

## Representing gender. Automobility in discourse of femininity in the Weimar Republic

Defying all notions of unfemininity, women cut their hair and, in doing this, released inhibitions, and armed with features once monopolized by men, slid into a position where they could navigate their lives and automobiles with comfort and confidence.<sup>1</sup>

Female emancipation in association with driving, as the above quote from 1927 points out, arose from the fact that before World War I driving was a male domain. In contrast to women, men had the commitment to buy a car, the physical strength and the technical know-how to drive. The absence of women in automobility is documented by indices of German automobile clubs which listed only male drivers, called "Herrenfahrer", as members. At the beginning of the automobile era, it was not socially acceptable for women to drive. Not only were women discouraged from driving but they were not granted suffrage, they were not allowed to work outside home nor to attend university either.

### Women on the move

During World War I conventional understandings of masculinity and femininity unhinged. Due to the lack of male workers women worked in traffic and transportation as tram and rail conductors or taxi drivers.



A female taxi driver in 1910, in  
Ulrich Kubisch, Taxi. Auf den Spuren des mobilen Gewerbes,  
Berlin 1984, p. 88.

Hence, female professional life changed physical demands by forcing women to abandon feminine delicacy and demonstrate instead strength and energy. This shift was even reflected in fashion. Female immobility and corset-clad women \_ typical for the 19<sup>th</sup> century \_ were now

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<sup>1</sup>Anke Hertling is responsible for all the translations presented in this article. However, each quotation is presented in original version in footnote, to be more precise.

„[...] allen Entwürfen von der Unweiblichkeit zum Trotz [hat die Frau] ihre Haare und damit unzählige seelische Hemmungen abgeschnitten und ist, [...] bewehrt [sic] mit allen Eigenschaften, die einst die Männer für sich monopolisiert hatten, auf den Platz gerutscht, von dem aus sie Leben und Auto bequem und überlegen steuern kann.“ Katharina Rathaus, Der erzieherische Einfluß des Autos auf die Frau, in Elegante Welt, no. 23 (16.1.1927), p. 26.

replaced by diligent and powerful women in pantaloons, once a men's privilege. As Dr. med. Henny Magnus stated in the German journal *Die Frau und Gegenwart* in 1925 that women took a new place in society:

The supple and trained female body is much more likely to meet the demands of professional life. As this type of body has become a must, we have learned to find it beautiful.<sup>2</sup>

While a lot of women employed in traffic and transportation lost their jobs when men returned from war, the percentage of female professionals in white collar occupations such as secretaries and salesgirls reached a historic peak in the Weimar Republic.<sup>3</sup> Equipped with typewriters, telephones and electric tills they assumed responsibility for standardised work in offices which required not only mechanical skills but body management as well. This group supported the powerful and sporty concept of the "New Woman". "Ladies, you need to get more exercise"<sup>4</sup> was the motto for those who embodied the modern female generation and women's magazines such as *Vogue*, *Uhu*, *Scherl's Magazine*, *Frau und Gegenwart*, *Die Dame*, *Elegante Welt* promoted sport and fitness. In order to constitute a new female identification in a time when women were conquering male domains, female motorists such as Tamara de Lempicka who portrayed herself in a sporty fashion on the front cover of German journal *Die Dame*, were centred in women's magazines.



"Selbstporträt im grünen Bugatti"  
by Tamara de Lempicka, in  
Friso Wiegersma, *Frau und Auto*,  
Amsterdam 1981, ill. no. 42.

The automobile, a symbol of self-determination, was qualified to convey an image of new female reality in which sporty and mechanised women were considered emancipated.

### Women and cars in "beauty contest"

With the image of sporty and motorised women which embodied new female attributes at the beginning of the 1920s, advertisements and magazines began to picture well-dressed women in vehicles in the middle of the 1920s.<sup>5</sup> During the Weimar Republic automobiles used to be exclusive consumer goods and car manufacturers geared their products to appeal to a clientele who could afford the luxury of automobility. To illustrate the sphere of automobile luxury auto

<sup>2</sup> „Der gestählte, abgehärtete, biegsame Frauenkörper kann die Anforderungen des Berufslebens bei weitem besser erfüllen. Da dieser Typ Notwendigkeit geworden ist, haben wir gelernt, ihn schön zu finden.“ Henny Magnus, *Schlank muss man sein!* in *Elegante Welt*, no. 20 (29.9.1920), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Ute Frevert, *Frauen-Geschichte. Zwischen Bürgerlicher Verbesserung und Neuer Weiblichkeit*, Frankfurt a. M. 1986, p. 172.

