



The City through the Eyes of Expressionism

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ABSTRACT

The process of industrialization and urban growth and the development of cities in the first three decades of the 20th century are inevitably related to rapid social changes. The new attitude to life, which corresponds to this process, affected the aesthetic perception and the work of artists as well. The study shows the sensitiveness of German expressionism to the dynamics, drive and chaos of the new city life. The expressionistic picture of the city is clearly ambivalent; it oscillates between fascination on the one hand and antipathy on the other. Expressionism also reflects the social alienation and the feeling of being lonely in a crowd as new phenomena of the 20th century.

KEY WORDS: expressionism, the picture of the city, poetry, visual arts, cinema

Introduction

The pictures of cities are written into the collective memory and consciousness, among others, by the arts. In their own way, the artefacts of Expressionism are evidence of city life especially in the first two decades of the 20th century. The following study focuses on the analysis of the city phenomenon as one of the main themes in German expressionism and shows how the artists capture the spirit of their time in literature and in the visual and performing arts. Using the analyses of poetic and artistic statements, of symbols and metaphors in the contemporary context of the early 20th century, our goal is to demonstrate

not only the specific expressionistic perception of the city but also the creation and change of human relationship towards it.

Expressionism was formed, like almost every artistic movement, as a natural reaction to the changing historical and social situation. The means of expression and the techniques used by the previous artistic movements such as Impressionism, Symbolism, Neo-Romanticism, Neo-Classicism or Secession were not capable of displaying the new, fast and vivid dynamic of the world and the life any more.

Especially if we take into consideration how rapid the development of the cities and the city life was, and how the large cities and metropolises were formed, the emergence of a new and considerably different literary movement does not come as a surprise. While there were only 6 per cent of the population living in the cities in Germany in the middle of the 19th century, as many as 35% did so in 1910, only to rise up to 41% in 1920 (NAUMANN 2008:12). The number of citizens in Berlin doubled in the last 30 years of the 19th century and in 1905 the German capital had over 2 million citizens, making it not only the fastest growing European metropolis but also the third largest city after New York and London (MOSER 2004:158). The movement of the citizens into the cities is linked to the process of industrialisation. Under the government of Wilhelm II, Germany changes from an agricultural to an industrial country. Germany's chemical and electrotechnical industry beats even strong competitors such as United States or Great Britain, the railway network spreads to four times of its original length, telephones and telegraphs enable connection to the whole world, the cutting of working hours and the establishment of vacations from work create a space for the development of the culture of free time. This in turn, acts as an influence on the growth of the market, hotel and gastronomy business and along with the shopping frenzy the commercial business comes into being.

New aesthetics

Ludwig Meidner was one of the artists who were aware of the fact that the pace of their time couldn't be expressed through the painting technique of Impressionism any more. In his article *Anleitung zum Malen von Grossstadtbildern* published in 1914, he criticises the impressionistic way of portraying the city and he emphasises that the mixture of urban architecture cannot be painted in the same manner as a flowerbed: "*Eine Strasse besteht nicht aus Tonwerten, sondern ist ein Bombardement von zischenden Fensterreihen, sausenenden Lichtkegeln zwischen Fuhrwerken aller Art und tausenden hüpfenden Kugeln, Menschenfetzen, Reklameschildern und dröhnenden, gestaltlosen Farbmassen.*" (1914:312–313)

The new technique concentrates on light, focus and usage of straight lines. The rays of light are connected in bundles and fall apart into scraps; they form contrast with the shadows of the buildings. The light creates the impression of hanging or swimming objects, towers, houses and street lamps, the painting becomes rhythmic. In view of the composition, the focus plays the main role, it is clear and is positioned in the middle or in the lower part of the picture, towards the edges the objects are less and less sharp. Following the perspective, the buildings far in front are standing upright, the other ones even closer to the spectator appear to be falling or tilting. The straight lines correspond also to cubism and are important in the graphic arts too. Meidner is commenting the geometry of the lines with the words: *“Was für Dreiecke, Vierecke, Vielecke und Kreise stürmen auf den Strassen auf uns ein. Lineale sausen nach allen Seiten. Viel Spitzes sticht uns.”* (1914:314)

