multilevel narrative structure of the play, which combines a *mélange* of genres, texts, and paratexts, did not translate well on stage, which may have contributed to the fact that Gustaf Gründgens’s production of *Pariser Platz 13* in early 1931 was a flop.

Set almost entirely in a (fictional) luxuriously furnished beauty salon in Berlin, *Pariser Platz 13* follows six characters, whose paths become intertwined professionally and personally: the internationally renowned beauty guru and salon owner Helen Bross and her manager Elias; two of the salon’s clients Katja, the socialite, and Alix, the architect; Alix’s boyfriend Pix; and an aspiring actress (unnamed in the play). The characters Alix, Katja, and the actress draw the readers’ attention to the inherent ambivalence of the cultural icon of the new woman: This figure combines traits of both traditional and of modern femininity; her body functions both as a commodity and as a vehicle for self-transformation and a professional career. For Alix the architect, a fashionable and groomed appearance secures building contracts: “Wenn meine Fassade nicht in Ordnung ist, lässt niemand bei mir bauen” (78) ‘If my personal “façade” is in disarray, nobody will build with my company.’ For the 51-year-old wealthy socialite Katja, it ensures triumphant parties and young lovers. For a talented but unattractive actress, beauty is a prerequisite to success in the film industry: “Ich komme nicht aus Eitelkeit, mein Beruf verlangt Schönheit” (19) ‘I don’t come out of vanity; my profession demands beauty.’ The comparison highlights the degree to which Baum re-inscribes traditional femininity, associated with beauty and romance into the social and cultural context of the interwar years.

While advising youth- and beauty-hungry women in the Berlin branch, Helen falls in love with Pix, the boyfriend of the architect Alix. Against the wishes of Elias the manager (who later turns out to be Helen’s uncle), Helen decides to spend the night with Pix and to reveal to him her long-kept secret: that she, who claims an ageless appearance at forty-two as the result of the so-called Helen Bross method, is, indeed, a twenty-four-year-old woman who uses makeup to accentuate

her beauty but, primarily, to camouflage her youth. Helen contemplates abandoning her disguise to build an authentic relationship with Pix, but Pix returns to Alix preferring the role of gigolo to that of breadwinner. Helen, following the advice of both Alix and Katja, also steps back into her fabricated identity because her livelihood and career both depend on her “ageless” appearance. The play ends with Helen and Elias transforming the ugly actress into a stunning woman with a fashionable haircut and flawless face to assert the salon’s ability to create beauty.

Despite its seemingly uncomplicated plot, the play offers a vibrant and rich account of cultural phenomena, commercial strategies, and real people that helped shape beauty culture in the Weimar Republic. *Pariser Platz 13* may be a fictional address near the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, but beauty salons were a ubiquitous site in the city in the 1920s,<sup>7</sup> including a branch of Elizabeth Arden on Lennéstraße 5 (Bertschick 199). The rejuvenating procedures offered at Helen’s salon mirror the beauty services available to Baum’s contemporaries: slimming, massage, facial masks, and even tanning: In the 1920s, the ideal skin was no longer a pale skin free of any freckles, thus women were encouraged to seek ruddy and lightly tanned skin with the help of innovative cosmetic remedies such as X-rays, electrolysis and artificial sun lamps (*Höhensonne*).<sup>8</sup> Echoing the popular publications of the era, the rituals of the salon seek to reinforce the message that women have power over their appearance. At the same time, Baum underlines that transformation is offered at a high cost, and thus is accessible to affluent women only.

During her face-to-face interactions with clients, Helen wears a white doctor’s coat to underline the scientific foundation of her services and products, pointing to the professionalization of beauty. Helen’s fabricated biography, which is preserved and reinforced through ads and promoted verbally in front of clients, plays a vital role in selling the Helen Bross method. Originally from London, Helen experienced the death of her English husband in WWI, a divorce from another husband and the challenges of raising two sons. Helen’s turbulent life left her feeling and looking “tired, overworked, disappointed, old and ugly,” until she

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<sup>7</sup> Berlin magazines began advertising beauty salons as early as 1908. Their services ranged from facial massage to facial douches to steam baths. There was also a service for removing freckles, pimples and milk spots. The cosmetics institutes placed ads in every women’s magazine during the early days of the Weimar Republic and emphasized the scientific and professional foundation of their services. Elizabeth Arden and Elise Bock were the most well-known beauty salons in Germany (Ramsbrock 149).

<sup>8</sup> The discoveries in the natural sciences that initially had nothing to do with beauty, such as the apparatuses producing X-rays, electric current, and artificial ultraviolet light became widely used in the emerging beauty industry and as a healing treatment. X-rays were praised as an innovative cosmetic remedy to treat eczema, tumors, lupus, acne and warts despite the side effects such as burns, pigmentation, inflammation, atrophy, hair loss and diffused pain. By the end of the 1930s electrolysis replaced X-rays to treat spots, small tumors, pigmentation marks and hairs. Artificial “mountain sun” lamps, called in German *Höhensonne*, became popularized in the 1920s (Ramsbrock 69).

serendipitously came across a recipe for a beauty aid by her Native American wet nurse. The ancient potion, in fact, was “ausgestaltet mit den modernen Erkenntnissen der Wissenschaft” (Baum 22) ‘contained properties in sync with the modern findings of science’ and helped rejuvenate Helen’s withering looks. Elias the business manager carefully cultivates Helen’s image, intensifying the demand for her services through staged international calls, Helen’s frequent inaccessibility due to travel, high prices, and selective clientele. Not just the products, but Helen’s aura of cosmopolitanism and refinement are advertised as being in sync with contemporary social and cultural values and gender roles. The woman of Helen’s making is analogous to the independent, desirable, fashionable New Woman.

