Chapter 2

Cultural Representation: Abortion on Stage, Screen and in Fiction

> Don't be stupid, woman! Don't go, woman, where you will be given potassium cyanide or syringed with carbolic soap or infected by dirty instruments and you will be sure to die in the convulsions of puerperal fever, don't go there! I warn you!

With these words a doctor pleads with a young proletarian woman, Hete, to stay away from a back-street abortionist. She had asked him to terminate her unwanted pregnancy, which he declined, although he had just arranged this for the previous patient, a middle-class woman. The scene is taken from Friedrich Wolf's play *Cyankali. §218* (Potassium cyanide. §*218*) which caused a sensation when it was premiered in 1929 in Berlin and on its subsequent tour through Germany. Hete's journey of pain and humiliation takes her from the cynical doctor and a pathetic attempt at self-help into the clutches of a so-called wise woman, Madame Heye. Just as the doctor predicted, Madame Heye poisons Hete with potassium cyanide and she dies in agony in her mother's arms.[1]

Wolf, a member of the KPD (German Communist Party), as well as a doctor who got into trouble with the abortion law barely two years later for referring women for medical terminations, wrote his play as a rallying cry against an unjust law. It presents abortion as a tragedy for the working classes and the proletarian aborting woman as a victim of the bourgeois state. How typical was this portrait of other cultural presentations and of the experience of the hundreds of thousands of women who underwent an abortion during the Weimar Republic? This chapter will explore the way events surrounding abortion were portrayed in Weimar popular culture and compare it with the meaning women themselves attached to the operation. It seems that there was a remarkable disparity between women's perceptions (as we will see in Chapters 5 and 6 below) and the way abortion

featured in most cultural productions at the time, and the question is why this was the case. Did scriptwriters, directors, playwrights and authors pay little heed to women's own views? Or was it the case that while films, plays and novels may have entertained their female spectators or readers, they did not influence their opinion?

While the passionate debate about §218 and the extraordinary mass street demonstrations of the later Weimar years has received due attention by historians in recent years, the full significance of cultural representations of abortion has, apart from the occasional brief reference, been largely neglected by historians, leaving it a subject almost exclusive to literary, art and film studies.[2] Yet, popular culture contributed to the social construction of abortion in the Weimar years and must be taken seriously. Scott Spector made a similar point in an essay on the importance of feature film for the study of Nazi Germany. He bemoans the fact that few historians use the work of their colleagues in literature and film departments. Even when historians do use popular culture as a primary source they tend to concentrate on plot and factual information, paying little attention to artistic style, production and consumption, or, in the case of film, to how visual representation is 'cinematically produced and experienced'. Film and literary studies, he argues, enrich historical interpretation by complicating our understanding of important concepts: in addition to analysing plot they also interpret extranarrative aspects of films by addressing 'the semiotic complexity of images and of sound, the sequencing of images and the establishment of visual tropes, and, not least importantly, the referentiality of aspects of the film to things outside the frame'.[3]

Key to interpreting popular culture properly is to situate it in its historical context and analyse it with reference to literary or film scholars; nevertheless I will, throughout this book, also want to go beyond the discussion of film and literary studies by exploring the interrelationship of multiple voices in the abortion discourse: from gendered 'official' prescriptions via the opinions of various pressure groups to grassroots views by ordinary people and finally to the attitudes implied in cultural representations. Thus, in the following I will analyse examples of popular representation of abortion as a social and individual issue in films, plays, novels and poems. Popular culture as a source of attitudes to §218 of the penal code in Weimar Germany is especially significant for two reasons. Firstly, the proliferation of cultural products in which abortion featured as the main or a subsidiary topic; secondly, the 'classical modernity' of the Weimar Republic with a shorter working day, reasonably high wages and women's increased participation in public life led to the emergence of a mass culture which often catered particularly for a female audience.[4]

The term 'popular culture' signals that this discussion is not confined to 'high art', indeed there will be little high art considered here; instead the focus will be on working-class culture, especially linked to the parties of the

left, the SPD and the KPD, as well as on mass culture disseminated through popular theatre and the new media of high-circulation journals and especially of silent film. Dismantling the strict distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture, as propounded by contemporary bourgeois critics, was indeed the self-confessed aim of many avant-garde and socialist artists, writers and producers at the time who strove to make their products accessible to a wider audience, particularly of the poorer social strata. But their aim went further: to overcome not just class demarcations, but also those between different artistic disciplines and between culture and other areas of public life. Culture was to be inclusive and it was interrelated with the various areas of private and public life. In Weimar Germany, as the literary and film historian, Anton Kaes remarked, culture, society and political life criss-crossed and intersected and did so usually by complex routes.[5] Ernst Toller was not alone in spanning a career both as one of the most successful playwrights of his time and as a political activist. He took part in the Bavarian revolution of 1919, was briefly Minister of the Interior of the Soviet Republic of Bavaria and, once imprisoned for high treason for this, he set about writing a play about his experiences.[6] Other literati straddled two professions, too: medical practitioners such as Friedrich Wolf, Carl Credé and Alfred Döblin who were also successful playwrights, with Döblin also writing one the most original novels of the Republic, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929). The playwright Bertolt Brecht and the theatre director Erwin Piscator, both inspired by communist ideals, set out to activate spectators by breaking down the barriers between the classes and also between the performer and the audience. Plays were made relevant to contemporary politics and specific dramaturgic devices were meant to awaken the audience's rebellious spirit. One of the purposes of Brecht's theories of epic theatre and his use of *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect) was to prevent spectators from simply identifying uncritically with the characters on the play. This meant a reversal of the tradition of late nineteenth-century realism which asked for the suspension of disbelief and emotional empathy with the drama unfolding on stage. In an early statement Brecht wrote that the 'essential point of the epic theatre is perhaps that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason. Instead of sharing an experience the spectator must come to grips with things.'[7]

Abortion and the reform of §218 of the penal code were apt subjects to engage the public with. It was, as we have seen, one of the discursive obsessions of the time. It had been at the centre of debates on national and gender identity since the end of the First World War. Not surprisingly, it attracted many well-known writers and filmmakers and others who made their name by portraying the problem on stage, in novels, poems and on screen. For example, Klabund, Walter Mehring, Brecht, Erich Weinert, Kurt Tucholsky and Erich Kästner all wrote poems about abortion, many of them published in working-class or popular journals. Stage plays like *Der Frauenarzt* (The gynaecologist) by Hans Rehfisch and *Die Verbrecher* (The

criminals) by Ferdinand Bruckner (1928) reached a wider public; but the play with by far the biggest impact was *Cyankali.§218* by Wolf (1929). Wolf was the most successful communist playwright at the time and it was directed by Erwin Piscator, the most famous of the young generation of left-wing directors.

Carl Credé, a socialist doctor who was imprisoned for illegal terminations, authored the play *§218. Gequälte Menschen* (§218. Tortured people), which Piscator also staged in 1929. In 1932 Döblin's play, *Die Ehe* (The marriage) appeared. Then there were proletarian *Zeitromane*, or more pejoratively, *Tendenzromane*, describing the pernicious effects of §218 on the working classes, such as Rudolf Braune's *Das Mädchen an der Orga Privat* (The girl at her Orga Private typewriter, 1925), Franz Krey's *Maria und der Paragraph* (Maria and the law) and Willi Bredel's *Rosenhofstraße* (both 1931). Finally, there were the best-selling serialized entertainment novels by women authors, such as Vicki Baum's *stud.chem. Helene Willfüer* (1928), serialized in a mass-marketed illustrated journal, and Irmgard Keun's *Gilgi – eine von uns* (Gilgi, one of us, 1931), later made into a film with the same name, which featured abortion as an important issue in their protagonists' development.

Novels by male writers who thematized women's reproductive problems were Arthur Schnitzler's *Therese. Chronik eines Frauenlebens* (Therese. A chronicle of a woman's life, 1928), Arnold Zweig's *Junge Frau von 1914* (Young woman of 1914, 1931) and Hans Fallada's *Kleiner Mann, was nun?* (Little man, what now?, 1932). A further sign of the intense artistic engagement with this question is the fact that in 1931 the Committee of Self-incrimination against §218 (encouraging well-known people to admit to an abortion or having aided one) included a whole array of celebrities, e.g. the writers Lion Feuchtwanger, Thea von Harbou, Ernst Toller, the poet Else Lasker-Schüler and the scientist Albert Einstein.[8]

Last but by no means least, there were a surprising number of silent feature films dedicated to the subject which captivated contemporary audiences; many are lost or had slipped from our sight and are only gradually being rediscovered. By the mid-1920s the cinema had become one of the most influential mass media, attracting both intelligentsia and the general public alike. Conservative estimates put the number of daily spectators at that time at one million; by the end of the 1920s the domestic film industry produced more films than the rest of Europe put together and had become, according to one historian, already by 1920 the third largest branch of industry.[9] But the stabilization of the German currency in 1923 was also the beginning of a much-debated German 'film crisis', as the production companies lost the advantage of cheap prices on the international market and had to fear artistic competition from imports particularly from the U.S.A. The need to ensure an audience meant that directors were increasingly looking for 'realistic' high-profile themes. §218 fitted the bill well.

To understand how abortion was constructed in the Weimar Republic we need to tease out the interrelations between the official discourse (e.g. among doctors, lawyers, government officials, churchmen), women's own testimony gleaned from, amongst other sources, depositions in criminal court cases, and the way abortion was represented in popular culture. As to the latter, the different cinematic and literary narratives have to be carefully situated, revealing their specific historical influences and the existing aesthetic and literary conventions. But this does not, of course, mean that cultural representation should be reduced to a passive reflection of the 'real' world. As has often been pointed out, reflection theory, so powerfully expressed in the works of film critics Siegfried Kracauer and Lotte Eisner,[10] is misleading as it assumes a simplistic pattern of cause and effect according to which an artistic production is judged as a more-or-less truthful reflection of an already existing social reality, or, even more complicated, by the way it is meant to fit historical interpretations.[11] Cultural products do not simply convey official ideology; they are not a neutral vehicle which 'expresses' social meaning. Rather, cultural representations function to transform and mediate the world through their own specific codes and the institutions of which they are a part. Thus, to study the social construction of abortion the relationship between artistic representations, dominant and popular discourses need to be understood as an interactive process.

With the help of some examples from the screen, stage and fiction I want to explore whether they subscribed to dominant views, whether they subverted them and whether they diverged from views of ordinary women and men. I will argue that the different cultural representations provided a vital link mediating between the frequently opposing views of the official discourse and attitudes held by ordinary women and men. These films, plays etc. also demonstrate the extent to which the issue of abortion had moved from being a medico-moral and political concern to a popular cultural one. This was accompanied by a shift in gender and class: away from academic and professional men to women, particularly of the lower classes, which changed the means of communication and the language used. Women were the new consumers of popular theatre, film and print culture, especially the illustrated journals.

