“Nihilism and Boogie Woogie at the ‘Badewanne’” (September 7, 1949)

Abstract

After the war, the jazz club “Die Badewanne” [“The Bathtub”] in Berlin-Wilmersdorf hosted cabaret performances that drew on the Surrealist-Dadaist traditions of the 1920s. This article from *Neues Deutschland* accuses the “Badewanne” of exploiting its artists and offering a program that was unconventional on the surface but actually served petty-bourgeois tastes.

Source

Nihilism and Boogie Woogie at the “Badewanne”

Nothing against artists’ hangouts! But then that’s what they should be: meeting places for artistic individuals who are looking for stimulation and conversation, who want to engage in discussions or read the newspaper. The “Badewanne,” which opened some time ago on Nürnberger Straße in Berlin West, is not this kind of artists’ restaurant, but rather a business enterprise that is speculating with the misery of West Berlin’s artists. A smart nightclub owner has “taken them in” and is using them as a lure.

For their “Badewanne” chatter, these artists get five percent of the revenues and a hot dinner. At first, they imagined this differently and thought that a real artists’ hangout would arise here, one to whose program everyone could contribute. But it has turned into an entertainment club for the Americanized Ku’damm. The cabaret program runs in between the usual Boogie Woogie dancing, and the mob of black marketeers lusting for little sensations splashes around loudly and demandingly in this tub.

The cabaret program is reminiscent of the Dada fuss of the twenties, except that people were more intelligent and humorous back then. The funniest thing about the “Badewanne” is that the people there take themselves so seriously. Those who put on the first Dada exhibition in 1920 were at least humorous enough to put up a sign that read: “Take Dada seriously, it’s worth it!” In today’s West Berlin, people nihilize and surrealize with utter humorlousness.

A man in short underpants gets up from a bed and puts on his pants, tail-coat, and top hat, while a kind of modern clown contorts his limbs in front of him in a wild belly dance. Next to them a woman lies on the floor and emits ghastly screams. The whole thing is called “The Meaning of Life.” The clown is a talented graphic artist who started off as a first-rate socio-critical illustrator after 1945. All manners of suicide are staged. Here are a few titles of these pieces: “Artery,” “Sword,” “Poison,” “Fall from the Window,” “Morphine,” and “Gas.” They must have been thinking of those West Berlin artists who don’t get a meal at the “Badewanne.”

By contrast, the supposedly serious Thursday evening literary programs are much funnier. The other day Negro poetry was read. A not unfamiliar “abstract” painter read three nice poems by Langston Hughes badly. And then things really got going. “Poems” by a French Negro, who, as it was declared in a solemn voice, draws on Surrealism, were presented by the translator himself. They were called “Tam-tam 1,” “Tam-tam 2,” and so on, and they referred to “the orgasm of sacred pollutions” and the like. “Literastic,” Tucholsky would have said.

They are trying to shock the middle class in the “Badewanne,” and they don’t realize how petty bourgeois they are themselves. Above the “artists’ table” hangs a crocheted blessing: “Let the world do

its thing, my house shall be my resting place." This is meant to be ironic, but it gets to the heart of the matter. They let the world do its thing, and they are quietly vegetating on the margins, these representatives of a bohème that has become a pitiful bunch.

And so this nightclub offers a picture of life in the West Berlin of today. Artists without money, businessmen flush with money or black marketeers, Boogie Woogie boys who usually wear their shirts over their pants, and grinning Americans mixed in with them. One is reminded of the caption that George Grosz wrote under one of his drawings: "Let those swim who can and those who can't may sink."

Source: Florian, "Nihilism and Boogie Woogie at the ‚Bathtub'", *Neues Deutschland*, September 7, 1949.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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