Fictional Helen bears similarities to Helena Rubenstein, the cosmetics queen who created a fascinating identity to sell her products. Rubenstein (born Chaja Rubinstein in Krakow, Poland) made a fortune in 1905 by selling a crème called Valaze, which she created and sold first in Australia. Between 1909 and 1928, Helena Rubenstein established an international empire with seventy items of makeup and dozens of facial and body care products and opened beauty salons in Melbourne, New York, London, Paris, Vienna, and Milan. Throughout her sixty-year reign as a cosmetics tycoon, Madame Helena, a Jewish immigrant, negotiated a niche for her business and herself as a legitimate and novel appropriator of European (Parisian) beauty secrets. Furthermore, Helena used her second husband’s alleged noble roots to claim the title “Princess” (and to name a new line of apothecary shops that opened in New York in 1941). Advertisements in *Vanity Fair* in 1929 aggrandized Rubenstein as a beauty adviser to European royalty and one of the greatest “Artistes” of Europe, who presided over an establishment that “radiated the Spirit of Beauty” (Gifford 81). Described as a “woman without a country” in the 1928 four-page article by Joe Sweling in *The New Yorker*, Rubenstein employed nearly 3,000 people around the world, in addition to those who were “employed by the 5,000 selling agents who handle her products” (Fitoussi 202). Rubenstein’s formidable reputation as a beauty expert and shrewd businesswoman was further solidified by the fact that in December 1928, she sold her company for the astounding sum of \$7.3 million (\$90 million in today’s money) (Fitoussi 206).

Rubenstein’s establishments blurred conceptual boundaries between an art gallery, a domestic interior, and a beauty parlor, packaging her services as the continuation of a unique cultural experience (Gifford 84). Simultaneously, the meticulously decorated space of the salon, which evoked a stylish domestic interior, sought to frame Rubenstein as a reassuringly domestic, upper class, respectable figure and her business as socially appropriate, where Rubenstein’s professional skills became analogous to the social conduct and lifestyle of her intended clientele (Gifford 87).

Similar to Rubenstein salons, Baum's directorial remarks portray the salon on *Pariser Platz 13* as the ultimate enclave of respectable female authority and power, where the lavish interior not only symbolizes Helen Bross's commercial success and refined (middle class) taste, but also actively participates in the construction of femininity à la mode. Elegant furniture, long mirrors, sumptuous artwork and brightly lit cabinets with perfume and cosmetics all provide trendy surroundings for the social banter of clients in advance of their treatments, as well as serve as a welcoming venue for the transformation of aging and/or unattractive women in the hands of an artist.<sup>9</sup>

A quotation from Baum's own article in *Uhu* sneaks into Helen's rehearsed monologues about makeup application and hair coloring: "Es gibt keine hässliche Frau. Aus jeder Hässlichkeit lässt sich ein Reiz gewinnen" (28) 'There are no ugly women. One can create an alluring look out of any ugliness.' Helen's (and Baum's) words nearly quote Elizabeth Arden verbatim.<sup>10</sup> According to Arden, a beautiful face was unthinkable without clever application of rouge and powder that should be neither "detectable" nor "visible" (Ramsbrock 122). Unlike the nineteenth century beauty manuals that praised naturalness as symbol of an authentic and moral character and considered wearing makeup an expression of deficient morals<sup>11</sup> or the mark of a prostitute, Arden promoted a concept of naturalness that was based on the skillful use of decorative cosmetics. Over the course of the 1920s, far from being an expression of corrupted morals, the use of decorative cosmetics signified a progressive, healthy worldview. Contemporary women had to master the ability to combine naturalness and artificiality, because "when the exertions of our modern

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<sup>9</sup> Baum's comments in regard to the stage props for Act 1 insist that the atmosphere of the salon should be "strikingly impressive": with coquettish, feminine, colorful furniture, an abundance of mirrors and lit-up glass counters showcasing perfume and beauty potions. The female staff is outfitted in princess-style sleeveless dresses with flirty white aprons, while Madame projects professionalism and expertise in a conservative dress and an elegantly cut doctor coat (Baum *Pariser Platz 13* 7).

<sup>10</sup> Arden (real name Florence Nightingale Graham) became the uncontested queen of the American beauty market by 1914, offering seventy-five cosmetic and skincare products and managing beauty salons with a trademark red door in New York, London, and Paris (Fitoussi 197).