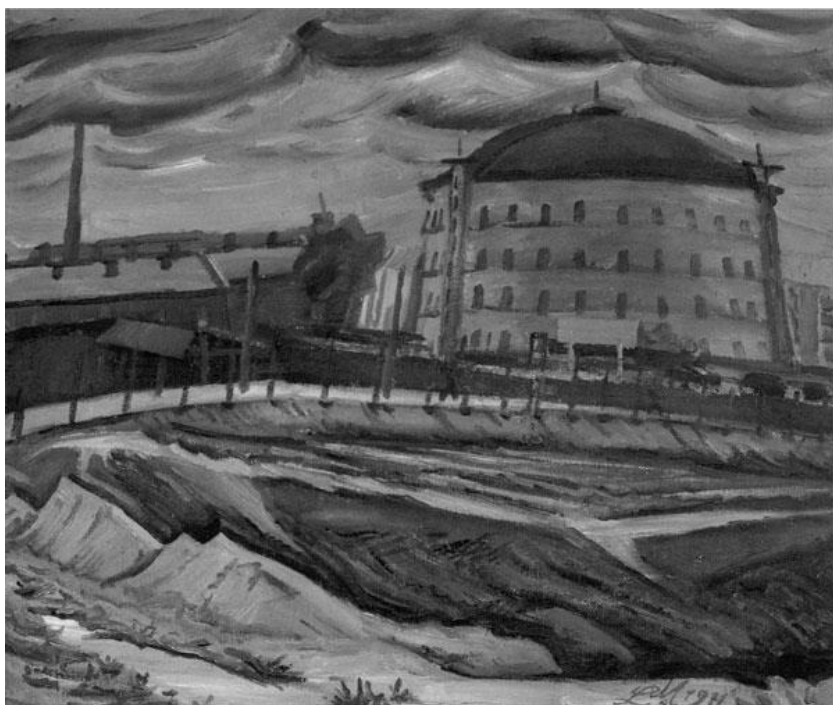


Figure 1: *Straße in Wilmersdorf*

The programmatic text is calling for new concepts of aesthetics and Meidner is encouraging the artists: *“Malen wir das Naheliegende, unsere Stadt-Welt! die tumultuarischen Strassen, die Eleganz eiserner Hängebrücken, die Gasometer, welche in weissen Wolkengebirgen hängen, die brüllende Koloristik der Autobusse und Schnellzuglokomotiven, die wogenden Telephondrähte (sind sie nicht wie Gesang?), die Harlekinaden der Litfass-Säulen, und dann die Nacht ... die Großstadt-Nacht”* (1914:314).

This image is not only a part of Meidner's theoretical work, it can also be discovered in his own paintings such as in the cycle *Straßen und Cafés* (1913) and in the paintings *Straße in Wilmersdorf* (1913), *Betrunkene Straße mit Selbstbildnis* (1913) or *Gasometer in Berlin-Wilmersdorf* (1913).



Figure 2: *Gasometer in Berlin-Wilmersdorf*

The pictures painted by Erich Heckel (*Stadtbahn in Berlin*, 1911) or Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (*Nollendorfplatz*, 1912) follow these aesthetic principles, too. But gasometers, industrial buildings or railways as artistic motives became not only the part of the visual arts; the expressionistic poetry is confronting the lyrical subject with the technical phenomena as well. In his poem *Diadem* Theodor Däubler is wondering about the glow of the arc lamps:

- *Die Bogenlampen krönen Sonnenuntergänge,*

- *Ihr lila Schein wird den Abend überleben.*
- *Sie geistern schwebend über lärmendem Gedränge.*
- *Es muß verglaste Früchte andere Welten geben!* (PINTHUS 1997:48)

On one side the light of the lamps holds out against the darkness and seems to be eternal, but on the other side it looks unnatural and frightening. Although the lamps are not fully understandable for the lyrical subject — “*Ich kann das Wesen dieser Lampen schwer vernehmen.*” (Ibid.) — and they are perceived as irritating, the lamps are also described as being alluring and fascinating at the same time.

Another example is the poem *Fahrt über die Kölner Reihnbrücke bei Nacht* (PINTHUS 1997:179). The author Ernst Stadler tries to capture the surrounding world, which is in an ongoing movement while he's leaving the city sitting in a train. The roofs, street lamps, chimneys, millions of lights flashing in front of his eyes create the modern optics of this text.

