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PROVINCIALISING BERLIN IN *MENSCHEN IM HOTEL*

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I take the peculiar source of Vicki Baum's *Menschen im Hotel* (1929) in a Southern Moravian town as a starting point to reveal the ways in which the hierarchies between metropolis and province are negotiated and complicated by the novel. Focusing on the provincial in this big-city novel sheds light not only on how the popular image of Weimar-era Berlin — as glamorous and progressive, bountiful and exciting — emerges as the construct of petit-bourgeois, provincial unfamiliarity and excitement, but also on how the novel shows the province itself as less parochial, ignorant and close-minded than the stereotypes suggest. It shows how the novel brings together local and global geographies by entangling provincial life with global and colonial trade. It shows how the newspaper in which it was first printed equally painted a picture of a more provincial Berlin. And it shows how the novel complicates the relation between modernist and conservative aesthetics both in Berlin and in the provinces. Re-reading Baum's novel from the margins thus starts to decentre Berlin from the geographies of Weimar-era modernism and modernity.

In diesem Artikel nehme ich die eigentümliche Quelle von Vicki Baums *Menschen im Hotel* (1929) in einer südmährischen Kleinstadt zum Ausgangspunkt, um die Art und Weise aufzuzeigen, wie die Hierarchien zwischen Metropole und Provinz in diesem Roman behandelt und verkompliziert werden. Die Fokussierung auf das Provinzielle in diesem Großstadtroman beleuchtet nicht nur, wie das populäre Bild von Berlin in der Weimarer Zeit — glamourös und fortschrittlich, prachtvoll und aufregend — als Konstrukt kleinbürgerlicher, provinzieller Ungewohntheit und Aufregung auftritt, sondern auch, wie der Roman die Provinz selbst als weniger engstirnig, unwissend und weltfremd zeigt, als es die Stereotypen nahelegen. Es wird gezeigt, wie der Roman lokale und globale Geografien zusammenbringt, indem er das Leben in der Provinz mit dem globalen und kolonialen Handel verschränkt. Die Studie zeigt, wie die Zeitung, in der der Roman zuerst gedruckt wurde, ebenfalls ein Bild eines eher provinziellen Berlins zeigt. Und es wird beschrieben, wie der Roman das Verhältnis zwischen modernistischer und konservativer Ästhetik zwischen Berlin und der Provinz verkompliziert. Baums Roman von der Peripherie her neu zu lesen, trägt dazu bei, die Position Berlins in den Geografien der ästhetischen und politischen Moderne zu dezentrieren.

On 31 March 1929, the *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* (*BIZ*) published a photograph showing two cows grazing in front of the Berliner Dom (see figure 1). In the lower half and in the foreground, we see the two cows accompanied by what looks like a farmer in a field; the top half of the photograph is dominated by the Dom, one of the most important landmarks of Berlin at the time. The photograph is accompanied by the

Figure 1. Cows grazing in Berlin with the Berliner Dom in the background. *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*, 38.13 (31 March 1929), p. 516.

text: 'Ländliches aus Berlin: Kühe auf der Wiese vor dem Zirkus Busch am Spree-Ufer. Im Hintergrund der Berliner Dom.' It is a peculiarly peaceful image, far removed from an image of Berlin as 'the paragon of urban living', characterised by 'continuous mobility, rootlessness, nervousness, loss of concentration, and the resulting relativity and meaninglessness of traditional values', as Anton Kaes has described the city.[1] Indeed, the Dom, the dynastic tomb of the House of Hollenzollern, hovering over the land, suggests the immediate past of Imperial power and Protestant values rather than urban modernity. And yet the Dom, with the new building having only been inaugurated in 1905, also signifies the immense social and material changes that re-shaped Germany in the quarter of a century that separates the 1929 photograph from this landmark's opening. The reference to Circus Busch and its famous permanent building on the Spree further suggests the presence of mass popular entertainment. And if the cows, despite their quiet demeanour, are marked by their displacement, that is, as the 'rural in the big city', then they were not out of place in a city famous for its immigration.

In the same issue of the magazine, a couple of pages after this image of the rural in Berlin, we find the first instalment of *Menschen im Hotel* by Vicki Baum (1888–1960), in which, among other storylines, a provincial

[1] Anton Kaes, 'Leaving Home: Film, Migration, and the Urban Experience', *New German Critique*, 74 (1998), pp. 179–92 (p. 186), doi:10.2307/488496.

migrant's 'hungry eyes' feed on the splendour of the most luxurious of hotels in Berlin. The proximity of this image and the text brings into focus a striking aspect of Baum's novel that remains underacknowledged: its reliance on the provincial, 'outsider' figure. This article shows how a focus on the provincial in this big-city novel complicates rigid distinctions between metropolis and provinces by also entangling the latter in global and colonial trade. Baum's novel is set for the most part in a luxury Berlin hotel and follows several guests as they interact there. Yet, in her autobiography *Es war alles ganz anders*, Baum writes that the main inspiration for her big-city novel comes from a surprising place. The kernel of the story was not laid in one of the big cities — Vienna where she lived as a child, or Berlin, where she was living when she wrote the novel — but rather in a visit to the provinces. As a young teenager she had spent three days with her aunt and uncle in the small town of Lundenburg (Breclav) in Southern Moravia. 'Lundenburg,' she writes, 'war das Urbild des vielbewitzelten Provinznestes, ein wahres Posemuckel.'[2] There, one of the members of a men's choir, who got to step out of the group for an eight-bar solo, inspired one of *Menschen im Hotel*'s central characters, Kringelein, who comes to Berlin from the provinces. It is through his eyes that we first see the Grand Hotel at the centre of the story. It is his perspective that makes the city look bright, new and exciting, countering other characters' blaséness. His naivety and warmth counter the other, cold and lonely, characters; he brings some of the supposed community of the provinces to the big city.

