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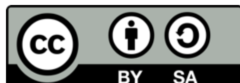

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Intermediality and Decadent Performance in Anita Berber and Sebastian Droste's *Die Tänze des Lasters, des Grauens und der Ekstase* (1923)

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It is hard to separate fact from fiction when considering the life and work of Anita Berber. Anecdotes about her bisexuality, drug addiction and final demise paint a picture of a decadent living legend who dominated the Weimar Republic cabaret scene of the 1920s. Expressionist writer Max Herrmann-Neiße recounts that Berber's dance performances at the time could cause 'eine Revolte' [a revolt] in the short time they lasted.[1] However, anyone who watches the few preserved scraps of footage of Berber's performances on film or in photographs might well be disappointed to find them lacking in 'decadent' appeal. Her rather timid performance style and artificially staged photographs give little impression of the 'revolt' Herrmann-Neiße observed. So how can Berber's performances be considered in the context of decadence?

The decadence of Berber's performance resides largely in the transgression of genre boundaries and in the intermediality of her work, meaning that the work is best understood not in terms of a single medium but rather as the meeting or interaction of several media. Such intermediality can be best observed in her collaboration on the book *Die Tänze des Lasters, des Grauens und der Ekstase* [*Dances of Vice, Horror and Ecstasy*] (1923) with her second husband and artistic partner, the dancer and poet Sebastian Droste (Willy Knoblauch, 1898-1927). Together with Droste, Berber choreographed a series of theatrically bold and sinister dances, which the pair first performed in Vienna in 1922. The duo published the book after the scandal surrounding these dances, reimagining the performance in the form of expressionist poetry, photographs, drawings, costumes, and set designs. The displacement of the performing body into a literary context is most prominent in 'Pritzelpuppen' ['Pritzel Puppets'], a dance-poem that rehearses a cycle of intermedial translations from performing body to literary text to puppet. Through its transgression of aesthetic convention, *Dances of Vice, Horror and Ecstasy* self-consciously distorts preconceived definitions of

feminine beauty. Similarly, Berber and Droste's dance-poem 'Suicide' creates a decadent effect in its ironic perversion of ethical and aesthetic categories through its rupturing of formal media, essentially cancelling out the performing body in ways that parallel its aesthetic method. What emerges is the disappearance of individual artistic categories into an excessive amalgamation of materials – a core quality of decadent texts – which both perverts the ethical subject of suicide and permits the work to flourish as an excessive spectacle celebrating the vitality of the arts. Looking at the intermediality of Berber's dance practice by way of reference to examples like these therefore demonstrates how it is not so much how she chose to present herself (as in her nude performances) that makes her work 'decadent'; rather, the decadence of her work has to do with the transgression of aesthetic conventions and transplanting the performing body into the contexts of other media.

In Theatre Studies, intermediality generally refers to a translation of various performance texts into other media, especially technological media such as video, voice recordings, or virtual spaces. Intermediality here describes the co-relation between different media in the sense of mutual permeation and influence. The importance of intermediality to the romanticization of Berber as an icon of decadence becomes apparent with Berber's biography, which can be regarded as an intermedial artifact in itself. The sources that document the personal scandals surrounding Berber's career range from such contemporary accounts as the journalist Leo Lania's biographical novel *Tanz ins Dunkel* [*Dancing into the Dark*] (1929) and the Czech choreographer Joe Jenčik's study of Berber (1930) to Rosa von Praunheim's 1987 film *Anita: Dance of Vice*, Lothar Fischer's books on Berber's life, and Mel Gordon's *The Seven Addictions and Five Professions of Anita Berber: Weimar Berlin's Priestess of Depravity* (2006). The staged and highly theatricalized photographs add to the sense of displacement of the actuality of her persona as well as the actuality of her performances. While all these narratives help to elaborate the myth of Berber, they do not do much to establish reliable information given that Berber did little autobiographical writing.[2] Thomas Mann's son Klaus met Berber and summarized her appeal in 'Memories of Anita Berber': 'ich fand sie faszinierend, aber abscheulich […] Nachkriegserotik, Kokain, Salomé, letzte Perversität: solche Begriffe bildeten den

Strahlenglanz ihrer Glorie' [I found her fascinating but detestable […] Post-war eroticism, cocaine, Salomé, ultimate perversity: such notions formed the halo of her glory].[3]

Berber's many faces are reflected in the many art forms to which she applied herself. She appeared on screen (by 1923 Berber had appeared in twenty-six films under such famous directors as Richard Oswald and Fritz Lang),[4] in print as a nude model, as a dancer on the stage, and as a published poet. Her work was regarded as transgressive even by Weimar standards at a time when all social and moral boundaries had collapsed, both by those who wished to celebrate vice and those who wanted to condone it. Berber's notoriety is reflected in – and created by – reports such as one made in 1926 by an unnamed journalist in the magazine *Der Junggeselle* [*The Bachelor*]:

> die Berber [ist] die Inkarnation der parodierten Gestalten. Durch und durch dämonische Frau […]. Lasterverheißender Mund, böse Augen, verdorben bis in die Haare hinein. So gleitet sie dahin. Umgirrt etwas imaginär Männliches. Zuckt zurück, lockt und wirkt wie ein schlimmer, drückender Alptraum. Nichts ist echt.
>
> [Berber [is] the incarnation of parodied figures. Demonic woman through and through […]. A mouth promising vice, evil eyes, even her hair bedevilled. That way she glides past. Cooing around an imaginary masculine something. She jerks backwards, entices and appears like a fatal, oppressive nightmare. Nothing is real.][5]

This passage captures the typical characteristics of the nineteenth-century *femme fatale* in the description of Berber's manipulation of gender boundaries, her artificiality, and her acute sense of staged realities. Yet this description is remarkable because it hints at the way in which the myth of Berber is reassembled and ironized by an evocation of nineteenth-century legends of decadence. As much as Berber's biography is a blend of various narratives and images reflecting on one another to establish the myth of her persona, the decadent element of her performance originates in the intermediality of the contexts out of which her dances grew. The excessive network of references, oscillating between those drawn not only from contemporary culture but also from nineteenth-century decadent literature, Symbolist paintings, and music, makes her work decadent by virtue of its referentiality. Berber's decadence, then, is not to be found in the performances themselves, but in the intermedial construction of her dances, which is in turn exploited to further disrupt social codes and traditional etiquette.

