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## Heinrich Zille and the politics of caricature in Germany 1903-1929

Apparently, at Heinrich Zille's funeral in Berlin in 1929 the respective delegates from the socialist town council and the communist party entered into a violent public dispute over his artistic legacy. At the time of his death Zille was a legendary figure. He was so well known and loved in the city that each side of the warring left had an interest in appropriating his work and reputation. And the work was sufficiently open to allow them to do so. Indeed, in 1933 one of his main critical champions, the sociological journalist Hans Ostwald, attempted to defend it from censorship on the grounds that Zille had 'exposed in order to help all his compatriots towards a better life. Unconsciously, he prepared the way for the national socialist movement and the new Germany.'<sup>1</sup> This essay examines the character of Zille's published representations of Berlin life, particularly in the pre-war years, in the light of both its enormous popularity and its political ambivalence, which were, of course, not unconnected.

With the exception of his wartime series 'Korl and Vadding', that featured two country bumpkins in the army, Zille's subjects were almost exclusively drawn from ordinary, mainly working class, life in the poorest districts of north and east Berlin, which he referred to as 'Mein Milljöh' (milieu). This claim for authenticity was largely justified: like hundreds of thousands of his fellow Berliners, he came from a modest provincial family who had migrated to the city as it underwent dramatic expansion from the mid-century onwards. They settled in east Berlin and eventually Zille's father found work as a mechanic.<sup>2</sup> Looking back on his career the artist cited the harshness of his father's working life as an incentive for his own choice of profession- having shown talent at drawing, in the 1870s he trained as a lithographer and obtained a position at the 'Photographische Gesellschaft', a business that specialised in coloured representations of artwork, for which there was a flourishing market.<sup>3</sup> In due course, after the company moved to Charlottenburg, Zille established his young family there in 1892 and spent the rest of his life in this western adjunct to the city. Through his technical abilities, and the opportunities offered by the dynamic economy of Berlin, he had succeeded in rising socially above his original 'milieu'. As Matthias Flügge has pointed out, Zille in fact maintained a distance between himself and the underworld with which he became intimately associated in the public eye in his later career as an illustrator.<sup>4</sup> 'Meister Zille' the proletarian artist was a cultivated identity, although one that drew on personal experience as well as sympathy.

Zille began exhibiting his own work in the form of drawings and prints in 1901 and became a full time artist after losing his job at the Photographische Gesellschaft in 1907. This personal development, which made him famous, was made possible by two

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<sup>1</sup> Flügge, M. Der publizierte Zille. – In: Flügge, M. and Neyer, H. J. (eds) Heinrich Zille. Zeichner der Grossstadt. Dresden, Verlag der Kunst, 1997, 35-68. This catalogue is an invaluable source of information and analysis concerning Zille's work and career. See also: Ranke, W. Heinrich Zille. Vom Milljöh ins Milieu. Henrich Zilles Aufstieg in der Berliner Gesellschaft. Frankfurt, Büchergilde Gutenberg, 1979; Murmann, G. "Heinrich, lieber Heinrich!". Zille und seiner Zeit. Düsseldorf, Droste, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Fischer, L. Zilles Lebenslauf 1858-1929. – In: Heinrich Zille. Zeichner der Grossstadt, 283-312.

<sup>3</sup> Zille, H. Wie ich zu meinem Schicksal kam. – Der Querschnitt, 9, July 1929, 265-266.

<sup>4</sup> Flügge, M. op.cit., 38-39.

related features of German cultural life at the turn of the century: the establishment of Secession organisations for the exhibition of contemporary art, and the growth of the illustrated press. After its formal establishment in 1898 the Berlin Secession immediately became a focus of modern art activity in the city. Zille was encouraged to develop his own work and submit it for exhibition by his friends the sculptors August Gaul and August Kraus, both of whom were members. The Secession was closely associated with the promotion of naturalism in the visual arts. The depiction of working class life was not a central feature of the art of its leaders Max Liebermann and Walter Leistikow, but the two established artists whose work was closest to Zille's, Hans Baluschek and Käthe Kollwitz, were both prominent members of the association, and the exhibition of contemporary graphic art, including that of foreign illustrators of urban life such as Theophile Steinlen and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, was an important feature of its programme.<sup>5</sup> The Kaiser undoubtedly had the Berlin Secession in mind when he castigated those tendencies in modern art that, instead of offering the people ideals to aspire to, 'represented misery as even more vile than it already is' and 'sank into the gutter.'<sup>6</sup> This criticism could have been formulated specifically for Zille's depictions of city life: six of the pieces he exhibited in 1901 were subtitled 'From Dark Berlin.'

