

Sadomasochism and identity narratives in the Weimar Republic: Klaus Mann's *Mephisto*

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ABSTRACT: Klaus Mann's Novel *Mephisto*, published in 1936 during the writer's exile, and partially inspired by the real life of actor Gustav Gründgens, focuses on the problematic and ambiguous relationship between art and power (in this case the Nazis' power). One of the most meaningful episodes in the novel depicts a sadomasochistic session between the protagonist and a "black Venus", an Afro-German dancer, who holds a central role in the protagonist's life as well as a particular cultural relevance from the critic's point of view. Starting from the analysis of this episode, the paper investigates the role of performance in the construction of the actor's identity and its socio-political implications in Weimar literature and culture.

KEYWORDS: Klaus Mann; BDSM; sadomasochism; Weimar culture; Jazz; Dance.

1. PRIMITIVISM, COLONIALISM AND GENDER IN THE CULTURE OF THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC.

The aim of this essay is to analyse a specific case study explicitly featuring BDSM practices in literature, that is the function and the meaning of a sadomasochistic session in a German novel of the first half of the 20th Century.

Exilroman, Künstlerroman, Theaterroman, Zeitroman: all these definitions have been used to describe *Mephisto. Roman einer Karriere* (1936), probably the best known among Klaus Mann's novels. The best known probably, surely the most controversial, because of Mann's choice to represent the link between artists (in particular theatre practitioners and actors) and political power (the Nazi regime) through a character clearly inspired by the famous homosexual actor Gustaf Gründgens¹ (Hendrik Höfgen in the novel), Mann's former friend and brother-in-law.² Höfgen's rise from the Hamburger Künstlertheater in 1926, where he tries to organise a proletarian theatre, to nationwide fame in 1936 as director of Berlin's national

¹ On this aspect and on the whole controversial affair involving Klaus Mann, his novel and Gustaf Gründgens with his heirs, see Spangenberg 1986 and Hoffer 1989.

² From 1926 to 1929 Gründgens was married with Erika Mann.

theatre, is the result of an artistic and human journey that leads the protagonist to a compromise – a real Mephistophelian pact – with the hierarchies of Nazi power.

However, the protagonist of the novel, Hendrik Höfgen, is not homosexual: he's a masochist in a relationship with a dark-skinned woman, Juliette, who plays the role of his mistress or dominatrix. Hendrik needs psychological and corporal humiliations and punishments to fully develop his creative potential and to play his role in managing first the theatre ensemble and then Berlin's theatre institutions. Considering that *Mephisto* is the only one among Klaus Mann's novels that does not thematise homosexuality, this choice concerning the protagonist's sexuality (one of the few variations of the real, historical background of the novel) takes on a cogent value. Strictly speaking, of course, Mann's novel dates from the years following the Weimar Republic, but its portrayal of this period's artistic and cultural features reflects a perception of art and (popular) culture already established in the German imagination before 1933.

I will focus on the scene from the second chapter of the novel, *Die Tanzstunde*, where the sadomasochistic session between Hendrik and Juliette is described in rich detail. The description of Hendrik's career begins with the story of a clandestine relationship with Tebab, a figure whose existential parable develops on the margins of society and completely outside the world of the protagonist. An exclusion to which Hendrik himself decisively contributes because, to exercise her beneficial influence, Tebab must remain a submissive component in the social and political sphere, exercising power only in the secluded and 'safe' (for Hendrik) space of the session. This exclusion will also be a decisive aspect in the development of the young woman's character and of her relation to Hendrik. Starting from the analysis of this scene, I will elaborate some considerations about the relationship between sadomasochism, art, political power and identity in the Germany of those years, as it emerges from the complex web of literary, autobiographical and cultural allusions that build this chapter and the whole novel.³ Why the author has decided to transform Gründgens' homosexuality into Höfgen's masochism is the central question around which

³ The most complete and rich analysis of the scene is in Maltzan 2001: 132-182. Maltzan's perspective is almost exclusively psychoanalytic; although very interesting and well-conceived, her interpretation does not consider at all the historical and cultural background of the SM chapter, which I instead try to delineate.

this reconstruction of this context will unfold. The relationship between the sadomasochistic practices and the representations of the mechanisms of power, as well as some of Klaus Mann's important biographical and cultural relationships, will be investigated as crucial elements in order to identify the aesthetic and ideological motivations behind this choice.

Many reflections, on different levels, are necessary to understand and interpret this kind of representation of sexual "deviation". First of all: Juliette, also known as princess Tebab, is not only a mistress but a dark-skinned mistress, the daughter of a German engineer and of an African woman from Congo. She is the first Afro-German character in literature, and for this and other reasons she plays a symbolic, I would say an iconic role. In Hendrik's perspective – not in that of the author, and this must be underlined because some scholars have confused the two levels – she represents a primitive dimension: she has a "höchst barbarisches Haupt" (Mann 1965: 73) and "ihr Gesicht stand vor ihm wie die schreckliche Maske eines fremden Gottes: Dieser thront mitten im Urwald, an verborgener Stelle, und was er fordert mit seinem Zähnenblecken und Augenrollen, das sind Menschenopfer" (Mann 1965:78).

