

Lady Killers and Lust-Murderers: The *Lustmord* Paintings of Weimar Germany

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In May of 1919, George Grosz exhibited his painting *Der Kleine Frauenmörder*, which translates to “The Little Lady Killer” (Figure 1). The painting offers us a representation of a crime in progress: a bald, bearded man is shown in profile and mid-step, with a bloody knife in his right hand. His body is torqued and his right arm is crossed over his torso as though he has just slashed his victim. The knife is shown in a suggestively phallic position, and the man’s genitals are revealed in the contours of his pants. The perspective of the room appears tilted, with the wine bottle and potted plant pitched as though disturbed by the violent energy within the room. The female figure seems caught in mid-air, and the stability of the room is upended in a whirl of angles and shadows. She is nude but for a blue sash and stockings, and her face is bruised and her throat cut. Her body has been partly disassembled; her arms are missing and her legs are hidden from view behind her attacker. In Grosz’s pseudo-cubist urban setting, her skewed reflection is suggested in a mirror or reflective window, which abuts against another window that shows either the silhouette of an onlooker or the reflection of the killer, along with a red crescent moon. Another male silhouette lurks in the shadows to the left of the canvas, and two green orbs, suggesting streetlights, hover in the upper right corner of the picture plane, marking this crime as one set in the city.

The same year as Grosz’s exhibition, Otto Dix painted *Der Lustmörder (Selbstporträt)*. This painting (Figure 2), which is now lost or destroyed, is also of a male figure in a bedroom attacking a female victim. In Dix’s painting, the room is stabilized, though a chandelier swings pendulously, and

the victim’s bleeding body parts are strewn across the space. Dix’s title translates as “The Lust-Murderer: Self-Portrait,” and it has been noted that the furniture was copied from that within the artist’s Dresden apartment.¹ The grinning, clean-shaven Dix-as-Lustmörder wears a dapper, tweed suit. Just as Grosz’s villain, he, too, is splattered with blood, caught in the midst of his butchering. To the killer’s left, our right, a marble-topped desk supports an atomizer bearing Dix’s signature as well as a severed leg, and a vanity mirror reflects a bed, suggested as sharing the viewer’s space. Dix has taken care to graphically articulate both the genitals and reproductive organs disemboweled from the woman. As if to emphasize his complicity in this horrific crime, Dix’s red handprints literally mark the canvas, pressed specifically onto the woman’s body parts.

During the years following World War I, and until the consolidation of the Nazi party in 1933, paintings and drawings of butchered, semi-nude women proliferated in the art galleries and publications of the Weimar Republic.² This phenomenon coincided with the sensationalized serial killings of women and children by men who were known as — among other names — *Lustmörders*. *Lustmord*, a term derived from criminology and psychology, was the label assigned to this sensational genre.³ The Weimar *Lustmörder* clearly bother modern scholars, who are faced with the challenge that Weimar critics failed to comment on how these paintings represented the disfiguring of women. The misogyny of these works, uncommented upon in their own time, has become the central focus of much modern *Lustmord* scholarship, which ultimately defines this treatment

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¹ Beth Irwin Lewis, “*Lustmord*: Inside the Windows of the Metropolis,” in *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, ed. Katharina von Ankum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 220.

² *Lustmord* enjoyed a curious ubiquity in German culture. The term was initially proposed by philosopher Richard von Krafft-Ebing as a condition describing one afflicted with degenerate sexuality. Within just a few decades, it encompassed an entire artistic and literary genre. The application of the term in Germany during the late nineteenth and

early twentieth centuries varied, depending on the decade and the nature of the crime. Criminologists and psychologists often understood *Lustmord* differently, and once *Lustmord* entered the cultural sphere, other new and varied meanings accrued among artists, writers, and the general public.