At any rate, all journals, including the communist and social democratic press, certainly profited from addressing the concerns of contemporary women. The modern novel, the *Zeitroman*, invariably made a reference to women's sexuality and reproduction control and it reached millions of women readers in cheap editions and serialized form. No doubt the attraction of abortion as subject matter was also due to a decisive change in the artistic climate from about the mid-1920s when Expressionism in the arts gradually gave way to *Neue Sachlichkeit*, only imperfectly rendered in English as New Sobriety or New Objectivity. While Expressionism, with its stress on the struggle of the individual – always represented as a type rather than

personalized – against the forces of evil, suited the extreme experiences of a society in shock after the dislocation of a lost world war, *Neue Sachlichkeit* was characterized by a cooler and more sober rendering of social drama rooted in recognizable issues of the day. Indeed most important abortion narratives originated in the second half of the Weimar Republic, presented in a *neu-sachlich* style, or even in the last few years, during the Depression after 1929, when agitprop (agitation propaganda) was characteristic of left-wing proletarian art. In this cultural climate writers and filmmakers were inspired by the spectacular mass demonstrations against §218 and by the tangible hardship experienced by many hundred of thousands of women who sought to free themselves from the burden of an unwanted pregnancy.

Abortion in the movies

As early as September 1918, that is, in the last few weeks of Imperial Germany, the film *Sündige Mütter (Strafgesetz §218)* (Sinful mothers, §218 of the penal code) was premiered in Dusseldorf, the fourth part of a tetralogy, *Es werde Licht!* (And there was light) of sexual enlightenment films, all directed by Richard Oswald and with the active cooperation of sexologists. Magnus Hirschfeld acted as scientific consultant for *Sündige Mütter,* which portrayed the negative implications of quack abortions and the illegal status of children born out of wedlock, and echoed the official line of Wilhelmine abortion policy.[12] October of the same year saw the premiere of another sexual enlightenment film, *Keimendes Leben* (Nascent life), directed by Georg Jacoby, which was the last part of a trilogy; despite its suggestive title, it only dealt with abortion in passing. A third film to be produced in 1918, Walter Creutz's *Arme kleine Eva* (Poor little Eve) dealt with the seduction of an innocent young woman who was subsequently tricked into undergoing an abortion performed by a quack, with the result that she faced a trial and imprisonment, had she not been pardoned in the last minute.[13]

In Weimar Germany the first serious cinematic critique of §218 and its impact on women, however, was Martin Berger's 1926 silent film *Kreuzzug des Weibes* (Women's crusade).[14] As a young socialist Berger had previously produced feature films for the SPD's *Volksfilmbühne* (People's Cinema); in 1925, with the help of the trade union and the Reichsbanner, he filmed *Freies Volk* (Free people) 'the first major republican film', which proved, however, a financial fiasco.[15] In *Kreuzzug* Berger portrays the abortion law as dysgenic and class discriminatory. With the help of no less than four big stars – Maly Delschaft, Conrad Veidt, Werner Krauß and Harry Liedtke – the film was a considerable popular success.

The narrative interweaves the starkly contrasting stories of three women from different social backgrounds, all depicted as types and without names: firstly, the tragedy of a proletarian mother of four who is refused a

2. Anja Zimowa as the modern wife, Maly Delschaft as the young teacher in *Kreuzzug des Weibes*, directed by Martin Berger, 1926

3. Maly Delschaft as the young teacher, rape scene, *Kreuzzug des Weibes*, directed by Martin Berger, 1926

termination of her fifth pregnancy by a young doctor (Harry Liedtke). Even though he expects her child to be 'sickly', he says he cannot 'help' because the law permits a termination of pregnancy only on strict medical grounds and her pregnancy does not endanger her life. He warns her against a quack or self-induced abortion. But the woman turns to the concierge who encourages her to do just that, probably offering her the necessary means to do it. As a result the woman falls mortally ill. The incident is brought to the attention of the public prosecutor (Conrad Veidt) who issues an arrest warrant for her and her husband. When the police officer arrives at their lodging the woman has already died. Nevertheless he apprehends the widower, thus depriving his four children of their only parent.

The second story is about a 'modern wife' who seeks a termination purely for vanity. She tells her husband, 'Why would I want to ruin my figure just so that you can enjoy fatherhood?' Nevertheless, she easily secures an abortion from her family doctor on fabricated medical grounds which were permissible if not in law then in practice.[16] This case has also come to the notice of the (same) public prosecutor (it is hinted that the angry maid had denounced her former mistress) but on this occasion he is unable to press charges.

The third story concerns the chief protagonist of the film, the prosecutor's fiancée (Maly Delschaft). She lives in the elegant front apartment block and has just received her certificate as a teacher in a state high school for girls. She has heard about the death of the proletarian woman, who lived in the rear building, witnessed the husband's arrest and pleads with her fiancé on behalf of the husband. When she fails, her relationship with the prosecutor undergoes a crisis. The dramatic climax of the film occurs when she is raped by the caretaker's 'mentally handicapped' son (Werner Krauß) and finds herself pregnant. Her life now seems in ruins: she knows that as an unmarried mother she will lose her job and probably her fiancé, too. In desperation she turns to the young doctor (Harry Liedtke). Shaken by the death of the proletarian woman, for which he feels responsible, he is now determined to save the teacher's life from a 'back-street abortion'. He offers his 'help' (we then assume he also performs the abortion) and then honourably gives himself up to the police and the prosecutor. When the latter learns that the case concerns his own fiancée he suffers a nightmarish vision: he perceives first the silhouette of his fiancée in a white nightdress and then those of women walking in an eerie procession over a bridge against the backdrop of ringing church bells. They are the ghosts of abortion victims and the scene represents the woman's crusade of the title. This hallucination signifies the prosecutor's change of heart: instead of morally condemning his fiancée and bringing charges against her, he resigns his position as a civil servant because he cannot work for a state whose laws he no longer supports. His inner development makes reconciliation with his fiancée possible.

The release of this film was brilliantly stage managed for maximum impact. It was premiered on 1 October 1926 in two large cinemas simultaneously, the

Alhambra on the Kurfürstendamm and the Primus Palast.[17] It also benefited from a number of well-staged events: the high-profile campaigns, in the previous year, by sex reformers, the political left and women's groups to liberalize the abortion law. In the same year the conservative German Medical Association had dedicated its annual conference to the issue; there had been a number of motions in the Reichstag to legalize abortion; and the commission set up to revise the entire penal code published their own proposal to liberalize the abortion clauses. Indeed, in May 1926, just three months before filming of *Kreuzzug* started,[18] the abortion clause was revised. All this guaranteed high-profile publicity for an issue which juxtaposed aspects of health, morality, women's rights, class discrimination, culture and gender in a complex set of relationships. Not surprisingly then, the focus on §218 and its class-specific effects on women secured *Kreuzzug* immediate public attention – obviously hoped for by the film's publicity material, which pointed to the 'hotly disputed subject' and 'the many tragedies which are caused by it. Must a woman become a mother? Or may a hardpressed woman … ?'[19] Indeed, according to the influential journal *Film-Kurier*, *Kreuzzug* was the eighth most popular film of the 1926/7 season.[20] Contemporary reviews were generally positive. One review praised the film for its 'extraordinarily subdued and refined' style and the 'love and care' with which the notion of 'compulsory motherhood' had been 'formed into a great work of art'. Another commended the seriousness with which the film portrayed 'the sanctity of motherhood' and a third especially liked the director, Martin Bergers' 'sparse, restrained and dispassionate' approach which 'broke with all cinematic convention. No car passes by, no cigarette is being smoked, there are no love scenes … ' This was 'a film of hard facts, narrated with intentional matter-of-factness and through it especially impressive'. The film proved a huge success for its main actors and Maly Delschaft's fame as a first-rate actress was secured.

On the other hand, none of the reviews failed to mention the commercial appeal of the subject matter, predicting 'good business'.[21]

Berger's film was a sufficient hit in Germany to secure U.S. distribution and to usher in a veritable flood of other abortion films, most of them in favour of liberalizing the law.[22] But it would be wrong to dismiss films like *Kreuzzug* purely as a clever commercial exploitation of a controversial subject as, for example, Siegfried Kracauer did. Writing in 1947, he took topical films to task because he felt they deflected from revolutionary issues of the day as they merely 'pretended to tackle the social problem by harping on the sufferings of the proletariat … '. He thought filmmakers tried to neutralize pent-up indignation of social critics by directing it against what he regarded as evils of small importance, such as stigmatizing the 'rigors of the penal code'. Since these films, moreover, 'emphasized sex matters, they were bound to arouse a mixture of indignation and sexuality which could not but increase their value as safety valves.'[23]

Certainly, Berger's message in *Kreuzzug* was reformist rather than revolutionary, resolving the moral crisis with a personal conciliation between two middle-class professionals rather than class solidarity to institute change. Nevertheless *Kreuzzug*, or bestselling novels like Irmgard Keun's *Gilgi – eine von uns* and a selection of other abortion narratives were important means of communication about women's everyday experience of modernity in Weimar Germany. Whereas abortion is the central topic in *Kreuzzug*, Keun's novel affords a useful comparison because abortion features only as a marginal issue in it. Nevertheless both touch on other fashionable subject matters. *Kreuzzug* places abortion within the context of contemporary views on eugenics, population policy, medicine versus quackery and, last but not least, the phenomenon of the New Woman. *Gilgi* explored amongst other topics the new rationalized working woman, consumption, single motherhood and adoption. It is this interrelationship between fiction and the debates of the day that makes these works especially relevant for analysis.

What is immediately striking is how uncritically *Kreuzzug*, and many other films and novels, too, adopted medical opinions. Doctors are always depicted as male despite the large and increasing number of women in the profession – which itself throws an interesting light on the adherence to stereotypical gender roles; they feature as sole arbiters and reliable executors of abortion. The tacit assumption is that the aborting woman is always safe in medical hands and that there would be no 'abortion crisis' if doctors were allowed to help the deserving woman. This is certainly the underlying idea in the resolution of the young teacher's dilemma: once the young doctor agrees to 'help' her, her life and her career are saved. As will be shown below in Chapters 3 and 4, the notion of medical infallibility was, however, not borne out in practice.