Decadent performance

In the German-speaking context, decadent performance tends to be understood through dance, sculpture, or painting rather than drama. German decadence is indebted to its expressionist heritage and cuts across imported Symbolist and naturalist tendencies.[6] Historically, ideas of French decadence shaped the works of the German-speaking avant-garde and were mediated by figures like the Viennese editor Hermann Bahr (1863-1934). In his essay 'Die Décadence' (1891), Bahr criticized decadence and aestheticism (especially Wilde's persona) and questioned whether the term could really be applied to German literature, which in his view had not yet overcome the influence of naturalism.

In fact, many works by authors writing at the same time that Berber performed were variously classified as expressionist, Symbolist or classicist, rather than outright 'decadent'. Yet, works by famous writers – such as Else Lasker-Schüler's Orientalizing prose adorned with her own drawings, or poet Stefan George's poetry cycle *Algabal* (1892), or even Thomas Mann's novellas *Der Tod in Venedig* [*Death in Venice*] (1912) and *Wälsungenblu* [*Blood of the Walsungs*] (1905) – display, at times, the strong influence of French decadent style and thinking. In sum, a fluidity of styles and schools were being practised simultaneously, which hinders a clear-cut definition of what artistic decadence entailed in Germany. That said, the hard-to-classify Berber seems to be one of the better cultural candidates to represent the equally hard-to-classify category of German decadence. Susan Laikin Funkenstein has examined the interplay between portraiture and performed artifice in Otto Dix's rendition of Berber. She finds that by examining the cultural-historical background of Dix's painting, Berber emerges as 'a woman more complex than the written records reveal'.[7] A similar method of mutual enhancement was explored by writers of nineteenth-century French decadent literature who explored the intersection of artistic genres and media in the service of literary performativity.

With regard to theatre, decadence lacks a definite canon. Examples of plays frequently considered 'decadent' might include Oscar Wilde's Symbolist play *Salomé* (1891), or possibly Stéphane Mallarmé's anti-theatrical closet drama *Hérodiade* (1871). As Martin Puchner says, these play texts resist or reject the conditions of corporeality required by staged performance.[8] According to Adam Alston, 'the closest thing we have to a "decadent theatre" is not the dramatic work of Wilde, but the symbolist theatre of Maurice Maeterlinck and Rachilde. Both situated interiority and painfully refined sensation at the forefront of their work.'[9] Decadent performance, then, is indebted to forms of Symbolist suggestiveness (no emphasis is placed on outward action or plot) and expressionist rawness of states of being. Understood in these terms, decadent performance in general and Berber's performances in particular share the common condition of intermediality.

Symbolist theatre capitalized on the hidden depth of emotional states enabled by the suggestiveness of language that the nineteenth-century French poet and critic Théophile Gautier described in his 'Notes on Baudelaire' (Baudelaire dedicated *Les Fleurs du mal* to Gautier in 1857). Gautier describes the synaesthetic transposition between one art and another, whereby pictorial elements, music, or sculpture help structure poetic expression and vice versa, a quality also found in Berber's choreography In such transpositions, art is liberated from moral directiveness and integrity, and delivers unmediated ecstatic sensations. According to Gautier, Baudelaire's literary decadence

> is an ingenious, complex, learned style, full of shades and refinements of meaning, ever extending the bounds of language, borrowing from every technical vocabulary […] a style that endeavours to express the most inexpressible thoughts, the vaguest and most fleeting contours of form, that listens, with a view to rendering them, to the subtle confidences of neurosity, to the confessions of aging lust turning into depravity, and to the odd hallucinations of fixed ideas passing into mania. This decadent style is the final expression of the Word which is called upon to express everything […]. Contrary to the classic style, it admits of the introduction of shadows, in which move confusedly the larvae of superstition, the haggard phantasms of insomnia, the terrors of night, the monstrous dreams that impotence alone stays in their realisation, the gloomy fancies at which day would stand aghast, and all that the soul has of darkest, most misshapen, and indefinably horrible in the depths of its uttermost recess.[10]

Berber's dance practice appears to have some of the same qualities that Gautier identifies in Baudelaire's poetry. The word is replaced by a moving body to be deciphered and 'read'. The embedding of the dancing image in other artistic media produces the 'shadow-like' quality that transfixed Berber's audiences. Just as Baudelaire's poetry, in Gautier's reading, extends 'the bounds of language', Berber's dance spectacles borrow 'from every technical vocabulary' to create a sense of multi-layered representation. In Berber's case, language and image are translated into bodily movement, rendering choreography as poetry. Cultural critic and expressionist poet Leopold Wolfgang Rochowanski (1888-1961) analysed Berber's dances and described her technique as 'speaking with the limbs'.[11] Similarly, Herrmann-Neiße described a duet called 'Absinth', which Berber danced with her second husband Henri Châtin Hofmann, as a 'mimische Ballade' [mimed ballad].[12] These commentators perceived Berber's performances as not only aesthetically daring but also ethically provocative because of the intermedial play between embodied image and literary text.

Berber has previously been placed within the context of decadent performance based on the topicality of her dance routines, which often enact addiction, pain, lust, madness, and, not least, extreme forms of dying. Dance, as the ultimate form of corporeality on stage, enabled Berber to articulate these often oppositional and extreme states of physical and psychological sensation. For example, Berber very much embodied, as Alston puts it, 'the (a)liveness of decadence' which 'is made palpable as a state of ruination; we are invited to share in this peculiar breed of (a)liveness – to feel the exuberance of a dancer, for instance – only to find vitality steered towards decay'.[13] Barbara Hales also notes how the trance-like quality of Berber's style developed in the wake of Émile Jacques-Dalcroze's rhythmic gymnastics, which lend her performance a hyper-real quality.[14] Finally, the paradoxical tension between the pulsation of life exhibited by a body in motion and the representation of stasis is explained by Kate Elswit's analysis of the heightened corporeality required when enacting death through dance.[15]

In her extensive work on the implications of Berber's dance aesthetics, Elswit has argued that performer and audience become co-creators, and that the investment of an audience in Berber's naturalistic dramatization of death was conditioned by biographical 'offstage factors' such as Berber's celebrity persona, her drug addiction, and eccentric behaviour.[16] For example, Elswit explores how Berber's most acclaimed solo dance *Cocaine* evidenced 'both a distancing of display and enactment and a collapse, foreshadowing their complete unity when the actual breakdown of the dancer's body eclipsed the parameters of theatricality'.[17] Elswit also places particular emphasis on the 'creative, transformative work of spectatorship' that was necessary to fully realize the impact of Berber's dances.[18] Elswit's insistence on shifting the focus on to the work the audience has to do in order to 'translate' the artificial authenticity of Berber's dance is an important stepping stone for this discussion: decadent performance entails, to a large extent, the effect the performing body has on the audience. In other words, the audience's emotional, imaginative, and intellectual engagement completes the performance. Furthermore, in decadent performance the act of creating exists not only in watching a body on a stage, but in the audience's synthesizing the intermedial relations in which this body is placed. In the interaction with other media – for example, imagining an inanimate doll made in Berber's image as a dancing body while reading a poem on a doll – the audience creates a decadent spectacle by establishing a network of intermedial references. Such a virtual synthesis blurs generic boundaries, challenges social conventions, and does away with the conventional theatrical space.