³ Richard von Krafft-Ebing popularized the term *Lustmord* in the late 1880s, and in 1905, criminologist Erich Wulffen published *Der Sexualverbrecher* (The Sex Criminal), which included a chapter on *Lustmord*. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis with Especial Reference to Contrary Sexual Instinct*, trans. Charles Gilbert Chaddock (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis, 1894); Erich Wulffen, *Der Sexualverbrecher: Ein Handbuch für Juristen, Verwaltungsbeamte und Ärzte* (Berlin: Groß-Lichterfelde, 1910). The earliest application of the term to a work of art seems to have been by Grosz, with his 1913 drawing *Lustmord*, published in *George Grosz, 1893-1959: A Selection of Fifty Early Drawings*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Peter Deitsch Fine Arts, 1968).

of the female form as implicit attacks on the so-called New Woman, a name given to middle- and upper-class women pushing against the traditional roles and restrictions imposed upon them by society.⁴

This discussion seeks to bridge the gap in criticism by arguing that Weimar *Lustmord* paintings, such as those by Grosz and Dix, differ from other media in which *Lustmord* proliferated: cinema, literature, and reportage. After discussing psychological and criminological interpretations, this paper will focus on a comparison between literary and painted representations of *Lustmord*. The differences lie in the presence and role of the *Lustmörder*, and the way in which women are depicted as victims. This discussion posits that the charge of misogyny is too limiting as an explanation of these Weimar paintings. The question is why these paintings differ from *Lustmord* of other media, and how further contextualization of these works may offer a more complete understanding of these paintings.

Lust-murder is a foreign and ambiguous word for non-Germans. It began as a criminological term describing a certain category of crime and type of criminal.⁵ The prototypical *Lustmörder* developed in the form of the serial murderer of prostitutes who populated the Whitechapel district of London in 1888. Jack the Ripper, to quote Colin Wilson, “inaugurated the age of the sex crime.”⁶ Sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, writing in 1894, discussed *Lustmord* not as a crime, but as a perversion derived from sadistic urges. Krafft-Ebing describes *Lustmord* as “lust potentiated as cruelty,” and his study emphasizes what is done to the corpses of victims after having been killed, primarily identifying cannibalism as a motive for *Lustmord*.⁷ He also offers another explanation for the butchery of *Lustmord* victims, in which “the sadistic crime alone becomes the equivalent of coitus.”⁸ This explanation, rather than a cannibalistic drive, became a key aspect of later *Lustmord* studies and art.

Criminologist Erich Wulffen also wrote on *Lustmord* in the ensuing decade, and his book *Der Sexualverbrecher, or the Sex Criminal*, which is laden with gruesome crime

scene photographs, seems to have been well known among Weimar Germans.⁹ Wulffen’s analysis of *Lustmord* is linked to German law, and his focus is on the actual crimes. He emphasizes that *Lustmord* is an act in which the violent attack and killing of a victim replaces, or facilitates, sexual climax for the assailant.¹⁰

Otto Dix and Rudolph Schlichter both used photographs from Wulffen’s text as guidelines for their own *Lustmord* subjects. Both artists vary their derivation to a degree, keeping the basic positioning of the victim’s body, but altering aspects of interior details and the position of the viewer to the crime. Dix chose one of the most horrific images in Wulffen’s text as his model, and takes liberties in his representation (Figure 3).¹¹ He has given his victim boots and stockings, and placed a gag in her mouth. The most pronounced alteration of the scene is a pair of copulating dogs in the foreground, suggestively positioned below the woman’s gaping and bloody womb. This etching was one of eight in a series titled “Death and Resurrection,” all of which include a gruesome death scene and a suggestion of rebirth.

The images that Dix and Schlichter chose to copy are revealing: of the approximately fourteen crime scenes pictured in Wulffen’s study of *Lustmord*, only four are of adult women murdered in an interior, and both Dix and Schlichter used one of these four as their model. The other crimes recorded by Wulffen are of murders committed in what appear to be rural exterior settings, surrounded by grass, hay, or woods, and five of the fourteen crime scenes were of children. That Dix and Schlichter chose *Lustmörder*s of women killed in interior settings aligns with the manner in which nearly every Weimar *Lustmord* painting was depicted: an adult female, often signified as a prostitute, as the victim set within an urban interior.