Zille's first published illustration, which appeared in *Simplicissimus* in January 1903, was simply entitled 'Aus Berlin': it showed a group of streetwise children playing 'Friedrichstrasse' (the centre of the sex trade).<sup>7</sup> *Simplicissimus* took two more drawings that year. In 1904 he was engaged to provide illustrations for a short lived, high quality, illustrated journal in Vienna – *der Liebe Augustin*.<sup>8</sup> Then, in 1905, he made his debut in *Simplicissimus*'s rival, and complementary, periodical *Jugend* with a full page colour drawing of a 'Berlin Christmas Market' – an ironic image of children peddling goods on the street.<sup>9</sup> This was the point at which his second career took off. He became a regular (if minor) contributor to both these Munich journals, and also began to place work in the Berlin press, particularly in *Ulk*, the illustrated supplement to the *Berliner Tageblatt*, and *Lustige Blätter*, published by Otto Eysler, who became his principal patron up until the outbreak of war. It was the two major collections of his drawings published by Eysler's company, *Kinder der Strasse* (1908) and *Mein Milljöh* (1914), that established his popular reputation as the authoritative chronicler of Berlin's lower class existence.

As a skilled technician Zille had benefited from the boom in the printing trade in the 'Grunderzeit' period post 1871. As an artist he profited from the development and expansion of the illustrated press, particularly in Munich and Berlin, at the turn of the century. Technological innovation had revolutionised the possibilities of reproducing images in both black and white and colour; economic and social development had generated an educated, largely urban public with a thirst for information, comment, and entertainment; political change had created a space where debate and criticism were open and dynamic – if occasionally repressed. These conditions brought about a golden era for

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<sup>5</sup> See **Altner, R.** Der Einfluss der Berliner Secession auf die Aufsprägung des graphischen Stiles von Heinrich Zille.- In: Heinrich Zille 1858-1929. Berlin Information, 1982, 95-132, and **Freitag M.** Zille und die Secession. – In: Heinrich Zille. Zeichner der Grossstadt, 21-34.

<sup>6</sup> Speech at the opening of the *Siegesallee* 1901, cited in: Berlin um 1900. Berlinische Galerie, 1984, 199.

<sup>7</sup> *Simplicissimus*, 7 44, 27.1.03. See the invaluable site [www.simplicissimus.com](http://www.simplicissimus.com).

<sup>8</sup> **Flügge, M.** op.cit., 45-46.

<sup>9</sup> *Jugend*, 10, 3, 12.1.1905, 52.

the press in general and notably for illustrated journals featuring social and political satire.<sup>10</sup> When Zille started selling his work to them, *Jugend* and *Lustige Blätter* had sales of 50-60000 per week, and *Simplicissimus* 100000.<sup>11</sup> These journals were ‘progressive’ – they stood for free, critical, thinking and the modernisation of German culture and society. Politically they were liberal, not socialist. In fact, the best selling humorous journal of the period was *der wahre Jacob*, published in Stuttgart and closely aligned with the Socialist Party. Zille does not appear to have placed work with it before the war. This reflects both the unprogrammatically character of his representations of the working class and his aspirations as an artist. *Der wahre Jacob* was a popular journal that used satire to proselytize for the socialist cause. *Jugend*, *Simplicissimus* and (to a lesser extent) *Lustige Blätter* were known for their critical take on the establishment but also for the high quality of their artistic content. Publication of his illustrations in these journals was, like his election to the Berlin Secession, a sign that he was acknowledged in the modern art world as a distinctive individual talent. The harshness of his subject matter was, of course, central to this distinctiveness but so too were the sometimes black humour with which he presented it, and the lively, personal character of his drawing. The Munich journals used the occasional Zille illustration to diversify their artistic content and to provide a relatively light hearted insight into the strange and disturbing realities of ‘dark’ Berlin. The amused observation of social and sexual manners was part of the programme of *Lustige Blätter*: Zille’s impoverished modern ‘street types’ acted as a counterpoint to the work of other contributors such as Ernst Heilmann who illustrated the life and customs of the rich.<sup>12</sup>