The theme of the provincial or 'outsider' figure is not only central to Baum's work but also plays a crucial role in many 'Großstadtromane' of the Weimar Republic. Like Baum's novel, Georg Kaiser's *Von morgens bis mitternachts* (1917), for example, views the city through the eyes of a provincial bank clerk. The main protagonists of such different big-city texts as Irmgard Keun's *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* (1932), Erich Kästner's *Emil und die Detektive* (1929) and *Fabian* (1931), or indeed his poem 'Besuch vom Lande' (1929),[3] and Hans Fallada's *Kleiner Mann — was nun?* (1932) also come or have come to Berlin from small or medium-sized towns elsewhere in Germany. Even Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) relies on a main character who, despite being a Berliner, is no longer used to life in Berlin as he has become habituated to a repetitive life in jail. On film, Walther Ruttmann's *Berlin — Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (1927) also starts by taking us on a train ride from Berlin's regions into the city.[4] While Baum's novel is eclipsed in literary scholarship by the work of her male counterparts, its narrative in its various iterations was very successful in

[2] Vicki Baum, *Es war alles ganz anders. Erinnerungen* (Ullstein, 1962), p. 381, hereafter referenced in-text as *E.*

[3] I want to thank Mila Ganeva for bringing Kästner's poem to my attention.

[4] See also Kaes, 'Leaving Home'.

the last years of the Weimar Republic and beyond. With theatre and film adapting the story in Germany, the UK and the US in subsequent years, Baum's novel deserves further treatment.

Baum was a Jewish author from Vienna who moved to Berlin around 1926 to work at the famous Ullstein Publishing House, where she wrote and edited for various magazines and newspapers such as *Die Dame* and *Uhu* as well as the Berlin newspaper *BIZ*. In this latter illustrated weekly, Baum published her first successful novel *Stud. chem. Helene Willfüer* in serialised form, a novel which, because of its depiction of a modern working woman, including her having an abortion, was widely discussed. A couple of months after the last instalment of *Helene Willfüer*, in 1929, the first instalment of what would become Baum's biggest success appeared: *Menschen im Hotel*. In her autobiography, Baum writes about the novel: 'Eins habe ich in den letzten dreißig Jahren gelernt: man kann jede Menge Fehlschläge aus dem Gedächtnis der Mitwelt tilgen, aber keinen großen Erfolg' (*E*, p. 380). Around the time that *Menschen im Hotel* was serialised, the newspaper had a circulation close to two million.[5] In 1930, Baum turned the book into a successful play, which premiered under the direction of Gustaf Gründgens and with the ensemble of the Deutsches Theater at the Theater am Nollendorfplatz in Berlin. Other versions were performed in Germany and the German-speaking world in the early 1930s, too. After a successful translation and adaptation for Broadway, it was turned into the Hollywood film *Grand Hotel* (1932), directed by Edmund Goulding and starring Greta Garbo, John Barrymore and Joan Crawford. The film won the Oscar for best film in 1932, cementing the story's world-wide success.

In this article, I take *Menschen im Hotel*'s peculiar source in a Southern Moravian town as a starting-point to reveal the ways in which the hierarchies between metropolis and province, centre and periphery, are negotiated and complicated by the novel. Focusing on the provincial in this big-city novel sheds light not only on how the popular image of Weimar-era Berlin — as glamorous and progressive, unfamiliar and exciting — emerges as the construct of a petit-bourgeois, provincial unfamiliarity and excitement, but also on how the novel shows the province itself as less parochial, ignorant and close-minded than the stereotypes suggest.[6] Kringelein's provincial life is entangled in global and colonial trade: he is a bookkeeper in a cotton factory and the son-in-law of the owners of a colonial goods store. His movement from province to metropolis follows in the footsteps of his boss, who is currently fighting to keep his cotton business alive by attempting to secure its place in an international trade

[5] Peter de Mendelssohn, *Zeitungsstadt Berlin. Menschen und Mächte in der Geschichte der deutschen Presse* (Ullstein, 1959), p. 110.

[6] See, e.g., Salvatore Pappalardo, 'The Cultures of Modernism', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 38.2 (2015), pp. 191–99, doi:10.2979/jmodelite.38.2.191.

network with Manchester and thus, presumably, with Britain's colonies. The metropolis is not only introduced through a provincial lens as beautiful and bountiful, Berlin also encompasses the concerns of provincial life and shows how these are part of developments on a much larger geographical scale.[7] Moreover, the novel's serialisation on the pages of *BIZ* situates it within larger narratives of cities as foreign. Such articles show the US as far ahead in terms of alienating technological advancement and consumerism, or sketch Berlin as standing out to foreigners in the most mundane of ways (e.g. people eating sandwiches on their way to work). Aesthetically, too, the novel places Berlin at the centre of modernity at best ambiguously. When we return to Baum's autobiography to reveal some of her modernist influences, we again find ourselves in regional territory, namely in Hanover, where, as she describes it, she was surrounded by expressionist experimentation. Her memoirs about her time in Hanover foreground how, counter to Berlin's legacy, *Menschen im Hotel* negotiates the international and Imperial traditionalism present in Berlin with a regional avant-garde. Re-reading Baum's novel from these margins — that is, through a provincial lens, situating it in its material newspaper contexts, and within Baum's partially provincial life — starts to decentre Berlin from the geographies of modernism and modernity more broadly.

KRINGELEIN'S PROVINCE

Menschen im Hotel traces several characters as they come together over the course of several days in the most luxurious hotel in Berlin. They are stock figures: a gentleman thief; a pretty stenographer; the diva at the end of her wits (a ballerina modelled on Anna Pavlova); a tycoon of local industry; and the 'little man' Kringelein, a poor bookkeeper from a provincial town in Saxony called Fredersdorf, diagnosed with only a few weeks or months to live, who wants to spend his life savings in Berlin staying at the same hotel his boss is staying at.

Baum's autobiographical notes on *Menschen im Hotel* in *Es war alles ganz anders* (1962) are a good starting point for thinking about how Kringelein shapes the reader's view of the city. Baum describes the seeds of *Menschen im Hotel* not as being in one of the big cities she knew but rather in a visit to the provinces. In her autobiography, Baum states that the novel took inspiration from the aforementioned trip she undertook as a teenager with her aunt and uncle in Lundenburg in Southern Moravia. She went there to play the harp at a concert (Baum would go on to play the harp professionally in various orchestras before her career as a writer and editor (*E*, p. 381). Baum writes in her autobiography:

[7] My argument in this essay is partly based on discussions with Benjamin Morgan, for which I want to thank him.