<sup>11</sup> Over the course of the nineteenth century, the authors of beauty manuals such as Johann Carl Lübeck were opposed to artificiality—such as pompous dress and makeup of the courtly society—and implicitly criticized them as the expression of deficient cultivation. The body perceived as natural and healthy became a sign of the embodiment of hygienic knowledge and of following specific behavioral guidelines, while also symbolizing Enlightenment values such as education, morality and sincerity. Employing cosmetics, e.g., beautifying the body resulted in an unnatural body. Hygiene was the leading guideline for attaining beauty; makeup application was to be used to conceal blemishes such as pockmarks, freckles, and wrinkles. The idea about naturalness was not based on the facts of nature but rather on cultural standards; natural cosmetics to regulate nature (the body) were an essential feature of bourgeois society. In other words, "natural" cosmetics regulated the body's nature, unlike makeup, which artificially enhanced the body (Ramsbrock 54-55, 58).

life leave the slightest trace in your face, it's your fault. In our age of progress there is no excuse for tired eyes and withered skin" (Ramsbrock 122-3).

Besides a made-up, wrinkle-free face, fashionable femininity in the Weimar Republic required a slender body. Unlike the salons of the 1900s, where women were encouraged to revitalize their natural bodies, the beauty industry during Baum's era emphasized a new "imperative to shape the body in accordance with modern form." (Clifford 91). Ulrike Thoms connects the fashionable slenderness of the era to the shifts in contemporary medical discourse: if thinness was previously considered a sign of undernourishment and vulnerability, in the early twentieth century, the new ideal rejected the voluptuous body and celebrated the body that resulted from rigid dieting and exercise (Thoms 10). *Die Dame*, to which Vicki Baum was a frequent contributor, frequently emphasized the social significance of the modified body, instructing women that they had to modify their bodies in a certain manner in order to gain public acceptance or to be hired. In her analysis of the history of cosmetics in Germany, Annelie Ramsbrock argues that during the Weimar Republic, the "modified body came to symbolize the normatively still relevant (feminine) idea of beauty and (masculine) idea of strength" and was often "depicted as the calling card that offered modern women access to masculine domains" (110). Because producing and maintaining a slender body demanded a high degree of discipline and motivation of women, the slender body "betokened rational behavior and mental firmness, the character traits traditionally ascribed to men. Corpulence, on the other hand, revealed insufficient rationality and self-control."<sup>12</sup>

Articles in *Die Dame* and *Vogue* insisted that a woman's body was "a principle and a worldview," which manifested either a passive, indifferent attitude to life or an active, sporty, balanced one (Ramsbrock 130). A face that showed signs of aging was perceived as a symbol of resignation and failure. Reiterating the popular press, in her sales pitches Helen underlines that „wir [women]dürfen uns nicht aufgeben, nicht mit dreißig, nicht mit fünfzig Jahren... Das Altwerden einer Frau beruht auf einem Aberglauben, den man abschaffen muss" (Baum 21-22) 'we [women] mustn't give up on ourselves, not at thirty, not at fifty. ... [The idea of-] woman's aging is based on a superstition, which one must abolish.'

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<sup>12</sup> Nutrition and diet studies in the Weimar Republic drew parallels between the human body and steam engines, while scientists such as Harvard professor Bennet O. Flaxlander designed specific machines to achieve slenderness "phematic hip-shaper": an apparatus consisting of a metal tube which was suspended from the ceiling and wrapped around a woman's abdomen and hips. It was connected by cable to two machines, which created a vacuum around the abdominal area. The vacuum and additional alternating currents were supposed to lower the patient's blood pressure and then dissolve fat and flush it out of the body. One of the most outlandish therapies was "hanging sleep". This therapy required women to stick their upper bodies through a life preserver suspended from the ceiling, resting their arms and elbows to keep the body from slipping through the ring (Ramsbrock 124-127).

The rising cost of beauty is highlighted in a casual conversation between two mature clients of the salon: “Eine andere Nase kostet zweitausend Mark, sagt er. Das ist mir zu teuer, sage ich. Jetzt habe ich also die Wangen heben lassen, zwei Schnitte hier, zwei Schnitte hier, das ist alles nur eine Geldfrage” (Baum 12) ‘A different nose costs two thousand Marks, he says. It’s too expensive for me, I reply. So now I had my cheeks lifted, two cuts here, two cuts here; it’s all a matter of money.’ Reconstructive surgery in Germany, which was initially developed and reserved for the faces of soldiers wounded in WWI, became commonplace in the 1930s for affluent civilians as well. Breakthroughs in the fields of asepsis (disinfection) and anesthesia expanded the range of and paved the way for aesthetic procedures (Ramsbrock 125). As seen in the guidelines of medical journals such as *Kosmetologische Rundschau*, by 1937, wealthy clients could request rhinoplasty, a facelift, an eyelid lift, lop-side ear correction surgery, or a breast lift.<sup>13</sup>

Baum’s allusions to the power of modern medicine and cosmetics to fabricate a new body (part) and face respectively highlight yet another point: how fluid and relative authenticity and genuineness are when it comes to the beauty industry. When the author reveals that Helen and her uncle Elias, who are recent immigrants from Germany—and Jewish ones at that—survived and prospered by capitalizing on the public obsession with youth and beauty, she terms Elias’s marketing ploy the “größte Propagandaidee des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts” (72) ‘the biggest propaganda of the twentieth century.’ To Elias, falsifying Helen’s age to sell cosmetics seemed better than other options offered to young Jewish women in 1920s New York:

Sommersprossen hast Du gehabt und schüchtern warst Du—was hätte ich mit Dir anfangen sollen? Schreibmaschine? Jeden Tag zehn Stunden krumm sitzen? Für fünf Dollars die Woche? Zur Revue? No (sic) —passt denn jemand aus unserer Familie zur Revue? – Da habe ich in der Zeitung gelesen einen Artikel über Schönheit. Das ist Konjunktur habe ich mir gesagt: Schönheit! Ein kleiner Einwanderer war ich in der großen Stadt. Aber ich habe gerochen, was kommt .... (Baum 72)

You had freckles and were shy—what could I possibly do with you? Put you at a typewriter, to sit and stoop for ten hours a day? For 5 dollars a week? [Or send you] to a revue? No! —Can that suit anyone from our family? Then I saw an article about beauty in the newspaper. That is the

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<sup>13</sup> The maximum monthly income of a regular white-collar employee amounted to 100 Reichsmarks, while aesthetic surgeries ranged from 150 to 400 Reichsmarks for rhinoplasty, 100-300 Reichsmarks for ear surgery, 200-400 Reichsmarks for face-lift, and 100-200 Reichsmarks for an eyelid lift surgery (Ramsbrock 102-105).

direction, I told myself: beauty! An insignificant immigrant in a big city, that is what I was... But I smelled what was to come...

The life that Elias carved for both of them—if based on an enormous scam—pays the bills and allows Helen to travel and interact with high society. To pretend and achieve a comfortable life appears to be better than to be authentic and starve. Making Helen a Jewish woman who achieves fame and wealth after assuming a different identity connects the heroine to Helena Rubenstein who concealed her Jewish origins and to Baum herself, whose commercial success was fueled by the identity created for her at Ullstein. At the same time, Helen's disclosed ethnicity in the play may also be interpreted as Baum's subtle criticism of anti-Semitism in Europe.<sup>14</sup> Although Baum did not advertise her ethnicity, her affiliation with fashion and beauty in the eyes of her fans and critics alike aptly coded her as Jewish. Her Ullstein-cultivated image as a fashion guru, while it sought to overcome existing social, cultural and ethnic barriers, also reproduced stereotypes of Jews as ostentatious dressers and frivolous spenders.<sup>15</sup>

The beauty salon in *Pariser Platz 13* thus reads as an astute commentary on the latest developments in the cosmetics and medical industries, the evolving beauty ideal, and the perceived role of Jews in the emerging beauty culture. At the same time, *Pariser Platz 13* also hints at changing gender roles and relationships. Baum's portrayal of her contemporaries is strikingly nuanced: the traditional gender characteristics are not simply reversed; rather, Baum reformulates gender expectations. At first glance, male protagonists in the play appear as appendages to strong, talented women. Perhaps most convincingly, this model is explored in the relationship between Alix the architect and her much younger lover Pix. As Elias the business manager points out, Pix is Alix's luxury and her property—just like the shiny cabriolet she parks next to the salon. Pix appreciates Alix's groomed looks, but he is drawn most of all to the comfortable existence her earnings can provide for him. Being an indulgence of a rich older woman suits Pix better than being a provider for a woman his age. Their gender role reversal is further emphasized by the tasks Pix is expected to complete for his lady: to pick up dry-cleaning, buy artichokes and be nice and patient when the hardworking woman gets home. Baum's framing of the Pix/Alix relationship forms part of the image of the new woman who consumes romantic relationships and sexual pleasures as one

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<sup>14</sup> Historically in Germany, Jews occupied a prominent place in the German fashion industry as tailors and *Konfektion* owners. Because it was often Jews who shopped for fashionable and luxury goods (frequently in Jewish-owned stores), their tastes steered the fashion market in distinct ways (Wallach 113, 115).

<sup>15</sup> The nationalist-conservative and anti-Semitic press repeatedly labeled Baum a Jewish *émancipée* who contaminated the minds of German women with false ideas about social roles and identity (Capovilla 66).

would devour a delicious dessert—as a reward after a busy, intellectually or physically challenging day.

Helen's budding infatuation with Pix develops along similar lines. While beautifying Alix, Helen welcomes Pix's flirting because romance is a pleasant distraction to her exhausting days. For a short while, Helen allows herself to be seduced by the sexual appeal of Pix's youth, precisely because it is real and authentic, not fabricated in a beauty salon. The dichotomies between authenticity and fabrication and between art and scam come together in the play's finale. When confronted by the socialite Katja about the rumor concerning her age, Helen intends to stand by the truth. Yet, the worldly 51-year-old Katja encourages Helen to continue with the legend:

Welche Frau hat nicht genug von ihrem Alter? ... Bleiben Sie nur bei Ihren 42. Die Welt will beschwindelt sein, lassen Sie es doch dabei. Ich gehöre zu den Gescheiten, die den Schwindel durchschauen und den Mund halten. Sie haben Verpflichtungen. Mein Gott, ich habe Ihr Institut in Berlin lanciert—da können Sie doch jetzt nicht herkommen und mich blamieren... (Baum 140)

What woman does not lament her age? ... Just remain at your 42. The world wants to be deceived, so leave it the way it is. I belong to those clever ones who can see through the fraud and keep their mouth shut. You have obligations. My God, I have set up your Institute in Berlin—you can't simply just come here and disgrace me....