Zille had learnt the basic skills of life drawing at evening classes under Theodor Hosemann. Hosemann was himself an illustrator of Berlin life and he encouraged this vein of work in his pupil. Zille’s mature style was, however, very different from that of his teacher, which was rooted in early nineteenth-century conventions. Commenting on this Georg Hermann, in his introduction to Zille’s collection *Mein Milljöh*, claimed that his style was ‘his entirely, comparable to nothing else, like no other artist.’<sup>13</sup> The implication that he had created his personal style virtually unaided was misleading: as he began to develop as an artist at the turn of the century, Zille clearly looked for guidance and inspiration to contemporary artist illustrators interested in the representation of the lower classes and big city life. Max Klinger’s elegant drawing style and dense use of tone was an early influence, but Zille was particularly drawn to the more severe manner of

<sup>10</sup> See Koch, U. E. and Behmer, M. Grobe Wahrheiten – Wahre Grobheiten. Feine Striche – Scharfe Striche. Jugend, Simplicissimus und andere Karikaturen-Journale der Münchner “Belle Epoque” als Spiegel und Zerrspiegel der kleinen wie der grossen Welt. Munich, Reinhard Fischer, 1996; Allen, A.T. Satire and Society in Wilhelmine Germany: Kladderadatsch and Simplicissimus 1890-1914. Lexington, 1984; Koch, U.E. Paris-München-Berlin: Illustrierte humoristisch-satirische Journale im Wandel des Zeitgeistes (1871-2005). – In: Zimmermann, C. and Schmeling M. (eds), Die Zeitschrift - Medium der Moderne. La Presse magazine – un média de l’*époque* moderne. Bielefeld, Transcript, 2006, 157-184.

<sup>11</sup> Robertson, A. Karikatur im Kontext. Zur Entwicklung der sozialdemokratischen illustrierten satirischen Zeitschrift *Der Wahre Jacob* zwischen Kaiserreich und Republik. Peter Lang, 1992, 327.

<sup>12</sup> On Eysler and *Lustige Blätter* see Koch, U. E. Der Teufel in Berlin. Von der Märzrevolution bis zu Bismarcks Entlassung. Illustrierte politische Witzblätter einer Metropole 1848-1890. Cologne, 1991, 263-269; Moszkowski, A. Das Panorama meines Lebens. Berlin, 1925, 95-112. Moszkowski was the editor of the *Lustige Blätter*. Its sole ‘programme’ according to him was to be ‘neither one-sided nor boring’.

<sup>13</sup> Hermann, G. Heinrich Zille. – In: Zille, H. *Mein Milljöh*. Berlin, Eysler & Co., 1914, 3-6. (Reprint Cologne, Fackeltrager, 1967).

Käthe Kollwitz. Several pieces from the early 1900s, including two representations of female suicide attempts – ‘Des Lebens satt’ (‘Tired of life’) and ‘Ins Wasser’ (‘Into the water’ – in this case holding a child) are reminiscent of Kollwitz’s prints with their use of stark tonal contrasts and vigorous, hard, lines to create images of poverty and suffering.<sup>14</sup> He also found models for the representation of the urban poor in the illustrations of Theophile Steinlen, which were widely disseminated in the French and German press. As he developed the comic dimension of his work, Zille was particularly aware of the examples provided by *Simplicissimus* illustrators. Th. Heine and his colleagues combined levity with social comment using the visual devices of caricature – reduction and exaggeration – to mock a wide range of characters and social types.<sup>15</sup> From his starting point in a realist approach to subject and style, and employing a variety of techniques, from sharp outline ink drawing to more atmospheric tonal compositions, Zille established his own distinctive genre in which he presented a range of stereotypical figures, clearly identified as inhabitants of ‘dark Berlin’, who were rendered comic, endearing and occasionally tragic through simplification and distortion – and narrative. The economy of means used, and a degree of awkwardness and limitation in technique actually contributed to the character of the work, the ‘Zille identity’ as honest, empathetic comment on the life of the Berlin poor, by one of their own.