> In den Vordergrund schob sich dabei die Gestalt des kleinen Mannes, der im Konzert einen Augenblick aus dem Chor hervortrat, ein Tenorsolo von acht Takten hinlegte und wieder zurücktrat.
>
> Es war für mich ein unauslöschlicher Eindruck, komisch und rührend zugleich. Und diese Mischung aus Komischem und Rührendem hat seitdem immer das Wesen meiner Romanfiguren bestimmt. […] Die Augen hinter dem Buchhalter-Pincenez schielten ein wenig. Aus seiner dürftigen, angstbebenden Singerei glaubte ich einige ganz unbuchhalterische Gefühle herauszuhören. Etwas mit Flügeln und Träumen und Wünschen […]. Als ich wieder in Wien war, nahm ich mir ein Diarium vor und begann das Leben dieses kleinen Mannes aufzuzeichnen. […] Ich schrieb die Geschichte des kleinen Kringelein aus 'Menschen im Hotel.' (*E*, pp. 382–83)

Baum, looking back almost fifty years, places the impetus for her big-city novel in her witnessing of the performance of a small-town man, meagre and fearful, comical and touching. She describes a community that is aesthetically parochial: she finds herself too good to perform there, but it will mean a lot to her uncle to be able to show her off to his bosses. There is little mention of nature in her description of this provincial community. Rather, it represents a 'little' life in the sense of the 'kleiner Mann': petit-bourgeois, habitual, meagre. In other words, it is comical and touching because it is amateurish, parochial, yet full of heart.

In the novel, many of the characteristics of Kringelein's origin in the real world return. The province is again the seat of traditional, petit-bourgeois married life. Otto Kringelein is married to Anna Sauerkatz, 'Tochter des Kolonialwarenladens Sauerkatz'.[8] If she appeared to him beautiful until the wedding, the text tells us, shortly after she became 'häßlich […], unfreundlich, geizig und voll kleinlich-wichtiger Schwierigkeiten' (*MH*, p. 24). He seems especially spiteful about her stinginess: never being allowed to get the piano he wanted and having to do away with his dachshund when the dog tax went up (*MH*, p. 24). Kringelein works for a local textile company and is a member of the local 'Sangverein' where his closest friend and confidant also sings. The novel tells us the choir is where he felt good: 'Manchmal […] wenn sein hoher tremolierender und zarter Tenor über die andern Stimmen hinaufstieg, kam ein schwebendes und genußvolles Gefühl über ihn, so, als fliege er sich selber davon' (*MH*, p. 25). The provincial town is predominantly described as a place of the (social and financial) strictures of petit-bourgeois (and married) life: a meagre life of very few pleasures.

[8] Vicki Baum, *Menschen im Hotel* (Ullstein, 1929; repr. Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2007), p. 24, hereafter referenced in-text as *MH*.

KRINGELEIN'S FOREIGN BERLIN

Noah Isenberg writes in his introduction to a recent English edition of *Menschen im Hotel* (as *Grand Hotel*) that the novel portrays Berlin as 'an exhilarating city, buoyed by resplendent neon lights, hidden amusement parlors, jazz clubs, casinos, and all manner of distraction'.[9] But if this is so, then this is a Berlin cast through the prism of Kringelein's provincial background. Seen through the eyes of a meagre and boring life, the city and the hotel are given to the reader with a focus on beauty and bounty.

> Die hungrigen Gläser seines Kneifers schluckten alles auf einmal […]: die Marmorsäule mit den Gipsornamenten, die illuminierten Springbrunnen, die Klubstühle. Er sah Herren in Fräcken, Herren in Smokings, elegante, weltläufige Herren. Damen mit nackten Armen, mit Glitzerkleidern, mit Schmuck, Pelz, ausnehmend schöne und kunstvolle Damen. Er hörte entfernte Musik. Er roch Kaffee, Zigaretten, Parfüme, Spargelduft vom Speisesaal und Blumen, die an einem Tisch zum Verkauf aus Vasen strotzten. Er spürte den dicken, roten Teppich unter seinen gewichsten Stiefeln, und dieser Teppich machte ihm zunächst den stärksten Eindruck. Kringelein schliff vorsichtig mit der Sohle über diesen Teppich und blinzelte. Es war sehr hell in der Halle, angenehm gelblich hell, dazu brannten hellrote, beschirmte Lämpchen an den Wänden, dazu strahlten grüne Fontänen in das venezianische Becken. Ein Kellner flitzte vorbei, trug ein silbernes Tablett, darauf standen breite, flache Gläser, in jedem Glas war nur ein bißchen goldbrauner Kognak, in dem Kognak schwamm Eis — aber warum wurden im besten Hotel Berlins die Gläser nicht vollgefüllt? (*MH*, p. 17)

It is a cornucopia of impressions. Kringelein sees a world of luxury: bright lights and various smells; glitter, perfume, food, drink, flowers and expensive materials. Kringelein shapes both what we see of Berlin and the quality of it. When Kringelein starts to engage with the world around him, he feels out of place: even the German language comes to feel strange. He attempts to speak as he feels he should in the most expensive hotel in the city, but it does not work:

> Er kam mit den eleganten Sätzen, die er sich zurechtgelegt hatte, nicht aus. Seit er im Grand Hôtel wohnte, bewegte er sich wie in einem fremden Land. Er sprach die deutschen Worte wie eine fremde Sprache, die er aus Büchern und Journalen gelernt hatte. (*MH*, pp. 51–52)

He is a bit of a laughing stock, indeed 'komisch und rührend' as Baum says in the above quotation from her autobiography. He doesn't know how things work or 'are done' in the world of the luxury hotel; thus, his first evening was full of 'kleinen Peinlichkeiten' (*MH*, p. 46). Kringelein's past

[9] Noah Isenberg, 'Introduction', in *Grand Hotel*, by Vicki Baum (New York Review of Books Classics, 2016), pp. xii–xvi (p. xi).

in the province may be somewhat absent from the novel — Baum writes: 'Kringeleins Provinzexistenz […] warf ich weg' (*E*, p. 384) — but it lives on in how we first see the hotel and the city. We see it in its contrast with petit-bourgeois life. Not through the eyes of someone initiated and familiar, someone who is at home in the city, but through the eyes of someone who does not understand it, who does not know how to behave in it, and who is craving the very thing it seems to offer. Berlin is exceptional: plentiful, beautiful, strange, exciting and dangerous all at the same time.