<sup>4</sup> C.F. *Schlank muss man sein!*, in *Elegante Welt*, no. 20 (29.9.1920), p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> C.F. Gesa Kessemeier, *Sportlich, sachlich, männlich. Das Bild der >Neuen Frau< in den Zwanziger Jahren. Zur Konstruktion geschlechtsspezifischer Körperbilder in der Mode der Jahre 1920 bis 1929*, Dortmund 2000, p. 73.

advertising staged an aesthetical entity of women and cars. “Never before”, Wolfgang Sachs summarised, “have there been so many advertisements displaying women or ladies with automobiles”<sup>6</sup>.

The image of motorised beauties emphasized women’s role as ornament. Women’s magazines



Lucy Doraine presents herself as a luxury automobilist, in *Elegante Welt*, no. 11 (2.6.1926), p. 28.

organised automobile parades in which women rested against bonnets in a graceful and feminine dress rather than in a sporty pose. This image can be traced back to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet at the beginning of the automobile era, French carmakers staged ladies in their advertisements to demonstrate luxury and easy manageability. Even though female motorists were not accepted in public discourse, they were able to give automobiles a luxurious and leisurely status while strength and adventure was represented by male drivers. This concept

of gender continued in the mid-1920s only insofar as car culture increasingly became "feminine". The sporty challenge as male domain was no longer the decisive factor when buying cars. German car manufacturers focused in their production on limousines<sup>7</sup> which have a similarity to clean and closed electric cars at the beginning of the automobile era, devised by Henry Ford specifically for women who wanted to be motorists<sup>8</sup>. This reference to "feminine" standards in the car industry shifted car culture towards luxury for men as well. The portrayed motorised beauties demonstrated the high social prestige of the new established group of middle-class car buyers who imitated a noble lifestyle.



The advertisement for Delahaye presents an image of "female" dignity and calm, in Friso Wiegiersma, *Frau und Auto*, Amsterdam 1981, ill. no. 6.

On the one hand, women’s influence on car culture appeared as an access to the male domain of automobility. On the other, women only played the role of taste experts or agents of distinction, positions which were traditional female domains:

Cultivated women instinctively recognize and appreciate every major achievement, be it in the fields of interior design, fashion or even automobile manufacturing. Women consider a 6- or 8-cylinder Packard not only a basic commodity but also a work of art. Its beauty turns the everyday procedure of necessary transportation into a luxurious pleasure.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Wolfgang Sachs, *Die Liebe zum Automobil. Ein Rückblick in die Geschichte unserer Wünsche*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1984, p. 53.

<sup>7</sup> C.F. *ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>8</sup> C.F. Virginia Scharff, *Taking the Wheel. Women and the Coming of the Motor Age*, Albuquerque 1992, p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> „Kultivierte Frauen erkennen und schätzen ganz instinktiv jede wertvolle Leistung, sei es eine solche auf dem Gebiet der Raumausstattung, der Mode oder auch des Automobilbaues. [...] Die Frau sieht in einem Packard – ob 6-

Automobile advertising presented driving as the key to private consumption. First and foremost, this implied the use of the car for leisure activities. Depicted with their cars whilst sunbathing<sup>10</sup>, having a picnic<sup>11</sup> or whilst playing golf<sup>12</sup>, female motorists embodied not only personal freedom but were similarly framed in terms of femininity - they were, for example, put into the traditional context of nature. But were female motorists in the Weimar Era simply an image used to establish cars as luxury consumer goods, as advertisements substantiated?

