"THE NEVER-ENDING TREMBLING AND VOMITING OF THE SOUL"

CARL STERNHEIM'S CRITIQUE OF THE MODERN DANCE MOVEMENT

Carl Sternheim's 1926 comedy *Die Schule von Uznach oder Neue Sachlichkeit* (*The School of Uznach,* subtitled *New Objectivity*) is at once an extremely useful and entertaining point of reference for evaluating the contemporary – and in this case critical – reception of German *Ausdruckstanz* (expressive dance) in the second half of the 1920s. The playwright and novelist Sternheim was an important literary figure in Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany, especially renowned for his unique comedies which lampooned social pretensions and middle-class aspirations, often by mocking their central characters and undermining current cultural trends and practices. The comedy addressed in this paper was written after the period of Sternheim's most famous plays (the 1910s and early 1920s) and as a result it has not received much attention from literary theorists.[1] It has also been largely ignored by dance scholarship.

It is only too obvious that Sternheim drew on contemporaneous dance colonies and institutes as a model of the boarding school at Lake Constance where his comedy is set. The clues provided by the author are unambiguous: Rudolf von Laban's name is explicitly used in the text, and Mary Wigman's is encrypted as "Mary Vigdor". The comedy is an ironic and hugely amusing comment on the first years of the Weimar Republic, and in particular the time's reform movements and its dance craze. The piece makes little distinction between the various approaches to dance in 1920s Germany, and elements of gymnastics, body culture and eurythmics are treated, and attacked, somewhat sweepingly. However, the explicit mention of Laban and Wigman does show how well recognised these leading dance figures were at the time.

The first act of the play introduces the reader to the following *dramatis personae*: the school director Dr. Siebenstern; his son Klaus, who is normally resident in Spain; and his intimate circle of four female pupils: Maud, Vane, Thylla and Sonja. Three other figures: an expected new pupil

called Mathilde Enterlein, the school's dance instructor Mary Vigdor and the teacher Heinrich Andresen do not make their entry until later in the play. The first scene sees the institute's pupils sitting with their director on the stairs leading to his comfortable home and evoking sharp criticism of all the bourgeois values of their time; these include traditional societal structures and ideologies, gender stereotypes and male hegemony, sexual deprivation, the process of technological advance and the general bourgeois ennui. They agree in unison that they are compelled to live in a horrible era, which they consider backward-minded, sexist and authoritarian.

Quite in keeping with the general reformist tendencies of the Weimar Republic, the school director – only too eager to provide an antidote to old-fashioned bourgeois values – trusts in the latest educational methods:

> But instead of subjecting you to correction by beating, you are brought here to me, and I shall not take you down a clandestine bourgeois side-street, but instead make you acquainted with today's facts and understanding (Sternheim 1926, 18).

By cultivating in his students an unadulterated sense of expression of individuality, which he terms "radical personal clarity" (ibid, 21), Siebenstern abandons traditional concepts of education, and takes a stance against the prevailing conformist trends of bourgeois society. In their place, the institute establishes a novel pedagogy grounded in the development of the students' 'individual nuances'[2] which, Siebenstern contends, will help them form integrated personalities. To this end, he relies on the central tenets of Nietzsche's influential philosophy of assertive individualism and adopts the watchwords of a full affirmative espousal of life (*Lebensbejahung*) and a re-evaluation of physiology, linked as these were with the disparagement of rationality and traditional ethical or communal values. The motto "let oneself relax in one's emotional depths" (ibid, 31) embraces Uznach's emancipatory pretensions and, in particular, its attempted recovery of the emotional and intuitive faculties of women.

It seems, at least initially, that the school has successfully implemented its proclaimed emancipatory objectives. The pupils apparently possess the self-determination and passion which Nietzsche marked out as essentials for an autonomous subject, and which are appropriately characterised by snappy catch phrases such as "mobility" (ibid, 17) and "vitality" (ibid, 21). Their energetic behaviour is manifest in their pronounced corporeality and cleverly translated into language by means of exclamations, stichomythia and short sentences. Moreover, the school's radical value transformation entails setting moral scruples aside. The school director is having an affair with Sonja, one of his pupils, whose family name – Ramm – is revealing,[3] and the prevalent liberal attitude even allows for contraventions of normative heterosexual codes: the lesbian couple Maud and Vane do not cause the slightest stir.

