

Friedrich Sieburg, “Worshipping Elevators” (1926)

Abstract

This article by the literary critic and writer Friedrich Sieburg was published in July 1926 in the renowned literary magazine *Die literarische Welt*. The magazine was published weekly from 1925 to 1932 and was edited by the critic and screenwriter Willy Haas. At the time, Sieburg was working as a foreign correspondent for the liberal-bourgeois *Frankfurter Zeitung* in Paris. His sharp-tongued and witty article takes aim at the supposed Americanization of German literature, adding to the voices of conservative cultural criticism of the time. The artistic avant-garde of the Weimar Republic in particular was enthusiastic about the economic, political and cultural developments of American mass democracy.

Source

Worshipping Elevators

Every day the resort towns on the California coast hold beauty pageants. Seventy-five virgins clad in scanty tricot show what God gave them. They arrive in long chains, lay their hands on one another's shoulders, and march through the market square or along the boardwalk. Once the photographers have finished, powerful, square-shouldered men approach to fasten banners around the girls' bellies, with numbers visible from a distance. The police maintain order (keeping special watch over the fiends on whom the display has some kind of effect) as a commission put together of film directors, girl traffickers, ministers, artists, and other specialists works to assess the limbs in particular and the overall impression in general. The Taylor system is used here too. One concerns himself only with the legs, the other with the line of the back, the third takes the face into account, a fourth measures bottoms, so that the result is achieved rather quickly. It turns out that Miss Williams from Salt Lake City wins first prize. The biggest of the square-shouldered men comes forward to wrap a starred banner around her middle, so that the tempting stomach muscles are no longer visible. The band picks up a patriotic tune. Old people who still remember the Civil War wipe away a tear. The minister congratulates the dear girl and entreats her to continue to bring her parents joy.

A man emerges from the crowd and pinches her on the fanny—the least he could do—and is seized by the indignant crowd, tarred, feathered, and thrown into the water.

Meanwhile, lyricists of all ages in Europe are writing their excited homages to the American tempo, how it finds its supreme expression in elevators, and to the American spirit, how it primarily appears in a quickly resolved attack and the lightning-quick conclusion of agreements. Moved, they celebrate the speedy performance of tasks in New York hotels—for example, when one sends a pair of pants away to be ironed. Almost sobbing, they praise the way traffic is managed and toss the old German God determinedly overboard from the decks of smooth-running Hudson River boats.

The American businessman, who dispatches several wagons loaded with cornmeal or railroad ties over the telephone, has worked a profound effect on German literature. He is characterized as “cold, hard, and unbending”; one idiot even speaks of Napoleon's American traits. Because one does not understand these people's language, because one sees that they do not wear moustaches, that they do not speak Yiddish, one believes them to be Caesars. Their dialogue as they discuss freight instructions is taken for economical, their padded shoulders appear monumental, their uniform faces, six of one, a half-dozen of the other, seem to be masks of iron. In short, in view of their own lachrymose sentimentality, verbosity, and inability to master a shipping schedule, writers import the American face into literature.

This is a disgraceful reaction to the alleged failure of the European tradition. For how does America represent itself in its own statements, to the extent that they even reach Europe? How does it present itself in its films, in its reporting, in its novels, in its politics, and in its illustration industry? Its relation to God is known from the Scopes Monkey Trial, its relation to women from films and novels, in which sexual intercourse can only appear in the form of a rape in the untamed forest or a bad neighborhood. The middle-class American brings his children into the world with a fade-out or by closing the chapter with an enticing "to be continued." Then one day the children are suddenly there, and, late in an evening, the husband stops to knock on his wife's bedroom door to discuss the household budget or announce the acquisition of a new automobile. On hot days women drive through the city streets of Chicago in bathing suits—one learns by watching that a contest for the prettiest legs is somehow bound up with the trip—but should the sight cause anyone to have impure thoughts, a policeman reads it on his face and drags him into court. As compensation the young men in films beat one another's faces bloody with their fists while the pure young lady stands quivering in the background. The one who gets knocked out is, of course, the one who attempted a rape, because one day he had seen the young lady ride her bicycle down the street in a bathing suit. The victor takes her off to a minister, and, in some mysterious way in the intermission between the fifth and sixth acts, a child appears who will later grow up to be one hundred percent American—anti-Semite, football player, and virtuous husband.

What America produces in the way of artistic and moral values comes from the pariahs of the country, the Negroes, Jews, and Germans. They are persecuted and oppressed, and deprived, with justice, of the title of a one-hundred-percent American.

What in the world drives a portion of Berlin's literati to admire these people, to write millionaire dramas, to adorn boxers with halos, to depict Canadian lumber traders, to worship elevators, to prattle on about steel rhythms, to kneel before the General Motors Company? A writer nearly burst into tears because he heard a song on a gramophone in which the singers said "Tyenaseee" instead of Tennessee. Why is this? What does he say when he hears "Laipzch" instead of Leipzig? Is a new romanticism being born here? Should [Peter] Rosegger or [Arthur] Achleitner be repressed? Perhaps country boys and girls are putting on airs, and maybe the tuxedo no longer suggests a contrast. This is how we begin now: "McCormick reached for the telephone and, with an iron expression on his face, ordered the twelve train cars with wheat for Ohio off onto dead-end tracks." I do not see the alternatives being between an ideology that throws a certain human type—the peasant—into relief and opens the way to general admiration and one which idealizes motors, elevators, and businessmen at the expense of other human and figurative values. Without denying that a skyscraper and a forest both have their aesthetic value, I still do not agree that they are particularly to be recommended as ideal symbols. The so-called Americanization of the world is certainly not yet an established fact.

Such unfamiliarity with the world is expressed in this engineer romanticism, which does not understand the workings of a carburetor and therefore hears the breath of our time in the pounding of six cylinders. Where one once wore velvet skirts and loose neckties, one now goes around in a leather jacket. I see no difference. It is astounding that a writer of animal stories, Charles Robert, is celebrated and by exactly the same people who make fun of [Hermann] Löns, who is certainly no worse. Germany will soon make a place for the stories of [Thomas Henry] Marshal and [James Oliver] Curwood in which disillusioned amateur hunters gather up virginal daughters of millionaires, drape them over their horses, and gallop off to the preacher. And they will be taken seriously for the reason that they take place in New Brunswick and not on the Luneberg heath.

The machine need not be an enemy, nor should it be an object of worship. It has released other powers, but has created no new ones. The machine can be understood and, to the mechanic, is not a mystical object. Why then for the writers? How can something learnable inspire reverence? One looks with regret at the replacement of Hölderlin's Greece by America just because some people do not know what happens on the wheat exchange in Chicago or inside an electrical power plant.

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