It is worth observing again that several examples of Weimar-era big-city literature have protagonists who are not at home in the metropolis and cast the city not only as unfamiliar, but also as foreign. Even in the most famous big-city novel of the Weimar period, Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Franz Biberkopf (who seems through and through a Berliner) is no longer used to it: the city is made unfamiliar as Biberkopf has just spent six years in the strict routines of the jail. This difference is made explicit from the beginning, where Biberkopf stands with his back against the wall of the unfamiliar jail, unable to move away from the stability of the wall as modernity, in the form of electric tram after electric tram, passes by. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the city in such texts is repeatedly marked as foreign. Language is often used here to mark such foreignness. In Kaiser's *Von morgens bis mitternachts*, for example, it is a misunderstanding over the English 'dry' and the German 'drei'. The waiter asks if he wants dry Sekt, but the protagonist thinks he is asking if he wants three bottles. In Karlheinz Martin's film version of *Von morgens bis mitternachts*, it is French and English signs on buildings. In *Menschen im Hotel*, Kringelein proudly starts to use Anglicisms like 'starten' (*MH*, p. 202) and 'groggy' (*MH*, p. 233). In Baum's novel and elsewhere, people of colour often mark such a supposed foreignness of the city, too. The city is thus cast not only as unfamiliar, but also as global, infused with foreign influence.

But if Berlin is seen through the prism of the province, class plays an important role here, too. Kringelein strives for a kind of class ascension when he decides he wants to stay at the same hotel as his boss. And he is fascinated by the language, behaviour and surroundings of the upper class in the luxury hotel. At one moment, Kringelein, now in an expensive suit driving in the aristocrat Gaigern's car through one of Berlin's poor neighbourhoods, sees it as similar to his provincial town and finds it hard to place 'dieses gespaltene Gefühl' he gets from his sudden awareness of his new lifestyle (*MH*, p. 204). The distinction between province and city as we see it through Kringelein is thus also a class distinction. This distinction is clearly not based in actual distinctions between Berlin and the provinces, as Kringelein's boss also comes from the province and Kringelein recognises Berlin's poor neighbourhoods as like his hometown. Yet, symbolically, the city and the province are related here to the upper and to the middle to lower classes respectively. Again, as seen through Kringelein's eyes, Berlin looks beautiful and bountiful.

However, often the city turns out to be less foreign than expected. It is not just a lack of know-how that throws Kringelein off course in the novel. False expectations also play a role. For instance, Kringelein says that the black bartender he encounters is not foreign, as he speaks German (*MH*, p. 47). The media is blamed for some of these false expectations. Kringelein makes this clear when he comments on the city.

> 'In Wirklichkeit sieht doch alles anders aus, als man sich's vorstellt', sagte Kringelein, den sein scharfer Cocktail nachdenklich machte. 'Man lebt ja heutzutage auch in der Provinz nicht außerhalb der Welt. Man liest die Zeitung. Man geht ins Kino. Man sieht alles in den illustrierten Blättern. Aber in Wirklichkeit schaut es eben doch anders aus. Ich weiß zum Beispiel: Barstühle sind hoch. Sie sind aber gar nicht so hoch, finde ich.' (*MH*, p. 47)

The media — of which Baum was herself a part — thus play a role in mediating the metropolis to those who do not live there. Baum references the kind of illustrated magazines she wrote for and that some of her novels, including this one, first appeared in. In the quotation above, Baum also seems to be referencing Martin's film version of *Von morgens bis mitternachts*. In a moment of physical comedy in the film (not in Kaiser's drama), the barstools are extremely high: its main protagonist, who travelled from Weimar to Berlin, struggles to get onto one of these (the scene also includes a, potentially ironic, racist portrayal of a black bartender). Baum's portrayal of Kringelein adds another layer to this struggle: it is perhaps part of Baum's portrayal of the provincial's naivety that Kringelein not only does not know how barstools work, but also takes a film like *Von morgens bis mitternachts* for a realistic portrayal of life in the metropolis. Kringelein's reflection on his clumsy engagement with the barstool thus also presents a moment in which the novel 'thinks' about its own possible impact — or at least the impact of the illustrated weekly in which it was serialised. It is important to note here that while *BIZ* carries the name of the metropolis, its aim was, as per its publisher's memoirs, to capture a much wider audience.[10] The provincial man and woman were thus also direct targets of the serialisation of Baum's novel — and Kringelein potentially a figure of partial identification.

On the one hand, Baum's novel presents us with a familiar image of Weimar-era Berlin as extraordinary: exciting, beautiful, modern and full of lights, fashion and glamour. On the other hand, it relativises this version of Berlin as the perception of an unhappy, petit-bourgeois provincial man who has only a few days to live, and who is actively looking for a version of Berlin that contrasts with his provincial home. Kringelein's references to the distorted images of Berlin presented by films and illustrated papers suggest that we should not take what we read here at face value, either. If we then turn to the illustrated paper in which Baum's novel was first published, we get a similar undercutting of Berlin's supposedly exceptional

[10] Herman Ullstein, *The Rise and Fall of the House of Ullstein* (Nicholson & Watson, ca. 1944), p. 75.

status, either by contrasting it to a hypermodernity observed in the US or by casting Berlin in the most mundane light.