The city as setting for this crime is important to *Lustmord* of other media, but is nuanced in very different ways that are significant to the figures of the victim and the killer. The fantastic and mystery novels by Weimar authors Robert Musil, Hanns Heinz Ewers, Karl Hans Strobl, and Hugo Bettauer

⁴ Brigit S. Barton has analyzed the *Lustmord* compositions of Grosz, Dix, and their contemporaries as critical responses to the corrupt German bourgeoisie, while Dennis Crockett explains the works as resulting from the brutalizing effect of war on the veteran-artists. Brigit S. Barton, *Otto Dix and Die Neue Sachlichkeit 1918-1925* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981); Dennis Crockett, *German Post-Expressionism: The Art of the Great Disorder 1918-1924* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999). Beth Irwin Lewis has linked *Lustmord* representations to misogynistic responses to the “New Woman” and the “Woman Question,” and Kathrin Hoffmann-Curtius has published studies on Grosz and Dix’s *Lustmörder*s that reveal multiple layers of political and gendered discourse within the works. Beth Irwin Lewis, *George Grosz: Art and Politics in the Weimar Republic* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1971); Kathrin Hoffmann-Curtius, *Im Blickfeld: George Grosz, John, Der Frauenmörder* (Hamburg: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1993). Maria Tatar has produced the most recent and extensive study on the subject in English in which she concludes that the works amount to “murder committed in the mind of the artist,” Maria Tatar, *Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany* (Princeton:

Princeton University Press, 1995), 15.

⁵ Krafft-Ebing and Wulffen use the term to categorize those acts of murder in which women and children are killed through a particular combination of desire (*Wollust*) and cruelty (*Grausamkeit*).

⁶ Stephen Kern, *A Cultural History of Causality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 151.

⁷ Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 62-8.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Wulffen, *Der Sexualverbrecher*, 454-92.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 454.

¹¹ The crime scene photograph of the *Lustmord* of a Viennese prostitute is figure 9 from Erich Wulffen, *Der Sexualverbrecher*, 455.

that feature *Lustmord* are varied in their setting.¹² The action is depicted in a variety of settings from cities and bourgeois interiors to Gothic castles and Pompeian ruins, though, the former was often established as a “rational” space contradicted by the mysterious latter.¹³ In other words, the city is suggested as the rational, male sphere and the archeological ruins and rural areas as the mysterious, female sphere.

Rationality is an important aspect of literary representations of *Lustmord*, and the suggestion of the metropolis as a rational sphere is linked to the role of the male protagonist.¹⁴ The male figure is depicted as intellectual and cultured, and even though he commits *Lustmord*, it is because his rational foundation has been somehow destroyed.¹⁵ The manifestation of this violence, this monstrosity that overtakes the rational male, is rooted in the feminine and consequently lashes out at women.¹⁶

When the *Lustmörder* is not depicted as the rational male in these novels, he is depicted as possessed by monstrous transformation into a vampire or werewolf. This reference to the *Lustmörder* as a supernatural half-human is paralleled in news reportage of serial *Lustmörders*, like Peter Kürten, who was dubbed the *Vampir von Düsseldorf*, and Fritz Haarmann of Hannover, similarly titled a vampire and a werewolf. Jay Layne calls this tendency in literature and reportage the “monster metaphor,” which gives a clear distinction between the human and monstrous.¹⁷ The use of this metaphor separates the killer from humanity to mark him as *other*.¹⁸

Artistic representations of *Lustmord* differ from these literary works in both their emphasis of setting and their treatment of the *Lustmörder* and victim. The literary sequestering of the rational to the urban environment in *Lustmord* settings is contradicted by artistic representations of the crime. For painted *Lustmörderes*, the city was imperative as setting, and suggested as a dangerous space that threatened the bodies of women.