If Katja cites Helen's professional obligations, Alix is certain that Pix is not worthy of Helen's bravery and that he cannot possibly become Helen's "purpose in life" (*Lebensinhalt*).

Ach, Pix ist ja etwas Ganzes. Glauben Sie mir, so wie er ist, ist er komplett und richtig. Ein ... sagen wir 60prozentiger Mann. ... Ja. Bei Tage haben wir keine Zeit und abends sind wir todmüde. Sehen Sie, und dann wollen Sie glauben, dass unsereins noch Platz hat für einen Lebensinhalt ... neben dem Beruf? Oh nein, wir Frauen von heute, so wie wir geworden sind, für uns ist ein Mann wie Pix gerade recht, —wie Pix, —nicht wie Peter. [Pix's real name] ... Wir haben selber Sorgen und Kämpfe und Probleme genug. Wir brauchen Männer, die gut aussehen und vergnügt sind und angenehm zum Ausspannen. ... Ich biete ihm das, was er braucht, und er bietet mir, was ich brauche. (Baum 143-45)

Well, Pix is already something complete. Trust me, the way he is, he is indeed complete and real. A...let's say, sixty-percent man/male. ... Yes. During the day we have no time and in the evening we are dead tired. Do you see? —And you still want to believe that our kind has room for a purpose in life ... besides our profession? Oh no, we modern women, the way we have become, for us a man like Pix is just right,—as Pix,—not as Peter [Pix's real name] ... We ourselves have enough cares, battles and problems. We need men who look great, who amuse us and who are pleasant to unwind with. ... I provide for him what he needs and he provides for me what I need.

Alix's monologue sheds light on the similarities between the two women's lives and especially on the role that their careers and sexuality play in their encounters with men. Her apparent cynicism about romance does not diminish her earnest attitude towards her profession. The pleasures of meaningful occupation and financial independence are more substantial than the pleasure of sex. This understanding as well as mutual admiration serve as the foundation for Alix and Helen's budding friendship, even if they are in love with the same man. With Helen and Alix, Baum explores a new concept of female honor, which relies not on virginity or monogamy within a patriarchal marriage, but on women's professionalism and integrity in the business world. Female protagonists in the play are depicted as authentic, gritty and talented—in contrast to men, who are fickle and conniving.

The play closes with the affirmation of Helen as a professional: in her hands, the actress with mousy hair, an unremarkable face and poorly applied makeup is transformed from head to toe, dazzling the audience with a shiny blond coiffure, carefully painted eyes and mouth, a perfectly tinted face, and a flattering long dress. Although one might note that Helen's template of beauty alters all women into blond vamp-types, the clients receive what they seek: the look that is deemed fashionable and desirable.

The ending of the play foreshadows Baum's own experience with the beauty industry and the world of glamour. At a formal event in New York in 1931, where the author had traveled for the publicity tour and Broadway opening of *Grand Hotel*, Baum was encircled by American socialites, whose "exquisite grooming, posture, the glow of hair, teeth, skin, slimness of ankles and wrists, smallness of hands and feet and waist" dealt a "hard blow to her feminine self-assurance" (Baum 423). Inspired by the "incomparable Oyster Bay wives and daughters," Baum rushed to the Elizabeth Arden salon, emerging as "eine augenbrauenlose Platinblonde" 'a platinum blonde without eyebrows' just like the actress from *Pariser Platz 13* (Baum 423). Irony notwithstanding, the result must have boosted

the author's self-confidence: from 1934 until her death in 1960 Baum "swindled years off," claiming to be six years younger than she actually was (Weng 233).

*Pariser Platz 13* offers a rich and multifaceted portrayal of the consumer culture of the 1920s and early 1930s in the Weimar Republic, pointing to the high costs of beauty and the pressure to keep up with the feminine ideal promoted in the popular media. The play also exposes the burden affecting professional women like Helen and Alix literally to preserve the façade, revealing the interrelatedness of their struggles for financial, social, and sexual fulfillment.

### Der große Ausverkauf

When during her first trip to America Baum was contracted by the Paramount film studio to produce another bestseller similar to *Grand Hotel*, the author, following the suggestion of the film director Ernst Lubitsch, chose a department store as her setting.<sup>16</sup> For Baum, weeks of research at Wanamaker's, New York's largest and oldest department store, revealed the unglamorous details of a salesgirl's daily life: "subway ride at the rush hour, the bad food ... the cold-water flats overrun by cockroaches, the cheap, smart little dresses, the beloved jerks they had for boyfriends or husbands" (329). *Der große Ausverkauf* (published in America as *Central Stores* in 1940) presents a modern Cinderella story with elements of social realism, probing realities of the Depression era: bankrupted families, gigolos, and New York mafia. Contrary to a typical Cinderella story, in this novel, the hardships of the heroine Nina do not end with her marriage; rather, the marriage becomes a sober and disenchanted relationship, in which she has to forgive infidelity and struggle through financial challenges. Furthermore, the villainess of the story, Lilian, after being briefly punished, is rewarded with fame and money.