Alexandra Kolb has identified Berber's *Nackttanz* [nude dance] as an aesthetic device to undermine normative renderings of the beautiful death of female performers on stage.[19] Kolb argues that Berber's mode of performance 'took a critical stance towards this culturally determined signification'.[20] Berber's aestheticization of real agony was not aimed at romanticizing death as something beautiful. On the contrary, Berber's violent body imagery aimed 'at arousing, or liberating, the spectator's feeling of threat and angst from its usual state of repression'.[21] While the importance of a breach of convention is visible in Berber's works, the aim was not to purge angst

from an audience witnessing a performance of death. Rather, Berber's dance, and the extra-theatrical media documenting her dances, invited the audience to pleasurably explore extreme states of angst, desperation, irony, and sexual transgression from the safe distance of the individual's imagination. Thus, decadent performance does not necessarily rely exclusively on the performing body on stage but makes it part of an extra-theatrical context that completes the dis-embodied, virtual, intermedial spectacle. Building on these preliminary ideas, the following analysis explores how Berber's works and the dance culture from which they grew form an aesthetic space of permeation between such disparate artistic media as literature, fine art, puppetry, and music.

Weimar cabaret culture as the home of mixed media performance

Berber's art notably contributed to a shift away from classical ballet in Germany in the early 1910s and 1920s towards ways of perceiving the body as a canvas for the expression of raw emotional states.[22] Berber started her classical training as a dancer with choreographer Rita Sacchetto from 1915 to 1916 alongside Valeska Gert in Berlin. Sacchetto's *Ausdruckstanz* [expressive dance], which had its foundations in ballet, was hailed as one of the main innovations of the New German Dance in the early twentieth century. It was influenced by ground-breaking, free-flowing solo performances by Isadora Duncan and Varieté performance by the 'living statues' duo Olga Desmond and Adolf Salge, who revolutionized the dance scene in the early 1910s, not least by performing in the nude. Other artists also emphasized the narrative significance of nudity, as in, for example, Valeska Gert's 'Grotesktanz' [Grotesque Dance]. Leading in an entirely different direction, Mary Wigman's 'absolute dance' also encompassed a physical exploration of the heroic and the primeval unconscious.[23]

Nackttanz became vital for Berber's aesthetics after the abolition of stage censorship in 1919. The exhibition of the nude female body supposedly introduced to society a new type of erotically liberated woman. The feminist *Freikörperkultur* [*Naturism*] propagated the pure and innocent 'return to nature', ironically via the cultivation of a 'de-eroticised' body through

gymnastics and sports.[24] In 1917, Berber premiered an 'exotic' Korean dance solo which showcased her as a mature artist early in her career, according to a review in the fashion magazine *Elegante Welt* [*Elegant World*], which praised her performance as 'daring', 'remote from all sweetness', and 'always a little boyish'.[25] Classed as 'New Women' and/or *femmes fatales*, these artists experimented with prescribed gender and social roles (the mother, the whore, the nun, and so on) as a way to assess the reconfigured position of women in society.[26] This new way of 'speaking with the limbs' represented what Laurence Senelick calls 'one outlet of release' in a German society that felt the pressures of the post-empire and post-war collapse of economic, national, and moral certainties in the liberal climate of the early Weimar years.[27]

Weimar Berlin, the entertainment capital of Europe also described as the capital of vice in the 1920s, was a stage in itself. The frenzy for which this period in German history is known was created through extreme political and economic turmoil between 1918 and 1933, marked by post-war destitution, legalized prostitution, a sprawling entertainment industry, hyperinflation, and the rise of the Nazi party. Reviewing the cult of a 'decadent theatre' in the Weimar era, Senelick has found that in fact 'the decadence of Weimar cabaret has been grossly exaggerated' because of the retrospective embellishment of its dark glamour, which was aestheticized in Bob Fosse's film *Cabaret* (1972), based on the play derived from Christopher Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*.[28] Senelick has a point about the glamourization of 1920s Berlin, which for most of its population was more gritty than glamourous. The same can be said of cabaret culture, the alleged 'perversity' of which was often nothing more than a 'liberation from convention'.[29] Berber's decadent appeal might have appeared to some to be a mere reprise of Aubrey Beardsley's black-and-white androgynous figures, Ernest Dowson's verses, and Orientalist clichés, but Berber is due more credit for her aesthetic innovations, especially in the way in she shifts between dance, texts, drawings and music, constantly demolishing and rebuilding genre categories.

The case of cabaret lends itself to the reframing of decadence as an intermedial act of genre collapse. In the small cabarets, audiences were becoming part of the show rather than being set

apart from the performance in a classical proscenium set up. Peter Jelavich highlights the 'intimacy of the setting' which 'allowed direct, eye-to-eye contact between performers and spectators'. Shows typically entailed 'short (five- or ten-minute) numbers from several different genres, usually songs, comic monologues, dialogues and skits, less frequently dances, pantomimes, puppet/waxwork shows, or even short films.'[30] Cabaret performance is typically brief and quintessentially heterogeneous in terms of its art forms and anarchic in relation to individual performance parts. Unlike drama or opera, no literary or musical text fixes the structure of performance or the expectation of what is to be performed. According to Jelavich, cabaret performance 'devised a new paratactic grammar, which juxtaposed divergent elements without claiming to see any logical unities to their relationships,'[31] placing a variety of genres side by side without logical connections. This way of conceptualizing performance mirrors Berber's way of placing dance in the context of literature, music, and photography. The spontaneity, the non-linearity, the potential for subversion, and the intimacy of the cabaret format all relate to the characteristics of decadent styles which rely on the fracturing of narrative structures and correspondences between art forms. In other words, the audience is left to absorb and synthesize what we could call 'decadent performance'.