Otto Eysler’s initiative in publishing a collection of Zille’s work as a modestly priced book proved to be inspired. *Kinder der Strasse* was reprinted six times between 1908 and 1914. By 1925 there had been fourteen editions of the book, and eleven of its successor *Mein Milljöh*, from 1914. Total sales of the two books were apparently at least 250000 by the mid 1920s.<sup>16</sup> They reproduced, together, 222 illustrations. Many, but not all, of these had been published previously in journals. They covered most of his subjects and manners, and this core of work secured his reputation and popularity. ‘Ohne Apparat’ and ‘Auf dem Standesamt’ (ill.1,2) represent the two poles of Zille’s repertoire both stylistically and in their subject matter. The first, which appeared opposite ‘Ins Wasser’ in *Kinder der Strasse*, employs a similar technique, combining atmospheric tonal contrast with a sharp linear treatment of the figures. Facial expressions are very summary but there is only a mild degree of caricatural exaggeration. The hand and face of the young girl in the centre convey pain, while the depiction of her companions suggests a mixture of curiosity, sympathy and indifference. The humour is provided entirely by the caption: ‘When I want to I can spit blood into the snow.’ Defiantly, she can convert her tuberculosis into a performing trick. ‘At the Registry Office’ is drawn more softly, with less characterisation. The woman’s features and body are very simply outlined and somewhat exaggerated. The registrar’s sense of superiority, and disapproval, are indicated summarily by the inclination of his head and slight grimace, comically echoed by the Kaiser’s expression in the painting behind and above him. The caption clarifies the reason for this: ‘So, you have been a housekeeper now for four years and have five

<sup>14</sup> See **Hühns, I.** Zur Naturalismusauffassung in der Druckgraphik Heinrich Zilles (1890-1906). – In: Heinrich Zille 1858-1929. Berlin Information, 1982, 63-93. Also: **Osmond, J.** The women of Berlin: representations by Zille, Kollwitz and Baluschek. – In: **Nilsson, L.** (ed.) Urban History in Comparative Perspective. CD Rom, Stockholm, Institute of Urban History, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> **Benecke G.** The politics of outrage: social satire in the cartoons of ‘Simplicissimus’ 1896-1914. – In: Politics in cartoon and caricature. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Studies, 13/14, December 1975, 92-109.

<sup>16</sup> **Flügge, M.** op.cit., 51.

children; so why don't you marry the man?' Ooh, you see, I don't like him.' This image combines one of Zille's most frequent subjects – working class women and their children – with another recurring theme, the gulf of understanding, and interest, between the common people and the representatives of the state, be they bureaucrats, as here, lawyers, or the police. In *Mein Milljöh* this illustration was paired with one in a similar style showing a group of cheerful looking woman, with babies, that evoked this gulf in a more abstract manner and on a darker theme, although the tone is one of resignation not anger. 'Geburtenrückgang' ('Drop in the birth rate'): 'I've got six children in the cemetery, isn't that some effort for the Fatherland?'

Images featuring children, both in the company of adults and on their own, formed the largest group in both collections, with a slightly higher proportion in *Mein Milljöh* – over a quarter in each case. Although their circumstances are often grim, Zille's children are usually rather robust and cheerful and this quality undoubtedly contributed to the appeal of his work. Hermann noted Zille's sensitivity to children and attributed it to his fundamental humanity and feeling for social ills. 'Don't people understand that continuously through all these prints there runs the one cry "but the children! But the children!"? This is the wonderful, young, often still unspoilt human material, everything can be made out of them, everything!' But social conditions would in fact turn them into the ugly, flawed adults that also populated his 'Milljöh'.<sup>17</sup> Often Zille's children are represented at home, and images that engaged with housing conditions in the city featured prominently in both books. The other principal categories of subject, with 5-10 examples of each, were couples, indoor and outdoor leisure scenes, bars, tramps and beggars, and prostitutes.<sup>18</sup> The great majority of Zille's characters are clearly poor – sometimes extremely so. The indicators of class in these images are partly contextual. They show basic, dark, overcrowded flats, narrow alleyways, crudely furnished bars – and, occasionally, contrasting environments: the home of a daughter who has married out of the slums (*Milljöh* 27), a café-bar specialising in discreet sexual encounters for the bourgeoisie (*Milljöh* 29), or an artist's studio (*Kinder* 99, *Milljöh* 28). Physiognomy and dress are also class markers. Many of Zille's women are stocky figures in simple shifts and dresses, with big feet and coarse features. Their men folk are scrawny types in caps and bowlers and ill fitting trousers. Beggars and tramps are gaunt and emaciated with their clothes coming apart, or hunched up, their faces flushed and distorted by drink. Zille also used dialogue to situate his characters. Officials and other representatives of the middle classes articulate 'correctly' but most of these figures speak simply and directly with strong Berlin accents, usually with comic effect. Hans Ostwald noted, in 1908, that as well as observing the 'people' Zille also listened to them and this had contributed to his unparalleled understanding of how they thought and felt. Ostwald claimed that Zille wrote all his own captions, which was not normal practice. Certainly they are fundamental to the character of his work and particularly its humour.<sup>19</sup> The drawing creates a situation and mood: the caption both fixes the point and provides comic gloss. A

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<sup>17</sup> Hermann G. op.cit., 5-6.