*Der große Ausverkauf* follows Baum's three other works about America written in the late 1930s after her emigration, capturing the author's growing disenchantment with her new home country. As suggested in the title, which would literally translate to "The Big Sale," the novel deconstructs modernity as a process of an unceasing circulation of goods and services and of the commodification of relationships and people. Written in the Baum-popularized genre of *Gruppenroman* 'group novel,' *Der große Ausverkauf* follows genuine representatives of the 'melting pot': the salesgirl Nina, an orphan from Texas; the store's window designer Erik, her fiancé, an impoverished Danish aristocrat; Nina's coworker Lilian Smith, the sexy "mannequin," who hails from the city slums; the clerk Mrs. Bradley, the widow of a bankrupted stock market broker. Using the microcosm of

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<sup>16</sup> *Der große Ausverkauf*, which Baum described as the "hardest work I ever did for five thousand dollars" (328) never made it to the silver screen (Baum *It was all quite different* 201).

the store as a backdrop, Baum documents the daily minutiae of the employees,<sup>17</sup> exploiting realistic detail to portray the American lifestyle and to comment on the experience of exile.

The setting where each character is displayed highlights not only their skills, but also their market value: Erik, an aspiring painter, decorates display windows; Nina's innocence and daintiness are well suited to selling discounted merchandise in the porcelain section, while Lilian's "queenly" figure and oozing sex appeal are utilized in modeling clothes. Those without the allure of youth, sexiness, or talent, such as the forty-six-year-old Mrs. Bradley, are assigned to assemble packages alongside the sixteen-year-old clerks. The symbolic parallel between the value of people and the value of goods develops over the course of the novel: first, with Mrs. Bradley's demotion, followed by the dismissal of the detective who has worked at the store for 26 years, culminating in the drastic reduction in price for the rose tea set from \$38.90 to \$9.75 in the last pages of the novel. This ending, Gürtler convincingly argues, sarcastically points to the decreasing value of goods and people in American society: both are discarded when they are old or out of style (267).

In their daily interactions as agents of consumption, the protagonists become entangled in the intricate web of deception and unfulfilled desires. Heavily made up and perfumed, Lilian embodies the cynical Girl, the child of the slums whose goal in life is to escape from the "Vulgarität ihrer Herkunft und ihres Namens" (25) 'the vulgarity of her origins and of her [last] name.' Similar to Baum's character Flämmchen from *Grand Hotel*, Lilian views her body as a commodity, an opportunity to survive in the big city jungle, and sex as disconnected from emotion or love (Mikota 170). Oscillating between hatred for her own miserable circumstances and envy for her affluent customers, Lilian feels affection only for the clothes she wears as a mannequin:

Sie war verliebt in die Kleider, die sie trug, in all diese Seiden, Chiffons, Velours, Spitzen; Pelze machten sie verrückt. Ihre Haut was glücklich unter der Berührung von feinem Material. ... Das Schlimme nämlich war es, die Kleider nachher wieder auszuziehen und in das eigene armselige Zwölf-Dollar-Kleidchen zu kriechen. ... Das Schlimmste aber ist es, die Kleider, diese geliebten Kleider, an der Kundschaft zu sehen. Zu sehen, wie ein Modell die Linie verliert, wie alle diese zu Kurzen, zu Dicken, zu Plumpen, zu Alten, sich in die Kleider zwängen ... und nörgeln, wie sie Kleider nicht tragen können und [wie sie] die schönsten Pelze vulgär machen ... (Baum 28)

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<sup>17</sup> The structure of the novel was inspired by Karl Freund's cinematic narrative *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* (1927) and Emile Zola's novel *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883) (Gürtler 265).

She was in love with the clothes that she modeled, in all these silks, chiffons, velour, lace; furs drove her crazy. Her skin was happy under the touch of the fine fabric ... The bad thing was that she had to take off the dresses afterwards and creep back into her own pathetic 12-dollar-rag of a dress. ... The worst, however, was to see these dresses, these beloved dresses, on the customers. To see how the dress loses its lines. How all these women who are too short, too wide, too fat, [or] too old force themselves into the dresses ... and then whine that they cannot wear the dresses. ... [How they] make the most beautiful furs look vulgar.

Like Doris from Irgard Keun's *Artificial Silk Girl*, Lilian spends her meager earnings on the latest fashions and cosmetics, being able to afford only the cheapest knock off versions (Gürtler 264). Lilian's dreams: to become an actress, a revue star, or a beauty queen are motivated by her desire to partake in conspicuous consumption. In Lilian's life—which is devoid of intimate emotional connection with people—clothes and jewelry are shown as compensation for human warmth and affection. The physicality of Lilian's relationship with clothes points to the fact that she is generally engaged in an erotic relationship with things, not people. Lilian's coding as a materialistic, cynical Girl distances her from Nina and Mrs. Bradley, the more traditional feminine types, who seek to nurture and sacrifice self.