But the film does not just condone medical claims; it positively celebrates the profession by presenting a young doctor as the hero of the plot and by casting the heart-throb Harry Liedtke for the role. Thus the physician in the film was not only young and glamorous but his character undergoes an impressive development from the professional blinkered by conventions and class bias to the humane and courageous individual who takes on the law and saves the female lead. His former and future self in fact neatly mirrored the two camps within the medical profession during the Weimar Republic fighting each other over the abortion question: on the one hand, the traditionalists who resisted law reform or, at best, tolerated abortion on strict health grounds; on the other hand, the progressives, mostly on the left, who advocated medical, social and/or eugenic abortion.[24]

While *Kreuzzug* pleads the case for the social indication – the proletarian woman's plight is clearly caused by her material hardship – it aligns itself even more strongly with those who campaigned for eugenic abortion to prevent 'degenerate' offspring. After all, the central drama concerns the young teacher's rape and subsequent pregnancy. Significantly the

perpetrator is the 'mentally deficient' son of the caretaker and by implication his unborn child would in all probability have inherited his 'dysgenic' traits. Sex crimes perpetrated by the mentally ill were a favourite topic in the contemporary medical literature. It usually evoked the danger to the *Volkskörper* in the darkest tones emanating from the allegedly growing number of 'degenerates' who were considered to be especially fecund.[25] The eugenic argument is also explicitly and rather didactically put in the fourth act of the film when the young doctor and the prosecutor argue over the merits of a quantitative versus a qualitative population policy. In future women, like the sick proletarian woman he was not permitted to help, should be permitted to terminate unwanted pregnancies, declares the young doctor: 'the removal of a sick foetus serves the good of the *Volk* and is no murder'. Eugenic danger is also implied cinematically when the camera focuses on her son at the very moment when the concierge encourages the proletarian couple to procure an abortion without medical help. Surely the spectator is meant to conclude that had the concierge practised what she preached ('if the doctor does not want to help, why not do it yourselves?'. 'Rubbish, dangerous? If you knew how many do it!')[26] she would have been spared a son with learning difficulties and the teacher her rape? Finally, as von Keitz points out, in Werner Krauß's acting the 'mental debility' of the caretaker's son translates physically into a 'total lack of control over his own body'. He behaves exactly as no child of respectable parents was allowed: he eats with his fingers like a savage and reveals an unchecked oral and sexual appetite; as soon as he sets eyes on something, he wants to touch and possess it. Aided by an appropriately infantile hairstyle and ghostlike facial expression Krauß gives an exuberant performance of 'mental deficiency' in close-up shots. Interestingly, the heinous deed of rape is only punished physically when the public prosecutor pushes Krauß's character down the stairs; significantly, he desists from pursuing proper legal sanctions against the culprit. Von Keitz suggests that this reveals a belief that the 'feeble-minded' were without a sense of guilt or remorse.[27]

The second example of medicalized thinking concerns the way the film accepts that abortion should be a prerogative of doctors and that back-street abortionists were a bad thing. While the medical press vilified quack abortionists openly, *Kreuzzug* condemns them more indirectly: it is left ambiguous whether the caretaker – in court case narratives indeed frequently the abortionist – merely encourages the proletarian couple to induce their own abortion or actually provides the necessary instruments for it. At any rate, her persona is unmistakably associated cinematically with darkness through her physical surroundings, with 'degeneration' through her son and finally with murder through the death of the proletarian woman who follows her advice.

Irmgard Keun's novel *Gilgi* does not criticize lay abortionists outright but damns them by omitting any reference to them. The pregnant Gilgi does not

turn to a 'wise woman' but instead goes straight to the next doctor and even when he rejects her request she still does not consider 'help' from a quack. Even more surprisingly, Hertha, the pregnant wife of Gilgi's destitute friend Hans, also only refers to medical help. When Gilgi exclaims in horror: 'Hertha, my God, how can you think of having this child!', she replies resignedly: 'What else can I do, Gilgi? Or do you really think I could go along to the local health insurance fund?', a reference to the well-known fact that sick funds usually paid for a termination induced by a doctor on health grounds.[28]

When criminal abortion did feature in films and fiction the road to it was shown as a stony one. For example, the young unemployed Hete in the film of Wolf's play *Cyankali* has to suffer not only an attempted sexual assault by the caretaker in return for an abortifacient but also a degrading consultation with a general practitioner. He furnishes a rich woman with the necessary medical certificate for a termination on dubious therapeutic grounds but rebuffs the poor young woman, Hete. Wise women (or, more rarely, 'wise men') appear invariably as negative characters (see Chapter 4). The former were usually called 'Madame' like a procuress and were given the appearance of the unacceptable or exotic 'other'. For example, Madame Heye in the film *Cyankali* is the undisputed villain of the plot; long before Hete meets her, the uncooperative medical practitioner warns her not to go where she will meet certain death, associating lay abortion with death and preparing the spectator precisely for Hete's actual end. Despite Madame Heye's superficially respectable appearance (neatly dressed in a white blouse and dark skirt and wearing a homely apron) she soon reveals her coarseness by her rude and abrupt gestures, ungrammatical speech and the merciless way she strikes a hard bargain: extracting a large sum of money (30 Marks in instalments) from a distraught Hete, who can ill afford it; in return Heye offers an operation (with dirty instruments) and poison (the potassium cyanide of the title) for Hete to take home, eventually causing her agonising death.

Madame Lu in Franz Hofer's 1929 film *Madame Lu, die Frau für diskrete Beratung* (Madame Lu, the woman for discreet advice), however, seems to be a departure from the rule: she is well dressed and well spoken, conscientious and painstakingly hygienic. Yet, her counterpart in the film, a dark, gypsy-like woman of the demi-world conforms to the stereotype of the sluttish abortionist. Only at the denouement do we learn that Madame Lu is not really a wise woman at all but a philanthropist who works closely with social welfare and uses her guise to attract desperate women whom she then saves from the clutches of the real back-street operators. Her mission is fuelled by her own daughter's tragic death after a bungled quack abortion. I have yet to find an example in film or fiction which offers a neutral, let alone positive, image of commercial abortionists.[29] This is in line with academic medicine, which aimed to 'stamp out' a practice which it blamed officially for the rise

of maternal morbidity and mortality. Yet, as we shall see in Chapter 4, women's own stories and judicial investigations often offer a more complex picture: while there are of course numerous examples of lay abortionists having exploited their position of power and having caused injuries and even deaths, there is also a surprising wealth of evidence that a good many operators possessed considerable skills and medical knowledge and helped women efficiently. Consequently, they were often regarded by their clients with gratitude rather than disdain.

Although the *Film-Kurier* in its review of *Kreuzzug* emphasized the lack of 'party political interventions',[30] like the play and film *Cyankali* and a number of novels (e.g. Keun's *Gilgi*, Franz Krey's *Maria und der Paragraph* and Willi Bredel's *Rosenhofstraße*) *Kreuzzug* stressed the social inequality of access to medical abortion. This was very much in tune with the campaign by the political left.[31] We have seen how *Kreuzzug* (and *Cyankali*, too) compares the deserving yet unsuccessful case of the proletarian woman with the undeserving, but successful abortion case of the society lady. Left-wing advocates of abortion law reform repeatedly argued that the existing law favoured the rich who could afford to 'buy' safe surgical terminations, while it drove the poor to risky self-help or to dangerous back-street abortionists. This is precisely the line of the film; yet it goes further. It also portrays the law enforcement agencies as class discriminatory: a public prosecutor does not hesitate to have the proletarian couple arrested, thereby ruining an entire family, while he dismisses the case against the wealthy woman. Only at the close of the film have the representatives of bourgeois mores and civil service freed themselves from their restrictive roles: the doctor performs an illegal abortion on the teacher, and the public prosecutor refrains from pressing a charge. As von Keitz points out, at the very end the grip of the out-of-date law dissolves literally, because none of the civil servants respect it: 'the doctor aborts, the prosecutor stops prosecuting, the teacher teaching sitting at home instead and the written law becomes superfluous when the prosecutor quite literally leaves it behind and quits his job'.[32]

The film also decries class differences cinematically by its use of space and lighting: the public areas of the middle-class professionals like the prosecutor's office, which is reminiscent of a 'mediaeval' hall complete with an exaggeratedly high gothic chair, emphasize the supreme importance of the law while rendering the figure of the prosecutor curiously fragile. The doctor's surgery is also relatively large and very brightly lit; so are the staircase of the teacher's apartment block and the living area of the 'modern' couple. In contrast, the spaces of the poor are narrow and gloomy. For example, the working-class drama unfolds on the dark stairwell of the tenement block at the back, in the caretaker's tiny office and the cramped family room where the woman dies.[33]

Paradoxically, however, the narrative structure and characterization in the film reinforces the very class inequality it seeks to criticize: it focuses on the

story of the middle-class teacher and marginalizes the proletarian tragedy as a sideshow. It also perpetuates the stereotype of the proletarian woman as victim, an image well known from the graphic art of Käthe Kollwitz, the most successful woman artist of the Weimar years. It depicted the hopeless and helpless mother, a symbol of capitalist exploitation, and was made available to a wider public through being reprinted in popular journals, in pamphlets and on posters. The working-class family in *Kreuzzug* is almost a caricature of suffering writ large on their worn faces, unfashionable clothes and their children's general beseeching look. The unspoken judgement that this proletarian family is marked with 'degeneration' is thus established entirely through cinematic means.

Kreuzzug anticipated many other tragic abortion narratives in working-class circles. In *Cyankali* Hete's helplessness in the face of a class-ridden society is magnified by her inability to prevent the sexual attacks of the caretaker or overcome the reluctance of the two-faced doctor. More subtly, Hete's mother, who looks old and worn out despite being only fifty,[34] serves as a warning example of wasted proletarian womanhood. In Keun's *Gilgi*, the protagonist's old friend Hans and his wife Hertha have similarly given up hope. During the Depression Hans has slipped down the social ladder and finds himself amongst the down-and-outs facing imprisonment unless he can repay his debts; Hertha has resigned herself to a third child despite being destitute. She admires Hans and professes to be prepared 'to die for him' but 'illness, tiredness and the constant fear of a child' has made sex for her 'torture, a terrible torture' and she is tempted to give Hans enough money for a prostitute.[35] When Gilgi fails to deliver the money she has obtained for them, Hans and Hertha end in the most pathetic way possible: they gas themselves and their children. Their lack of resolve provides a poignant backdrop to Gilgi's own fate: while her friends have sunk into apathy, the reader cannot but admire the heroine who fights on. Instead of muddling through with her charming but irresponsible layabout boyfriend she leaves him and bravely faces the future as an unwed mother in the capital. Berlin, of course, was associated with modernity and sexual reform. Gilgi thus signals her determination to retain agency and break the stereotypical fate of young women as victims of seduction and abandonment; as the literary scholar Barbara Kosta has remarked, it is also a powerful 'affront to notions of family and dominant culture'.[36]

Finally, both *Gilgi* and *Kreuzzug* can be accused of anti-working-class prejudice in their characterization. Whereas the protagonists, both middle class or, in the case of Gilgi, lower middle-class, are drawn as more rounded personalities, the lower classes, in true Expressionistic style, remain one-dimensional types. In the case of *Kreuzzug* this is despite the fact that the main characters, too, have no names and are not rounded but primarily represent professional roles, thereby elevating the drama into an almost abstract argument, a strategy particularly applauded in a contemporary review.[37]