<sup>18</sup> In the first editions of *Kinder* and *Mein Milljöh*, 15 and 12 illustrations, respectively, represented aspects of housing conditions and 26 and 33 showed children in other situations either with adults or alone.

<sup>19</sup> Ostwald H. Vorwort. –In: Zille, H. *Kinder der Strasse*. Berlin, Eysler & Co., 1908, 3-6. (Reprint Cologne, Fackeltrager, 1966). Renate Altner has noted that the extent to which all the texts for the *Kinder der Strasse* illustrations were actually by Zille cannot be definitively established. Altner, R. op.cit., 128.

doctor stands by the bed of a sick woman in an attic room. ‘Doctor, I shouldn’t eat bread?’ ‘No dear lady’. ‘Ah well, I haven’t any money to buy anything anyway.’ (‘Diet’ *Milljöh* 87). In ‘To Mother Earth’ (ill. 3) the woman’s instructions clarify the meaning of the scene, and underline its tragic-comic character: ‘Don’t get drunk, and bring the coffin back, the Miller lodger needs it tomorrow as well.’

There are no explicitly political cartoons in these collections: no images of political figures, demonstrations or strikes. Perhaps more surprisingly, representations of the world of work – certainly industrial work – are virtually absent. There is one notable example, a double image on the theme of exploitation (‘Das Jubiläum’ *Mein Milljöh* 92, 93, ill. 4). An old, tired employee in an engineering works is congratulated by his younger colleagues on his long service, but when he goes to see the boss he is greeted cynically with the remark ‘So, today you’ve been with me for twenty five years – so just think how much money you’ve already had out of me.’ This bitter little scene possibly referred to Zille’s own, or his father’s experience at work – but it was an exception.<sup>20</sup> His terrain was the streets and the domestic and leisure spaces of the city, not its factories. Housing, poverty, health, child mortality and prostitution, which did figure in his work, were, of course, social issues with a political dimension. Housing conditions in the working class districts of Berlin were notoriously bad, with poor facilities and overcrowding as a consequence of building speculation and the very rapid expansion of the population.<sup>21</sup> These conditions contributed to the high rate of infant mortality which became a topic of public policy at the end of the century.<sup>22</sup> As we have already seen, Zille engaged with this theme more than once, as a commonplace occurrence in the slums. In 1929 Hans Ostwald identified common prostitutes as one of the main social types that interested the artist.<sup>23</sup> Not many, but a significant number, of his published illustrations were of such girls, particularly in *Kinder der Strasse*, the first edition of which in 1908 included ten. The most explicit of these touch on the key political and administrative issue concerning prostitution at the time – its regulation and control.<sup>24</sup> The cover illustration to *Kinder* showed a woman resisting arrest on the street (ill. 5). ‘In engen Gassen’ (‘In the narrow lanes’ *Kinder* 42) showed a weary young mother complaining that the vice squad was back, even though she was registered and had paid her taxes; ‘Alexanderplatz’ (*Milljöh* 38) showed a disparate group of women patiently waiting for their obligatory regular medical inspection, that was taking longer than usual because the doctor was new to the job. Zille’s ‘Mächens’, like his other characters, are unglamorous survivors who deal with harsh circumstances and the intrusions of authority stoically and

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<sup>20</sup> Zille represented a similar scene in an illustration published by *Simplicissimus* in which an employer, dismissing a group of workers, curtly informs them that there are no pension arrangements. ‘Entlassung’. – *Simplicissimus*, 13 10, June 6 1908, 179.

<sup>21</sup> See **Erbe, M.** Berlin im Kaiserreich. – In: **Ribbe, W.** (ed.) *Geschichte Berlins*, Vol. 2, Munich, Beck, 1988, 707-720, Soziale Schichtung, Wohnungssituation und Lebensqualität.

<sup>22</sup> Child mortality in Prussia in the last quarter of the century was over 20%. In 1907 a hospital was founded in Charlottenburg with the specific mission to combat this problem: the Kaiserin-Auguste-Viktoria-Haus zur Bekämpfung der Säuglingssterblichkeit im Deutschen Reich. See **Engel M.** *Medezin, Naturwissenschaft, Industrie*. – In: *Berlin um 1900*. Berlinische Galerie, 1984, 125-139.

<sup>23</sup> **Ostwald, H.** *Das Zillebuch*. Berlin, Paul Franke, 1929, ch. 8, ‘Zille Mächens’.