STRANGE BERLIN

In the editions in which Baum's novel was printed, *BIZ* shows a strong interest in cultural difference, specifically in how large Western cities appear to foreigners. In a variety of articles, it explores the differences between New York, London, Paris and Berlin. Such articles show, for example, the high modernity of the US and/or make life in Berlin look mundane, and in so doing provincialise Berlin and Germany on the world stage. One example is a photojournalism series about 'Seltsames Amerika' by the famous photographer Erich Salomon (1886–1944).[11] The second article in this series had the title 'Essen am laufenden Band'.[12] The title works, as Rob Kroes points out, in two ways: referring both to continuous eating and food from the assembly line. The way in which the article is constructed shows the US as much further advanced in technological pragmatism than Germany is thought to be. Kroes writes:

> In a series of five staged photographs [Salomon] appears as the uninitiated outsider who sits down at a table, waiting to be served. Captions add a minimal dialogue in which the waitress introduces him to the style of the American self-service restaurant. Of course, this has all come to Europe later, but as in so many other instances this first European encounter with a particular aspect of the thoroughgoing rationalization of life cast it in the light of something typically American. Europeans chose to be both stunned and fascinated as well as haughtily amused if not worried by what they called 'Americanism'.[13]

Such series of photographs in *BIZ* present a similarly amusing outsiderdom to the one that shapes Kringelein's engagement with Berlin. Kringelein's engagement with the barstools, for example, shows how Berlin only exists as 'Berlin' through the eyes of the outsider, and is in reality less exciting than it is represented in the media. In Salomon's article, the engagement with the US provincialises Europe, Germany and Berlin as not (or not yet) as modern as America. Berlin is not yet as saturated with alienating and isolating technology as the US is.

In *BIZ*, such an outsider's gaze is also turned repeatedly on Germany and Berlin specifically (sometimes in a conflation of the two). In such articles, it becomes especially telling how the newspaper likes to provincialise the big city whose name it carries. One example is an article entitled 'Was den Ausländern in Deutschland auffällt' — part of a series that also includes

[11] *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*, 25 May 1930, p. 949.
[12] *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*, 31 May 1930, p. 958.
[13] Rob Kroes, *History of Photography: Private Pictures, Public Images, and American History* (Dartmouth College Press, 2007), p. 65.

similar articles about foreign cities, such as 'Was den Deutschen in London auffällt' (see figure 2).[14] In the article, we are told that foreigners in Germany notice, for example, that men do not take their hats off for women in elevators and that there are so many tasteful display windows. What we see here is not the incredible modernity of New York, with its immense crowds, racial diversity and large skyscrapers, that we read in cartoonist Paul Simmel's descriptions of New York for *BIZ* in the same year, accompanied by an illustration of his of Broadway. Rather, the copy as well as the photographs cast a much more mundane aspect of the supposed particularity of Berlin life — importantly conflating Berlin with Germany — by focusing on briefcases and sandwiches:

> Wenn sich der Ausländer in Berlin darüber wundert, daß hier so viele Männer mit Aktentaschen herumgehen, und daß man so viele Stullen ißt, so weiß er doch wenigstens nicht — wie würde er darüber erstaunt sein —, daß die Aktentaschen gewöhnlich nichts anderes als die Stullen enthalten ….'[15]

BIZ's peculiar self-effacing tone to discuss how foreigners see Berlin has the opposite function of Kringelein's provincial viewpoint, namely to show Berlin as rather mundane: mostly a question of sandwiches and the minutiae of when men take their hats off and when they do not. And yet, both such reportages in *BIZ* and Baum's use of the provincial 'kleiner Mann' ultimately challenge Berlin's supposed extraordinary status; the novel, too, shows that everything Kringelein sees through his excited viewpoint is but a particular vision that should not be trusted.