The novel *Gilgi* and the female reader and spectator

We know from contemporary studies that women comprised a large number – if not the majority – of the cinema-going public and the same was true of the serialized novel. Patrice Petro has convincingly argued that if we look at different textual practices we can deduce that 'a female spectatorship was indeed assumed and addressed' by the cinema and the illustrated press, and that it 'is the existence of a female spectator and the function of representation for mobilizing her desires and unconscious fantasies, that analyses of the Weimar cinema have repressed'.[38] It may be reasonable to assume that the portrayal of upwardly mobile lower middle-class or middle-class heroines attracted both the proletarian and the bourgeois woman spectator and was therefore eagerly pursued by film distributors as well as publishers. The young teacher in *Kreuzzug* fitted the new model of the emancipated Weimar woman whose higher education afforded her a profession, enough self-confidence and economic independence to control her own fate (until she found she had little control over her own body). New Woman narratives were extremely popular. The fortune of the illustrated press was much boosted by printing in instalments a novel which conformed to the new vision of women's modernity. The serialization of Vicki Baum's *stud. chem. Helene Willfüer* (1928) reputedly increased the circulation of the *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* by no less than 200,000 to reach more than two million copies.[39] Baum's protagonist was also the epitome of the New Woman: a middle-class chemistry student, a single mother (after failing to obtain an abortion), a successful scientist working on the fashionable process of rejuvenation, all the rage at that time.[40]

Keun's bestseller *Gilgi* was also serialized, no doubt riding on the wave of the huge public protests against the arrest in early 1931 of the two doctors Else Kienle and Friedrich Wolf for illegal terminations, which took place in the same year. Keun dealt deftly with one of the key conflicts of the New Woman: to overcome the apparent incompatibility of work, love and motherhood, exacerbated in the slump. Interestingly, *Gilgi* was not serialized in the illustrated press but in the SPD organ, *Vorwärts*. In 1932 it was filmed by the German Paramount film company as *Eine von uns*, directed by Johannes Meyer. Despite the first-class cast, with Brigitte Helm in the title role and Ernst Busch as the musician Pit, however, it proved a disappointment.[41] But it was a popular and critical success both as book and serial. Within a year of publication the book was reprinted five times, having sold no less than 30, 000 copies for the 26-year-old first-time author (who claimed to be only 21).[42] Tucholsky praised her as a 'woman with humour', others like Hans Fallada and Kadidja Wedekind followed suit. Conservative critics liked the protagonist's courage but might well have been shocked by Keun's tough description of the scene at the abortion doctor's.[43]

Gilgi, the white-collar heroine, strives to advance through a tough regime of self-improvement, body culture and work discipline and a fashionably

sober attitude to life and love at the beginning of the book. It must have spoken to thousands of other young women with similar worldly aspirations. Gilgi's modernity was perfectly conveyed in Keun's idiosyncratic style. As Kosta has formulated it, 'both Gilgi's tempo and time schedule, punctuated by Keun's rapid scene changes, fragmented writing and abrupt sentences replicate the pulse of the city' of the 1920s.[44] Sentimentality in sexual relations is spurned by Gilgi from the outset and she criticizes her own unexpected feelings for Martin, her *bon-vivant* lover as a *Betriebsstörung* (operational difficulties).[45] This was very much in keeping with the atmosphere of sexual cynicism among the younger generation and the notion of rationalized sexuality discussed by sex reformers and population strategists alike.[46] Bemoaning the 'increasingly hard, cold, masculine tone' of contemporary literature, Max Brod, writing in 1929, explained that 'it is unacceptable either to sing or to speak of love' since it was 'incompatible with "objectivity", the supreme postulate of the present.'[47] Gilgi was surely the perfect role model for all aspiring New Women. She is well aware of her youth, her slim build, her tight muscles and her taut face. In fact she insists on being called Gilgi rather than Gisela, her real name, because 'a name with two i's fits slender legs and prepubescent hips, a tiny fashion cap which balances mysteriously on the outer edge of the head'.[48] She is the very image of that phenomenon, the confident white-collar worker, maligned by Kracauer in his 'The Little Shop Girls Go to the Cinema' and the 'typists who fashion themselves according to their ideals on the screen'.[49] Gilgi fits this stereotype well: she is a stenotypist with huge social ambitions, intensely aware of advertising and consumer values, who names brand names effortlessly and seemingly unaware ('Kaloderma soap, Pebeco toothpaste'), and is able to hum current pop songs ('Reich mir zum Abschied noch einmal die Hände – good nighit, good nighit … ').[50]

In contrast to the working-class victims Hans and Hertha, Gilgi is proud of getting on under her own steam. She is successful despite not being especially talented: ' I am pretty average and I'm not letting that get me down. But I'll make what I can of myself … '. She has no time for melancholy thoughts: 'You know, if you are healthy and not hungry you have simply no right to be unhappy.'[51] Yet, her supreme self-confidence is shattered later in the book when she falls in love in an old-fashioned romantic way, loses her self-control and her job, gets into debt and finally finds herself pregnant. In an effort to regain control of her life and her body she seeks an abortion from a general practitioner, but in vain. Thus the book illustrates very powerfully the problematic experience of modernity by Weimar's young women, who bravely strove to challenge conventions and create a new social role for themselves. Kosta suggests that the 'narrative resolution holds the tenuous promise of a new family structure in a modern, secular society that does not bind marriage with maternity. Perhaps she alludes to the possibility of re-imagining the maternal.'[52]

Both book and protagonist met with strong criticism from the political left. In 1932 when the novel appeared in daily instalments in *Vorwärts*, the editor, evoking Keun's title, asked readers: 'Is Gilgi one of us?' and apparently received a sackful of letters. Judging from the selection printed in the paper, the response on the whole was more critical than positive. Readers took Keun's character Gilgi to task for her 'contempt' and her 'lack of empathy'. One woman journalist even wrote an invective in the KPD journal *Weg der Frau*, accusing Keun's heroine of fascist tendencies. The real Gilgis, she argued, had more important worries than a love affair; they needed work and bread; what was needed was not 'social climbing but a struggle of all Gilgis against the existing economic circumstances … '. She called on 'all Gilgis of the real world – to defend themselves!'[53] This is reminiscent of Kracauer's critique of the 'false consciousness' of the white-collar workers whose comprehension of the real world of work, social position and class adherence was, he suggested, diverted by the illusions created by entertainment film and advertising.[54] His tendency to accuse the female spectator, especially the young female spectator, of passivity and gullibility has for some time been challenged by a number of feminist scholars.[55] It is of course especially unconvincing to accuse women watching films like *Kreuzzug* of merely wanting an easy escape from reality when what they were watching was precisely the very real problems they encountered in everyday life. But, as we know, Kracauer was not the only one who viewed the rise of mass culture with alarm, as is shown in the widespread debates about *Kitsch*, *Trivialliteratur* and *Schund und Schmutz* throughout the 1920s and the various articles by Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel before him.[56]

Socialist plays and novels

Only left-wing film and fiction dared to put the plight of the working-class heroine centre stage. The best-known examples are two agitprop plays, Friedrich Wolf's *Cyankali. §218* (1929) and Carl Credé's '*§218. Gequälte Menschen* (Tortured people) of the same year. The protagonist in *Cyankali* is 20-year-old Hete who lives with her widowed mother. Hete started off as a manual worker but has recently become a white-collar worker in an office. Her boyfriend Paul is a boiler man in a steel factory. When Hete finds herself pregnant she looks forward to the child; but this changes when Paul loses his job in a lock-out and is subsequently imprisoned for stealing from the works canteen (to prevent starvation). When Hete's mother accuses her of bringing shame on them she runs away to seek a termination at all cost. She consults a doctor who, like the family doctor in *Kreuzzug*, hides behind the law ('the law ties the hands of us doctors … ') which he quotes verbatim to the bewildered Hete and then tells her about abortion and mortality statistics issued by the Annual Conference of the German Medical Association, for

good measure.[57] Even more than in the film, the play spells out all the mortal dangers of wise women: cyanide or 'syringing with carbolic soap', 'infection from dirty instruments' leading to death 'in convulsions of puerperal fever'.[58] Like the working-class mother in *Kreuzzug*, Hete seeks a lay abortion and dies like her. Her road to perdition has the usual stops along the way: the attempted self-abortion (here in the back of a newspaper kiosk) after Hete had obtained a syringe from the male caretaker, who wanted to be paid for it 'in kind'; the quack abortionist Madame Heye, found through a small ad in the papers, and finally the death in her mother's arms. It is in fact her mother who is tricked into administering the deadly poison and thereby becomes the murderess of her only daughter.

The play was written as a 'docudrama' interspersing fiction with documentary material of statistics and newspaper cuttings to make it seem like a dramatized reportage and help to mobilize the audience into political action, in the belief that 'Kunst ist Waffe' (Art is a weapon).[59] *Cyankali* was premiered on 5 September 1929 in Berlin's Lessing Theatre, the so-called second Piscator stage. Wolf's aspirations became real when the socialist collective of the unemployed *Gruppe junger Schauspieler* (group of young actors), who in 1930 took it on tour throughout Germany and Switzerland, created a sensation: they faced theatre scandals and right-wing attacks, as well as left-wing

4. Renée Stobrawa as Hete in Friedrich Wolf's play *Cyankali. § 218*, Berlin, 1929

support.[60] Critics praised and mocked it in equal measure. For example, the *Hamburger 8 Uhr Abendblatt* praised the young actors as being

> of our generation. They are inhabited by *zeitgeist*. They do not only identify with the characters, but also with the playwright, the social will of the drama comes alive in them … This is the first strong impetus to a national theatre of the present.[61]

Although the SPD press, probably motivated by Wolf having joined their arch rival, the KPD, could be critical at times – one paper described Wolf's drama as 'a reflex of petty-bourgeois ideology'[62] – left-wing writers and journals generally praised Wolf's commitment to the cause of class equality but recognized the artistic limits of his writing. The novelist Erich Kästner thought the play a 'simple work' but an 'exemplary thesis play'. He described how at the end of the performance he attended, a voice rang out from the balcony with 'Down with §218!' followed by a tumultuous chorus of female and male voices: 'Down with it! Down! Down!' Kästner predicted, rightly, that the play would stimulate discussion in the Reichstag, in newspapers, among doctors and the legal commissions in parliament. A Stuttgart left-leaning newspaper praised it as a 'powerful indictment of bourgeois society' but criticized what it regarded as Wolf's 'failure to tread the path of the proletarian class struggle' by omitting to offer a solution for social problems and show the importance of solidarity amongst the striking workers.[63]