The principal means, however, by which Dr. Siebenstern seeks to further the liberation of society, and of women in particular, is through the espousal of modern trends in body culture. The school's progressive pedagogical strategy is clearly embedded in the modern dance movement, although the students' undifferentiated use of the terms "gymnastics" (p.42), "*turnen*" (for instance p.45) and "eurythmics" (p.49) in the second act (which centres on their physical education) suggests that the author was either not especially well-informed about the different trends within German body culture, or not interested in such elaboration. The text draws in particular on Laban's conception of *Ausdruckstanz*, alluding both to his ideas on technical and aesthetic reforms and his underlying theories, albeit again in an eclectic and somewhat disjointed fashion through the characters' voices. Laban's approach to dance is incorporated and taught to the students by the dance teacher Mary Vigdor, which is something of an historical anachronism as Laban and Mary Wigman had divided into polarised factions by 1926.[4] In Act II, Vigdor does not appear on stage and instead it is the girls who relate her Laban-inspired teaching to the new pupil Mathilde.

The play's emphasis on outdoor settings and nature – the stage directions stipulate that the sets in the first two acts should offer a view of Lake Constance – and the girls' rejection of technological devices – as Vane exclaims: "Down with technology! Mechanics motors antennas!" (p.15) – are both reminiscent of Laban's philosophy. His thinking was strongly coloured by contemporary fears of the ramifications of the industrial age, which was perceived as detrimental to human culture and values. In this respect, he can be seen as part of the more widespread social movement of life reform (*Lebensreform*), which attacked metropolitan culture and technological progress as alienating human beings from nature. Sternheim's play also mentions the *Wandervogel* (p.54), a youth movement which sought to shake off societal restrictions and reconnect with nature through the promotion of outdoor activities.[5] Laban, much like such groups, reacted against the constraints of civilised life and sought to recover and reinstate primeval human affects which, he believed, could be manifested in bodily expressivity. In criticising other effects of civilisation, such as the overestimation of cognitive and rational thought-processes – the "monstrous over-evaluation of human reasoning" (Laban 1920, 132) – Laban gave dance a prominent position as a medium of social criticism. In his book *Die Welt des Tänzers (The Dancer's World)*, his first treatise on expressive dance, dance is embedded within more general trends of the German Expressionist movement, notably the protest against the rigid educational ideals of the Wilhelmine bourgeoisie, its critique of industrialisation, its emphasis on emotions and its attempted construction of a new type of human being, the *Neue Mensch*.

The social critique expressed by modern dancers was also directly related to the development of a new image of the female, which was propagated by a number of Laban's female contemporaries and pupils. Mary Wigman, for whom modern dance constituted a feminist practice, is a clear case in point. Wigman not only sought to explore specifically female forms of subjectivity through dance;[6] but her choreographies also withstood attempts to categorise female dancers in the limited terms of (male) conceptions of beauty and eroticism. For example, her *Witch Dance*

(1914/1926), with its threatening gestures and instinctual rawness, utilised a jerky and abrupt movement style that would have strongly contravened conventional images of femininity.[7]

In *The School of Uznach*, the practice of modern dance is at the core of the school's educational principles. In line with some of Laban's central concerns, body education is presented as offering a counterbalance to a utilitarian, rational and technological epoch. Moreover, Dr. Siebenstern's concept of the emancipation of women is seemingly based on the notion of dance as the most appropriate means to develop distinct female personalities and express womanly feelings. In this regard, his pedagogy is much in line with Mary Wigman's (alias Vigdor's) notion of women's emancipation as being based on the immediate corporeal expression of the female interior. The connection between this striving for emancipation through dance and Mary Wigman's actual pedagogy or choreographic work is not made explicit in the play, and instead dance remains rather diffusely bound up with a purported liberation of the female.

When Mathilde Enterlein, the new and slightly clumsy pupil from the provincial backwater of Lüneburg, appears on the scene, she is soon introduced to the basic principles of Laban's bodily education; this, it is alleged, will allow her to access the core of her female being. Mathilde's quest for self-knowledge, her clichéd behaviour and desperate attempts to abnegate her inner coldness make the other girls eager to help her out of the "desert of her utilitarian life into the depths of her being's essence" (Sternheim 1926, 51). However, even prior to the central dance scene in Act 2, the text sends subtle signals that the girls' emancipatory self-discovery and renunciation of old power structures is not, as yet, very far advanced. For instance, Vane – who is as vain as her name suggests – displays a curious affinity for corsets, a classical symbol of the suppression of women, and silk tights; thus contravening her proclaimed feminist ideals by a marked adherence to relics of bourgeois patriarchal society.