This kind of vision is typical of the artistic avant-garde of the Weimar period but also, in a different direction, of ultraconservative politicians:

Thus, in Expressionism the primitive also stood in contrast to the alienating and repressive nature of modern life. Primitive immediacy, especially as captured in pure creative expression, thus offered a regenerative antidote. Where defenders of 'civilisation' spurned the primitive as a degenerate Other, in primitivism this radical alterity was precisely the source of its power. This turn to the primitive was ideologically and culturally heterogeneous and ran through many different fields. Primitivism informed art, cultural criticism, forms of mass culture, and various counter-cultural movements. In all of these fields, primitivist tendencies ostensibly celebrated or defended the culture of non-European and non-white peoples. But these approaches were inextricable from imperial and colonial logics and histories, connections that were especially evident in the ways in which they drew on anthropological conceptions of the primitive. [...] colonialism and primitivism were deeply implicated in broader discourses of race and the politics of the *Volkskörper*. In this sense, primitivism needs to be understood in conjunction with the complex politics of degeneration and social or racial hygiene. (Heynen 2015: 344)

Hendriks' perspective, characterised by a radical obsession for purity – "Du bist stark. Du bist rein" (Mann 1965: 81) –, is exactly that of the white

imperialist, because “for colonial settlers, and even more for their supporters in Germany, colonization represented a response to the corruption of German space by modern forms of degeneration. The colonial space was imagined as empty and pure, thus offering the potential for national regeneration.” (Heynen 2015: 346). Naturally, after the Treaty of Versailles, Germany retained a limited role in imperialist networks of trade and finance, and the loss of a direct colonial empire was of major significance for the development of Weimar culture and politics.⁴ Weimar popular culture, such as fiction, film, and advertising, portrayed Africa as an excitingly strange place: while, as just said, political realities barred Germany from colonial expansion, “new empires emerged in enduring cultural fantasies. Seemingly innocuous stories for children about Germans in Africa propagated a role for Germany as a bearer of civilized culture, a dispenser of prosperity, and a catalyst of order, even though Germany’s record of colonial brutality challenged such claims” (Springman 2011: 99).

Furthermore, Tebab/Juliette is a former prostitute and the association of the primitive with this kind of activity or with sexual diseases is a frequent theme of the colonial literature from the Weimar period.⁵ All these aspects are strictly connected with an identity crisis, a national identity crisis I would say, that involves social and cultural dimensions. As Richard W. McCormick has shrewdly noted, a key element in the identity crisis of the pre-war era in Germany was gender. The condition of women, as well as the radical changes of their position in the social structure, become in this context an element of great complexity for the analysis of the same crisis: “Female identity was thematized and debated in the culture not just in terms of male anxieties about modernity and the ‘New Woman,’ but also

⁴ In relation to dance shows and nude dancers, a theme that will be discussed in the next pages, Jelavich (1996: 154) affirms: “Such stages also performed ‘Americanized’ music and entertainment. Their conception of the United States was influenced by what Germans perceived to be black culture, which they considered a form of vital ‘primitivism’ appropriate to modern urban life. This characterization of blacks, however well-meaning in intent, underscored prevailing racial stereotypes. Similarly, reactions to the kicklines of ‘Girls’ revealed attitudes toward gender and sexuality. Superficially, the Girls seemed to embody a vital new image of womanhood. More fundamentally, however, they represented deeper structures of order and control in the modern world.”

⁵ The so called “Black Horror” or “Black Shame” scandal could be cited as a paradigmatic example of these complex interconnection between racial/gender prejudice and the construction of a national identity. See Wigger 2017 and in a closer connection to the theme of this paper Nenno 1997.

because women themselves were confronted with new choices and opportunities as well as many new stresses and burdens (usually doubled – if not tripled)” (McCormick 2001: 3). A similar remark acquires a precise significance when reading of Tebab and her tormented biography. The black Venus’ sexual inclinations, her sadistic tendencies, are perceived as something disturbing even in a context of extreme sexual freedom: “Sie liebte es und konnte es gar nicht lassen, mit der Reitpeitsche auf diejenigen ihrer Bekannten und Kollegen loszugehen, mit denen sie gerade nicht in allen Stücken der gleichen Meinung oder Stimmung war –: eine Angewohnheit, [...] die auf die Dauer gar zu originell und übrigens einfach störend wurde” (Mann 1965: 74). It is exactly this indomitable nature and the “irregular” character of her sexuality that causes her to be marginalized even among prostitutes.⁶ Tebab seems to embody a perfect synthesis of the different levels in which modernity destabilizes the German society of the thirties. Art and aesthetic theories no less than popular culture shared the legacy of colonialism, a legacy especially evident in primitivism. From a historical-cultural point of view, it is exactly this kind of legacy that Hendrik Höfgen represents in his masochistic relationship with Tebab. All these issues will obviously acquire an even more problematic and complex dimension in the novel at the time of the advent of the Nazi regime.