In 1917 George Grosz wrote a poem titled “Berlin, 1917,” part of which reads:

Gloomily the overcoat flaps at the pimp’s bones,
Back bent, brass knuckles fixed,
Descending with a sharp Solingen knife

Deep into tenements
Into fur shops and silk houses
Or coal cellars
Afterwards one sometimes finds a bloody
Piece of taffeta or a wool stocking
Or the bill with a handprint.¹⁹

Grosz’s poem alludes to a *Lustmord*. The assailant is a hunch-backed pimp, armed with brass knuckles and a kitchen knife. Grosz provocatively describes the deathblows, “Descending ... deep into tenements/Into fur shops, and silk houses/Or coal cellars.”²⁰ The tenement apartments and fur shops initially suggest a metropolitan setting, but the phrase “silk houses” clues the reader that these buildings are symbols for the victim’s body.²¹ The female body has become the city, its unique architecture, and man’s violation of his own civilized status. The “coal cellars” subtly implies the womb of the woman so often eviscerated during the crime.

It has been noted that the apartment, streetlights and shadowy voyeurs of Grosz’s *Der Kleine Frauenmörder* imply a metropolitan setting. Heinrich Maria Davringhausen’s 1917 *Lustmord* also displays the dangers of city living (Figure 4). In an obvious quotation of Manet’s *Olympia*, a nude woman reclines on a bed in an apartment bedroom. The potential *Lustmörder* peers out from underneath the bed to look at a pistol on the table, foreshadowing the violence to come. A large window that occupies nearly one-fourth of the canvas reveals through its distorted frames the shadow-filled and ominous metropolis outside. Overhead, a jagged lightning bolt between storm clouds emphasizes the danger.

Otto Dix’s gruesome *Lustmord* painting of 1922 also emphasizes its city setting (Figure 5). The furniture is the same Biedermeier furniture of his 1920 self-portrait copied from Dix’s Dresden apartment.²² Here, a woman’s unnaturally large and eviscerated corpse is sprawled across a bed and onto the floor, and a chair is toppled over before her. The violence done to her genitals is repeated in the mirror on the wall, and blood stains nearly everything in the bottom-right quadrant of the painting. This appalling crime scene, with the upended corpse and chair, and the disheveled, bloody sheets, is juxtaposed with the bourgeois furniture, and es-

¹² Robert Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften: Erstes Buch Kapitel 1-80*, ed. Adolf Frisé, *Gesammelte Werke* 1 (1930; repr., Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1978); Hanns Heinz Ewers, *Vampir: Ein verwilderter Roman in Fetzen und Farben* (1920; repr., Berlin: Sieben Stäbe Verlags- und Druckerei-Gesellschaft, 1928); Karl Hans Strobl, “Das Aderlaßmännchen,” in *Lemuria: Seltsame Geschichten*, *Galerie der Phantasten* 4 (1909; repr., München: Georg Müller, 1917); Karl Hans Strobl, “Die arge Nonn,” in *Lemuria: Seltsame Geschichten*, *Galerie der Phantasten* 4 (1911; repr., München: Georg Müller, 1917); Hugo Bettauer, *Der Frauenmörder* (1922; repr., Vienna: R. Löwit, 1926). Jay Michael Layne discusses these novels and their representations of *Lustmord* versus news reportage of the crime in his dissertation “Uncanny Collapse: Sexual Violence and Unsettled Rhetoric in German-Language *Lustmord* Representations, 1900-1933” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2008).

¹³ Layne, “Uncanny Collapse,” 60-67.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁹ George Grosz, *Gedichte und Gesänge, 1916-17* (Litomyšl: Josef Portman Verlag, 1932), quoted in Lewis, *George Grosz*, 204.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Lewis, “*Lustmord*,” 220.

pecially with the empty street visible through the window. The empty, eerily still city beyond is on a direct diagonal axis with the *Lustmord*, forming a pyramid with the body and the mirror that reflects its wound, suggesting the metropolis as a necessary component of the crime. Unlike the Weimar novels that often depict the city as a rational, male-gendered space, the city within these paintings is a predatory entity paralleled with — and an affront to — the female form.