The medial cross-over and the new 'grammar' of cabaret culture resembles Paul Bourget's oft-cited idea of the anarchy of the parts that dissolve a wholesome organism. In 1883 Bourget described decadence as the disintegration of Western societies resulting from the rise of individualism, reflected in literature by disjointed narratives that devoted too much stylistic attention to individual words at the expense of artistic unity.[32] Friedrich Nietzsche also adapted the idea of a decadent quality in artworks, affirming, as Nicholas D. More puts it, that 'decadent art is composite, calculated, artificial, and built for effects'.[33] The disintegration or paratactical grammar which cuts the logical or narrative links between symbols and images is likewise cultivated in Berber's *Dances of Vice, Horror and Ecstasy*, which confronts the reader with a panorama of multiple arts. Elswit has argued that the cabaret audience watching the choreography of bodies in

Berber's choreography 'would co-produce dance's dramaturgy'.[34] By extension this relationship also holds true for the reader of *Dances of Vice*, *Horror and Ecstasy*. If the covers of the book can be understood to demarcate the "performance space" of reading, then the reader re-enacts in their mind's eye the collapsing of genre boundaries in the work Berber and Droste perform.

The book as cabaret: the performance of literature in Anita Berber and Sebastian Droste's dance book

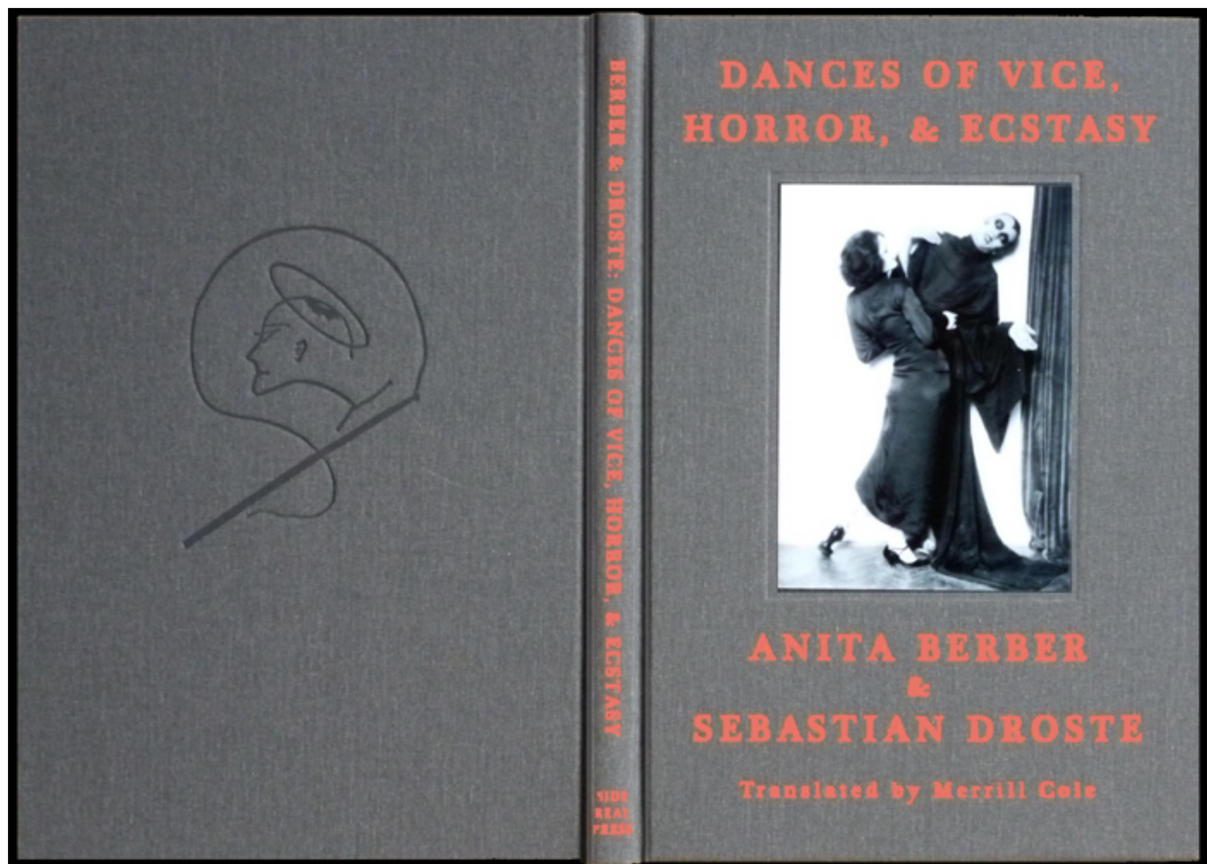

Fig. 1: Cover of the English translation of Anita Berber und Sebastian Droste, *Die Tänze, des Lasters, des Grauens und der Ekstase* by Merrill Cole. Courtesy of Side Real Press.

Dances of Vice, *Horror and Ecstasy* originated out of a performance routine of the same name staged in Berlin and Vienna in 1922, which Berber and Droste subsequently toured through Europe.[35] The book contains theoretical texts by Droste and Viennese poet and promoter of radical art, Leopold Wolfgang Rochowanski. Twenty-six dance-poems were authored by Droste,[36] and four are attributed to Berber. In their performance, Berber and Droste danced as a pair for seven of

the poems. The book also includes photographs from the Atelier D'Ora (studio of Dora Kallmus), staged after the dance performances of the pieces; set and costume designs by architect Henry Täuber; and two pencil-drawn self-portraits by Berber. In its hybridity, the book works as a cabaret performance on paper, a perfect expression of the anxiety and desperation of early 1920s expressionism. The poems, each a miniature drama, carry haunting titles such as 'Byzantinischer Peitschentanz' [Byzantine Whip Dance], 'Haus der Irren' [House of the Insane], and 'Die Nacht der Borgia' [The Night of the Borgia].

The book is decadent in both content and form, replete with such textbook tropes of decadence as Orientalism, addiction, exhaustion, sexual transgression, and sadomasochism. Among the many references to literature and art we find Edgar Allan Poe, whose works were translated by father of decadence Charles Baudelaire; Symbolist poet Paul Verlaine; German Renaissance painter Matthias Grünewald, whose depiction of Christ's crucifixion figures in Joris-Karl Huysmans's Satanist novel *Là-Bas* [*Down There*] (1891); Symbolist writer Auguste de Villiers de L'Isle Adam; contemporary influences such as the German expressionist actor Hans Heinz Ewers (famous for his grotesque performances); and painters Marc Chagall and Pablo Picasso, to name but a few. The specific atmosphere evoked by these allusions in each poem/dance is trans-medially supported by a specific piece of music. The poetry often reads like stage directions for the choreography, although no records survive indicating whether or not the poems were part of the staged dances.[37] Senelick claims that Berber's performances lacked the aesthetic sophistication of nineteenth-century dancers. However, on closer inspection, we can see that her carefully curated network of allusions and symbols, combined with the intermedial transaction of certain themes, creates a rich backdrop of reference for the dances. Indeed, this network formed the decadent matrix out of which her dances and poems unleashed their enthralling power.