2. TEBAB’S IDENTITY AND DANCE CULTURE IN WEIMAR

The novel aims to represent contemporary reality; consequently, although *Mephisto* must not be considered as a *roman à clef*, every character is shaped after an historical counterpart. Princess Tebab has raised many hypotheses regarding her “real” identity, and most interpretations contextualize this character in the socio-cultural milieu of the so-called primitivism: Tebab should be interpreted as just “Literatursatire”, the beautiful savage girl, the barbarian African woman, “eine heruntergekommene Nachfahrin der schönen Wilden, die als Exotinnen und Pantherfrauen von der Romantik bis zu Baudelaire und Huysmans die poetischen Phantasien des Bürgertums wöllüstig bevölkert haben” (Naumann 2006: 94). Or, in a similar perspective, Tebab “looks like a Barbarian African fetish whose details the author finds in the exotic trivial literature of Colonialism and the weakness for ‘fresh’

⁶ Many interpreters have judged negatively the character just because of her activity as a prostitute: as a paradigmatic example of this kind of misleading lecture, see the recent, very polemic Addendum by Eichler 2017.

primitives so typical of the turn of the century” (Thompson 2018: 166, n. 5). Even the idea of the noble savage from Rousseau’s philosophy should be considered as “relevant” to understand *Mephisto*, “since the nature of Juliette” would be “almost identical to that of the ‘noble savage.’”⁷ I do not intend to focus specifically on these hypotheses: although some of these aspects were in some way important for the invention of the “schwarze Venus”, I believe other cultural aspects can help us understand the nature of this character and its iconic value better.

Juliette Martens is a dancer: her relationship to the dance is something she brings from her country, she has learned this art from her parents, the narrator tells us. As a dancer in an infamous night club in Hamburg she seduces the protagonist and as a dancing trainer she plays the role of his mistress. The whole session sees Hendrik dancing to jazz music, spurred by his dominatrix’s crack of the whip: “als es handelte sich um ein ernsthaftes Training anstatt um eine etwas schauerliche Lustbarkeit” (Mann 1965: 79). Tebab strikes him ruthlessly as she addresses him with humiliating epithets stressing his inability, his clumsiness and his physical inadequacy. That’s exactly the opposite of the situation Hendrik lives at his job as a theatre director, where he shows a sadistic attitude towards his crew of performers. The training, that is the masochistic session with Tebab, has an evident cathartic effect, it is a therapy necessary to cure his attacks of manic-depressive hysteria, and furthermore it triggers the Dionysian dimension of his soul. In a later scene, in the fifth chapter, *Der Ehemann*, Hendrik demonstrates on stage to his “Chorgirls”,⁸ who have to dance to a piece by Offenbach, how they should move:

Herrisch winkte er dem Orchester, und da es wieder zu spielen begann, tanzte er selbst. Man vergaß, daß es ein fast schon kahler Herr im grauen, etwas abgetragenen Straßenanzug war, den man da vor sich hatte. Höchst schamlose, höchst erregende Verwandlung am hellen Vormittag! Schien er nicht Dionysos, der Gott der Trunkenheit zu sein, wie er nun ekstatisch die Glieder warf? [...] Ohne Übergang war er nun verfallen in bacchantische Raserei. [...] Übrigens tanzte er glänzend,

⁷ That is the unconvincing thesis by E. B. Rubinstein 2015: 34.

⁸ The use of the English word “Girl” is a clear allusion to the so called Girlkultur, a term by which, starting from the mid-twenties, a certain Americanization of customs and habits was harshly criticized. About this aspect see Grossman1986. Particularly important in this context, in order to give an interpretation of Mann’s novel, is the relationship between this new way of experiencing the (naked) body, sexuality, and the new type of music and dance coming from the USA.

die Chorgirls schauten respektvoll auf ihren mit großer Technik taumelnden Regisseur, Prinzessin Tebab hätte ihre Freude an ihm gehabt. (Mann 1965: 185)

Hendrik's "schamlose Verwandlung" originates from the combined effect on his senses of the dance steps and the rhythm of can can music. A similar trance affects the protagonist during his session with Tebab; in that case the Dionysian dimension is achieved through the rhythm of jazz music.⁹

In this context, it is illuminating – although no one, as far as I know, has noticed it yet¹⁰ – to read the pages on Princess Tebab alongside the description Klaus Mann wrote of jazz singer and performer Nora Holt¹¹ whom he saw in Chicago. The description can be found in *Rundherum*, the book that narrates Klaus Mann's journey around the world with his sister Erika in 1927-28:

Sie ist Chansonette von exquisite Ruhm. Keine von der populären Sorte, Revuekönigin – Josephine Baker –: unsere macht Sensation in ausgewählten Zirkeln, Freundin der international-intellektuellen Kreise. Eine richtige Negerin ist sie nicht. Neuerdings hat sich sogar das Haar glatt machen lassen, blond gefärbt trägt sie es schon lange. Dieser Trick, widerspenstiges Haar zu entkräuseln, ist speziell für arrivierte Dame ihrer Rasse ausgedacht worden. [...] Die erotischen Triumphe dieser Frauen rächen ihre tief gedemütigten Brüder. Tausende werden nicht anders als Tiere behandelt; aber irgendwo tanzen ein paar Weiber ihrer Rasse, und weiße Männer warden nach ihrem dunklen, festen Fleisch verrückt. [...] diese *singt* nur, existiert nur im Rythmus, nun ist sie eine Art Priesterin, so ernst waltet sie ihres Amtes. [...] Sie wird, die Singende, eine Negergottheit sein,

⁹ "Perceived to be foreign and cacophonous, it evoked thoughts of occupation, insurrection, chaos, moral abandon, and a loss of national identity to the conservative fantasy of the 1920s, while it appeared erotic and even emancipatory to those of more liberal disposition" (Weiner 1991: 476).

¹⁰ Just a mention of the question, without any analysis of its hermeneutic implications, can be found in Fulton 2009: 102.