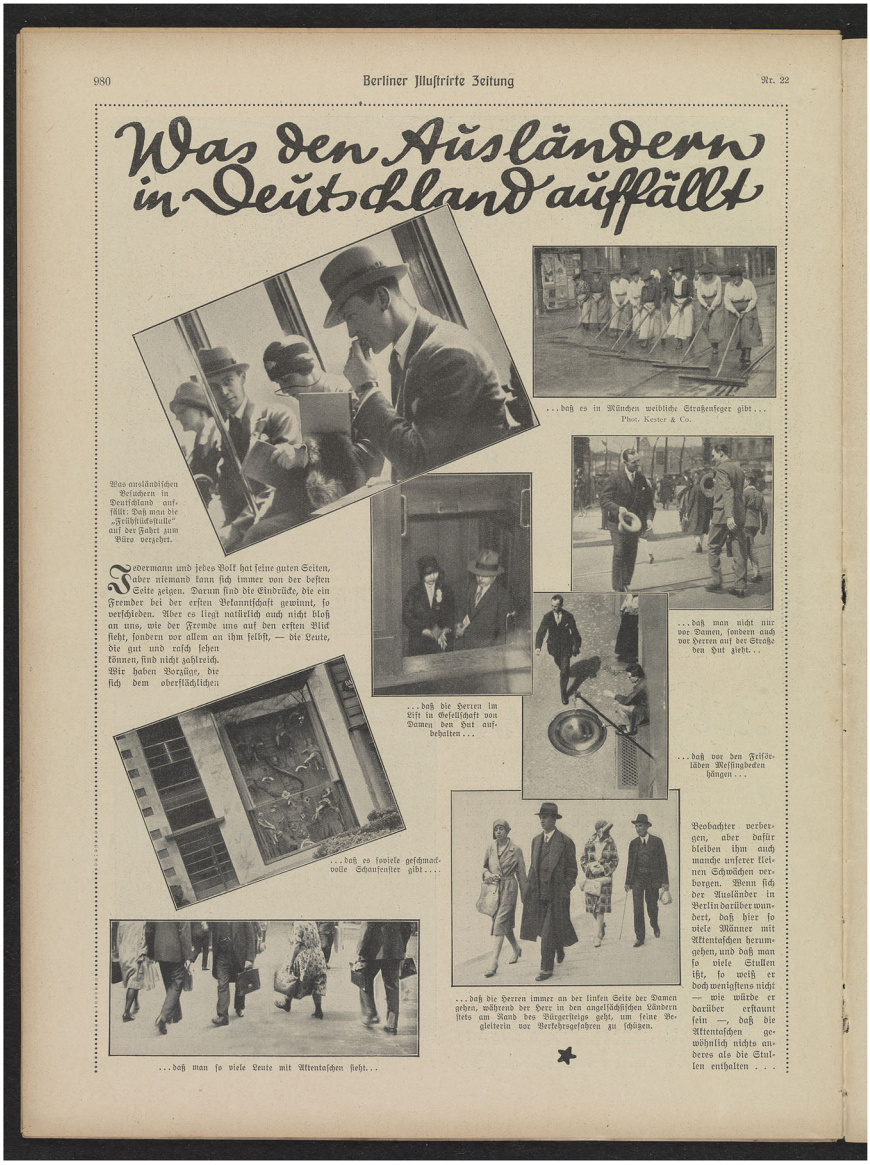
FROM THE PROVINCE TO COLONIES

If the novel and the articles that surround it in *BIZ* undercut Berlin's supposedly exceptional status, the novel also complicates the supposed provinciality of Kringelein's regional hometown. Fredersdorf and his life in it are a node in international and colonial trade. Kringelein's father-in-law owns a 'Kolonialwarenladen'. While in the novel this is mentioned only twice in passing, a short story that Baum wrote before the novel about Kringelein takes place largely in his future wife's family home above the store.[16] Here descriptions of the store, its clerks and its customers infuse the story of their unhappy engagement. It shows how the German provincial

[14] Indeed, the first in Salomon's series of articles has the subtitle 'Was unserem Fotografen in U. S. A. auffiel'.

[15] *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*, 2 June 1929, p. 980.

[16] The short story is titled 'Die Versicherung des Adolf Kringelein' and the manuscript is held by the Centre for Jewish History. The Leo Baeck Institute dates the story to somewhere in the 1920s. *Handwritten Manuscript: Die Versicherung des Adolf Kringelein, 192?*, Box: 1, Folder: 5, Vicki Baum Collection, AR 5130, Leo Baeck Institute, New York, <https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/5/archival_objects/1118661> [accessed 5 December 2024].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Was den Ausländern in Deutschland auffällt

Was ausländischen Besuchern in Deutschland auffällt: Daß man die „Frühstücksstulle" auf der Fahrt zum Büro verzehrt.

...daß es in München weibliche Straßenfeger gibt...
Phot. Kester & Co.

Jedermann und jedes Volk hat seine guten Seiten, aber niemand kann sich immer von der besten Seite zeigen. Darum sind die Eindrücke, die ein Fremder bei der ersten Bekanntschaft gewinnt, so verschieden. Aber es liegt natürlich auch nicht bloß an uns, wie der Fremde uns auf den ersten Blick sieht, sondern vor allem an ihm selbst, — die Leute, die gut und rasch sehen können, sind nicht zahlreich. Wir haben Vorzüge, die sich dem oberflächlichen

...daß die Herren im Lift in Gesellschaft von Damen den Hut aufbehalten...

...daß man nicht nur vor Damen, sondern auch vor Herren auf der Straße den Hut zieht...

...daß vor den Friseurläden Messingbecken hängen...

...daß es soviele geschmackvolle Schaufenster gibt...

Beobachter verbergen, aber dafür bleiben ihm auch manche unserer kleinen Schwächen verborgen. Wenn sich der Ausländer in Berlin darüber wundert, daß hier so viele Männer mit Aktentaschen herumgehen, und daß man so viele Stullen ißt, so weiß er doch wenigstens nicht — wie würde er darüber erstaunt sein — daß die Aktentaschen gewöhnlich nichts anderes als die Stullen enthalten . . .

...daß die Herren immer an der linken Seite der Damen gehen, während der Herr in den angelsächsischen Ländern stets am Rand des Bürgersteigs geht, um seine Begleiterin vor Verkehrsgefahren zu schützen.

...daß man so viele Leute mit Aktentaschen sieht...

Figure 2. What foreigners notice in Germany. *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*, 38.22 (2 June 1929), p. 980.

town in which Kringelein lives is not independent of the modernity of international trade and colonial relations. Furthermore, in the novel, Kringelein works for a factory that makes cotton products. Its director, Preysing, is in Berlin trying and failing to save his 'Saxonia Baumwolle' by attempting to make it part of an international supply chain that includes a merger with a company in Chemnitz and getting 'raw material' from Manchester. That Manchester's raw product presumably comes from one of Britain's (former) overseas colonies is never mentioned. Thus, if the hotel lobby is described as a place where guests sell, in all world languages, 'Papiere, Baumwolle, Schmieröl engros, Patente, Filme, Terrains' and 'Pläne, Gedanken, ihre Energie, ihren Kopf und ihr Leben' (*MH*, p. 57), then Kringelein's provincial life is equally ensnared in the international and colonial trades that are made there. With the cotton from Manchester, and thus the city's 'almost iconic centrality within the Industrial Revolution', Kringelein's hometown is connected directly to industrialisation and its histories in protectionism, colonialism and slavery.[17]

The dynamic between centre and periphery, metropolis and province, and capital and colony extends to the relation between the factory for which Kringelein works and its 'Kolonie', that is, its company town. The fraught relation between the factory director and his bookkeeper is central to Kringelein's wish to stay at Berlin's most luxurious hotel, as this is where his boss stays when he is in Berlin. Kringelein summons up the courage to confront his boss with the poor working conditions at 'Saxonia Baumwolle'. This interaction is precipitated by a letter Kringelein received from his wife about the badly built coal stove in their factory home, which is both expensive to run and polluting. In a significant linguistic 'nicety', the word that is repeatedly used for this factory housing site is 'Kolonie'. Although 'Kolonie' is not a strange use for 'Arbeitersiedlung', or factory town, Baum's repeated use of it in this moment of confrontation suggests a link between colonial relations and the relations between the ruling and the working classes in Germany. Such a suggested relation becomes even more pronounced when Kringelein starts to complain about a traineeship ('Volontärzeit') he did at his father-in-law's colonial goods store when he was young. It has nothing to do with Preysing, which infuriates the director, but the traineeship put Kringelein into debt and as such becomes part of a larger 'Klage des zarten und erfolglosen Menschen gegen den andern, der einfach und mit etwas Brutalität seinen Weg macht' (*MH*, p. 271). Not only is Kringelein's provincial town thus entangled in larger networks of international and colonial trade, but this late scene also makes an implicit connection between Kringelein's relationship (and those of most 'little