Distortion of beauty: 'Pritzel Puppets'

Fig. 2: Pritzel puppets by puppet artist and costume designer Lotte Pritzel, 1910, printed in *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*, 14.1 (October 1910), 332, courtesy of Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg.

Fig. 3: Photograph of Berber as Pritzel doll, Atelier Eberth, 1920s, courtesy of Deutsches Tanzarchiv Köln.

Fig. 4: Pritzel puppet 'Anita Berber', courtesy of Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt.

The 'Pritzel Puppets' poem by Droste and Berber takes the craft of Munich artist Lotte Pritzel (1887-1952) as its inspiration. Her puppets were the fashion items of the day; even Rainer Maria Rilke succumbed to their eerie charm and lifelike artifice, publishing a set of poems dedicated to them ('Über die Puppen der Lotte Pritzel' [On the Dolls of the Lotte Pritzel], 1921). Writer Carl Zuckmayer (1896-1977) describes Pritzel as a 'brilliant maker of dolls, creations which inspired a good many articles and essays at the time. They were delicate things of wax and cloth, marked by a subtle elegance and a touch of childlike depravity, like some of Beardsley's figures'.[38] The

marionette was an influential concept throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, inspiring Dadaists (Sophie Taeuber Arp), artists of the Bauhaus (Oskar Schlemmer), and theatre practitioners (Edward Gordon Craig), as well as artists of experimental forms of ballet and rhythmic movements (Émile Jacques-Dalcroze). The doll was a significant symbol because it encapsulates a paradox which Droste had outlined in his opening manifesto, 'Der Tanz als Form und Erleben' [Dance as Form and Experience]: lifeless things are full of life and become animated when performed in dance or in reading.[39] Through the doll's conversion from object to moving body into text, we can see how Berber and Droste experiment with the notion of feminine beauty. Like the intermedial transformation of the doll, beauty undergoes a transformation in its various states of being. Berber and Droste incorporated a Pritzel Puppet piece into their dance routine, which then appeared as a poem in their book:[40]

PRITZEL PUPPETS
DANCED BY ANITA BERBER AND SEBASTIAN DROSTE

MUSIC BY JAAP KOOL

Wax figures
Decadence
Degeneration
Slender hands
Powdered hips
Slim thigh and groping finger
Gemstones
Jewelery [*sic*]
Gold on the naked body
Narcissists who stain themselves
Self-love
Vain straddling
Dallying and cooing
But ever glass
So much glass
Cut glass
Byzantine[41]

In the poem Berber imbues words with a sense of dangerous vanity that hovers between the innocence and sexual suggestiveness of Pritzel's dolls (fig. 2): 'Wax figures | Decadence | Degeneration […] Gold on naked bodies | Narcissists who stain themselves'.[42] This tension is

echoed in Berber's body posture – erect yet twisted, her arm framing her head as if creating a halo, while her left leg, lifted to reach the level of her raised head, opens her groin to face the audience (fig. 3). The bodies of the dolls appear lifelike yet always remain cold, like 'cut glass'. The wax figures as well as Berber's dancing body dramatized in the photograph stand in for the objectification or literal commodification of bodies and the re-animation of art objects, a common theme in decadent literature. Salomé treats John the Baptist's head like a fetish object and Dorian Gray's objectification of actress Sybil Vane renders her a stage puppet. In Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) the noblewoman Raoule de Vénérande artificially uses parts of her dead lover for a wax dummy with real hair, teeth, and fingernails. Humans, and especially women, are shown as fragile and disposable, yet the performance of humanness, symbolized by the doll, is preserved in its perfection. The doll holds the promise of life yet remains lifeless.

The paradox of the decadent body as a dead-yet-lifelike thing is explored in Berber's poem and in her performance titled 'Pritzel Puppets'. This routine was previously danced by Berber alone in Max Reinhardt's cabaret 'Schall und Rauch' ['Sound and Smoke'].[43] Eric Karl Toepfer notes that Berber and Droste subsequently performed the piece together, set to music by Dutch jazz composer Jaap Kool (1890-1959), whose music irritated those whose taste was more classical. His style combined 'jazz, African rhythms, Asian harmonics, popular dance forms like the tango and shimmy, and modernist tonal structures'.[44]

As much as the musical backdrop to this performance was concocted out of a blend of influences, Berber's doll-dance perverts the classical ballet technique and thus undertakes a queering of preconceived notions of female grace and beauty. Harlequins and doll-like figures were 'characters typical of mainstream interest' in dance, and women as commodities were frequently paraded as ornate objects in commercial troupe-dancing.[45] However, Berber's movements add a Gothic uncanniness to the playfulness and fragility that these characters represent. According to Eric Karl Toepfer, Berber's dance scenes displayed

> a body well trained in ballet technique, able to move from decorative, on pointe delicacy to explosive lunges, but Berber's use of ballet technique was always subordinate to an expressionistic aesthetic that relied more on theatrical effects than on a refined sense of movement.[46]

Kolb comments on Berber's (de-)construction of gender and the way her performance of androgyny hovers between 'masculinisation and extreme feminisation'.[47] He reads these experimentations with gender roles as acts of female emancipation. In reviewing Berber's performance of the role of the eighteenth-century vamp for Charlotte Berend-Corinth's series of pornographic lithographs in 1919, Funkenstein has insisted on how consciously staged Berber's appearances were. In contrast, Berber's doll dance shows her in a lacy costume with over-knee boots, more reminiscent of a sexed-up doll rather than an ethereal ballerina. The reported 'harshness' of her movement interjects the ballet routine with jerks and quivers.[48] Otherwise her posture stays perfectly composed in what Elswit describes as a 'fascinating disunity in which her body was other or alien'.[49] The alienation of 'female beauty' is different from that of Mary Wigman's abstraction of body language, which was perceived as masculine yet un-sexed by contemporaries.[50] Berber's queering of femininity lies in the contrast of her hyper-erotic appearance and her autoeroticism. On the one hand her appearance seems contrived to satisfy the male gaze but on the other hand her aesthetic self-absorption is so extreme that no second party is needed for sexual satisfaction or for any other purpose, least of all reproductive. This doll dances for its own pleasure. The body replaces the spoken words in this scene in which the audience reads Berber's conscious distortion of beauty in her erratic, self-involved movements. Unsurprisingly, Herrmann-Neiße noted of Berber's dance: 'Etwas Wildes und im Grunde Einsames umschwebt ihre Schöpfungen' [Something wild and profoundly lonesome hovers around her creations].[51]