¹¹ Nora Holt (1884-1974), American singer, composer and music critic, first African American to receive a master's degree in the United States (Master of Music degree conferred in 1918). "A conservatory-trained musician on the one hand and a cabaret singer on the other, Nora Holt impressed some people who met her as a proper New Negro matron, while to others she was a jazz-age goddess. She was a study in contradiction, a woman whose multiple careers and identities remain difficult to reconcile. She reinvented herself constantly, which she could do because she was constantly on the move. [...] In the 1920s and 1930s, she was tall, glamorous, and blonde: a jazz-age goddess, who captivated audiences from stages in Berlin, Monte Carlo, Paris, Shanghai, and Tokyo. She performed a repertoire of bawdy tunes some of which she also composed and sang in a voice one London reviewer described as 'astonishing.' He elaborated: 'she can produce sounds not comparable to orthodox singing, ranging from deepest low voice to a shrilling high, often unaccompanied by words...'" Wall 2019: 91-92. See also Harpole, Mayerhofer 2017: 11-17

die ihren rythmischen Gottesdienst hält. Bunt behangen, mit bitem Mund und über der dunklen Stirne das unerlaubt blonde Haar, hat sie keinen Gedanken mehr, nur noch Takt – – (E. Mann, K. Mann 1965: 102-105)¹²

Tebab, as already stated, has the same divine and primitive nature; furthermore, her physical traits resonate of Nora Holt's description. Above all, one element unites the two women: "das Haar. Es war keineswegs die Krause, schwarze Mähne, die man zu dieser Stirne, diesen Lippen passend gefunden hätte; vielmehr überraschte es durch Glattheit und eine mattblonde Färbung" (Mann 1965: 73). If Nora Holt may have been a sort of inspiration for the physical characterization of Tebab, a very important "cultural" difference between these two figures must be underlined, something crucial in the social structure of Klaus Mann's novel, and more in general, in his political, ideological point of view. Nora Holt's hair is an artificial, that is a cultural achievement, something that constitutes a strong element of distinction with respect to others belonging to her own race; her whole body almost works as an element of racial revenge,¹³ and this allows her to occupy a prominent position, as a foreigner, in social American hierarchies (the distinction that Klaus Mann makes between her and the more popular Josephine Baker is also very interesting in this sense, also because it radically differs from the perception of public opinion at the time).¹⁴ In the case of princess Tebab the

¹² "She is a singer of most exquisite reputation. Not one of the popular type, the revue queen—such as Josephine Baker—: She is the sensation of selected circles, a friend of international intellectual circles. She is not a true Negro. Recently, she even has had her hair straightened, for a long time it has been dyed blonde. The procedure to straighten unmanageable hair has been invented especially for successful ladies of her race. [...] The erotic triumph of this woman avenges her deeply humiliated brothers. Thousands are treated just like animals. [...] She just sings, exists just in the rhythm, now she is a sort of priestess, so seriously she holds her office."

¹³ Revenge phantasies emerge in a sort of half-sleepy dream princess Tebab has during her exile in Paris, where she lives after Hendrik forced her to move away to avoid, on the one hand, putting the position reached in theatrical institutions at risk and, on the other, to protect her from possible dangers due to the color of her skin and her non-Aryan origin: "Sie dachte an Rache, aber es sollte eine Rache von großer und süßer Art sein, keine schäbige und mesquine. Lange Stunden des langen Tages ruhte Prinzessin Tebab auf ihrem schmutzigen Bett und träumte. Sie würde nach Afrika zurückkehren, alle Schwarzen um sich sammeln, die Königin und kriegerische Fürstin aller Schwarzen werden – um ihr Volk zum großen Aufstand, zum großen Kriege gegen Europa zu führen. Der weiße Erdteil war reif zum Untergang: [...] Ein Blutbad ohnegleichen sollte die Schande wegwaschen, mit welcher der weiße Erdteil sich bedeckt hatte. Die frechen Herren mußten Sklaven werden" (Mann 1965: 323-324).

¹⁴ "For the German public, Josephine Baker was not merely the primitive but also the elegant, well-dressed, modern American woman who conquered its capital. Josephine Baker's persona and her performances coincided with Berlin's own image as both highly elegant and exceedingly

remarkable hairstyle is a natural, a genetic feature of her own Afro-German identity: “Die dunkle Dame gefiel sich in der Behauptung, so seien ihre Haare immer gewesen, niemals habe sie etwas an ihnen verändert: ihre Farbe und Beschaffenheit habe sie vom Vater, dem Ingenieur Martens aus Hamburg, geerbt” (Mann 1965: 73). The totally integrated and culturally educated Nora Holt – “Ein [...] Romanist, intimer Kenner der französischen Literatur, plaudert pariserisch mit ihr; es ist nicht unmöglich, daß sie über Racine und Corneille sprechen. –” (E. Mann, K. Mann 1965: 103) – has gained her position in the American society through a domestication and a modification of her native traits. On the contrary Juliette Martens, whose total lack of literary culture is highlighted by the narrator when Hendrik recites some verses from a poem by Baudelaire in the original French and she does not understand him, is marginalised in German society because of her hybrid nature. On the other hand, the dance as well as the use of their voice, to sing or to give orders, stand out as the elements through which the two figures express their explosive, performative potential.