The topics of urban architecture, city streets, places, modern achievements and the rush of the city are some of the motives of expressionism, but they are also of interest to the art movement called “*Neue Sachlichkeit*”, which was a part of the Weimar culture between 1918 and 1933. The moment of wondering and dealing with the new loud-voiced modern reality was replaced with disillusionment or unemotional and more objective insight. But on the other side “*Neue Sachlichkeit*” cannot fully shake off the pathos and hymnicity of former literary movements and keeps going to celebrate the technological progress linked to the cities. One of the examples is the film *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* directed by Walther Ruttmann in 1927. The silent film without a discernible plot shows changing pictures of machines, working operations, streets, city traffic and so on, which are realistic but somehow stylised. The music by Edmund Meisel underscores the poetic character of this avant-garde film too.

The interaction between the subject and the city

The fascination for the life and pulse of the city is just one of many impulses that inspired the Expressionists to pick the metropolis out as a central theme of their work. The process of urbanization brought a lot of new problems and challenges to the lives of the people. Already at the beginning of 20th century Georg Simmel observed that the city life determines the psyche and the behaviour of the urban citizens. Simmel speaks of a so-called metropolitan individuality as a new type of personality, which is impacted by the intensification of “nervous stimulation” and uninterrupted change of external and internal

stimuli (SIMMEL 1903:188). The metropolitan mental life is according to Simmel based rather on intellect than on feelings and it's stimulated by economic interests. Punctuality, calculability, exactness and blasé attitude are the characteristics of modern individuals, who are addicted to time and money. On the basis of the inability to adequately react to the ongoing thrills, impulses and crowds of people, the metropolitan mind became insensible, averse, and reserved. The metropolis leads the people to individualism, which gives them an opportunity to be individual personalities in a positive sense (SIMMEL 1903:189-206).

The escalating nervousness of the city life affects the perception and work of the expressionistic authors as well. We can demonstrate this by looking at the picture *Ich und die Stadt* by Ludwig Meidner and compare it to the work *Scream* by Edvard Munch.

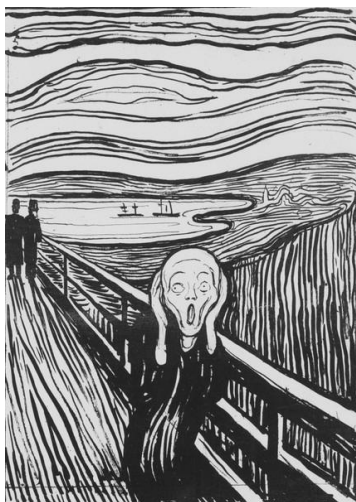


Figure 3: *Scream*



Figure 4: *Ich und die Stadt*

In case of Munch's painting we only can guess why the subject is screaming and the elements of the maybe irritating civilization are present only through the bridge construction or ships, whereas the subject of Meidner's picture is surrounded and seems to be assaulted by the city, its leaning buildings, or smoking chimneys. The sun is also a part of the irritation, because in the matter of fact it is only a balloon. For Meidner the city becomes a place where the catastrophic visions happen, his pictures *Brennende Stadt* (1912) or *Apokalyptische Stadt* (1913) reveal the city as a place of threat and fear.

The demonic appearance of the city can be observed in some expressionistic poems too. Georg Heym's texts *Der Gott der Stadt* and *Die Dämonen der Städte* can serve as examples. In *Der Gott der Stadt*, the city has the face of the biblical God named Baal (PINTHUS 1997: 42). The personified city is surrounded by the atmosphere of evening and darkness, the streets are filled with millions of people diving in an ecstatic dance, the smoke of the chimneys transforms into the smell of incense. Baal's personality is built on aggressive masculinity, he is furious, full of anger and irritated, because he cannot eat and swallow the last houses far away from him. At the end of the poem he is compared to a butcher who is slaughtering the streets and sends fire and fume to destroy and to eat them. But there is no self-articulated subject in Heym's poem. On the contrary Heym's *Die Dämonen der Städte* or the poem *Die Stadt* by Jakob van Hoddis confront the lyrical subject with an irrational feeling of threat. With van Hoddis' words is this inexpressible oppression symbolically compared to an angry or bad wind:

“Darf ich dem Nichts erliegen, darf mich quälen

Der Städte weiten Städte böser Wind?”(PINTHUS 1997:46)



Figure 5: *Brennende Stadt*

In his text *Berlin* Johannes R. Becher also lets the lyrical subject to articulate itself. It represents the anonymous crowd of all people walking through a destroyed city. The landscape reminds us of the apocalyptic cities of Meidner's paintings: we are attacked by noises, contrasts, colours, nature elements and the human desperation. There is only one-way communication between the subject and the personified city. Instead of creating a dialogue, Berlin is metamorphosed into a spider monster, eternal orchestra, battlefield, snake or wormy bone lying in a mud made from humans. This intense, expressive, explosive yet hymnic style is typical not only for Becher but for the expressionism per se. In addition to this the citizens themselves are portrayed with a similar emphases. There are people who live in abandoned dark rooms, stabbed girl is lying on stairs, and old prostitutes are strolling through the early morning. The subject of the poem sighs at this: "*O Stadt der Schmerzen in Verzweiflung düsterer Zeit!*" (PINTHUS 1997: 45)



Figure 6: *Apokalyptische Stadt*

The poem *Die Vorstadt* written by Georg Heym draws pictures of poverty, misery, illness, and beggars, disabled or blind people too. And similar negative connoted images of the city can be seen in Georg Trakl's poem named *Vorstadt im Föhn* (LINDEHAHN 1999:19).

The literary portraying of the sad and miserable aspects of the human life, of the disgust and the negativity is nothing new. Already the art of naturalism at the end of the 19th century was interested in the unflattering reality and was concentrating e.g. on the exposure of poverty especially of the working class. The growth of this social class was a consequence of the process of the industrialization. At the turn of the 20th century the industrial firms like Borsig, Agfa, Siemens or AEG were forced to move their production towards the city periphery because of the capacity reasons. Besides the factory buildings or own electric power stations the companies built housing complexes for their employees – new residential areas such as Siemensstad or Borsigwaldau have been developed in Berlin. Nevertheless the number of flats was insufficient what made real estate speculations possible. Interesting social phenomena of this time were so called “Troddenwohner” – the precarious tenants were occupying new buildings where the mortar had not set. The practice of “Troddenwohnen” was a better option than to be homeless, but the people were not in possession of their own furniture and they had to move very often. At the end of the 19th century the most citizens of Berlin live in tenement barracks (Mietskasernen). The only one room is at the same time a kitchen, a room for living and sleeping, the toilets are outdoors in the staircase or in the backyard. To be able to pay the rent, most families accept another worker with whom they share the only room (MOSER 2004:157-159).

The living conditions are so grim, that Albert Südekum begins his study named *Großstädtisches Wohnungselend* with the motto: “*Man kann einen Menschen mit einer Wohnung gerade so gut töten, wie mit einer Axt.*”¹ (1908:5) Südekum's work is a part of a bigger urban research project carried out between 1904 and 1908. The head of the research group Hans Ostwald publishes a series of 51 books titled *Großstadtdokumente*. The individual parts of the study explore a variety of negative aspects occurring in a city such as criminality, unemployment, prostitution, and single mothers to name only a few. The University of Chicago library bought the whole series in a short time after it had been published. According to Jazbinsek (2001) the work of Ostwald and his co-workers could have been a precursor of the later Chicago school of sociology. Even though the leading

¹ One may kill somebody with a flat as well as with an axe.

German scientists of this time such as Robert Michels, Franz Oppenheimer, Georg Simmel, Ferdinand Tönnies or Max Weber let Oswald's work unnoticed, *Großstadtdokumente* had strong influence on the sociologists of the Chicago school and preceded their own research. For the European urban research of nowadays it maybe could be helpful to return back to the roots, to be inspired by its origins and to use its potential instead of reimporting the ideas from America under the label of the Chicago school of sociology.

Analogously to Ostwald and his team, who used the power of words to describe and to document the reality, Heinrich Zille transforms his observations into paintings, caricatures and photographs. The photos and drawings titled *Hurengespräche*, *Kinder der Straße*, *100 Berliner Bilder* or *Mein Milljöh. Neue Bilder aus dem Berliner Leben* document the daily life of average people and are of great importance for our knowledge and idea of the early 20th century. But from the perspective of the aesthetics Zille's work is rather naturalistic than expressionistic.