<sup>24</sup> See **Abrams, L.** *Prostitutes in Imperial Germany, 1870-1918: Working Girls or Social Outcasts?* – In: **Evans R.** (ed.) *The German Underworld. Decians and Outcasts in German History*. London, Routledge, 1988, 189-209.



sometimes humorously. They are not presented as helpless victims, nor as dangerous threats to the moral order, but as an acknowledged part of the social fabric of the big city.

Otto Nagel claimed that when Zille saw his work for the first time in the early 1920s, with its explicit political content, he told him that this was the kind of art he had always wanted to make but had not been able to because of his publishers.<sup>25</sup> Nagel's interpretation and presentation of Zille was coloured by his communist convictions, but the artist was obviously dependent on his publishers' judgement of what was acceptable and *Lustige Blätter* did in fact make changes to the selection of images in reprints of the collections that involved replacing some of the harsher images. By the third edition of *Kinder der Strasse* in 1911 the cover had been changed to a more innocuous representation of a young man flanked by two girls. 'In engen Gassen' was also replaced together with, amongst others, images in the style of Kollwitz representing two haggard mothers from 'Berlin N' and 'Wohnungs Hygiene' ('Home Hygiene') in which a group of children explain to the visiting doctor that their mother has put their dead baby brother away in a drawer, to prevent them playing with him. Otto Eysler and Co's 'Amusing Pages' were committed to satire and the deflation of establishment complacency, but they did not see themselves as social campaigners. These adjustments are indicative of the boundaries that functioned in the bourgeois press - although not all of Zille's most troubling images were removed in this process. 'Ins Wasser', 'Ohne Apparat' and 'Zur Mutter Erde' were retained, as were some stark representations of life on the streets. The overall effect, however, was to reinforce Zille's reputation for seeing and showing the amusing aspects of his chosen milieu.

Käthe Kollwitz identified three Zilles: the typical humorous illustrator; the biting, instinctive satirist; and the pure artist – whom she preferred.<sup>26</sup> His commentators and defenders identified and responded to the different aspects of his work in ways that reflected their own preoccupations. The novelist and critic Georg Hermann insisted on the artistic quality of Zille's output. If the purely anecdotal and humorous elements in the drawings were put to one side, what remained were supreme skills of craftsmanship and expressive representation. The thousands of readers who enjoyed *Mein Milljöh* for its content and humour should not forget that 'Zille's art is amongst the best, strongest and most honest to be created in Berlin, that needs to be appreciated outside its engagement with the day to day.'<sup>27</sup> Hans Ostwald, Zille's first and most prolific critical supporter, also saw him as a great artist, but he particularly emphasised the social dimension of his work. At the time he wrote the introduction to *Kinder der Strasse* in 1908 Ostwald had been immersed for four years in his major *Grossstadt-Dokumente* project, a series of fifty booklets that set out to record the nature of life in the great city (mainly but not exclusively Berlin) in an inclusive, accessible and non-judgemental way, with a degree of emphasis on its darker, less well-known features. Zille's Berlin pictures in many ways complemented this survey. They were not documentary in character, but they did present, sympathetically, the 'hidden' lives carried on in the 'dark corners' of the city that were central to his own survey. Zille's empathy with, and deep understanding of, the lives of

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<sup>25</sup> Nagel, O. *Mein Leben*, 1952, 28. Cited in: Otto Nagel. *Leben und Werke 1894-1967*. Oberhausen, 1988, 43.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in: Heinrich Zille 1858-1929. *Berlin Information*, 1982, 211.

<sup>27</sup> Hermann, G. *op.cit.* 6.

the poor gave him a unique position as a witness to their condition. For Ostwald Zille's work, with both its harshness and its humour, constituted a powerful appeal for social reform. It was not his intention just to satisfy the social voyeurism of his public, or amuse them. However, his art was not in any way dogmatic. Because of his own background, and his humanity, Zille could represent both the squalor and distress in which his 'milieu' lived, but also their inner strengths in dealing with their lot, partly through being able to laugh about it.<sup>28</sup>