Moreover, in this case we deal not only with a literary question but with a socio-cultural paradigm of the Weimar period. In his autobiography, *The Turning Point: Thirty-Five Years in this Century* (1942),¹⁵ Klaus Mann wrote about the dance mania that conquered Berlin in the middle of the Weimar Republic, at the beginning of the twenties. This chapter, the fourth of this book, is titled: *Unordnung und frühes Leid*. The atmosphere of the German capital, affected from a “Jazz-Infektion” (Mann 1976: 144) is described in apocalyptic tones: “Millionen von unterernährten, korrumpierten, verzweifelt geilen, wütend vergnügungssüchtigen Männern und Frauen torkeln und taumeln dahin im Jazz-Delirium. Der Tanz wird zur Manie, zur idée fixe, zum Kult” (Mann 1976: 144)¹⁶. Some dancers, who in these years achieve the status of real stars through epochal scandals, use their body

decadent, as combining both American and European elements” (Nenno 1997: 155).

¹⁵ The first edition of the autobiography was written in English; the German version, translated, edited and extended by Klaus Mann, will be published in 1952 with the title *Der Wendepunkt. Ein Lebensbericht*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*: 143. “Millions of helpless, impoverished, bewildered people capered and swung in a delirium of hunger and hysteria. Dance was a mania, a religion, a racket” (Mann 1984: 86). With similar tones speaks Ostwald 1931: “Nicht nur Berlin – ganz Deutschland verfiel einem Tanztaumel” (147); “Nie ist in Berlin so viel, so rasend getanzt worden” (149). It is however important to specify that ‘literary portrayals of jazz do not represent the musical reality of jazz performance in early twentieth-century Germany [...] Rather, they express a variety of concerns with which the music had come to be associated in the cultural imagination of the time.’ Weiner 1991: 482.

(including their own hairstyle) as an instrument to create together with the musical rhythm an almost religious, mythical, sexual rite: “Mary Wigman – jeder Zoll eckige Erhabenheit, jede Geste eine dynamische Explosion, – tanzt Weihevoll, mit Musik von Bach. Anita Berber – das Gesicht zur grellen Maske erstarrt unter dem schaurigen Gelock der purpurnen Coiffure – tanzt den Koitus. [...] Aus der Mode wird die Obsession” (Mann 1976: 143-144)¹⁷. The nude female body functions as a symbolic site where questions of modern identity, aesthetic and gender ideology were contested (Kolb 2009: 197).

The use of the body in a sort of religious conception of the artistic performance is clearly something that Klaus Mann elaborates starting from the Nietzschean aesthetic and considers as a ‘genetic’ character of his whole generation. In 1927, reflecting on the spiritual situation of the youth in Europe (*Heute und Morgen. Zur Situation des jungen geistigen Europas*), Mann claims that the only “*Erlebnis*” that unite young people in the period after the First World War, giving them the character of a proper generation, is “das neue Erlebnis des Körpers” (Mann 1992: 138). In this particular construction of subjectivity through the senses, the body is the element building an intimate connection between the religious and the erotic experience: “Unser Grunderlebnis war das Erotische und das Religiöse. Beide hingen geheimnisvoll auch in der Tiefe zusammen. [...] Unsere ganze Problematik schien gedankenfeindlich, körperlich geworden; damit verband sich geheimnisvoll unser religiöses Erleben. Über uns war eine erotisch-mystische Welle” (Mann 1992: 139-140).

The very close connection between dance, music, bodily performances and sex, conceived in its sacred dimension, is the result of an artistic and aesthetic conception of art as something absolute, all-encompassing in which the body takes on a fundamental role. For this vision the main dancers of these years – Celly de Rheidt¹⁸ and Anita Berber above all¹⁹ – will pay

¹⁷ The description of Anita Berber – “Anita Berber – her face a gaudy frozen mask under the horrible curls of her purple hairstyle – dances the coitus” – is only in the German version. “Mary Wigman – all angular loftiness from top to bottom – danced Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. They danced ecstasies, hangover, orgasms, intoxications and nervous tics. [...] Jazz was the great balm and narcotic of a disconcerted, frustrated nation” (Mann 1984: 86).

¹⁸ About this dancer see Müller 2019.

¹⁹ Klaus Mann had known Anita Berber since he was eighteen years old. After her death in 1929, Mann wrote a short essay, *Erinnerung an Anita Berber*. Some of his expressions in the description of the dancer are of great interest in relation to Tebab’s character: “Ihr Gesicht war eine düstere und böse Maske. [...] Sie erzählte mit einer heiseren Stimme die unglaublichsten Abenteuer. [...]”

a very high price: the persecution by the police authorities, the use and addiction to cocaine and morphine, the choice of an artistic discipline that at the time did not yet show a clear boundary between revue, Ausdruckstanz, Nackttanz and prostitution – all these elements contribute on the one hand to gradually destroy the (artistic) existence of these performers,²⁰ on the other to establish an ever closer bond between the performances staged and the representation of scenes of violence and submission.²¹ The dancers gradually take on more and more the role of mistress or dominatrix.

It is not uncommon to find illustrations or descriptions of shows from these years in which dance and BDSM performances merge on the same stage. *Schönheits-Tänze*, a production mounted at the Chat noir Cabaret (Black Cat Cabaret) in Friedrichstrasse, achieved widespread notoriety by generating a scandal, the so-called 'black cat affair'. The show was described in detail by Magnus Hirschfeld, by journalist and writer PEM (i.e. Paul Marcus), and by several other reporters. The last part of the show was a pantomime titled *Opiumrausch*:

An erotic pantomime, the 'Opium Slumber,' ensues in quick succession. It begins with the shadow of a Chinaman smoking wanly on an opium pipe. After a few minutes, an evil femme fatale appears and seductively enslaves him to be a victim for her mélange of sadistically lewd games. The club spectators watch this with a special intensity.