### Gender trouble.<sup>13</sup> The female motorist Erika Mann

Virginia Scharff has shown that American suffragettes used cars for their activities. In Germany during the Weimar Era, however, the automobile had no direct effect on the feminist movement in the fight for women's rights.<sup>14</sup> But a look at female motorists' texts reveals that driving was a expression for "New Women" who enjoyed the new female reality: Erika Mann, Annemarie Schwarzenbach, Ruth Landshoff-Yorck, Clärenore Stinnes or Margret Boveri worked as authors and journalists, they lead a self-supported life and the automobile enhanced their search for new possibilities. Especially the feature pages offered a forum for women to articulate their new freedom. The reporter is the new type of female author, wrote Erika Mann in 1931.<sup>15</sup> She published her automobile texts in the Berlin tabloid *Tempo* and the stories' themes were the possibility of a mobile existence. Her car was not a limousine but a rickety Ford which guaranteed adventurous driving. For Erika Mann driving represented cruising at breakneck speed with opened roof. Her automobile dress and her driving style point out a gender discourse in which male driving style was adapted. Erika Mann took the wheel like "Auto Wildlinge"<sup>16</sup> at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:



Erika Mann in 1930, in Birgit Haustedt, *Die wilden Jahre in Berlin. Eine Klatsch- und Kulturgeschichte der Frauen*, Dortmund 1999, p. 143.

You only start to feel better when you are hurtling through a rainy, miserable village above speed limit, causing puddles to splash pedestrians, and chance has to save you from harm on every bend.

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oder 8-Cylinder – mehr als einen nützlichen Gebrauchsgegenstand; für sie ist er auch ein Kunstwerk. Seine Schönheit gestaltet einen alltäglichen Vorgang – den der notwendigen Beförderung – zu einem luxuriösen Genuß.“  
Advertisement for Packard, in *Die Dame*, Erstes Juniheft 1928, no. 18, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> C.F. *Elegante Welt*, no. 16 (10.8.1927), p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> *Freuden des Picknicks*, in *Die Dame*, Erstes Juniheft 1928, no.18, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> C.F. *Elegante Welt*, no 17 (24.8.1927), p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> The title is adapted from the concept of "Gender Trouble" by Judith Butler.

<sup>14</sup> Virginia Scharff, *Taking the Wheel. Women and the Coming of the Motor Age*, Albuquerque 1992, p. 80.

<sup>15</sup> C.F. Erika Mann [1931], *Frau und Buch*, in Irmela von der Lühe, Uwe Naumann (eds.), *Erika Mann. Blitze überm Ozean. Aufsätze, Reden, Reportagen*, Hamburg 2001, p. 85.

<sup>16</sup> Christoph Maria Merki, *Die „Auto-Wildlinge“ und das Recht*, in Harry Niemann, Armin Hermann (eds.), *Geschichte der Straßenverkehrssicherheit im Wechselspiel zwischen Fahrzeug, Fahrbahn und Mensch*, Bielefeld 1999, pp. 51-73.

On the open country road, chicken, witty little creatures, waddle towards your 70-km/h. Now you even make sure they get right under the car, unharmed by the wheels.<sup>17</sup>

This genderplay is a reason for male distrust, especially when women developed cars professionally. Although women's magazines emphasized that female motorists needed technical skills, Erika Mann showed in her article *Wie ich Auto-Monteur lernte* that female mechanics were still considered an interference to a male domain:

It is understood that the boys are at first suspicious when you turn up in a blue overall and a beret. They hardly ever notice you, lie under their cars, greasy with oil, make a mess around you, squirt you with pumps filled with oil mixture, make a hell of a noise with a grinding machine; it is like a cauldron that you entered voluntarily.<sup>18</sup>

To counter male prejudices, Erika Mann did not articulate a programme of emancipation but supported female motorists in her automobile stories and drove male critiques back with callousness and automobile knowledge. In her article *An den Berliner* she made clear that female motorists embodied a new self-assured generation of women. The article was an answer to Franz Hessel's essay *An die Berlinerinnen* in 1929. Hessel, a city stroller and self-appointed friend of beautiful women<sup>19</sup>, described Berlin women as representative of "New Women" who deal with their lovesickness as if it were toothache when taking the wheel. He required that woman have to be more sentimental.<sup>20</sup> In view of this statement, Erika Mann had to laugh. She answered: "the stupid love! [...] It is brought into discredit [...]."<sup>21</sup> The modern love of "New Women" is unsentimental. For a first date, Erika Mann advised:

If you want to test someone – madam or sir – neither go to the theatre or dancing – make a journey, a sport journey though, go skiing with the creature to be tested, or, which is the best thing to do, go driving. Nothing reveals more about one's character than sports. A nocturnal ride, and you know everything.<sup>22</sup>

In her humourous manner, Erika Mann breaks with male voices such as Franz Hessel's, whose complaints about female motorists show a male feeling of insecurity about the new generation of