In the major study of Zille that Ostwald published in 1929, he reproduced and reinforced his view of the artist as a sympathetic observer of 'types' in the Berlin population and as a modern jester, a man with an 'Eulenspiegelnatur'.<sup>29</sup> He identified nine categories in Zille's depictions of Berlin life, that included prostitutes and their pimps, children and adolescents, proletarians and petit bourgeois, and 'der fünfte Stand' – the helpless poor, who were the true proletarians of the modern age, permanently trapped in their destitute condition. In a chapter on 'Zille as social critic' he highlighted the artist's sympathetic awareness of the suffering of the urban poor, particularly in respect of children, but also emphasised how, in contrast to Kollwitz, he depicted this with humour, and with a recognition of the resilience, and wit, of the people. He also commented that 'Meister Zille' was a realist who, generally, treated the promises of visionary revolutionaries with appropriate scepticism. 'He knows that all too many of the makers of the future are incompetent in practice.'<sup>30</sup> In the book on Zille's legacy which he brought out a year later, he emphasised that Zille's political engagement, such as it was, was due to his deep humanity and sense of solidarity with the poor. He had declared himself a socialist, and later a communist, sympathiser, but he held back from party engagement: 'He did not believe in fair words, propaganda, talk and speeches. He was in favour of action.' Which in his case meant his own work.<sup>31</sup>

Ostwald's account, no doubt deliberately, contrasted with that of Otto Nagel, who had set out in the postwar years to enlist Zille in the communist cause. He had obtained his agreement to support a new venture, a KPD oriented illustrated journal, *Eulenspiegel*, in 1928, and published his own selection of Zille's work, *Für Alle!*, in 1929. Nagel claimed that the socio-political engagement of this book reflected the artist's wishes more closely than any of the other compilations of his work that had appeared to date. He argued that the common focus on Zille as a humorous illustrator obscured the central fact about him which was his class consciousness: what placed him far above other artists who took the proletariat as subject was that unlike them he was, and felt himself to be,

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<sup>28</sup> Ostwald, H. op.cit., 1908. On Ostwald see Thies, R. Ethnograph des dunklen Berlin. Hans Ostwald und die "Grossstadt-Dokumente" (1904-1908). Cologne, Böhlau, 2006. Also Rowe, D. Representing Berlin. Sexuality and the City in Imperial and Weimar Germany. Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003, 90-122, and Fritzsche P. Vagabond in the Fugitive City: Hans Ostwald, Imperial Berlin and the Grossstadt-Dokumente. – Journal of Contemporary History, 29, 1994, 385-402.

<sup>29</sup> Ostwald, H. Das Zillebuch. Einleitung, 9-16. Max Liebermann, now president of the Prussian Academy of Art, made the same point in 1925: Zille's art was characterised by humour of a high level, comparable to that of Keller, Jean Paul, Swift and Sterne. – In: Zille, H. Berliner Geschichte und Bilder, Dresden, Carl Reissner, 1925, preface n.p.

<sup>30</sup> Idem, 338.

<sup>31</sup> Ostwald, H. Zilles Vermächtnis. Berlin, Paul Franke, 1930, 13. Ostwald's outlook became distinctly 'völkisch' in the Weimar years and he aligned himself with National Socialist positions after 1933. See Thies op.cit., Dritter Teil: der urberliner, parts 4 and 5, 262-296.

part of it.<sup>32</sup> The illustrations in *Für Alle!* included a number from a project – ‘Kreigesmarmelade’ – apparently begun during the war, that were suggestive of Zille’s disillusionment with the course of events. Even here, however, there was very little explicitly political content. The depiction of political slogans in ‘November 1918’ (Ill. 6) was virtually unique in his output. This illustration was clearly prompted by events at the end of the war. In the context of Nagel’s book, in which it appeared opposite ‘Brüder, zur Sonne, zur Freiheit’, an image of the people marching into the sunset, the implied message was clearly one of rejection of the SPD and sympathy for the Spartacists, but the image is in fact ambiguous. As Matthias Flügge has argued, it probably projected, rather, Zille’s general anxiety over the state of Germany and distrust of extreme solutions, as well as disillusionment with socialist leadership under Ebert.<sup>33</sup>