The bourgeois press was naturally more hostile and stressed the incendiary message which led to uproar. One critic, Ludwig Marcuse, called *Cyankali* 'hurried and coarsely constructed' and predicted that 'once the law is discarded so Wolf's play will be'. There were reports of protests in several towns such as that by Catholic associations, which issued a complaint in Frankfurt am Main.[64] A serious factual critique was printed in November 1929 in the influential *Frankfurter Zeitung*. A Dr Kögel, a high-ranking lawyer, accused the play of misinformation and Wolf of 'not even knowing the current penal provisions relating to abortion'. Kögel made three important points. Firstly, the law was misrepresented when at the start of the play, §218 and other texts were projected on a screen, presumably to underline the actuality of the topic.[65] But the text of §218 used (and repeated in publicity material for the play) was that of 1871 despite the fact that the law had been reformed in May 1926.[66] In addition, the play misrepresented legal practice. In Frankfurt where he was public prosecutor, Hete's case would have led to only one week (suspended) imprisonment or a fine of 20 to 30 Marks for the aborting woman. Moreover, the final scene of Hete's mother's arrest was quite implausible, as was the harsh attitude to Hete herself. Secondly, Paul's imprisonment was off the mark. In Kögel's own experience Paul's theft of food would have been condoned as petty theft in times of genuine hardship. Thirdly, no doctor was legally obliged to inform the authorities of a criminal abortion about which he had heard in his professional capacity.[67]

Why this slip on Wolf's part? Despite a rather feeble attempt in the same newspaper by a woman lawyer to exonerate Wolf and a more spirited response by the author himself, the accusation was never properly refuted. Ignoring the issue of misquoting §218, Wolf simply stated that every year 'many women and girls' had to defend themselves in court, that they were thus branded and lost earnings and that the reform of §218 had not brought relief.

> 10,000 German women would rather go to a quack and a back-street abortionist than to a doctor who is not permitted to help, they would rather endure a bad operation than have none at all, rather suffer puerperal fever and gynaecological problems than enforced motherhood and shame: This is where the problem is, Sir![68]

This amounted to Wolf's tacit admission of his error. Why did this come about? It is inconceivable that he was ignorant of the 1926 legal reform; after all, he wrote the play a full three years later and he was a prominent and outspoken law reformer. Indeed he had practised what he preached and had referred patients for termination on social grounds, which led to his arrest in February 1931. It seems more probable that Wolf used artistic 'licence' in reproducing the outdated 1871 law to strengthen his dramatic message: that thousands of poor women were victims of an unjust and murderous law. The same motivation was probably behind the other inaccuracies. But they sit uneasily with the claim of *Cyankali* as a *Zeitstück*, rooted in the social realities of the day and fulfilling the characteristics of the new political theatre supported by Piscator as functional, authentic and devoid of symbolism.[69] Furthermore, more errors were committed: Wolf asserted implicitly in the play and explicitly in his newspaper retort above, that doctors were not permitted to perform terminations. However, in 1927 the Supreme Court had decreed the permissibility of termination on medical grounds. Finally, Madame Heye's prescription of cyanide is unrealistic; not a single one of the many judicial abortion files examined for this book mention this method of lay abortion.

The success of the play secured Wolf lucrative offers from many film companies, amongst others Prometheus, close to the KPD and part of the International Workers' Aid. In spite of Wolf having joined the KPD in 1928 he rejected Prometheus in favour of Atlantis-Film, the German subsidiary of the U.S. Fox Film Company. Wolf was apparently anxious to prevent the film from being sentimentalized but, as the correspondence between Wolf and the film's director, Hans Tintner, testifies, artistic cooperation soon proved problematic and Wolf distanced himself from the end result, dismissing it as 'kitsch'.[70] Wolf's own disaffection and the endless problems of censorship notwithstanding, it proved to be one of the most successful of all so-called sexual enlightenment films and was considered *the* 'classic' *Thesenfilm* against §218. It was premiered on 23 May 1930 not on the Kurfürstendamm, but in the Babylon in the working-class east of Berlin (with 120 seats, one of

5. Film poster, *Cyankali. §218*, directed by Hans Tintner (1930), Grete Mosheim as Hete, 'Madame Heye', the abortionist, in the background

Germany's smaller cinemas).[71] The film was soon shown all over Germany and was used by both SPD and KPD in their election campaigns, as indeed was Berger's *Kreuzzug* and Eduard Tissé's *Frauennot – Frauenglück* (Women's misery and women's happiness) in 1928.[72]

Cyankali certainly contained all the stereotypical ingredients of vintage abortion drama: the young lower-class Hete is vulnerable to capitalist economic vagaries and finally falls victim to the bourgeois abortion law; Madame Heye, in the guise of the grim and greedy quack whose potion proves lethal, functions as the archetypal villain. Reminiscent of the uncontrolled sensual appetite of the caretaker's son in *Kreuzzug*, Heye's thirst for money is expressed in several ways: we first see her eating greedily and at the same time 'devouring' the downmarket *8 Uhr Abendblatt*. Her gestures are rude; she beckons Hete with a mere movement of her head and also uses street slang: 'What about dough?'. Her boasting of her attention to hygiene ('everything with antisepsis and sterilization [sic!] you see, because of puerperal fever!') only serves to draw attention to her negligence of asepsis and antisepsis in the following sequence. She takes out of an old chest of drawers instruments loosely wrapped in cloth and offends the most basic rule of hygiene by not rendering them sterile or washing her hands. Instead she wipes them on her grubby apron. Commerce rules, as when Heye signals the value of her time by pointing to her watch at the beginning of the encounter with her client. Heye drives a hard bargain, thereby reducing the gravely ill Hete into little more than a commodity: 'Do you really believe that I'd risk this for a lousy 10 Marks – and in your state!' (In the play she demanded 30 Marks). Finally the abortionist rids herself of an uncomfortable customer by selling her potassium cyanide which would not only kill the foetus but also Hete herself. The director uses a paradoxical voyeuristic strategy: showing the operation in silhouette behind an opaque glass wall impeded the spectators' gaze of gynaecological details but stimulated their imagination.[73]

In fact, as we will see in Chapter 4, this must be rated as a highly partisan portrait of a lay operator. Abortionists worth their salt would have declined such a risky case: the presence of a temperature and abdominal pain pointed to an infection by a previous bungled operation. This posed a significant legal risk, since medical complications or death almost always led to police investigation and prosecution of both aborting woman and her accomplice. Hete's sickly looks do indeed arouse Heye's suspicion ('Been at the doctor – or tried it yourself? You look so seedy!') at the outset; once it is established that Hete has fever (here the German word 'FIEBER' is written in distorted letters all over the screen) and we see her writhing with stomach pain, these suspicions are confirmed. In Wolf's play Heye does not risk an operation; in the film she does. Both play and film imply that Hete pays with her life as a result of Madame Heye's intervention. This is, however, wilfully misleading; since Hete had attempted self-abortion her final death cannot be blamed

6. Programme for Carl Credé's play §*218. Gequälte Menschen,* directed by Erwin Piscator, illustration by Käthe Kollwitz, 'At the Doctor's'.

only, or even mainly, on the intervention or administrations of this abortionist. What is more, the film also commits an extraordinary medical blunder: Heye dramatically pronounces a fever not after she has used a thermometer but after she has taken Hete's pulse!

Immediately in the wake of *Cyankali* a second abortion play, '*§218'. Gequälte Menschen* (Tortured people), swept Germany by storm. There are many striking parallels between the two plays. The author of '*§218'*, Carl Credé, was also a left-wing doctor and he, too, got into trouble with the law. In 1927 he had published a polemic written while in prison for illegally terminating pregnancies. It was illustrated with several drawings by Käthe Kollwitz, who herself had leftist sympathies and whose husband was a socialist doctor working in a working-class district of Berlin. One, *Beim Arzt* (At the doctor's) showed an emaciated proletarian woman with a swollen belly knocking on the door of a doctor with a mixture of resignation and quiet determination.[74] The play was based on a 'reportage', *Frauen in Not. '§218'* (Suffering women) for abortion law reform which was serialized in the Communist Party paper *Die Rote Fahne* and which also inspired, in October 1931, a touring exhibition with the same name and organized by the communist journal *Weg der Frau*.[75] The play '*§218'*, also directed by Piscator, was premiered in Leipzig in November 1929 and was, like *Cyankali* a *Kampfstück*, a campaigning drama for the liberalization of the abortion law, an aim made very explicit in the theatre programme: Credé called for a referendum on §218 and Piscator wrote a eulogy on the institution of the theatre, which he regarded as one of the few media to instil a sense of outrage. People, he said, were usually passive, 'for lack of imagination … [and] do not fully experience their own life, let alone their world. Otherwise reading a single newspaper page would suffice to stir humanity to uproar.'

'§218' (Gequälte Menschen) and *Cyankali* were perfect examples of the kind of agitprop drama in which Piscator believed: 'Theatre today has to be linked to the needs, demands and pain of the mass for better or worse, if it is not to remain a pretentious institution for the upper five hundred.' Abortion was just such a topic which had politicized the masses in the 'post-revolutionary state'.[76]

Like *Cyankali*, the programme quoted §218 in the 1871 rather than the 1926 version, again no doubt an artistic licence which ran, however, counter to a claim of authenticity sought by quoting details of actual abortion trials in 1929 in Berlin and Swabia. The misquoted law also sat uncomfortably with a eulogy by Herbert Ihring, a fellow left-wing director. He praised Piscator as 'the greatest director of contemporary material that Germany possesses', as a director who deals in 'actual events' rather than in 'fables and fiction'. The author's misleading background information notwithstanding, one reviewer, the legal adviser to the General Medical Council, found the message of the play so convincing that he urged his colleagues to go and see it to better engage with the central issue of abortion law reform.[77]

Like *Cyankali* and the film *Kreuzzug*, Credé's play thematized the supposed class inequality of the law and the judiciary. The first act showed the death of a proletarian mother of eight malnourished children at the hands of a quack abortionist. A well-meaning doctor, previously consulted, felt obliged to turn down her request for a qualified medical termination. The third act was set in a poor housing estate. It was the second act, however, which proved the dramatic climax: against the background of an examining magistrate investigating the case of a well-to-do childless couple accused of a 'convenience abortion' by a colluding doctor, the pros and cons of the abortion law were debated by the couple, a medical officer of health, a curate and a progressive doctor. To increase the dramatic impact of this discussion Piscator placed all but the magistrate amidst the audience, from where they voiced their opinions with increasing passion and anger. Financed by the Free Trade Unions, the play toured throughout Germany cities. It was frequently staged not in central theatres but cinemas, community centres or suburban theatres because of censorship invoked by municipal authorities.[78] Critics were divided roughly along political lines: those on the right deplored it and those on the left enthused about it. A Bremen critic praised Credé for pointing 'his finger relentlessly at a wound of the social body of modern humanity which has caused the most excruciating pain: … the question of the justification of termination of pregnancy.'[79] The *Barmer Stadtanzeiger* went as far as calling the play:

> true, great theatre of the kind we see rarely. Like Greek theatre … , like *Die Räuber* [by Friedrich Schiller] [it] dismantles the boundary between stage and spectator … between art and life. This is an evening which tears apart and rages through souls … .This evening is unforgettable.[80]

But the most feared critic of his time, Alfred Kerr, characteristically rubbished its artistic content: 'there is no author; he is called Credé'. According to Kerr the play had 'no artistic merit', it was a mere *Nutzwerk*, *ein Zweckwerk*, *ein Zeitwerk*, *ein Massenwerk* … (a mere utility drama, a functional drama, a topical drama, a mass drama).[81] Other reviewers concurred albeit in a less hostile language; one wrote that the play was an 'unpoetic version' of Wolf's play but 'for the less gifted'.[82]

Nevertheless, most agreed about the originality of Piscator's direction, aimed at the active involvement of a thinking audience.[83] Reviews applauded an 'enchanting playing on the blurred boundaries between illusion … and reality which is invigorating' and they liked the way the play was staged like a tribunal, in which the audience found themselves in the dock since they tolerated a law 'which spawns misery and crime'.[84] The popular success of the play seems undisputed and most newspapers reported an enthusiastic reception everywhere. In Mannheim where the play was staged in Germany's oldest theatre, the slow and painful death of

the proletarian woman apparently made such a strong impression that it caused several members of the audience to faint, by no means only women.[85] At the end of the opening night a straw poll was taken among the audience for or against a repeal of §218 which resulted in unanimous support for a repeal. But given the likelihood of leftist spectators this was not really surprising. The *Rheinische Zeitung* described how 'people left the theatre only slowly, and they could not calm down'. In some cities like in Worms in December 1929, however, the performance was hijacked by Nazi thugs who beat up communists.[86]

Another example of a left-wing treatment of abortion was the novel *Maria und der Paragraph* (Maria and the law) by the young communist Franz Krey.[87] Adorned with a preface by Friedrich Wolf, it was published in 1931 in the KPD's Red-One-Mark-Series and clearly rode the wave of popularity of the left-wing abortion dramas inaugurated by *Cyankali*. But despite Wolf's praise for the young working-class author and despite the fact that Krey based his fiction on actual judicial case material, it suffers from a turgid style, an improbable storyline and a relentless agglomeration of clichés which are only tenuously held together by a crude political message: only a KPD-led class struggle can overturn the 'shameful law' and save the proletariat in their daily fight for survival. Interestingly, in this novel the heroine of the title is not a blue- but a white-collar worker but because of her allegiance to organized labour she figures as an honorary proletarian. Maria is a typist in a small town who has undergone a back-street abortion and now needs to endure the taunts and blackmail of an office cleaner who had found her out. When Maria can no longer endure this she assaults and finally murders the cleaning woman. Her eventual trial is the dramatic climax of the novel: the court case is transformed into a proletarian mass demonstration against §218 of the kind which had taken place in real life that same year. It ends with a melodramatic letter by a young doctor who has lost his position because of his active support for abortion law reform. He writes that he is prepared to sacrifice his existence, although he is in danger, 'already has one foot in prison', for the sake of working women: 'these women don't just have one foot in prison, but also in the grave'.[88] Despite its doubtful literary qualities the topic was obviously compelling enough for the novel to be serialized in the communist *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*.[89]

Abortion as a topic also attracted poets. For example, the political revolutionary writer and member of the KPD Erich Weinert wrote two polemical poems about the abortion clause: in 1929 a poem with the title '§218', published in *Mahnruf*, a working-class monthly journal, and in 1931 'Was sagt Ihr nun zu §218?' (What do you now say about §218?) in which he argued that only a socialist revolution could abolish a law which harms the working class.[90] In this poem, the abortion clause is personified and accused of being a destructive 'monster' in the first stanza:

§218

In the dark of the Church and the chill of the Law
Is the monster of old yet lurking,
With a priggish attorney's cadaverous claw
To crawl on Love's dream, still smirking?

A good woman serves with confidence
Morality, yes, and the Nation.
Her support is paid for by Providence:
That's enough for the genuine Christian.

Here's a moral precept that still survives,
Meant first for the humblest, maybe:
A true German woman has no other drives,
She's always having a baby.

Our human stocks are our vital resource,
For employers and (one day) for battle;
And all women have their duty of course,
Which is unremittingly natal.

We see it afresh every single day,
Moral rot in the lower divisions:
The superior elements, come what may,
Stay strictly within the provisions.

So trust in the Lord, lowly workers and clerks,
And breed like the mice in your houses.
Think of Crown briefs, stewed in their rectitude:
Take after their stainless spouses.

Erich Weinert, 1929.[91]

Couched in sardonic irony, this poem attacks the antiquated powers of the clergy ('the dark of the Church'), the cruel and lethal power of the law ('chill of the law' with its 'cadaverous claw') and pious but inhuman public prosecutors ('priggish attorney'). The central message conforms to the standard opinion articulated by the KPD in that it decries §218 as a class law and links it to the misguided, but by then largely outdated, pronatalism ('our human stocks are our vital resources for employers and (one day) for battle') of the ruling classes. Certainly, in Imperial Germany the state, in tandem with economists and the medical profession, exhorted the poor to procreate ('breed like mice in your houses') and to imitate the wives of the professional classes ('the stainless spouses' of the 'crown briefs, stewed in their rectitude'), although this should be understood as irony, since the latter were actually producing far fewer children. It echoes the demands of socialists to repeal §218 and instead introduce proper maternity and child welfare because the state could not impose a *Gebärpflicht* (obligation to reproduce) without accepting a *Nährpflicht* (obligation to feed its children).[92]

Two years later, Kurt Tucholsky, a social critic and a satirist with communist leanings, published an abortion poem. He was a leading contributor to the most important radical cultural/political journal, *Die Weltbühne*, where he earned himself the nickname, the 'heckling voice in the gallery'.[93] He was also a prime representative of the cool style of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, apparent in this poem:

An Embryo Speaks

They all take care of me: the church, the state, the physicians, the judges.
I'm supposed to grow and to thrive: I'm supposed to slumber for nine months, to take it easy – they wish me well. They protect me and watch over me. Heaven help my parents if they do me any harm; then they all come running. Anyone who touches me is punished; my mother would land in jail, so would my father; the doctor who'd do it would have to stop being a doctor; the midwife who'd assist would be locked up. You see, I'm something precious.
Yes, they take care of me: the church, the state, the physicians, the judges.
For nine months.
But once these nine months are past, I am on my own.
TB? There's no doctor to help me. Nothing to eat? No milk? There's no help from the state. Torment and mental anguish? The church consoles me but does not fill my stomach. And I haven't a thing to eat, so I go out and steal; immediately there's a judge who locks me up.
For fifty years of my life no one will look after me, not a soul. I'll have to shift for myself.
For nine months they kill one another if someone wants to kill me.
Now I ask you: Isn't that a strange welfare system?

Kurt Tucholsky, 1931.[94]

With typical irreverence and wit Tucholsky sends up the sanctimonious official system which cared more for a foetus than for a living child. The poem also pokes fun at all those who ignored the hot debates about the beginning of life and the permissibility of a termination at what precise stage of gestation. The disembodied voice of the 'embryo' works well as a dramatic device in this satire of bourgeois and religious attitudes (where abortion was regarded as the killing of an unborn child) and it makes light of the stance of feminists and left-wing pro-abortionists, namely that a termination up to three months of pregnancy was not the killing of nascent life. As we will see in Chapter 5, many women concurred with these latter convictions.

Abortion pathologized

All the directors, writers and artists examined have not only insisted on a stereotypical unsympathetic portrait of the lay abortionist but have also depicted abortion, often even pregnancy, as a negative experience. Maybe it is not surprising that popular culture, driven as it was by commercial considerations, sensationalized both events and tragedy to render plots more dramatic. As we have seen, in the play (as well as the film) *Cyankali*, pregnancy and its termination is associated with disaster and death. As soon as Hete reveals she is expecting, she is told that feckless breeding leads to suicide. 'This

house is not a rabbit warren [proclaims the caretaker]. Every week another woman opens the gas tap or jumps into the water', thereby foretelling the subsequent suicide of Hete's neighbour. Hete's attempt to rid herself of her pregnancy exposes her to the caretaker's sexual advances, then to the doctor's warning that both quack abortion and cyanide will mean that she will die 'of puerperal fever in convulsions'![95] At the wise woman's Hete invokes death herself ('I do not want to die, you! I am still young, you') and so does the police inspector who questions Hete's mother ('we have to find the person who has … lethally damaged your daughter'). Lay abortion is linked to death most explicitly at the beginning (in the montage of newspaper cuttings) and at the very end of *Cyankali* the pros and cons of §218 are debated: 10,000 deaths annually from back-street abortion is alleged, repeated in Hete's last words: '10,000, 10,000 must die. Does nobody help us?'.[96]

Similar associations occur in *Gilgi* (Hans and his wife's suicide), in Krey's novel *Maria und der Paragraph*, and the film *Kreuzzug* (death of the working-class mother).[97] *Kreuzzug*, of course, also thematizes the death nexus in the ghost scene at the end of the film depicting the souls of dead abortion victims. Similarly, the huge cross at the centre of Alice Lex-Nerlinger's 1931 poster, *Paragraph 218*, conjures up the image of death very emphatically.

Interestingly, the gender of the writer or director/producer does not seem to have made much difference here. As we have seen, in Irmgard Keun's and Vicki Baum's books *Gilgi* and *Helene Willfüer* abortion was portrayed as unobtainable and the quest for it so humiliating and frustrating so that the heroines actually prefer to cope with unwed motherhood. As far as I know only two women wrote films about §218: Jane Beß, the most prolific of all female scriptwriters in the Weimar Republic[98] and Marie Louise Droop. Both offer striking examples of intertextuality and they seemed to have stuck firmly to the conventions, probably not surprising given the film industry in which men dominated and women scriptwriters were very unusual. Beß wrote *Frauenarzt Dr. Schäfer* (1929) which also boasted a female distributor, Marie-Luise Fleck, who, with her husband Jakob, acted as a team. Any expectation of a subversive, possibly even feminist, angle by these women is dashed. In this film a woman's reproductive and moral dilemma is not resolved and it was indeed derided by most critics for its simplistic and superficial treatment of a complex topic.