This is followed by a carnal 'Bullfight,' performed to the clicking of castanets. Celly, the female matador, disrobes with exquisite deliberation and uses her

Dabei blieb die bittere Maske, die ihr Gesicht war, im Halbdunkel unbewegt. [...] Sogar für das Nachkriegs-Berlin war sie zu weit gegangen" (Mann 1992: 22-24).

²⁰ It is worth in this perspective to quote Mann's words on Anita Berber's destiny again: "Gewiß ist das Zeitbedingte, ja, das Soziologische an dieser Lebenshistorie wichtig und interessant: wie das vom Inflationsfieber verzehrte Deutschland den Exhibitionismus dieser genialen Frau feiert, bezahlt, auf den Thron hebt; während gleichzeitig die hinter dem Fieber stark gebliebene Bürgerlichkeit ihrer Unmoral das Todesurteil spricht. Sie war Geschöpf und Opfer einer Schieberherrlichkeit. Man könnte ihre Geschichte als Anklage gegen die Zeit und gegen die Gesellschaft schreiben. Sie gehört wahrhaft zu den krassesten und zugespitztesten Tragödien der Inflation" (Mann 1992: 25).

²¹ "But with nude erotic performance, as Celly de Rheydt apparently understood when she quit the game in 1924, the escalation of erotic significance does not depend so much on production values as on the introduction of newer and stranger erotic actions. These, in turn, create more highly specialized audiences. The period 1925-1932 was supposedly the golden age of semi clandestine cult clubs catering to very specialized sexual tastes homosexuals, lesbians, transvestites, bisexuals, sadomasochists, fetishists of all sorts, pedophiles, female mud wrestlers, and other gross or grotesque entertainments [...]" (Toepfer 1997: 81); "A different perspective on the experimentation with gender identities can be gained from considering the nude dancer Anita Berber [...]" (Kolb 2009: 197).

diaphanous garb to sexually torment and subjugate the hapless beast. The dance concludes with the defeated bull lying supine next to the high heels of the triumphant – and now naked – matador.’ (Gordon 2006: eBook)

In Klaus Mann’s aesthetic and ideologic perspective, dance as bodily expression of the erotic dimension of power works alongside acting,²² more exactly it is the prerequisite on which the actor builds his promethean identity and his own abilities to stage the seduction of power: “Im Tanz wird das nach Identität suchende Subjekt zum Objekt der eigenen Darstellung, finden ‘Autor’ und ‘Werk’ im ‘Ausdruck’ zu einer in den anderen Künsten nicht möglichen Einheit. [...] Der Tänzer ist der Narziß, der die Einheit mit sich selbst um den Preis der Aufgabe des Subjektstatus erreicht. [...] Das Begehren nach Einheit und die Selbstaufgabe des Subjekts sind für Klaus Mann identisch mit der Erotik. Der Tänzer verbindet und bindet Kunst und Erotik, Höfgens Begehren nach der Macht pervertiert beides” (Bogdal 1999: 204). Through Hendrik’s pact with Nazism the permanent contamination and the two-way exchange between art and life is dramatically cut off (Bogdal 2004: 93). To give a most complete account of the complex interconnections forging the intimate structure of Mann’s novel, it is necessary to devote some attention to two other aspects of this character, in particular as regards her clothing accessories, which emerge as a decisive factor for the creation of princess Tebab: the black Venus wears green leather laced boots and uses a red leather whip. The colour choice is very important, for two reasons: the first one is related to a social code in the nightlife of Weimar Berlin. The colours of some accessories were a precise signal to reveal a certain type of sexual service: dress also communicated sexual practices. Boot-Whores,²³ for example, advertised their services through a “semaphore-like language. Black, green, scarlet, red, and brown leather footwear promised different *mise en scène* of sexual torment and debasement (i.e., green boots and gold shoelaces meant an evening of enslavement with a scatological conclusion; red-on-maroon denoted

²² Von Maltzan: 2001: 138-143, underlines the character of ‘Theaterinszenierung’ of the SM session/dance lesson.

²³ “Those who want to enter the ‘domain of the locals’ and experience the streets that epitomize modern Berlin are directed to visit Berlin-West, where the shopping promenades of the Tauentzienstrasse and the Kurfürstendamm quiver with sexual energy and offer pleasures that are potentially more risqué. Decked out in high boots of varying colors, prostitutes specializing in S & M aggressively proposition passersby” (Smith 2013: 142).

flagellation and discipline; and so forth)” (Gordon 2006). Arriving in Berlin in 1923, as a seventeen years old young boy, during the Inflation – the extreme sexual freedom of these years is strictly connected with the disastrous economic situation in Germany – Klaus Mann remembered walking past a group of outdoor dominatrices: “Einige der Damen – grimmige Matronen in streng geschnittenen Kostümen – fielen durch hohe Stiefel aus rotem oder grünem Leder auf. Es war eine dieser Gestiefelten, die mir zu meinem Entzücken heiser zuflüsterte: ‘Magste Sklave sein?’, wozu sie auch noch eine Reitgerte an meiner Wange vorbei durch die Luft zwischen lies. Ich fand es wundervoll” (Mann 1976: 146-147)²⁴.