Throughout the novel, Baum's characterization of Lilian focuses on her sexualized body, usually described from the perspective of a desiring male. Ironically, instead of attracting rich patrons, Baum's Lilian is propositioned on her long subway rides home and in the dark alleys of the slums. The ambivalence behind the perceived aggressive sexuality of the Girl is explored further when Lilian bitterly underlines the limitations of her beautiful body:

„Ja, wenn ich ihre Figur hätte!“ sagt die Kundschaft manchmal. ... Ja, wenn du meine Figur hättest! denkt Lilian dann hochmütig. ... Mit meiner Figur bekommt man sechzehn Dollar Wochenlohn und wohnt im Souterrain, ganz unten. Mit meiner Figur hat man nicht einmal einen Freund—denn für die meisten ist man sich zu gut, und für den man nicht zu gut wäre, den weht kein Wind in das große Warenhaus. (Baum 28)

‘Yes, if I only had her figure!’, says the client sometimes. ... Yes, if only you had my figure! thinks Lilian with disdain in response. With my figure, one is paid sixteen dollars a week and lives in the basement, all the way down. With my figure, one cannot ever have a boyfriend—because for the most I am too good, and the one for whom I would be not too good, he would never set his foot in this big department store.

In real life, live mannequins are treated as a clothes rack by wealthy patrons and subjected to the “Körperuntersuchung” (‘body check’) by the store’s detective, who makes sure that they have not stolen anything. That Lilian is just another object in the store is most strikingly captured during the interaction between the model; the fashion department manager, Madame Chalon; and the rich customer Mrs. Thorpe. When Mrs. Thorpe’s emerald ring cuts Lilian’s exposed flesh in an evening gown, Mrs. Thorpe excitedly points to her gigolo boyfriend that she has lost weight and her rings are now too big. Madame Chalon, after noticing Lilian’s bleeding shoulder, chimes in with “Geben Sie acht, dass das Kleid nicht schmutzig wird, Miss Smith” (Baum 89) ‘Please pay attention so as to not soil the dress, Miss Smith.’ Lilian’s value as a human is diminished still more when the manager adds: “Jetzt können Sie jedem erzählen, dass Sie mit einem echten Smaragd verletzt worden sind” (89) ‘now you can tell everyone that you were injured by a true emerald.’ Instead of being offended, Lilian should be proud that Mrs. Thorpe’s expensive ring penetrated her skin.

Baum’s portrayal of women employees as commodities culminates with Nina’s staging as a living doll in a display window arranged by her new husband. After winning in the store-wide beauty pageant, Nina (with a tag attached to her leg!) demonstrates the durability of the new product, the garter, amidst sixteen similarly dressed life size plastic mannequins. This act of advertisement blurs the boundaries between the store and the outside world, and between a salesgirl and a girl for sale. Nina’s exposure in the window transforms her into an object of desire similar to movie stars. At the same time, she becomes an easy target for sexual propositions such as the one from Mr. Thorpe (the embittered husband of Lilian’s customer).

Nina’s hesitation to sell her body for material comforts and pleasures sharply contrasts with Lillian’s, whose hunger for the glamorous life tempts her to steal an expensive emerald ring from Mrs. Thorpe and Erik from Nina—because he, a penniless Danish immigrant, also happens to be a count. Lillian’s cynical materialism also embroils her in a world of gangsters and mafia and makes her part of their plot to rob the department store. Drawn to the attributes of wealth, Lillian shows complete lack of compassion or remorse, allowing Erik to be blamed for the crime and imprisoned.

In her usual conciliatory fashion, Baum resolves the conflicts between the characters by upholding traditional gender expectations—and Baum’s own views of marriage, which, according to Mikota, are best summarized by Mr. Thorpe’s remarks to Nina (170):

“Kind,” sagte er, “Kind, Sie sind jung, Sie glauben noch, Ehe ist etwas Heiliges, etwas Großartiges und all diesen Zimt aus der Sonntagschule.

Sehen Sie doch um? Welche Ehe wird denn nicht getrennt oder gebrochen oder geht sonst wie zum Teufel? (Baum 148)

“Child,” he said. “Child, you are young. You still believe, marriage is something holy, magnificent and all that cinnamon from Sunday school. Are you looking around though? What marriage is not split up or broken or goes somehow else to hell?”

Disenchantment notwithstanding, Baum asserts the importance of marriage through her protagonists' choices. When Nina learns that she is pregnant by her husband Erik, she leaves Mr. Thorpe's house, where she had become a houseguest. Nina's magic carpet ride into the world of conspicuous consumption as Mr. Thorpe's companion ends with her asking for her old position at the department store: the virtuous Nina chooses to earn money rather than to be a kept woman. Mr. Thorpe reconciles with Mrs. Thorpe who has left her gigolo boyfriend; both decide to work on their relationship. Lilian is punished for her treachery.

At the same time, the details surrounding crime and punishment in the novel highlight Baum's irony towards both traditional femininity and the Girl. Nina's nurturing nature, lack of materialism and her loyalty to her philandering husband are depicted as virtues, but so is Nina's attempt to murder her rival, Lilian—because Nina is fighting to save her marriage and not lose her child's father. Lilian, who is recovering from the pistol wound, appears to get what she deserves—but the press creates a different legend surrounding the wound and turns Lilian into a well-paid celebrity, her long-cherished wish.