Two strands of the plot end in sentimentality. In the first, the daughter of a respected medical authority is raped and consults Dr Schäfer, her former fiancé. He rejects her and her father's urgent request for a termination but instead asks to marry her and thereby, so we are meant to believe, he preserves her honour. The other strand concerned the intergenerational debate within the local medical society in which the representative of the older generation, the heroine's father and Dr Schäfer's former professor, rejects abortion on any ground and the young gynaecologist, Dr Schäfer, campaigns for abortion law reform in order to guarantee 'fewer but fitter

children for the state'. The villain of the piece is the young and ambitious Dr Greber, the new protegé of the professor, who is found responsible for a botched abortion on the heroine's friend, who dies. When the heroine detects his misdeed, Dr Greber revenges himself by raping her. If spectators thought that this film took a critical stance of the medical profession and its renegade doctors, they were mistaken. At the final denouement Dr Greber is revealed to have faked his medical certificate.[99] Thus, the villain of the film is conveniently revealed as a quack and the honour of the medical profession has been exonerated. The woman scriptwriter and her female distributor had not, after all, rocked the boat.

Marie Louise Droop, who scripted *Der Sittenrichter. §218. Eine wahre Begebenheit* (The moral censor. §218. A true incident), (1929), proved no more challenging. Her story concerned the tragedy of Susi, a police constable's daughter, who is seduced by her married boss and subsequently finds herself pregnant. She has an abortion by a 'woman with a dark trade', acted by the exotic-looking Maria Forescu. When the latter is arrested Susi is also summoned to court on suspicion of having offended against §218. Rather than face public humiliation and her father's certain wrath, Susi commits suicide.[100] Thus, this script, too, conforms to the stereotypical notion of abortionists as untrustworthy outsiders, women as victims and abortion as tragedy.

Such cultural portrayal of the events surrounding abortion is strikingly different, however, from women's own views as we glimpse them in transcripts of police interviews, letters and gossip within the neighbourhood (see Chapters 5 and 6 below). Why then this disparity between so many women's actual experience and its fictional representation? An important reason was surely the success of the medicalization process of German society, which meant that the middle classes had absorbed the arguments of doctors and passed them on as their own, at least in such public arenas as the theatre, the screen and fiction. Most medical men considered abortion as an exceptional event and one which they avoided (see Chapter 3). The profession as a whole also denounced quack abortionists supposedly in the interest of public health, in reality also in pursuit of their own professional interests (see Chapter 4).

But what about censorship? Could one not argue that even if writers had wanted to cast abortion and lay abortionists in a positive light, they had to reckon with censorship, especially on screen and stage. The Council of People's Representatives had abolished censorship immediately after the First World War, but after there had been a proliferation of so-called sexual enlightenment films, often thinly veiled pornography, censorship was re-introduced on 12 May 1920. The *Reichslichtspielgesetz* set up two censorship boards in Munich and Berlin to vet scripts and films.[101] It seems that abortion films were generally prohibited from referring openly to medical misdemeanours, from portraying law enforcement as unreasonable and from

downplaying the dangers of lay abortionists, although, as we have seen, they seem to have got away with misquoting the abortion law. Literature and stage plays continued to be ruled by the pornography law, §184 of the penal code; furthermore the 1926 law 'to protect young people from *Schund und Schmutz* (trash and smut) instituted censorship panels in Berlin and Munich to scrutinize and, if necessary, ban offending publications or plays.[102]

In 1930 the film *Cyankali* is a good case in point. It was examined and then approved four times by the Berlin *Film Prüfstelle* (Board of film censors).[103] In August of the same year the *Film Oberprüfstelle* (Supreme board of film censors) in Berlin banned the film after a successful application by Bavaria, Baden and Württemberg. They had argued that the depiction of the law and its enforcement officers as immoral and unjust had a demoralizing effect on the audience and could endanger public order. The three *Länder* also asserted that the stark portrayal of Hete's physical suffering, her screams of agony at Madame Heye's and on her deathbed scene were 'brutalizing', especially since it occurred in the brief soundtrack at the end of an otherwise silent movie. In September the film was approved once more, but it was banned for young people and suffered several cuts: e.g. the caretaker's sexual harassment of Hete (presumably because it was deemed too coarse); the neighbour's suicide (Bavaria found this scene one of 'exaggeration and distortion'); the partisan preference of an elegant lady in the doctor's surgery over the proletarian Hete (Bavaria thought this brought the medical profession into disrepute); originally the entire scene at Madame Heye's was to be cut – it was only rescued by the filmmakers' ingenious idea of referring to the danger of cyanide through the insertion of newspaper cuttings and by illustrating the uncouth nature of Madame Heye's practice by adorning her with a dirty apron on which to wipe first her hands and than the gynaecological instruments. When the Berlin board of film censors wrote to the Supreme Board justifying the readmittance of the film in its changed format they added ironically that the new version 'seems to imply the possibility that a spectator regards the wise woman as carrying out her work in an especially hygienic manner'. Bavaria's renewed protest in November 1930 was finally rejected in December of the same year, but not before further cuts were demanded.[104]

Kreuzzug, too, encountered problems with censorship. The subtitles referring to §218 as a 'class law' had to be substituted with a blander version which diminished the class character of the film. Even after the approval by the Berlin board of film censorship Bavaria demanded a further censorship review. Although this was rejected the production company sought to preempt future problems by cutting four sequences in the third and fourth acts, all to do with the rape scene. As von Keitz points out, these damaged the portrayal of the central story as without them it was difficult to understand the motivation for the rape and, more importantly, its devastating effect on the young teacher.[105] Similarly and predictably, in the film *Frauenarzt Dr. Schäfer*, the rape scene had to go in its entirety, too.[106]

Yet, censorship alone cannot account for the striking consensus in a one-sided portrayal of abortion in general and lay abortionists in particular. By linking the aborting woman and her helper with death, destitution and criminality these narratives also implied such associations with female sexuality and thereby conjured up similarities with the topic of *Lustmord* (sexual murder) and prostitution, both frequent themes in popular culture. The disturbing images of mutilated female corpses as well as of prostitutes' bodies ravaged by age and destitution in the work of celebrated artists like Otto Dix, George Grosz and Rudolf Schlichter have been discussed by feminist scholars as examples of sexual cynicism and deep misogyny in modernist Weimar art.[107] I suggest that misogyny is also at work in the various forms of representation of abortion and, by implication, women's sexuality which was linked to male fears and fantasies. While much of popular culture privileged the image of the 'downtrodden' working-class woman seeking a termination after multiple pregnancies, abortion was also an option for middle-class New Women like Gilgi or Vicky Baum's Helene Willfüer and, as we shall see in Chapter 5, for married women who regarded it as a means of family planning. Birth control, that is contraception and abortion, had long been associated with extramarital sex and many contemporary commentators feared women's access to it as an encouragement to female sexual libertinage.[108] Aborting women appeared doubly threatening as they seemed to be in control of their fertility without having to depend on men's cooperation (as with coitus interruptus or the use of a condom) and sometimes also without their husbands' or lovers' knowledge.[109]

The contemporary unease with women's new public role and their increasing confidence to claim the same right of sexual experience and independence traditionally reserved for men must surely account for the way aborting women were portrayed. In part it was male anxieties about destabilized gender identities which conjured up visions of a destructive female sexuality. As Patrice Petro has argued with reference to such 'street films' as Pabst's *Joyless Street*, Weimar popular culture did not just convey male regression, or the story of 'male subjectivity in crisis' but a tragedy of women, who expressed their desire within a still largely patriarchal order.[110] Women were blamed, in large measure, for threatening the very fabric of society which depended on female acquiescence and subservience.

In part there was also a generational divide amongst women themselves at work: while younger women seemed to enjoy their new freedoms, older feminists and reformers were concerned about what they regarded as young women's irresponsible erotic behaviour, and attempted to channel it into socially more acceptable institutions like the new concept of a trial marriage or the old institution of marriage made more palatable to women once doctors helped husbands to fulfil their wives' erotic desires.[111] And of course opinions were shaped by attitudes to class, politics and culture, too.

Although the New Woman was also projected as a classless phenomenon, as we have seen above, the behaviour and the looks of New Women were more often regarded as a middle-class privilege while the stereotypical image of the proletarian woman remained steadfastly maternal, ageless and unerotic. Such ambiguous reactions to Weimar's modernity in general and women's aspirations in particular explains the striking dichotomy between the emancipatory vocabulary of sex reformers and radical feminists celebrating female desire and insisting on women's right of erotic satisfaction and the trend to pathologize women's sexuality in so many cultural products at the time. Thus abortion served also as a rhetorical device in the construction of female sexuality as deviant and dangerous.

Only those authors/directors of films, plays and novels which merely touched on the subject of abortion in passing and did not have to fear the censor on this account actually managed to convey the idea that the termination of an unwanted pregnancy was often an 'ordinary' and not particularly threatening event. Slatan Dudow's *Kuhle Wampe oder Wem gehört die Welt?* (Kuhle Wampe or who does the world belong to?) (1932), is a good example. It was sponsored by the KPD and was the only film during the Weimar Republic in which Brecht had a hand (he co-wrote the script with the young Bulgarian director). The film was originally produced by Prometheus-Film, founded in 1926 as an anti-capitalist and anti-bourgeois production company. But when it went into liquidation in January 1932 the film was taken on by Präsens-Film.[112] Independent of the commercial cinema, *Kuhle Wampe* could be artistically innovative and textually subversive. It refers to abortion according to the KPD party line: as a right for the working woman who cannot combine her economic role as producer with her biological function as reproducer in an uncaring capitalist system.[113] The story is about the Bönikes, a lower middle-class family who have fallen on hard times during the Depression. When young Anni (Hertha Thiele), who works in an electrical goods factory and is very much a New Woman, finds herself pregnant by her boyfriend, the taxi driver Fritz (Ernst Busch), Anni becomes the focus of attention. Brecht wrote: 'We see her struggling not for the right of her offspring to live, but for her own right to destroy it.'[114] Fritz suggests an abortion. When Anni's father is indignant, however, Fritz conforms and offers to marry Anni. But after an ill-fated engagement party, a true Brechtian farce of petty bourgeois pretensions and meant as a dig against the SPD, accused of being insufficiently revolutionary, Anni decides to call the engagement off. She moves in with a 'politicized' girl friend, has an abortion, joins a communist sports club and develops a sense of workers' solidarity. Fritz and Anni are reconciled when he, too, has developed a sense of political responsibility and together with their comrades they sing the song of solidarity.[115] Although abortion in this film is only implied, it is nevertheless a pivotal event in the narrative. It means liberation for the heroine from a degrading 'enforced' engagement and from the petty

bourgeois conventions of her parents' generation. Anni is thus free to realize her own potential in the world of work, politics and leisure and to form a more equal and meaningful relationship with her boyfriend Fritz. And of course witnessing that Anni had not sustained any ill effects from her, presumably, lay operation, was in itself a powerful oppositional message about the value of an operation which was officially so maligned.