The painted *Lustmords* also emphasize their killers very differently from their literary contemporaries. The *Lustmörder*s of Dix, Grosz, and Davringhausen are not supernatural, and seem to blend the rational bourgeois gentleman with a sadistic and irrational killer. Dix and Grosz both depict their *Lustmörder*s in suits and ties within middle class dwellings. Both assailants are caught in the midst of their crime, teeth gritted and brows furrowed as they slash and sling their victim's body. There is no suggestion of a forced suspension of rationality, perhaps implying that the potential for murder lies in every man.

Davringhausen's 1919 *The Dreamer* articulates this suggestion (Figure 6). As in the two paintings just discussed, Davringhausen's central figure is a *Lustmörder*. The Dreamer is well dressed, sitting in his apartment, and depicted as imagining a romantic moonlit excursion. Beside him lays a bloody razor, and behind him, a beheaded woman lies extended on his bed. The painting is subtly divided in half, with the right side of the canvas depicting the happy vision and a day-lit window, and the left containing the murder weapon, the corpse, a darkened window angled up towards a night sky with crescent moon, and a curiously-positioned vacant and blood-red cityscape directly above the victim's body. While the male figure is aligned with the beach paradise, the headless female is paralleled with the sinister city street, reinforcing the connection of the metropolis to the female body. The Dreamer is centered in the picture plane, sharing both halves of the canvas, and thus straddling the fence between rationality and bloodthirsty irrationality. The manner in which these paintings deny the positioning of *Lustmörder* as monstrous other can be understood, and — this paper suggests — was understood during the Weimar Republic, as a satirical commentary on mankind as a whole, manifested in a disillusioned society that had witnessed its own brutality during the First World War.²³

The woman as victim in the Weimar *Lustmord* paintings

also figured differently from that of the literary representations. Newspaper reportage of these crimes often began with a crime scene in which the victim reads as secondary to the descriptions of the horrified spectators, and the atrocity of the crime itself. These articles devolved into a hysterical fascination with the killer and determining his identification.²⁴ Weimar literary representations seem to often follow a similar formula, in which the killer is of primary interest and drives the plot, while the female victims act as props to the hideous acts of these monster-men.²⁵ The climax of the murder is often missing from these works, and many begin with the discovery of the corpse, as is formulaic for the detective novel.²⁶

Artistic representations of *Lustmord* treat the female victim differently. When the victim and killer are shown together, the action of the painting often depicts the climax of the murder. More importantly, the female form is of central importance to nearly every painted *Lustmord*. This is significant to the artistic tradition of the female nude, whether the reclining nude, in the tradition of Titian, Ingres and Manet, or the fragmented nudes of ancient Greece and Rome. Dix, Grosz, and Davringhausen all studied in Academies, at least briefly, and understanding these paintings as continuations and transformations of the academic female nude is a relationship seldom pointed out by scholars, but one certainly worth mentioning.²⁷ In post-World War I Germany, which was populated with war cripples and daunted by social and economic unrest, these broken and disturbing figures were perhaps understood as forms appropriate to their times.

It is assuredly this centrality and violent treatment of the female form that has led scholars to determine these paintings as attacks on the so-called New Woman.²⁸ Indeed, that a painting of a murdered and butchered woman went without apparent comment during the Weimar Republic, even when read as satirical, seems to reflect the patriarchal nature that governed Western society. Otto Dix has been especially subject to charges of misogyny. Maria Tatar has regarded Dix's focus on mutilated female genitalia as a visual and virtual attack on women, relating this attention to a kind of womb-envy.²⁹ This line of argument neglects Dix's apparent celebration of the fecundity of all women, including his wife, a theme he painted often. Such an understanding is also supported by Dix's depiction of life's extremes — life and death, as thematic polarities inseparable from each another

²³ Other scholars have recognized Grosz's *Lustmord* canvases as satirical and reflecting the trauma of the First World War. See Lewis, George Grosz; and Crockett, *German Post-Expressionism*.