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<sup>17</sup> „Erst als du schließlich, unerlaubt schnell, durch die regenmißmutige Ortschaft brausest, daß die Pfützen den Passanten um die Ohren spritzen und an allen Kurven der Zufall dich vor Unheil schützen muss, beginnst du dich wohler zu fühlen. Auf der freien Landstraße die Hühner, geistreiche Geschöpfchen, watscheln dir ins 70-Kilometer-Tempo. Nun richtest du es sogar ein, daß sie direkt unter den Wagen kommen, unversehrt von den Rädern.“ Erika Mann, *Verflixtes Regenwetter*, in *Tempo* 10.7.1929.

<sup>18</sup> „Zunächst, versteht sich, sind die Jungens mißtrauisch, wenn du im blauen Overall mit Baskenmütze bei ihnen antrittst. Sie achten deiner kaum, liegen verschmiert unter ihren Wagen, rangieren wild um dich herum, bespritzen dich aus Luftpumpen mit dem Ölgemisch, lärmern grausam am Schleifapparat; es ist ein Hexenkessel, in den du dich freiwillig begabst.“ Erika Mann [1930], *Wie ich Auto-Monteur lernte*, in Irmela von der Lühe, Uwe Naumann (eds.), *Erika Mann. Blitze überm Ozean. Aufsätze, Reden, Reportagen*, Hamburg, p.73.

<sup>19</sup> C.F. Irmela von der Lühe, *Erika Mann. Eine Biographie*, Frankfurt a. Main 1996, p. 61.

<sup>20</sup> C.F. Irmela von der Lühe, Uwe Naumann (eds.), *Erika Mann. Blitze überm Ozean. Aufsätze, Reden, Reportagen*, Hamburg 2001, p. 490.

<sup>21</sup> Erika Mann [1929], *An den Berliner*, in *ibid.*, pp. 68.

<sup>22</sup> „Willst du jemand ausprobieren – Dame oder Herr – , geh nicht ins Theater, auch nicht tanzen –, geh auf Reisen, aber auf sportliche, fahre Ski mit dem auszuprobierenden Geschöpf, oder am besten Auto. Nichts enthüllt den Charakter so sehr wie der Sport. Eine Nachtfahrt im Auto, und du weißt alles.“ Erika Mann [1931] *Sport und Charakter*, in *ibid.*, p. 92.

women. Women like Erika Mann do not want to be confined to the kitchen. Not at all: Erika Mann's fervour to race along, for which she was even fined once<sup>23</sup>, motivated her to take part in a European rally in which participants had to cover a distance of 10.000km in ten days. Her co-driver was Ricki Hallgarten. Since he always spoke about committing suicide, she wanted to give him new courage to face life and then she took the risk of participating in that rally. For both this driving experience went far beyond their physical and psychological limits.<sup>24</sup> Going over the top was representative for Erika Mann's pretension of life as a "New woman": setting off and looking for an individual approach to life. Here the automobile played a decisive role and offered women at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century more for manoeuvres than the image of motorised beauties wanted to credibly. "This is how I perceive her", a friend of Erika Mann who received her when she returned from the rally, remembers:

deadly weak and stunned behind the flounce of the touring car [...] she drove across Europe. It was in the middle of the night; it was like an encounter in a foreign land, and I definitely knew she would have angrily rejected the sympathy I felt for this strained face. She wanted to be strong rather than strengthened.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> C.F. Erika Mann [1930], Die Briefangst des Autlers, in *ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>24</sup> Erika Mann, Auch wir Frauen haben's geschafft, in *Ford im Bild*, no. 7 (1931).

<sup>25</sup> „So sehe ich sie todesmatt und unansprechbar hinter dem Volant des offenen Tourenwagens, den sie [...] quer durch Europa fuhr. Es war mitten in der Nacht; [...] es war eine Begegnung wie in der Fremde, und von Mitleid mit dem überanstrengten Gesicht, das ich empfand, wußte ich genau, sie hätte es belästigt abgewehrt mit einem ihrer eigenen verzerrten Entblößen ihrer Zähne. Sie wollte stark sein, nicht gestärkt werden.“ W. E. Süskind, Thomas' Tochter. Zum Tode Erika Manns, in *Deutsches Allgemeines Sonntagsblatt*, 14.9.1969.