But despite the failure of so many of these abortion films to develop an independent view from the dominant medical discourse and the tendency of some to exploit commercially rather than explore seriously the theme of abortion, it would be wrong to belittle the impact of these abortion narratives. Most films pleaded for sex and abortion reform. And the very fact that women's biological fate was portrayed so publicly was undermining the traditional power relationship between the genders and the classes. The exposure of the abortion issue in literary and cinematic representations probably did more to raise awareness of women's reproductive problems and thereby of female sexuality than debates in the Reichstag or amongst doctors had ever managed to do. What is more, the subject was often also explored from the woman's point of view even if an explicit feminist line was rare. This was less surprising with novels like *Gilgi* and *Helene Willfüer*, written as they were by authors who were New Women themselves and naturally put their heroines' plight centre stage. The narrative voice in *Gilgi* is not the protagonist's but hers are the only thoughts and feelings we are told about, so we necessarily see things with her own eyes, especially when we are let it on Gilgi's secret thoughts and emotions, often rendered in a stream of consciousness, that is, Gilgi's unreflected and unordered ideas. This is, of course, the strength of the novel as a genre: it is able to make visible, invisible things like inner thoughts. Baum's treatment of *Helene* is less immediate; nevertheless the book's narrator also seems to inhabit the protagonist's thoughts.

Even male film directors such as Martin Berger in *Kreuzzug*, who argued for eugenic rather than women's rights, could not but elicit his spectators' sympathy for his women protagonists by revealing such an extraordinary keyhole view of their intimate fears and desires.[116] Berger's film, it is true, features three male stars and only one female but he managed to boost the part of Maly Delschaft as the young teacher through the narrative structure, the use of montage and by thoughtful intertitles. It is she who acts as the mediator between the different social classes and between the state (in the guise of the doctor and the public prosecutor) and ordinary women. Although her rape emphasizes her vulnerability, she alone possesses the moral authority to change the inhumane stance of the representatives of medicine and law. When she has extracted the promise of a termination she appears to redeem the tragic death of the proletarian mother and has reasserted her role as a professional woman and gained at least some measure of reproductive self-determination. Finally, at the very beginning of

the film, Berger contrasts the young teacher's sensual desire with the prosecutor's timidity through montage: the camera switches from the tête-à-tête between the prosecutor and his fiancée in his office to the first signs of the impending storm outside, a tactic which prepares the spectator for the coming sexual crisis.[117] And in the course of the film, Berger provides his heroine with sufficient room for personal development and endows her with agency and strength which is grounded in an awareness of her body and her sexuality.

Of course, the full extent of the emancipatory or subversive message is sometimes not immediately understood. In silent films it has to be sought in the visual image rather than overt text (i.e. in sub- or intertitles) and it is of course significant that most films were silent and therefore the image was particularly important and could be instilled with potent meanings. As Anton Kaes puts it, the visual image 'was not only quicker and easier to decipher than a written text, but also guaranteed … stronger identification than any description, no matter how detailed'.[118] As Heide Schlüpmann has argued, in *Madame Lu,* for example, the poetic world of adolescent female love is contrasted to the cold male world of public strictures. This is conveyed only to a certain extent in the narrative but much more powerfully through cinematography. The opening scene, for example, is a close-up of the backs of two teenage girls' heads studying the small ad of 'Madame Lu, the woman for discreet help' in a newspaper. As Schlüpmann notes, the way the camera seems to caress the soft outlines of the adolescent napes framed by bobbed hair and then cuts abruptly to a gathering of older men in dark suits and high collars (politicians, doctors, lawyers) suggests that the film is about the fragility of female sexuality exposed to the bluntness of male authority. The girls have a problem and look for a way out; when the camera swings suddenly to the representatives of state authority who look disapprovingly at the same ad, we know that the young heroines cannot expect to receive support from this quarter.[119] The visual images also reveal a clash between female and male adolescent sexuality not touched on by the sub- and intertitles. They outline the overt story about two women social workers who set out to save a pregnant teenager from the clutches of a quack abortionist. As Schlüpmann has shown, it is the cinematography of the film which conveys an altogether more interesting story: the unfolding of female desire, the transmutation from adolescent to a woman's body set against the encroaching male lust and patriarchal violence.

Similarly, the tone of a passage in fiction could twist the meaning in subtle and subversive ways. In Keun's *Gilgi* the boundaries of acceptable female behaviour are frequently transgressed even if the impact is muted by the use of irony and the distancing effect of inner monologue. For example, the description of Gilgi's visit to the doctor, to have her pregnancy confirmed and to obtain a termination, is a bravura piece of blunt criticism of official medicine and of §218. The vehemence of Gilgi's attack is unparalleled. It

probably proved acceptable to publish because it was rendered not as speech but as inner monologue by a very young rebel who was also in dire straits. In this highly subversive encounter Keun reverses the usual doctor-patient power relationship. Gilgi takes the moral high ground, thinking it immoral to have a child whom she cannot look after. She has her come-uppance by the sheer force of her anger and her quick wit but the ambiguity of her role is still present: on the one hand, she is the outraged customer and her behaviour is appropriately abrasive; on the other hand, she is also vulnerable because her biological fate seems to depend on the goodwill of a professional man. Dressed androgynously with a tie tightly knotted round her neck, she orders the doctor to come to the point and tell her straight – and without recourse to Latin – whether she is pregnant or not. Taken aback by her verbal onslaught, the doctor tells her condescendingly that the 'little miss' is 'sound as a bell' and possesses 'a wonderful pelvis'. She explodes; the reader is privy to her thoughts:

> One needs a strong shot of street urchin to protect oneself. No fear of words, no fear of concepts – German to be spoken. She has a bad and unfair anger about the harmless little doctor. Stop being so pompous, you miserable Mickey Mouse dipped in carbolic acid, you … what do you mean by a splendid pelvis! I don't want a child![120]

When the doctor refuses to 'help', Gilgi switches tack and relies on the well-known trick of playing the little woman: 'Oh, please help doctor! I have such confidence in you!' She tells herself (and us) that 'every doctor likes hearing this' and continues all abashed, 'I don't know, what – I think – I … ' before she dismisses this play acting: 'Rubbish, this is stupid, I cannot do it.' Whereupon the doctor reacts quite authentically with a very oblique hint that she should return in three weeks since sometimes these things 'put themselves to rights – and yes, – in that case one could possibly help it along'.[121] This is a splendid example of the kind of unsatisfactory medical encounter which many women in trial records had actually experienced; but it also gives voice to the gutsy New Woman-speak using a *Neue Sachlichkeit* style of sort, sharp, ironic sentences.

The matter-of-factness of the style notwithstanding, *Gilgi* and the abortion films discussed above employed the medium of melodrama to address women spectators or readers and to challenge dominant ideology by conveying women's own, often alternative viewpoints. Melodrama has been so much maligned by cultural commentators but recently rescued from our disdain for them as a banal art form. Inspired by Peter Brooks's text, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Patrice Petro has argued that melodramatic narratives should be reevaluated for their ability to render everyday events in a new light, or, quoting Brooks, 'to exploit the dramatics and excitement discoverable within the real, to heighten in dramatic gesture the moral crises and peripeties of life'.[122] As Petro put it, in melodrama there is the inherent

'desire to say all, to stage and utter the unspeakable'. Melodrama uses abstraction by creating character types and intimate situations which were immediately recognizable and therefore particularly useful for silent films. It was a genre which has recently been associated by film historians and literary scholars with a 'feminine' emotional expression.[123] It suited the female spectator and reader, in that it addressed the drama of the real, the ordinary and the private life, mediating women's own experiences of the everyday in a post-First World War society.

At the beginning of this chapter I posited that popular culture which engaged with the problem of §218 contributed to the social construction of abortion and sexuality in Weimar Germany. Judging from the examples discussed above (and a number of others which could not be analysed here)[124] there is no doubt that they reinforced the dominant ideology of abortion as a bleak and dangerous experience and the role of the lay abortionist as wholly negative. In part this was due to medicalization of middle-class professionals who made up the writers, directors and actors; in part these ideas were upheld through censorship. But, as I have argued above, the tragic portrayal of termination was also a warning that unchecked female sexuality was marked for doom and destruction. This was part of the fear of modernity in general and women's emancipation in particular. The hidden message in many of the films and plays, especially those by male writers and directors, is that the New Woman's much-vaunted sexual freedom must be contained in tested social structures such as marriage, family and community. Yet, women writers and artists, though not scriptwriters and film producers, have furnished us with an alternative vision: combining public life with reproduction is shown to be difficult for young women but not necessarily impossible, thanks to the albeit often illegal access to birth control and abortion.

But how to explain the dichotomy between the official view of abortion and the wise woman displayed in the abortion narratives in films and plays, and ordinary women's own testimony in court cases when they stood accused of having violated §218? Were these women not influenced by what they saw on the screen or stage and read in popular novels? It is of course impossible to know for sure whether the audience of mass culture and the women, who feature in the judiciary files I consulted actually overlapped, although feminist film scholars like Hansen, Schlüpmann and Petro agree with the 1914 analysis of Emilie Altenloh that German women of all classes were 'addicted' to the cinema, particularly when it concerned romances and social dramas. Given the extraordinary sales of women's fiction quoted above and the popular successes of realist drama about §218, it seems reasonable to suggest that we can include in this interpretation the other genres of popular culture, fiction and plays, too. But these feminist scholars have disputed the charge by Kracauer and others that women's addiction and therefore distraction from important political participation was a

consequence solely of successful strategies of mass cultural domination; rather they have argued that women's eager involvement was due to gender inequalities, i.e. women's relative deprivation within the economy and society of the time. For women, it is argued, the cinema (and other forms of popular culture) provided the chance, in Altenloh's words, 'to live in another world, a world of luxury and extravagance which makes them forget the monotony of the everyday'.[125]

Even if it was the case, as Altenloh suggested, that women sought a distraction from the greyness of daily life, we cannot simply assume that female spectators or readers concurred with the message inscribed within the text, or were manipulated into certain views. Given the often very sophisticated responses from ordinary women to their interrogators in the police station or in court which we will witness in Chapter 5, it might indeed be safer to assume that even women from relatively deprived educational and social backgrounds were well able to immerse themselves in a work of art, even identify with fictional stories and characters, while holding on to their own quite different experiences. In other words, they applied quite naturally the demands of Brecht's epic theatre without knowing it, not really forgetting that what they say on screen or stage or what they read in novels was mere fiction. The balancing act so many women were able to perform in the presence of a policeman or judge, conforming to the dominant discourse without losing a sense of their own everyday reality, rather points in this direction. The ability of works like *Kreuzzug* or *Gilgi* to convey a thrillingly rebellious meaning hidden in images and between the lines no doubt reinforced the sense of independence of female consumers of popular culture to appropriate texts, or aspects of them, for their own use.