Moreover, when the girls' conversation turns to Mathilde's first sexual encounter, and they enquire about the date and particular circumstances of her defloration, we register a strong

element of intimidation and conformity. It is the general expectation of the group that each member is ready to verbalise her feelings and disclose her secrets, and confessions of an erotic nature belong to the initiation rites. Although the girls view the revelation of their most intimate experiences as indicating their emancipatory zeal and superior individual freedom, this enforced revelation has grotesque traits and, indeed, seems self-defeating. As Dedner rightly argues, the pupils are "the slaves of their own emancipatory rhetoric" (Dedner 1982, 141), for their subjection to the dogmas upheld by the peer group undermines their claim to have liberated themselves from repressive power structures, and sits uneasily with their pursuit of individuality and self-determination.

The situation comes to a head in the central second act. In its dance and gymnastics scene (Act II, Scenes 2 and 3) which takes place in the great outdoors, the girls, attired only in bathing costumes, exhibit a sample of their bodily training in front of the new pupil Mathilde. This species of exercise is based on Laban's conception of dance as expounded in *The Dancer's World*, which, according to Valerie Preston-Dunlop, he began writing in 1912.[8] Every body movement is accompanied by a corresponding proposition from Laban's book which explains its emotional and philosophical connotations. Sternheim was apparently very well acquainted with *The Dancer's World*, which was published only a few years before Sternheim's comedy, in 1920, as the scene consists of a compilation of quotes from Laban's text in which full and particle sentences are assembled in a montage:

> (Thylla:) Your being's accord involves tearing the conjunction of simultaneous feelings of love and hate out of the spectrum of your possible tensions, and preserving it as a lawgiving basic space rhythm (corresponding passage in Laban 1920, 70).
>
> (Sonja:) While standing erect, shoulder blades closed, chest swelled out for free breathing, the pubic joint turned down, the consciousness of a unified force develops in the body (Laban, 73).
>
> (Maud:) Appearances of the world are, for dancers, accumulations of gestural forces (Laban, 68/75).
>
> (Vane:) If a man stands on two legs, spreading them far apart, his mobility is more grotesque than if his stature rests on the smallest base (Laban, 76).
>
> (Thylla:) A free swinging leg gives the gestural force room to move (Laban, 76).
>
> (Sonja:) The foot rests on the little head of the metatarsus bone, toes and the heel bone. They support the body when the dancer stands on tiptoes (Laban, 76).

(Maud:) Greedy desire is bent (Laban, 77).
(Vane:) Free joyfulness lifted (Laban, 77).
(Thylla:) Strong emotion tears a whole side of the body forwards or backwards (Laban, 77).
(All quoted in Sternheim 44f.)

The satirical intent behind Sternheim's parodistic deployment of Laban's neologisms and nonsensical phrases ("Greedy desire is bent") becomes most poignant when Sonja's elaborately phrased question: "Movements of the thighs bring about vital movements of the contents of the body cavity. Can you feel crystalline tension?" (ibid, 46) is contrasted with Mathilde's trivial reply: "I have a pleasant sensation in my belly". This, in turn, is remarked upon by Vane, who displays the utmost expression of approval: "She has a great expressive accord" (ibid). The linguistic over-sophistication of the girls, and in particular the symbolic nature of their physical expression through dance, is diametrically opposed to Mathilde's natural and much less crafted mode of expression. This contrast contributes largely to the comic effect.

With his subtle critique of language, Sternheim seeks to lampoon Laban's intention, proclaimed in *The Dancer's World*, to articulate the expressive aims of dancers by giving linguistic descriptions of their idiosyncratic thought-processes: "All true dancers wait with a pounding heart for the time when what they have to say through dancing will not evaporate before it is felt. For the sake of this end, I burden myself with the alien task of saying words" (Laban 1920, 2f). According to Laban's authorial comments, he did not strive to establish new dogmas and norms but rather sought to arouse "dancerly understanding" (ibid) in his readers. In order to capture a dancer's specific thought patterns, he further argued, we "occasionally require the reshaping and revising of words" (ibid, 3).

Laban's (avowedly long-term) project of creating a language that adequately verbalises a dancer's train of thought is presented by Sternheim as somewhat nonsensical. The random amassing of Laban's word compounds, together with the reactions of the pupils who repeat Labanian propositions parrot-fashion without appearing to express any deeper feelings, seem intended to

challenge the rationale behind the undertaking. Laban's mode of expression is seen as too complex and esoteric to be universally accessible: one senses the girls of Uznach lack any clear understanding of what are meant by the "geometric and crystallographic laws of space" (Laban, quoted in Sternheim, 1926, 43). Moreover, they have been offered a rationalisation and highly complex verbalisation of what is, supposedly, an intuitive and instinctive approach to the human being: a paradox which Sternheim suggests lies at the heart of Laban's attempt to give linguistic expression to the modern dancer's consciousness.