The second reason of interest to be found in the colours of Tebab’s accessories is linked to the last section of the novel. In the final part of *Mephisto*, Hendriks’ second wife, actress Nicoletta von Niebuhr, is described wearing the same accessories as Tebab, but with inverted colours, red boots and green whip, but nothing is said about the way she uses them with Hendrik. The colour inversion as well as the domestication of the sexual perversion into a marriage approved by the regime, a marriage that Hendrik stipulates to ward off suspicions related to his relationship with his black lover Tebab, prove to be an only partial and inadequate replacement:

Er wußte: oben, in ihrem Boudoir, erwartete ihn seine Frau – Nicoletta. Wahrscheinlich trug sie unter dem leichten Seidengewand die hohen, geschmeidigen Stiefel aus glänzendem roten Leder. Die Peitsche, die auf dem Toilettentisch neben Dosen, Pasten und Flacons lag, war von grüner Farbe. Bei Juliette war die Peitsche rot, die Stiefel aber waren grün gewesen... Hendrik konnte hinauf zu Nicoletta gehen [...] Nein, es war nicht das, was Hendrik jetzt wollte – nicht dies, was er eben nun so dringend brauchte. (Mann 1965: 396-397)

3. MANN AND ISHERWOOD

Just a year before *Mephisto* came out in Amsterdam, Christopher Isherwood, who also lived in exile in the same city, published one of the most beautiful literary representations of Berlin’s nightlife during the Weimar

²⁴ A curious detail concerning the price of this kind of activity, present in the first English version of the autobiography, was deleted in the quoted German translation of the same episode; in the first edition Klaus Mann wrote: “Some of them looked like fierce amazons, strutting in high boots made of green, glossy leather. One of them brandished a supple cane and leered at me as I passed by. ‘Good evening, Madam,’ I said. She whispered into my ear, ‘Want to be my slave? Costs only six billion and a cigarette. A bargain. Come along, honey!’” (Mann 1984: 88).

golden age, *Mr. Norris changes train* (1935), which contains an impressive scene in the third chapter describing a sadomasochistic session in which the protagonists of the novel are involved. It is interesting to analyse possible connections between these two novels and in particular between the role of a sadomasochistic set and its cultural and political meaning, especially as the lives of the two writers (Isherwood and Mann) connected at the same intersection between politics and sexuality that emerges in the two novels.

Isherwood and his German lover Heinz Neddermeyer were in Amsterdam when Erika Mann arrived to join her brother Klaus. Isherwood and Neddermeyer were moving from country to country, trying to keep a few steps ahead of Nazi authorities, who were looking to conscript Heinz into the army. Klaus Mann and Isherwood had met in Berlin several years earlier and immediately became, in Isherwood's words, "intimate friends who seldom saw each other, for Klaus was always on the move." (Weiss 2016: 91; Isherwood 2013: eBook edition without page numbers) Some years later, Klaus Mann summarized his relationship with the English colleague: "Der herzliche Kontakt mit ihm ist mir im Lauf der Jahre immer wertvoller geworden" (Mann 1976: 359). Mann explained to Isherwood that Erika's life was in danger, that on occasion she had to sneak out of town in the middle of the night, and that as Public Enemy of the Third Reich she was about to lose her citizenship. He introduced his sister to his friend, with the intention of organizing a marriage between Erika and Christopher, so that Erika could obtain English citizenship (Erika and Gustav Gründgens had separated in 1929). "Isherwood came up with another suggestion: he cabled his friend W. H. Auden in England. "Delighted', Auden wired back" (Weiss 2016: 113-114; Isherwood 2013). This happened in 1935: Mann was working on *Mephisto* and dedicated his just published novel *Symphonie Pathétique: Ein Tschaikowsky-Roman* to his friend Christopher Isherwood, who in turn had just published *Mr. Norris*, in which a mistress called Anni together with another dominatrix, Olga, take part in a wild new year party in a hidden, ambiguous nightclub in Berlin. In our context, the importance of this scene and of the characters' constellation in Isherwood's novel, lies in the fact that Anni and other characters participating in the party are part of the so-called red Front, a communist political movement. Furthermore, later in the novel Anni will compromise her political stance by having Nazi patrons and lovers, among whom former communist Werner Baldow (in the first part of *Mephisto* Hendrik too is

an activist of a communist association), while Mr. Norris is a spy of the French government and must leave Berlin to save his own life. The same, very close connection between a particular sexual behaviour and political issues, or more generally issues related to power, are at the centre of both Isherwoods' and Klaus Mann's novels; moreover, in both cases the aestheticization of sexual desires (through Baudelaire's poem in Klaus Mann, through a parallel between Raphael's Madonna and Anni in Isherwood) functions to "intensify the characters', and possibly the readers', awareness of the aestheticization inherent in less obviously performative social roles" (Denisoff 1998: 92).