[17] Gurminder K. Bhambra, 'Cotton Colonialism: A Postcolonial Rethinking of Capitalism', *Global Dialogue*, 13.3 (2023), pp. 18–19 (p. 19). See also Utsa Patnaik, 'On Political Economy and its Fallacies: Why Critiques and Rethinking Matter', *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy*, 11.3 (2022), pp. 333–51, doi:10.1177/22779760221128656.

people') to financial capital and that of colony to coloniser. Indeed, as the novel here casts Berlin at the centre of economic decision-making, these suggested parallels are also mapped onto the relation between metropolis and province.

Placing Kringelein's provincial past in these global trade networks shows how Baum's novel negotiates various geographies between the local and the international. David James has described how English provincial literature during the Second World War showed the influence of global politics on the provinces. He writes that it demanded of critics to appreciate 'how writers move on that new axis between local and international concerns' when 'air raids in effect brought the scale of that conflict into the domestic sphere'.[18] Although in a different time and setting, a similar dynamic is discernible in Baum's novel. We are privy to Preysing's negotiations in Berlin to keep his company alive in and through global trade with the British and the world. The provincial town that Kringelein has left behind depends on the success of these negotiations. Via Preysing's negotiations in Berlin, the city as centre of economic decision-making brings these local and international geographies together: it is a place that shows the dependencies between life in Fredersdorf and that in Chemnitz, Manchester and overseas cotton fields. If James writes that Storm Jameson's 1943 novel *Cloudless May* about the Second World War 'gives voice to international concerns within, rather than by relinquishing, the generic framework of the regional novel', in *Menschen im Hotel* Kringelein's escape to Berlin to live like his boss shows how big-city novels, despite their setting, can bring into relief how international concerns affect provincial life.[19]

PROVINCIAL MODERNIST AESTHETICS

If the image of Berlin in *Menschen im Hotel* and its surrounding articles in *BIZ* is continuously provincialised, by suggesting it is a construct of petit-bourgeois unfamiliarity, or by highlighting its most mundane particularities and its less advanced modernity in comparison to the US, then Baum's own modernist aesthetics also have roots in the provinces. Weimar Germany is now known, despite its provincial name, for an extraordinary cultural productivity and creativity in Berlin. But German(-language) modernism, especially if we cast the net wider than the Weimar years, cannot be seen as merely a product of this metropolis, or even just of Berlin and Munich, or in exchange with Vienna. Meike Werner's *Moderne in der Provinz*, for instance, shows how the Thuringian city of Jena had an important role in hosting modernist intellectual life around 1900, especially with the

[18] David James, 'Capturing the Scale of Fiction at Mid-Century', in *Regional Modernisms*, ed. by Neal Alexander and James Moran (Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 104–23 (p. 107), doi:10.1515/9780748669318-007.
[19] Ibid., p. 108.

Eugen Diederichs publishing house and writer Helene Voigt-Diederichs. Klaus-Jürgen Sembach has shown that in a movement like 'Jugendstil', it was primarily 'places on the margins' that 'gave rise to the new'.[20] As Werner writes: 'More strikingly than in France, England, or Russia — or even than in Austria or Spain — the German turn of the century saw centres of cultural life emerge in the provinces alongside those of its major cities.'[21] Baum's autobiography shows that modernist experimentation was far from exclusive to the metropolis also after the First World War, drawing distinctions between provincial cities in Germany in which she lived in the years after leaving Vienna and before coming to Berlin. She describes the cultural scene in Hanover as the kind of vanguard of modernism we now associate primarily with Berlin, while she sees Mannheim, although a city with a rich cultural legacy, as a bourgeois town stuck in the past.

In 1916, Baum married the Jewish-Austrian conductor Richard Lert, with whom she lived in several German provincial cities including Hanover and Mannheim, before moving to Berlin in the mid-1920s. In her autobiography, Baum contrasts especially these two cities in which Lert worked as a conductor for their opera houses. Although Mannheim, as she describes it, was an important stop before world fame for such conductors as Wilhelm Furtwängler, she describes its tastes as conservative. Hanover, by contrast, was for her a place of experimentation, especially for expressionism. 'In Hanover,' she writes, 'hatten wir im Expressionismus gelebt und geatmet. In Mannheim sah sich Lert, der Erneuerer, um viele Jahre in einen Opernstil zurückgeworfen, der noch aus der Zeit von Krieg und Revolution, vor dem Durchbruch der Mahlerschen Ideen, stammte' (*E*, p. 337). Baum is talking about the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century when describing Mannheim's tastes — of the legacies of the 'Mannheimer Schule', that is, the innovations of the court orchestra of the Elector Palatine in Mannheim, and of Friedrich Schiller's *Die Räuber* (1781) which premiered there. About Hanover, she writes of her husband and Hanns Niedecken-Gebhard's operatic experiments including their revival of Georg Friedrich Händel, but also of such (expressionist) dancers as Mary Wigman, Max Terpis, Harald Kreutzberg and Yvonne Georgi. As Baum describes it, if Mannheim's artistic scene was Apollonian, then Hanover's was Dionysian. She contrasts the 'guten, frischen Wind' of Hanover with the 'stehengebliebene Vergangenheit' of a bourgeois Mannheim (*E*, p. 339). When she compares the latter's audience to her 'spießbürgerliche' uncles and aunts, then, she might be talking also about the aunt and uncle in Southern Moravia she visited as a teenager, when and where she was inspired to write the character of Kringelein (*E*, p. 340). Baum's own past in Hanover thus complicates the 'juxtaposition of urban modernism with