Sternheim might not have been aware of the fact that Laban, who was born in Hungary, lacked a native grasp of German at the time when his book was conceived and written, which might explain his rather clumsy use of the language. This said, the parody of Laban's discourse on dance fits in well with Sternheim's more general critique of imagery, which he expounded, among other places, in his text on *Kampf der Metapher* (*Fight against the Metaphor).*[9] As Williams (1985, 35f) has demonstrated, Sternheim bitterly condemned any attempt to glorify or idealise the banal and trivial through the use of intricate images and metaphors. For instance, in the above example, Mathilde's pleasant feeling in the belly is described as evidence of "a great expressive accord". Sternheim made it his task to subject language to a process of demystification and de-ideologisation. He called for precision and historical accuracy in place of the linguistic distortions by which, he believed, people try to mislead others about the true state of things.[10] Mathilde's naïve and sincere contributions are used to demonstrate, by means of contrast, that the school's principles, as depicted in the dance scene, promote nothing more than an artificial pretentiousness.

With the entrance of Siebenstern's son Klaus in the third scene of Act 2, the bucolic dance and gymnastics scene is brought to a climax. The girls are dancing around Klaus in a circle like chorus girls in a variety theatre, while quoting from Laban's work with an unambiguously erotic undertone:

> (Sonja:) Between the chest and the pelvic ring stretches the smooth waist musculature which encompasses the organs of semen and fruit production (cf. Laban 1920, 91).
> (Thylla:) In the skeleton, the sexual difference is manifest in the female pelvis's greater splendour (Laban, 95).
> (Vane:) But there are male pelvises which are broader than female ones (Laban, 95).
> (All quoted in Sternheim, 48)

The suspicion that this dance interlude is motivated more by the desire to attract Klaus's attention through a shameless bodily display than by the urge to present a sophisticated artistic performance is promptly substantiated by Maud's cheeky question: "Can you see us in full?" (ibid, 49). The pronounced theatrical nature of this scene and the girls' voluntary exhibition in order to satisfy male voyeurism suggests that the students are far from dissociating themselves from patriarchy. Indeed, it seems they mindlessly value their erotic appeal to men more than the strivings of modern dance to free women from precisely this sort of reduction to sexual objects. Only Mathilde shows unwillingness to perform exercises half-naked in front of a man. In full accordance with the school's ideology, however, Vane swiftly dismisses her shyness by claiming that Mathilde is "still undancerly and fossilised" (ibid).

Yet once again, it is Mathilde who first probes the pedagogical, Laban-influenced principles of the boarding school when she wonders whether it is really necessary to "accumulate energy twenty-four hours a day, to dance a mountain out of a molehill" (ibid, 52); an objection that Maud, pointing to the school's vitalistic and dynamic programme, counters with the rather absurd statement: "Even the nothingness should be given life. Causer, seldom being caused" (ibid). Through Mathilde's pained reaction, Sternheim once again casts a pallor of doubt over the ethos of the school and its educational principles. The very idea to which Uznach is ostensibly opposed – the standardisation of the individual according to certain societal norms – is actually propagated by the school's own forced dance routine, and even more paradoxically by its cult of 'personality and freedom', which is self-defeating insofar as it compels its members to adopt certain characteristics, such as sexual permissiveness and adherence to specific liberal values. (A *truly*

free-thinking institution, it might be claimed, would allow its members to hold more conservative ideals too, if they thought them valuable.)

The character of Klaus becomes the effective medium of the critique of Laban in the play. He depicts the pupils as fellow travellers of a cult that has become a senseless cliché. "Their participation in all high-flown nonsense" (ibid, 67) prevents them from defining their own individual characters. Klaus's view that the girls are victims of a mass cult (cf. ibid, 70) has a historical parallel in the flood-like dissemination of modern dance in 1920s Germany – an 'inflation', as Klingenbeck critically remarked (1930, 21). In 1929, for example, the city of Berlin alone had 150 dance schools, and Laban's movement choirs were spread all over Germany. Toepfer notes that the "mass of primary material reveals that the scale and complexity of Germanic body culture was far greater than previously supposed" (1997, p.6). The representatives of German expressive dance, indeed, hoped that their dance style would become established as an individualistic, emancipatory movement. However, this claim was arguably undermined by this very effort to stylise modern dance as a more mainstream dance form, for instance by proposing the introduction of dance, or rhythmic gymnastics, as subjects to be taught in all German schools.[11] The dangers of this approach were perhaps that modern dance might lose its individual character and unique aesthetic appeal, and indeed develop the same unifying tendencies for which Laban had rejected contemporary society with its emphasis on cognitive thinking and technological progress.[12]