The doll dance revives a decadent obsession with artificial bodies and the transgressive (sexual) attraction to art works. The performative nature of decadent sexuality has many precursors in the canon of decadent literature. For instance, Dennis Denisoff, and most recently Patricia

Pulham, have identified the need for a sublimation of transgressive desires that cannot be openly acknowledged. These are often buried and encrypted in the marble bodies of statues in Victorian writing.[52] Victorian texts, such as Olive Custance's sculptural poems, are safe spaces that allow the reader to seduce and caress the (forbidden) artificial object of desire and make it come to life. In a modernist context, Berber's vulgar yet erotic enactment follows in the footsteps of the Galatea myth: she is a statue come to life. Berber's dance inspired Pritzel to create an 'Anita-Berber-Figure' in an effort to capture Berber's expressiveness. The doll seems decentred and barely subject to gravity, bringing the evolution from doll to dance to poem to doll full circle (fig. 4).[53] Embracing a transgression of the chasms between life and death, Berber's performance hovers between art forms. Her doll performance plays with the horror and attractions of necrophilia and object fetish, enabling a revaluation of female beauty. It is the chain of different medial presentations of the doll that makes the audience reflect on the dynamics of non-normative desires.[54]

Elimination of artistic genre categories: 'Suicide'

In comparison to 'Pritzel Puppets', 'Selbstmord' ['Suicide'] is an extensive poem running over two pages sprawling with references to other artistic media and artworks. The self-referentiality and artificially constructed self-ruination in Berber and Droste's performances share another element of decadence, namely that of self-deconstruction through parody. At first glance, 'Suicide' provides another melodramatic, artificial display of death suffused with other artworks, including a sombre piano sonata by Beethoven. On a more metaphorical level, the list of references to artists, objects, and artworks could be read as an acknowledgement by Berber and Droste of their own bricolage technique. In reading the poem, one might assume that the voice in the text belongs to an artist surrounded by a gallery of admired and unsurpassed predecessors and contemporaries. The voice, presumably male, is aroused ('Sexuality | And agony | Steep aloofness of the poison flower')[55] and driven to madness by the idea of not being able to possess or master Art, allegorized in the figure of the violent female ('symbol of all evil' [p. 22]), who

eventually hands him a rope with which to strangle himself.[56] Yet, the suicide is a metaphorical one: each act of originality or claim to authenticity is suffocated through the 'Clouds | Powder | And perfume' (p. 20) of a long line of artistic precursors, from E. T. A. Hoffmann to the present day (1922).

The first half of the poem indulges in a series of accumulations and doublings to comical effect. For example, the listing of artists' works hanging in the gallery, by 'Kandinsky | Chagall | *And* Picasso' is doubled by the description of the garments worn by the speaker of the poem: 'Black silk pyjamas | Sumptuous silk pyjamas | *And* silvery tassels' (p. 19). The excessive listing suggests that while surrounded by artworks, the voice fails to fulfil its own original artistic ambition. The voice in the text reacts with actions of madness, 'Screaming | Laughing | Scoffing | Mocking | Crying' (p. 20), in response to the accumulation of masterpieces which cannot be surpassed. The struggle against the inability of the self to create, instead of just wanting to possess and collect, appears both desperate and comical when 'Snickering and scoffing' (p. 22), Art 'slinks' (p. 22) in to claim the failed artist as her latest victim.

A studio effigy of dance poses (fig. 5) visually reconstructs the dramatic physical intensity suggested by 'Suicide': a man, driven to death, is suffocated by the presence of a female figure. In the image, Droste's black cloak echoes the title of the poem as it annihilates all body contours that would allow the viewer to make out an individual. Berber, kneeling at his feet and also clad in a body-covering long black dress, reaches up to clasp his throat.

Fig. 5: Berber and Droste as 'Martyrs' from *Dances of Vice*, Nachlass Madame d'Ora, courtesy of Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg.

Droste leans backwards with lips parted as if experiencing a moment of ecstasy, reaching down to Berber's throat to keep her body at a distance. Taken on its own, this image is hardly decadent. Yet in combination with the heightened intermediality within the poem, the decadent nature of the performance becomes apparent. Neither the actual 'stage action' of the two bodies in motion nor the tragic story of a despairing artist signals a decadent dynamic so much as the intermedial relations the performance activates. The exuberant references to literature, music, painting, fashion and interior décor makes the irony of decadent excess evident from the opening of the poem:

SUICIDE
DANCED BY ANITA BERBER/SEBASTIAN DROSTE

MUSIC BY BEETHOVEN

Villers de l'Isle Adam
Edgar Allan Poe
E. T. A. Hoffman
Hans Heinz Ewers
And 1922
Rooms long left
Tapestries
Silvery candlesticks
Kandinsky
Chagall
And Picasso
Black silk pyjamas
Sumptuous silk pyjamas
And silvery tassels
Long thin white hands
And thin manicured fingers
Tormenting dream
Dull defenses against the world and God
Slow pacing
Slide from being to non-being
Hanging head
And falling soul
Moonlight

And Beethoven's Sonata
Clouds
Powder
And perfume […] (p. 19)

Presenting the dark parody of self-abandonment to art in 'Suicide', the risk of societal 'suicide' is also parodied in Rochowanski's 'Analysis' of the audience's physical reaction to Berber's *Nackttanz*. Rochowanski published some of Bahr's letters in his magazine *Die Literarische Welt* [*The Literary World*] in 1946. Rochowanski reflects on displaced performance in *Dances of Vice*, *Horror and Ecstasy* and concludes that it is not Berber's nudity itself but the audience's imagination and physical reaction to that imagination that produces the actual decadent performance:

> Ich habe diese prächtige Gesellschaft in den auserlesensten Exemplaren schon oft auf einmal beisammen gesehen: […] Die Apathie des immerwährenden Verdauungsstadiums ersehnt sich Bewegung, Erregung, Sensation!
>
> Nackttänze! (Ich liebe es, statt auf die Bühne, oft auf die Zuschauer zu sehen). Spannung. Gestörte Atmung. Bewaffnete Augen. Erwartung. Prüfung der eigenen nackten Arme. Gongschlag. Musik. Erregung. Glitzern und Leuchten. Erwartung.Pause der Wünsche. Lösen der Knoten. Keine At-mung. Erhöhte Atmung. Kniefall der Gewänder. Erlösung. Erfüllung. Raffinement der Entfaltung. Cresendo [sic.] des Körpers. Fortissimo der Linien. Furioso der Gefühle. Parfüms verströmen. Ein Bein

> spricht zur Nachbarin. Ein Knopf stürzt sich zu Boden. Phallusglanz der Augen wetteifert mit den Strahlen des Scheinwerfers. Laster! Oh Sehnsucht des Bürgers!Ich bin dagegen! Gegen die Nackttänze!
>
> [I have often seen this splendid society its most exquisite specimens coming together suddenly: […] The apathy of a perpetual stage of digestion yearns for movement, arousal, sensation!
> Naked dances! (I love to look at the spectators instead of the stage). Suspense, disrupted breath. Armed eyes. Expectation. Examining one's own naked arms. Gong sound. Music. Excitation. Glitter and glowing. Expectation. Suspension of wishes. Loosening of the knots. No breathing. Increased breath. Genuflection of garments. Redemption. Fulfilment. Refinement of unfolding. Crescendo of the body. Fortissimo of lines. Furioso of feelings. Perfumes exude. A leg speaks to its neighbour. A button hurls itself onto the floor. Phallic splendour of the eyes vies with the beams of the spotlights. Vice! O yearning of the bourgeois! I am against this! Against these naked dances!][57]

Rochowanski's description of the 'performed' moral outrage on behalf of the bourgeois audience is in stark contrast to its secret enjoyment of Berber's nudity. The audience becomes an orchestra of sensations ('Crescendo of the body') enthralled by the movements of bodies in front of them. The viewer succumbs to self-abandonment and the dismissal of bourgeois codes of moral restraint. Through his ironic tone, mirroring the staccato style in which Berber and Droste's poems were conceived, Rochowanski mocks the hypocritical righteousness of bourgeois audiences and their performed storm of protest ('I am against it! Against the naked dances!'). Baudelaire employed this method to co-opt his readers in the shared pleasure of artistically experiencing taboo topics while they read his poems. He knew that while despising the depravity of his writing, they would be equally as excited by transgressive themes as their author ('Hypocrite reader, – fellowman, – my twin!').[58]

In the blurred boundaries between stage and non-stage, cabaret titillates the audience, but it also makes the audience feel uncomfortable, and this discomfort is heightened with bleak parody. Klaus Mann, for example, reports how Berber attended a cabaret show during which another performer, Hermann Valentin, presented an obscenely insulting swansong to her talents. Mann writes: 'Sie wollte dabei sein und mit den Augen blitzen, während sie vor dem Publikum verhöhnt und bloßgestellt wurde' [She wanted to be there and dart her eyes while she was being mocked and exposed in front of the audience].[59] The outraged reactions and scorn of Valentin and his

audience in response to Berber's performances were in fact an integral part of the overall *mise-en-scène* of herself as an artwork that somehow managed to reflect the audience back to themselves. If decadence entails the disruption of both societal and aesthetic unity, as Bourget argued, then Berber and Droste's performances can be considered decadent, in as much as the performer builds, questions, and ruins preconceived images of what constitutes a sound wholeness. The poem 'Suicide' and its contextual media thus move away from a display of psychological depression and violent despair through physical embodiment. The intermediality of the poem exposes the decadent method through excess, in two ways. First, the performing body shifts from stage to audience when the audience feels such an excess of emotion that the reaction to the performance becomes a kind of performance in itself. Second, the use of multiple media results in something like aesthetic overload, as the audience is put in the position of having to respond to an excess of artifice. Decadent performance is located in the in-between space of medial translation. Berber's dances, mediated through *Dances of Vice*, *Horror and Ecstasy*, reveal the rich heritage of nineteenth-century decadent tropes which shaped her aesthetics of perversity. While looking to the previous century for inspiration, Berber's decadent 'spectacles of the real',[60] reflecting the cabaret culture of the 1920s, were both innovative and remarkably modern in shifting the performance space from stage to audience.[61]

While decadence remains a 'question of viewpoint',[62] this article has focused on locating decadent performance in the exchange of a variety of medial expressions. *Dances of Vice*, *Horror and Ecstasy* reflects the hybrid nature of cabaret formats and transpositions of arts borrowed from nineteenth-century aesthetics. Through poem performance, the physical dancing body is rendered as one sign system to be read alongside the other art forms embedded in the choreography. This bleeding of one art form into another creates performances aimed at interrupting genre boundaries and social certainties. The performance piece 'Pritzel Puppets' and its medial configurations use the doll as a paradoxical lifelike object to distort assumptions of female beauty. Similarly, the dance piece 'Suicide' and its accompanying poem relegate the responsibility of performance to the

audience by way of ironic perversion of a highly problematic subject. The stage is no longer demarcated by bodies in performance but extends into an artificial hyper-reality. Berber and Droste's performance pieces thus exemplify how, through the usage of different media (book, dance, film, photography, drawing, puppets), decadent performance is not limited to, and cannot be contained by, stage, page, or indeed any single art form.