Baum's depiction of Lilian expands and reformulates “the Girl” sketched by Fritz Giese in his book *Girllkultur. Vergleiche zwischen amerikanischem und europäischem Rhythmus und Lebensgefühl* (1925) ‘Girl culture. Comparisons between American and European Rhythm und Attitude to life’:

Der Bubikopf, der bestimmte modische schlanke Linie, der Sportkörper ohne Fett und erotische Fraulichkeit ... sexuell ohne Tabus, ... Sie [ist] bedacht auf ihre ökonomische Selbstständigkeit, ihre persönliche Freiheit und [ist] zum Teil sogar bereit, ihre Beziehung zu Männern diesem Ideal unterzuordnen (Mikota 169).

That bob, that defined fashionable slimness, that sporty body without fat and erotic femininity ... without sexual taboos, she is concerned about her economic independence, her personal freedom and is for the most part prepared to subordinate her relationships with men to that ideal.

Baum's Lilian illustrates the ambivalent nature of the Girl: behind the façade of sexual emancipation hides the Girl's direct dependence on men, market, fashion, and the media. While taking a critical stand on capitalism, the novel dismantles and perpetuates the myths about the New Woman, exposing a less alluring reality behind the American media, conspicuous consumption and their depiction of the Girl.

## Conclusion

When in her memoirs Vicki Baum admitted that she wrote for money, she also underlined her intention to make her fiction "lesbar und unterhaltsam" (463) 'readable and amusing.' In Baum's own, widely quoted words, she possessed the skill to entertain the masses, not the intellectual elite: "Ich weiß, was ich wert bin. Ich bin erstklassige Schriftstellerin zweiter Güte" (16) 'I know my own worth: I am a first-rate second-class writer.' Writing in the vein of New Objectivity,<sup>18</sup> Baum offered her readership a wide range of female role models, seeking to discuss controversial contemporary issues within popular culture and to provide a harmonious, conciliatory ending. Her books did not attempt to take a political or philosophical position; rather, both thematically and through protagonists, Baum articulated positions she herself inhabited as mother and wife, working professional, Austrian Jew, and later, exile.

While it reflected Baum's independent and adventurous personality and helped sell her books, Ullstein's marketing of Baum as an embodiment of the New Woman also narrowed the thematic range of her literary output at Ullstein. Cosmetics, beauty salons, and department stores represented a sign of modernity and were a safe, popular topic for a woman writer such as Baum: consumption of beauty was advertised in the visual and printed media as part of a modern woman's lifestyle. *Pariser Platz 13* and *Der große Ausverkauf*, while written with mass literature parameters in mind, explored beauty and fashion consumption differently from the mainstream illustrated press. If popular magazines advocated makeup and fashion as a pathway into emancipation and self-determination, *Der große Ausverkauf* offered a disillusioned view of glamour, pointing to the commodification and objectification of women, while *Pariser Platz 13* unmasked the inflated promises of beauty products and underlined the high cost of beauty

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<sup>18</sup> The literature of New Subjectivity reflected the worldview of a growing white-collar worker class and of the Berlin metropolis, exhibiting liberal-democratic tendencies and the sober, disillusioned attitude of the post-WW I generation. This literary trend increasingly distanced itself from trivial literature as well as elite aesthetics. It sought to re-define the role of art, especially literature, in the age of mass culture, claiming that literature and commerce, as well as literature and entertainment, should no longer be in opposition (Nottelmann 33).

rituals. At the same time, both texts echoed the contemporary belief in female agency to alter traditional roles and social status.

Similar to Arden and Rubenstein's salons, the fictional salon on *Pariser Platz 13* stands as a venue of female empowerment, where the beautifying of self is termed a worthy pursuit, and where Baum's readers can take note of the changing relationship between the genders, society and space. The concept of beauty presented by Baum in the play displays a fundamental shift in meaning that occurred in the early twentieth century: beauty was no longer perceived as nature's gift, but rather as a democratic asset available to any woman if she worked persistently at attaining it.

If the beauty parlor in *Pariser Platz 13* appears an enclave of female power, the department store in *Der große Ausverkauf* can be read as a place where the project of emancipation fails. The department store stands as a symbol for social interaction in modernity, where genuine human contact is neither possible nor really intended as all interaction is guided by the laws of market economy and people have to maintain their market value. The store is a site where youth and beauty are commodified and where the distinction between a salesgirl and a girl for sale is increasingly porous. An example of exile literature, the novel offers Baum's interpretation of the Girl in her home setting, pointing to her dependence on the media, men, and market, and articulates the author's critical view of the American way of life, especially concerning women.

In their attempt to construct progressive role models for female readers, both texts work with the problematic emancipatory concept of the New Woman. Reading these lesser known Baum works today brings into view intriguing parallels between her era and now: beauty and youth manufactured in a salon; an identity fabricated with the help of fashionable clothing, cosmetics, and lies; the complicated sisterhood of professional women; the commodification of sex, and the power of the popular media.

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