It is another aspect of the irony of expressive dance that it was mainly supported by the bourgeoisie.[13] Unlike the early protagonists, the second generation of modern dancers in the Twenties did not win their (originally anti-bourgeois) self-discovery and self-assertion at the cost of condemnation, let alone expulsion, from their families. It had, on the contrary, become rather a fashionable trend in bourgeois culture to attend dance classes, and Siebenstern's pupils too stem from the upper middle class.[14] The incorporation of the new dance form into the bourgeois

culture meant that it forfeited much of its revolutionary impetus. When Sternheim by implication labels Laban's dance practice and theory irrational as well as reactionary, he denounces it, contrary to the movement's own self-image, as a new manifestation of bourgeois society with all its conformist tendencies. Correspondingly, Klaus's poignant critique is directed against a "dark bourgeois affair" (ibid, 70).

The subtitle of Sternheim's play, 'Neue Sachlichkeit', refers to a German cultural movement of the middle of the Twenties onwards, which involved the transition from expressionism to a more 'objective' treatment of reality. Translated 'New Objectivity', or occasionally 'New Sobriety'[15], this trend arose specifically in reaction to the unrestrained and self-abandoned phase of post-war Expressionism. It promoted a staunchly realistic, unsentimental and yet optimistic approach in art, politics, and other facets of post-war life, which eventually impacted on dance developments too. At a time when this movement had gained currency and risen in intellectual esteem, the mystic branch of expressive dance, with its abstract invocations of a unity between humanity and the cosmos, seemed somewhat at odds with the new Zeitgeist.

In Sternheim's play, Klaus seems to champion the cause of New Objectivity, and correspondingly his disparaging comments about the "eternal trembling and vomiting of the soul" (ibid, 67) are directed at the principal motif of expressive dance, namely the (excessive) accentuation of the emotions. Such observations are indeed fully compatible with those raised by contemporary dance writers who levelled criticism at the mystical nature of expressive dance and at modern dancers' emphasis on inwardness.[16] For example, in *Schrifttanz,* one of the major journals of the time, the Russian-trained dancer and teacher Lasar Galpern wrote of the "lack of passion" which dancers sought to conceal "forcedly through ecstasy" and the "metaphysical fog" which had blanketed their brains (1928, 25-26). The journal's founder and editor Alfred Schlee adopted a similar stance in pointing out that expressive dance was urgently in need of reform:

"The variants of the presentation are not particularly manifold, the emotions wear out and the mental experience becomes a cliché" (1930, 2).

According to Schlee, the modern dance genre was not only aesthetically outdated – not 'on the pulse of time', to use the vitalistic jargon of the day – it was also no longer relevant in socio-political terms. With his 1927 text *Das Ornament der Masse* (*The Mass Ornament)*, the left-wing sociologist Siegfried Kracauer significantly advanced the politicisation of body culture when he argued that expressive dance was an atavistic and moribund artform which failed to reflect the existing political climate. He drew a distinction between those forms of dance (notably expressionist dance) which sought the return to a mythical idealised vision of the past and featured the expression of individual personalities, and the mass ornament (as exemplified by precision-dancers such as the Tiller girls) which reflected the logic of mass production and the rationality of the modern economic system through its precise, geoemetical choreographies. Kracauer rejected the productions of expressionist dance, "which regenerate worn-out higher sentiments in familiar shapes" (1977, 55), preferring the Tiller girls' physical demonstrations insofar as they enacted the contemporary reality of modern capitalism by bringing out its meaninglessness and surface-level expressivity. In other words, he claimed that the mass ornament, in which humans are objectified and convey no symbolic value, had substantially more social relevance than expressionist dance, since the latter was out of touch with the prevailing economic order. Moreover, according to this view, expressionist dance led to political stagnation because it decreased humanity's capacity for reason, deluded people into believing that the world had a deeper (for instance mystical) meaning and ultimately prevented them from critically reflecting on the current system's flaws and engaging in political action.[17]