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[1] Max Herrmann-Neiße, *Kabarett: Schriften zum Kabarett und zur bildenden Kunst* (Frankfurt am Main.: Zweitausendeins, 1988), p. 74. With thanks to Frank Krause for his help with the translations, all of which are my own, unless otherwise indicated.
[2] There is no coherent catalogue of Berber's papers. Some materials can be found via the Deutsches Tanz Archiv in Cologne: <https://www.deutsches-tanzarchiv.de/archiv/nachlaesse-sammlungen/b/anita-berber> [accessed 12 December 2021].
[3] Klaus Mann, 'Erinnerungen an Anita Berber', *Die Bühne*, *Wochenschrift für Theater, Tanz, Mode*, 275.7 (1930), 43–44 (p. 43).
[4] Susan Laikin Funkenstein, 'Anita Berber: Imaging a Weimar Performance Artist', *Woman's Art Journal*, 26.1 (2005), 26–31 (p. 27).
[5] Paul Marcus [d. i. Pem], 'Die vom Brettl', *Der Junggeselle*, 24.3 (1926), p. 6.
[6] Katharina Herold, 'Franziska zu Reventlow and Ruth Landshoff-Yorck', in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pagination forthcoming.
[7] Funkenstein, p. 30.
[8] Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright*: *Modernism, Anti-theatricality and Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 28.
[9] Adam Alston, 'Immersive theatre and the aesthetics of decadence: on the ruined worlds of Punchdrunk, SHUNT and Hammer Film Productions', *Theatre and Performance Design*, 3.4 (2017), 199–217 (p. 215).
[10] Théophile Gautier, 'Charles Baudelaire', in *The Complete Works of Théophile Gautier*, ed. and trans. by Frederick C. de Sumichrast, 12 vols (London: Athenaeum Press, 1909), II, pp. 39–41.
[11] Leopold Wolfgang Rochowanski, 'Analysis', in *Dances of Vice, Horror and Ecstasy*, trans. by Merrill Cole (Newcastle upon Tyne: Side Real Press, 2012), pp. 51-56 (p. 55).
[12] Herrmann-Neiße, p. 171.
[13] Alston, p. 213.
[14] Barbara Hales, 'Dancer in the Dark: Hypnosis, Trance-Dancing, and Weimar's Fear of the New Woman', *Monatshefte*, 102.4 (2010), 534-49 (p. 539).
[15] Kate Elswit, *Watching Weimar Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 7.
[16] Ibid., p. 25.
[17] Ibid., p. 24.
[18] Ibid., p. 1.
[19] Alexandra Kolb, *Performing Femininity: Dance and Literature in German Modernism* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 221.
[20] Ibid., p. 220.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Eric Karl Toepfer charts the diversity and significance of dance and *Körperkultur* for Weimar culture more broadly. See Eric Karl Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy: Nudity and Movement in German Body Culture, 1910-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
[23] Ulrike Wohler, 'Tanz zwischen Avantgarde und Klassischer Moderne: Anita Berber and Mary Wigman', in *Avantgarden und Politik. Künstlerischer Aktivismus von Dada bis zur Postmoderne*, ed. by Lutz Hieber, Stephan Moebius (Bielefeld: transcript, 2009), pp. 67–88 (p. 79).
[24] Kolb, p. 205.
[25] N. N., *Elegante Welt,* 6.3 (1917), 15, translated by and quoted in Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy*, p. 84.
[26] On the significance of gender in Berber's performances see Barbara Hales, 'Dancer in the Dark: Hypnosis, Trance-Dancing, and Weimar's Fear of the New Woman', *Monatshefte*, 102.4 (2010), 534–49.

[27] Laurence Senelick, 'The Mythical Decadence of Weimar Cabaret', 7 January 2021, <https://www.stagingdecadence.com/blog/the-mythical-decadence-of-weimar-cabaret> [accessed 10 September 2021], para. 12.
[28] Ibid., para 2.
[29] Ibid., para. 4 ('The Cabaret').
[30] Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 2.
[31] Ibid., p. 20.
[32] Paul Bourget, *Essais de Psychologie contemporaine* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1891), p. 25. Translation by Nancy O'Connor, <http://cat.middlebury.edu/~nereview/30-2/Bourget.htm> [accessed 14 April 2017].
[33] Nicholas D. More, 'The Philosophy of Decadence', in *Decadence and Literature*, pp. 184-200 (p. 189).
[34] Elswit, p. 3.
[35] The original edition of 1,000 (fragile) copies published by the Gloriette-Verlag, the same small publishing company that published Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening*, is now very rare and was only fully translated into English in 2012 by Merrill Cole. Anita Berber and Sebastian Droste, *Dances of Vice, Horror and Ecstasy,* trans. by Merrill Cole (Newcastle upon Tyne: Side Real Press, 2012). The poems 'Pritzel Puppets' and 'Suicide' in the body of the text are quoted from this edition and in Cole's translation.
[36] A poet in his own right, Droste's first poem titled 'Tanz' ['Dance'] appeared in the April 1919 edition of the leading expressionist publication *Der Sturm*. He continued to publish his works centred on degenerate topics in 1921 and 1922 under his birth name Willy Knobloch alongside Filippo Marinetti's 'Drama der Gegenstände' ['Drama of objects'] and Surrealists Louis Aragon and Philippe Soupault.
[37] Toepfer suggests the 'voice of the poems' did structure the choreographies. Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy*, p. 88.
[38] Carl Zuckmayer, *A Part of Myself*, trans. by Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Harcourt, 1970), pp. 236–37.
[39] Sebastian Droste, 'Dance as Form and Experience', in *Dances of Vice, Horror and Ecstasy*, pp. 9–10.
[40] Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy*, p. 366.
[41] Berber and Droste, 'Pritzel Puppets', in *Dances of Vice, Horror and Ecstasy*, p. 15.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Herrmann-Neiße, p. 34.
[44] Eric Karl Toepfer, *Pantomime: The History and Metamorphosis of a Theatrical Ideology* (San Francisco: Vosuri Media, 2019), p. 871.
[45] Funkenstein, p. 26; Kolb, p. 203.
[46] Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy*, p. 83.
[47] Kolb, p. 211.
[48] N. N., *Elegante Welt*, p. 15.
[49] Elswit, p. 23.
[50] Kolb, p. 168.
[51] Herrmann-Neiße, p. 74.
[52] Dennis Denisoff, 'Posing a Threat', in *Perennial Decay*, pp. 83–100; Patricia Pulham, *The Sculptural Body in Victorian Literature: Encrypted Sexualities* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).
[53] Lothar Fischer, *Anita Berber: Ein getanztes Leben* (Berlin: Hendrik Baeßler Verlag, 2014), pp. 126–27.
[54] A similar intermedial mechanism can be observed in Oscar Wilde's most decadent poem, 'The Sphinx' (1894) in which an object, the Sphinx, serves the speaker to bring to life his innermost sexually transgressive phantasies.
[55] Berber and Droste, 'Suicide', in *Dances of Vice, Horror and Ecstasy*, pp. 19–22 (p. 21). All further references are given in brackets within the body of the text and relate to this edition and translation.
[56] Berber and Droste, 'Pritzel Puppets', p. 15.
[57] Rochowanski, 'Analysis', pp. 53–54.
[58] Charles Baudelaire, 'To the Reader', in *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. by James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 4–7 (p. 7).
[59] Mann, 'Erinnerungen an Anita Berber,' p. 43.
[60] Elswit, p. 25.
[61] Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy*, p. 91.
[62] Senelick, para. 18 ('The Kabarett').