The question, then, is why Klaus Mann decided to transform Gründgens homosexuality into masochism. The first, most immediate answer, is that he did not want to associate homosexuality with fascism (Zynda 1986: 109); the second, more articulated answer, is that the sadomasochistic session with the black princess, the only totally fictional character in the novel, allows him to offer an effective representation of the intimate connection between the substantial instability and weakness of an individual devoured by ambition and a political power built on the fundamental ability to get on stage, to represent itself in a sort of theatrical show. Sadomasochistic practices as staging of power relations, as codified representation of roles, as a sometimes inverted, provocative reproduction of social norms of dominance and submission, are a vivid aesthetic instrument to portray Hendrik's complex identity and its relationship to power. Höfgen claims his own self only with Tebab, in a protected sphere, in which a paid sexual service guarantees compliance with codes of conduct which, paradoxically, cannot be transgressed: she is the only one who can call him by his real name, Heinz. The fascination for primitive nature, for Dionysian vitality, are all aspects of a cultural context in which a total loss of ethical and ideological values is replaced by an artificial image of otherness. Submission on a theatrical set, rituality, rhythmical regular performances, dress codification are a sort of *mise en abyme* of the political power seen as a great, terrible show. In his autobiography and in other texts, Klaus Mann speaks very often of the political situation in Germany at the end of the Weimar Republic in terms of a masochistic mass hysteria, of a wicked comedy, of a business with the devil (exactly what he represents in *Mephisto*). Although he was fascinated by the Dionysian dimension of human creativity (and of sexuality) – the review of

Hirschfeld's book *Sittengeschichte des Weltkrieges*, titled *Sex und Krieg* (1930), as well as some passages in the autobiography, establish a connection between the sexual drive and chaotic or destructive, more in general irrational drives in the human soul – the manifestation of the same power on a large scale causes anxiety and disgust and will be the reason for his public letter to Gottfried Benn: “Aber wenn das ‘Irrrationale’ mir in seinen zärtlich-träumerischen, erotisch verbindenden Erscheinungsformen behagt hatte, so erschreckte es mich in seinen aggressiv brutalen Manifestationen, besonders wo diese den Charakter zerstörerischer Massen hysterie anzunehmen drohten” (Mann 1976: 286).

4. CONCLUSIONS: MELLOWED ADAPTATIONS

A look at how adaptations have tackled its portrayal of sadomasochism may shed more light on its pivotal role in the novel itself. The study and analysis of these adaptations in the context of a reconstruction of BDSM practices in the Weimar Republic and of an interpretation of Mann's novel, does not have the sole purpose of offering an excerpt of reception history; they rather aim to highlight – so to speak *ex negativo* – the subverting nature at a social, political and identity level of a sexual subculture that everyone, even in the aesthetic field, prefers to keep obstinately hidden or to weaken through the dilution of its most ‘disturbing’ aspects.

Both adaptations of the novel, Arianne Mnouchkine's *Mephisto. Le roman d'une carrière d'après Klaus Mann* (1979) and István Szabó's *Mephisto* (1981) that won the Oscar as best movie, totally erased the erotic and sadomasochistic dimension of the novel. In the movie the relationship with Tebab has no masochistic connotation – the session scene is brought to the screen as a ‘normal’ sexual intercourse between Klaus Maria Brandauer (as Hendrik) and Kain Boyd (as Juliette), no boots and no whip are present in the scenography, the intercourse is set in an exotic, little room – although the Dionysian nature of the dance is brilliantly showed in a later scene (Hendrik's can can on the stage of his theatre, that, to be fair, gains its strength from Brandauer's interpretation). Furthermore, the black Venus is not a prostitute “sondern eine intelligente Frau”²⁵ (as if a prostitute must be necessarily stupid). Szabó's vision of the black Venus is unconvincing for two reasons: his moralistic point of view and the idea that, from a literary

²⁵ So director Szabó in an interview; quot. in Maltzan 2001: 150.

point of view, Juliette is a less structured and less successful character just because of her fictional – and not historical – nature.

In the adaptation for the theatre Mnouchkine seems to be completely uninterested in the connection between political power and the protagonist's sexual drives. In this case, the attention of the French stage director focuses above all on the troubled editorial story of the Mannian novel (some members of Mann's family are involved in the *pièce*), as well as on the tragic fate of the victims of Nazism. Juliette is played by French Caribbean actress Myrrha Donzenac. Just a brief allusion to a sadistic relationship between Hendrik and Juliette, although with a curious but significant reversal of roles, occupies the last part of the *Tableau II*:

HENDRIK: Mais, tu n'as besoin de rien savoir. Tu as tout dans le sang.

Ma beauté... Mon Afrique... Ma cruelle... Ma femme sauvage...

JULIETTE: Non... Hendrik... lâche moi... j'ai pas envie... je t'aime bien Hendrik...

arrête, tu me fais mal... (Théâtre du soleil 1979: 32)

In Mnouchkine's adaption Juliette is the schoolgirl, Hendrik the teacher ("Apprends-moi le communisme. J'ai bien envie d'apprendre quelque chose de bon." "Hendrik, apprend-moi quelque chose..." [Théâtre du soleil 1979: 32]), so that the audience can easily establish a banal equivalence: nazist = sadist = master (probably also readable in the inverse direction).

Both adaptations miss the explosive cultural and political dimension of the S&M scenario in the novel. The 'devotion' to biographical and historical facts means that the aspect of most stringent and shocking actuality gets paradoxically lost: through his sexual drives, Hendrick gradually changes to a type "die nicht durch ihre Rolle als Verräter, sondern durch ihre masochistische Charakterstruktur für den heutigen Leser sehr relevant und interessant wird" (Maltzan 2001: 212).

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