[20] Klaus-Jürgen Sembach, *Jugendstil. Die Utopie der Versöhnung* (Taschen, 1990), p. 34.
[21] Meike G. Werner, *Germany's Other Modernism: The Jena Paradigm, 1900–1914* (Camden House, 2023), p. 1, doi:10.1515/9781800108912.

small-town traditionalism' that Werner has traced back to Georg Simmel's seminal essay 'Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben' (1903). It further challenges our contemporary understanding of the Weimar Republic's rich aesthetic experimentation as rooted primarily in Berlin.[22]

Baum's engagement with expressionist dance in particular shows how the cultural experimentation of Hannover found its way into *Menschen im Hotel* as part of a larger attempt to describe Berlin's culture as partially lifeless. The audiences of the Russian ballet dancer named Grusinskaya are dwindling, and her physical and emotional tiredness becomes a metaphor for a tired Imperial culture standing on its last legs. This fading Imperial culture also finds expression in other depressed characters, such as a doctor and an aristocrat, who have fallen on hard times. Notably, Grusinskaya is enlivened somewhat by the suggestion that she might find new successes through expressionist dance. Expressionist dance here takes on a similar role for Grusinskaya as Kringelein takes on for other characters in the novel, namely of revitalising people stuck in the past. As Kringelein's excitement about the city works to revitalise other characters, so the idea of 'Ausdruckstanz' as a new way of dancing temporarily excites Grusinskaya. None of these revitalisations last in the novel, but it shows how Baum's experience with expressionist experimentation in Hanover feeds into the complexity of her description of Berlin between Imperial past and modernist experimentation. What might be taken as a reference to what happens elsewhere in the city, expressionist dance is in fact also a modernist expression cultivated outside the metropolis. If the novel shows Weimar-era Berlin's excitement as a petit-bourgeois construct, it also shows that Berlin was not synonymous with modernist aesthetics. Baum's autobiography allows us to decentre Berlin in the geography of modernism, suggesting that expressionist dance, as representative of truly new aesthetics for Baum, may be merely visiting from the provinces, as well.

CONCLUSION

In a vignette from *Einbahnstraße* (1928), Walter Benjamin reminds us that an unfamiliar town, one that has not yet been explored and in which habits have not yet been formed, looks fundamentally different to the familiar city:

> VERLORENE GEGENSTÄNDE. Was den allerersten Anblick eines Dorfs, einer Stadt in der Landschaft so unvergleichlich und so unwiederbringlich macht, ist, daß in ihm die Ferne in der strengsten Bindung an die Nähe mitschwingt. Noch hat Gewohnheit ihr Werk nicht getan. Beginnen wir erst einmal uns zurechtzufinden, so ist die Landschaft mit einem Schlage verschwunden wie die Fassade eines Hauses wenn wir es betreten. Noch

[22] Ibid.

> hat diese kein Übergewicht durch die stete, zur Gewohnheit gewordene Durchforschung erhalten. Haben wir einmal begonnen, im Ort uns zurechtzufinden, so kann jenes früheste Bild sich nie wieder herstellen.[23]

Benjamin's quote points to a function of provincial characters in the metropolis as often represented in German modernist texts: through these characters, the metropolis is not or only partially a lived-in place, not a place we *know*, but rather shown as unfamiliar, new and thus as both exciting and frightening. As the quotation from Benjamin's text brings out explicitly, such a view can only be temporary: with the slightest bit of 'Gewohnheit', this image of the city disappears under our changing perceptual apparatuses. Barstools are not as high as they appeared from a distance or, indeed, as mediated on film and in illustrated magazines.

The Weimar-era 'Großstadtroman' is entangled in ideas of the metropolis as unfamiliar. Often, the provincial woman or man takes on this role. The province in Baum's text, present in Kringelein's lack of knowledge of the city as well as in his excitement towards anything that is the opposite of his petit-bourgeois, dull and restricted life in the province, functions as a way of heightening what sets the city apart by making it different and unfamiliar. Rather than taking her own familiarity with the city as a model — a city in which she lived, worked and raised a family — Baum imagines a man from the provinces entering it whose only knowledge comes from the kind of media for which she wrote. And yet, such heightened difference is also undercut, by showing that representations might not be good roadmaps for participation: habituation is around the corner to make mundane and safe what was once scary and exciting.

At the same time, the provincial town from which Kringelein hails, with its cotton factory and colonial goods store, is much more entangled in global trade than its provincial status might suggest. His provincial existence is not the 'antitype of cosmopolitan modernity' that provincial life is often taken to be.[24] Rather, Kringelein's provincial existence is entangled in networks that extend between the German provinces, Manchester and the globe. Its connection to Cottonopolis, often understood as the epitome of industrialisation, shows how this provincial town is not far removed from the centres of modernity. Moreover, this connection to Manchester also ties Fredersdorf to global histories of colonialism and slavery. It reveals how big-city novels, especially with provincial characters at their centres, can show, despite their settings, how international concerns affect provincial life.

When we turn to the aesthetics of Berlin, the supposed contrasts between modern metropolis and traditional, backward province are further

[23] *Walter Benjamin: Werke und Nachlaß: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. by Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz, 22 vols (Suhrkamp, 2008–), VIII, *Einbahnstraße*, ed. by Detlev Schöttker and Steffen Haug (2009), p. 47.

[24] Ruth Livesey, 'Middleness: Provincial Fiction and the Aesthetics of Dull Life', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 29.1 (2023), pp. 25–36 (p. 26), doi:10.1093/jvcult/vcad029.

complicated. Georg Simmel's juxtaposition of urban modernism with provincial traditionalism is shown as false. Baum's experience of modernist experimentation in Hanover feeds into her descriptions of expressionist dance in the novel. Berlin is primarily shown as a place where the arts of the past run up against newer forms, ones that might well first have been initiated, developed or celebrated outside the Weimar Republic's urban centre. If we think of Weimar Germany's modern exceptionality today mainly through its metropolis, then *Menschen im Hotel* shows the ways in which the assumed contrasts and hierarchies between urbanism and regionalism, centre and periphery, modernism and traditionalism are, even in such a big-city novel, unable to hold.