Sternheim, whilst not matching Kracauer's theoretical level, appears to take a similar stance. His satire of Laban's theories and philosophy, as well as their practical application, presents them as diffuse and escapist. Moreover, in the play's implicit suggestion that expressive dance, with its

emphasis on pure affectivity and (pseudo)metaphysical fantasies, has lost touch with real life, we recognise a familiar motif of Sternheim's literary work; namely the failure of art to correspond to reality. On the other hand, both Kracauer and Sternheim seem to overlook the fact that the dichotomy between art and social reality *was* addressed within the German modern dance movement, even if mainly at its periphery by radical left-wing figures such as Valeska Gert, Jean Weidt and Jo Mihaly.[18] It is particularly curious that Sternheim completely ignores Gert, given that her work not only presented a gritty account of the contemporary realities of quotidian life, but also incorporated numerous elements of the culture of New Objectivity, for instance Americanism, multi-ethnicity and technology.[19]

If Sternheim is seeking to unmask expressive dance as regressive; as expressing no substantial social truth, having no emancipatory value and failing to dissolve deep-seated emotional ties with bourgeois culture, then what alternative is the author presenting to the audience? Let us consider the last thirty pages of the text, in which, as Hillach remarks so aptly (1980, 144), the deconstruction of the school's pedagogical ideals is followed by a revival of older, traditionalist rituals. The second and fourth Scenes of Act 3 allude to decadence, aestheticism and romantic clichés – for instance when the opera connoisseur Klaus sits down on a broad divan, puffing away at a pipe; motifs of precivilisatory wildness – Klaus's longing for peoples who lie in the sand all day and blow their bamboo canes; and romantic love – the balcony scene where Mathilde confesses her virginity to Klaus, who replies with the enraptured exclamation "world history!" (Sternheim, 1926, 80).

The assertion of feminist ideas, so vehemently enforced at the beginning of the play, is counteracted towards the end by what seem deliberate imitations of conventional gender behaviour which are exaggerated to the point of cliché. With Klaus restoring a sense for conventional romantic feelings, the school's dance teacher Mary Vigdor and the equally romantic Andresen revert to traditional modes of gender interplay. The engagement scene between them is

paradigmatic of this change of ethos within the school. During its course, Vigdor distances herself categorically from the school's principles: "The inner movement has withered away due to its superficial power" (ibid, 84), seeming thus to reject the original ethical and aesthetic programme based on expressive dance.

Ironically, the New Woman of the Twenties, exemplified here by the character of Vigdor, ultimately lives up to the expectations of traditional, petit bourgeois role allocations; in clear contrast with the historical Wigman who chose to realise her artistic aspirations rather than lead a traditional bourgeois lifestyle. (True to the feminist themes of her work she refused to conform to her parents' expectations of an early marriage, breaking off several engagements in her home town of Hannover.) Vigdor, however, is equipped with maternal instincts and all the other virtues of a good housewife: while complaining of her fiancé's uncleanliness she promises to take proper care of her "Heini", takes off his spectacles and cleans them carefully (compare ibid, 83-89). Her pupils seem enthusiastically to follow her example by finding partners and apparently seeking to settle down. The final scenario with its baroque-style multiple wedding, underpinned by reference to Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, is part of the same satiric strategy.

However, rather than simply promoting a conservative message, as commentators such as Alfred Polgar and Burghard Dedner[20] have suggested, the comedy in the end presents the reader with a multiple parody. First, there is a clear comic dimension in the way the conformist appropriation of superficial cultural practices – life reform and body culture – is shown to lead to the stereotyping of individuals. Through the tendency of the bourgeoisie to integrate new forms of culture into its own apparatus, dance in the end becomes completely wrapped up in the bourgeois culture industry – quite contrary to the intention of its early representatives to initiate radical societal change. The process by which dance is degraded to a mass cult conflicts with the girls' proclaimed search for individuality, originality and social progress. The Uznach institute

serves as an example to illustrate the decline of the utopian hope that avant-garde artistic practice can bring about a better life and a new society.

Secondly, we recognise parody of the trend towards New Objectivity – for instance when Sonja comments upon Vigdor's return to traditionalism with the exclamation "New Objectivity everywhere!" (p.92). The use of 'Sachlichkeit' in the text is inconsistent and slightly diffuse, and it may be speculated whether Sternheim might have enjoyed playing on the shallow voguishness of the term, the precise meaning of which was the subject of intense debate. It is made clear, however, that despite Laban's vain effort to furnish dance with a theoretical (pseudo-)cognitive underpinning, this art form, with its sentimental and emotional values, is not an appropriate tool in the pupils' search for demystification and unpretentiousness. Yet, we can also discern an element of parody in the move towards romantic ideals, old-fashioned femininity and wedding ceremonials. The ending of the play is clearly *not* part of a paradigm shift towards objective realism, as Sonja's earlier remark would imply, but rather constitutes a trend in the opposite direction.