Many of the illustrations in Nagel’s book dated from before the war. In the latter phase of his career in the 1920s, when he was famous and celebrated, a high proportion of Zille’s published work was in fact recycled material. What new work he did make recalled the manner and subject matter of his prewar output. The dynamic modern Berlin of the Weimar years, with its attendant climate of tension and decadence, is almost entirely absent from these images. His contribution to the special issue of *Simplicissimus* on Berlin in 1926 was a bar scene that could have been from before the war, in contrast to those of the journal’s principal illustrators, each of whom represented a different aspect of the harsh, brash, contemporary city.<sup>34</sup> Karl Arnold, who had begun a series of ‘Berlin pictures’ in the journal in 1921, included Zille himself in the collection of Berlin types that he presented here. In this vignette a reluctant looking artist is proffered a box of cigars by a corpulent, complacent bourgeois and his smart female companion: ‘Do take a fresh Havana Master Zille. You’ve given us so much pleasure with your tarts and paupers.’ Zille cited this ironic portrayal in a regretful note on the impact of his work, reproduced in *Für Alle!*. ‘I was ashamed, because it was true.’<sup>35</sup> Comparing the nature of Berlin humour as treated by Zille and Grosz in 1931, Paul Westheim noted that Zille’s vision was conciliatory and complicit, whereas in Grosz it had become colder and more confrontational, and explicitly engaged in class conflict. ‘To be exact, with Zille the bedbug is a domestic animal that belongs with the furniture, so to speak, whereas now it has become a socio-political problem.’<sup>36</sup> From the perspective of the postwar years Zille’s ‘Milljöh’ conjured up a vision of happier times, despite its grim features. This mutation partially obscured the degree to which some at least of his work constituted a genuine challenge to the sensibilities and consciences of the public of the late Wilhelmine era. Nonetheless it was the case that partly through choice and partly through the nature of the artistic and media institutions through which he communicated, Zille had provided this public above all with a humane and ultimately optimistic vision of the darker side of big city life. Peter Fritzsche has analysed how in Berlin at the turn of the century the

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<sup>32</sup> Nagel O. Heinrich Zille. – In: Zille, H. *Für Alle!* Ernstes und Heiteres von Heinrich Zille. Neuer Deutscher Verlag, Berlin, 1929, n.p.

<sup>33</sup> Flügge, M. op.cit., 62.

<sup>34</sup> *Simplicissimus*, 31 30, October 25 1906. The issue included a ‘Political Salon’ by George Grosz, whose work first appeared in the journal that year.

<sup>35</sup> Zille, H. *Mitmenschen*. – In: *Für Alle!*, n.p.

<sup>36</sup> Westheim, P. *Zille-Grosz. Ber Berliner Humor. Helden und Abenteuer*, Berlin, 193. Cited in: Flügge, M. and Neyer, H. J. (eds) op.cit., 276-278.

Press generated a 'word city' through which Berliners interacted with the complexities of the metropolis, and with each other. The presentation of the city as a spectacle, and as a site in which millions of strangers could co-exist successfully, had a political function in that it encouraged tolerance, asserted the rights of the citizen to occupy and use public space, and promoted consumption.<sup>37</sup> The humorous visual depictions of modern life relayed by the illustrated press played a role in this representation of urban society. Zille's particular speciality, of course, did not promote the consumption of commodities in the urban market place. This was a pleasure that his subjects only experienced in a very limited way – primarily in the form of cheap alcohol. But his work integrated his marginalised 'Milljöh' into the broad panorama of urban spectacle that the press as a whole displayed for its readership, and asserted both the presence of its inhabitants, and their right to some respect and sympathy. In 'Am Brandenburger Tor' of 1903 (*Kinder der Strasse* 13), Zille showed a cross-section of his 'milieu' being marshalled by a policeman to give 'a thunderous three cheers!' on Unter den Linden, presumably to some representative of the state. Their enthusiasm is muted, even ironic, but the image is one that nonetheless conveys a certain sense of community and participation in a socio-political entity based on tradition and established authority. Seventeen years later, when the drawing was republished in *Berliner Geschichten und Bilder* Zille had, appropriately, re-titled it 'From Past Times.' (Ill.7)

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<sup>37</sup> **Fritzsche, P.** Readers, browsers, strangers, spectators: narrative forms and metropolitan encounters in twentieth-century Berlin. –In: **Gee, M. and Kirk, T.** Printed Matters. Printing, publishing and urban culture in Europe in the modern period. Aldershot, Ashgate, 2002, 88-104; and idem Reading Berlin 1900. Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1996.

## Illustrations

(from the collection of the author)

1. Ohne Apparate. *Kinder der Strasse* 26.
2. Auf dem Standesamt *Mein Milljöh* 98
3. Zur Mutter Erde. *Kinder der Strasse* 40
4. Jubiläum (2). *Mein Milljöh* 93
5. Sketch for the cover of *Kinder der Strasse* – From: **Ostwald.H.** *das Zillebuch*, 1929, 147.
6. November 1918. *Für Alle!* n.p.
7. Aus vergangener Zeit. *Berliner Geschichten und Bilder* n.p.