²⁴ A few examples are "Kommt Licht in das Dunkel? Spuren des Düsseldorfer Mörders? Zusammenhang zwischen der Ermordung der Breslauer Kinder Fehse und den Jetzigen Untaten?" *8-Uhr Abendblatt*, 12 November 1929; H. R. Berndorf, "Der Ort des Grauens: An der Haniel-Mauer," *Vossische Zeitung*, 19 November 1929, "Lustmord an einem achtjährigen Mädchen," *Kölnische Zeitung*, 9 February 1929; *Abend-Ausgabe*, cited in Layne, "Uncanny Collapse," 28-32. Layne does provide examples in which this is not the case, citing examples where reporters are especially affected by their encounter with the corpse.

²⁵ Layne, "Uncanny Collapse," 130-158.

²⁶ Roger Callois, *The Mystery Novel* (Bronxville, NY: Laughing Buddha Press, 1984), 3.

²⁷ Hoffman-Curtius, *Im Blickfeld*, 38-40.

²⁸ Lewis discusses *Lustmord* and the "woman question," or the burgeoning woman's movement related to the figure of the New Woman in Europe, "Lustmord," 202-32.

²⁹ Tatar, *Lustmord*, 80.

— which govern Dix's oeuvre, and are notably pronounced in his *Lustmords*, such as his 1922 "Death and Resurrection" series. Although there is much in Dix's *Lustmörder*s to justify a highly misogynist reading, this reading can also be suspended if analyzed in a new context. Dix's appropriation of *Lustmord* as subject matter is curious, indeed, but not proof of his hatred of women. In fact, it could be argued that his wife, Martha, was the embodiment of the New Woman. Though a self-portrait of a murderer, *Der Lustmörder* is not autobiographical.

In conclusion, the ubiquitous Weimar *Lustmord* paintings are problematic works that challenge a modern reception. Especially challenging is the lack of comment by Weimar critics on this display of the ruined and ravaged female body.

Yet, these paintings are rich with contextual references: in explicating but a few ways in which these paintings differ from other *Lustmord* manifestations, and in challenging the limitations of a purely feminist reading of these works, it is possible to examine the misogyny of such paintings as not an ending point, but a beginning. To reduce these complicated and multivalent paintings to the status of chauvinistic attacks is to view them from an overwhelmingly anachronistic perspective that belies their original context; such a position is a failure to explore the implications of these problematic representations.

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Figure 1. George Grosz, *Der Kleine Frauenmörder*, 1918, oil on canvas, 66 x 66 cm. Private collection. Art © Estate of George Grosz / Licensed by VAGA, New York, New York.



Figure 3. Otto Dix, *Lustmord*, 1922, etching, 27.5 x 34.6 cm, Albstadt, Städtische Galerie Albstadt © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

Figure 2. Otto Dix, *Der Lustmörder (Selbstporträt)*, 1920, oil on canvas, 170 x 120 cm, lost © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.



Figure 4. Heinrich Maria Davringhausen, *Der Lustmörder*, 1917, oil on canvas, 119.5 x 148.5 cm. Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, München © Renata Davringhausen c/o Leopold-Hoesch-Museum & Papiermuseum Düren.

Figure 5. Otto Dix, *Lustmord*, 1922, oil on canvas, 165 x 135 cm, lost
© 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.



Figure 6. Heinrich Maria Davringhausen, *The Dreamer*, 1919, oil on canvas, 120 x 119 cm.
Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt © Renata Davringhausen c/o Leopold-Hoesch-Museum & Papiermuseum Düren.