Lastly, comic effects are generated by confronting the emancipatory pretensions of the school with conventional behaviour and familiar cultural models, especially in the 'Figaro' denouement. The girls ultimately fail in their feminist strivings to achieve 'totality' and liberation from male hegemony. However, whilst Sternheim is clearly critical of the false, imposed, liberalism of modern social and artistic institutions like the Uznach school, this does not make him a supporter of old-style conservatism either. Far from being upheld as a model for female flourishing, Vigdor's enactment of repertories of behaviour associated with womanhood (domesticity) and her evocation of the classic normative role of the female (maternity) are marked as deliberate performative imitations of exaggerated forms of traditional femininity. Similar observations apply to the textual reference to *Figaro*. Anyone who knows the libretto will undoubtedly recognise that the melange of petty jealousy, intrigues and seduction it portrays neither furthers Sternheim's

quest for individuality, nor vindicates traditional bourgeois role models. Evidently, *Figaro* cannot be an appropriate medium to express modern experiences; the allusion demonstrates only that in Uznach everything boils down to performance. Hence, the restoration of traditional gender constructions through the adoption of culturally encoded gender-specific behaviour is part of the satiric strategy.

In deconstructing the utopian beliefs of modern dance as well as satirising the embodiment of Romantic stereotypes, Sternheim gives expression to his conviction that a genuine personal emancipation is to be based on freedom of thought and personal development, rather than the mere replacement of one set of dogma with another. In his view, the development of a private and social personality can only be achieved in a very individual manner, and not indirectly via a cultural idealism that lacks any specific political or social reference to contemporary reality. Rudolf von Laban and Mary Wigman were perhaps rather easy targets of parody for Sternheim, but the persistence of their ideas and achievements in higher education, dance therapy, ethnography and dance history has proven their significance in their field. It stands to question, however, whether any of the points Sternheim raises might still be relevant with respect to today's trends in dance and dance education.

NOTES

[1] The piece was only moderately successful, as contemporary newspaper reviews reveal. Though apparently fairly popular with audiences (Alfred Kerr, in a Berliner Tageblatt review, notes that the 1927 Berlin production produced a lot of laughter and applause), literary and drama critics often wrote less than flattering accounts. For example, Herbert Ihering, in the Berliner Börsen-Courier, criticised Sternheim's stylistic pretentiousness, and Alfred Frankenfeld, in a 1926 issue of Berliner Tageblatt, wrote about the Hamburg world premiere thus: "There is a steep decline from 'Bürger Schippel' [one of the author's earlier plays] to 'The School of Uznach'. Rebellious mockery does not suffice to replace a lack of content, and humour without content is little fun".

[2] The "eigene Nuance" is a key term in the author's writing. Sternheim's concept of the 'individual nuance', through which he actively promoted the uncompromising realisation of the individual in defiance of societal opposition, had a great impact on the author's post-war work.

[3] The German verb 'rammeln', derived from the sexual act among rabbits, is often used in vulgar sexual contexts to refer to the act of sexual intercourse.

[4] See for instance Partsch-Bergsohn, 1994, in particular pp. 40 and 42.

[5] Most of these groups were founded around the turn of the 19th century, and some still exist today, having been refounded after World War II (http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wandervogel).

[6] Wigman sought, for example, to recover the woman's previously suppressed unconscious, and asserted that women were able to express something in modern dance that was specifically female: "I also believe there is a great and proper egotism in all young womanhood, of first seeking oneself, before approaching the world and surroundings, seeking oneself, feeling oneself, realising oneself" ("The dance and the modern woman", undated, p. 5, Mary Wigman Archive, Berlin 492).

[7] For further readings on this topic see Susan Manning's book on *Ecstasy and the Demon* (1993) and Dee Reynolds's article on *Dancing as a Woman* (1999.)

[8] Preston-Dunlop 1998, p.25.

[9] See Sternheim 1966, 499-503.

[10] In this context, see also Williams's insightful essay on *Fight the Metaphor* 1985, 37f.

[11] See the October 1928 issue of Schrifttanz documenting the resolutions passed during the second German Dancers' Congress in Essen (Schrifttanz 1/2, pp. 33-34).

[12] See, for instance, Laban, 1920, 130

[13] Cf. Klein 1992, p.203, and Müller 1994, 31f.

[14] It is conceivable that the economically exclusive Zurich school served as a model for Sternheim's fictional Uznach institute.

[15] See John Willett's book on Art and Politics in the Weimar Republic.

[16] Laban too dabbled in occultism and mystics; he was, for instance, a member of the Rosicrucians during his years in Paris.

[17] When his hope for a new social order was disappointed with the rise of fascism, Kracauer altered his perspective, and subsequently re-analysed mass culture as a symptom of Germany's glide into totalitarianism.

[18] For a concise differentiation of the aesthetic concepts of Wigman and Gert cf. Brandstetter 1995, in particular 449-453, and Burt 1998, especially 33ff. and 47-54.

[19] See my own article on Valeska Gert, 2007.

[20] See Alfred Polgar, 1985, p. 468, and Burghard Dedner, 1982, p.143.

WORKS CITED

Artus, Hans-Gerd. 1992. 'Ganzheitliches Bewegungsverständnis' – Worthülse oder tanzwissenschaftliche Kategorie? ('Holistic Understanding of Movement' – Empty Cliché or Category of Dance Studies?). *Tanzdrama* 19: 4-7.

Brandstetter, Gabriele. 1995. *Tanz-Lektüren (Dance-Readings).* Frankfurt: Fischer.

Burt, Ramsay. 1998. *Alien Bodies. Representations of Modernity, 'Race' and Nation in Early Modern Dance*. London/New York: Routledge.

Dedner, Burghard. 1982. *Carl Sternheim*. Boston: Twayne.

Frankenfeld, A. 1926. Carl Sternheim: "Die Schule von Uznach". Deutsches Schauspielhaus Hamburg. *Berliner Tageblatt* (23rd September).

Galpern, Lasar. 1928. Die Zeit und der Tanz (The Time and the Dance). *Schrifttanz* 1 (2): 25-26.

Hillach, A. 1980. 'Die Schule von Uznach' oder Der Immoralist als neusachlicher Romantiker? ('The School of Uznach' or The immoralist as new objective romanticist?), in: W. Wendler (ed.), *Carl Sternheim Materialienbuch*. Darmstadt/Neuwied: 133-158.

Ihering, H. 1927. Die Schule von Uznach. Theater in der Königgrätzer Straße. *Berliner Börsen-Courier* (6th April).

Kerr, A. 1927. Sternheim: "Die Schule von Uznach". Königgrätzer Straße. *Berliner Tageblatt* (6th April).

Klein, Gabriele. 1992. *FrauenKörperTanz (WomenBodiesDance).* Munich: Heyne.

Klein, Gabriele. 1996. Tanz – eine universelle Sprache? (Dance – a universal language?), *Tanzdrama* 34 (3): 10-14

Kolb, Alexandra. 2007. "There was never anythin' like this!!!" Valeska Gert's Performances in the Context of Weimar Culture, *The European Legacy 12(3):* 293-309.

Kracauer, Siegfried. 1977. *Das Ornament der Masse* (*The Mass Ornament). Essays*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

Laban, Rudolf von. 1920. *Die Welt des Tänzers* (*The Dancer's World).* Stuttgart: Seifert.

Laban, Rudolf von. 1930. Vom Sinn der Bewegungschöre (About the Meaning of Movement Choirs). *Schrifttanz,* 3/2, pp.25-26.

Manning, S. 1993. *Ecstasy and the Demon. Feminism and Nationalism in the Dances of Mary Wigman*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press

Partsch-Bergsohn, Isa. 1994. *Modern Dance in Germany and the United States. Crosscurrents and Influences*. Chur: Harwood Academic Publishers.

Polgar, Alfred. 1985. Carl Sternheim, Die Schule von Uznach, in: A. Polgar: *Kleine Schriften*, vol 5 (Theater 1). Ed. by M. Reich-Ranitzki. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, pp.467-468.

Preston-Dunlop, Valerie. *Rudolf Laban. An Extraordinary Life*. London: Dance Books.

Reynolds, Dee. 1999. Dancing as a Woman: Mary Wigman and "Absolute dance". *Forum for Modern Lanugage Studies 35/3*, pp. 297-310.

Schlee, Alfred. 1930. An der Wende des neuen Tanzes (The Turning Point of the New Dance). *Schrifttanz,* 3 (1): 1-2.

Sternheim, Carl. 1926. *Die Schule von Uznach oder Neue Sachlichkeit* (*The School of Uznach or New Objectivity*). Berlin/Vienna/Leipzig: Zsolnay.

Toepfer, K. 1997. *Empire of Ecstasy. Nudity and Movement in German Body Culture, 1910-1935*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Wigman, M. *The dance and the modern woman*. Undated. Mary Wigman Archive. Berlin Academy of the Arts, p.5.

Willett, J. 1978. *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period: The New Sobriety, 1917-1933*. New York: Pantheon books.

Williams, Rhys. 1985. Kampf der Metapher (Fight against the Metaphor), *Text und Kritik* 87: 35-48.