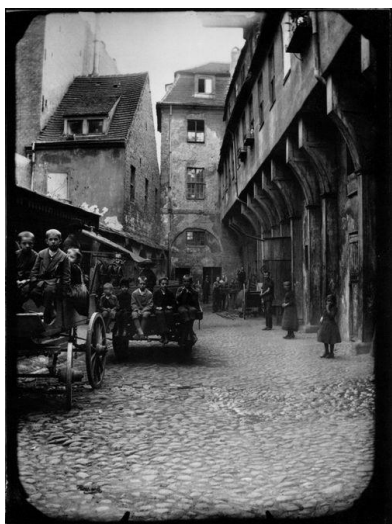


Figure 7: *Hof im Krögel*



Figure 8: *Kartoffelstehen*

Also, the writer Paul Zech draws our attention to the social situation of the average people. He focuses on the working class of the citizens and the terrible environment they

live in. The milieu full of misery – as it is described in the poem *Fabrikstraße Tags* (1911) – is in sharp contrast to the noble form of the sonnet:

*Nichts als Mauern. Ohne Gras und Glas
zieht die Straße den gescheckten Gurt
der Fassaden. Keine Bahnspur surrt.
Immer glänzt das Pflaster wassernaß.*

*Streift ein Mensch dich, trifft sein Blick dich kalt
bis ins Mark; die harten Schritte haun
Feuer aus dem turmhoch steilen Zaun,
noch sein kurzes Atmen wolkt geballt.*

*Keine Zuchthauszelle klemmt
so in Eis das Denken wie dies Gehn
zwischen Mauern, die nur sich besehn.*

*Trägst du Purpur oder Büßerhemd –:
immer drückt mit riesigem Gewicht
Gottes Bannfluch: uhrenlose Schicht. (PINTHUS 1997:55)*

While the first stanza of the poem introduces a street in fabric district that is not very welcoming, the second stanza describes an anonymous worker — his steps are hard, his look is cold, his breath remembers us of the smoke — so we could confuse the man with a chimney. Despite the atmosphere of coldness the walk of the man is attended with the gesture of rage — expressed through the symbols of fire and clenched fist. But neither an open protest nor revolution is the results of his anger. Instead of that the situation of the worker is compared to a prison and the work seems to be his damnation. Metaphysically the individual is facing the work as ever-present peril or punishment from God.

The second poem by Zech titled *Sortiermädchen* (1911) is using the same principle of contrasting the poetic form of terza rima with an unpleasant and critic topic (PINTHUS 1997:55-56). The daily life and work of the female sorting workers described with very expressive images is evoking a sense of existential nausea. We must disagree with Bernd Scheffer, who claims that the expressionistic authors barely talk about social misery, hunger, housing shortage or unemployment (SCHEFFER 1981:24), not only the poems by Zech can prove the opposite.

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner – one of the founders of the expressionistic group called ‘Die Brücke’ – visualizes the interaction between the subject and the city in his work in a different way. Kirchner’s masterpiece of art is the cycle of paintings named *Straßenszenen*, which was created between 1913 and 1915.



Figure 9: *Potsdamer Platz*



Figure 10: *Friedrichstraße*

The pictures like *Potsdamer Platz* or *Friedrichstraße* are miles away from Zille’s naturalistic style or Meidner’s apocalyptic visions, the city appears more sophisticated, extravagant and chichi, the nervousness and city rush is hidden in choice of colours, in shaking and vibrating moves of the paintbrush, in fragments of moving cars, in mysterious

lights of shop windows or street lamps. The prostitute figure shows up repetitively and can be interpreted as a hint at a specific social phenomenon, but this figure has also a demonic and nonhuman character. Kirchner's figures are oversized, disproportional, they remind us of the slim architectonic forms and as metaphors they are pointing to the new aesthetics of the modern technical world. The individuals become part of a crowd, the communication and the eye-to-eye contact are missing and it is possible to speak of depersonalization and materialization of the human. The woman who becomes a commodity is one of the figures that symbolically represent this process (KIM 2002:111-132).

The destiny of alienation

As the paintings by Ludwig Kirchner have indicated, city life goes hand in hand with the so-called alienation — from the natural environment, from the others or from oneself. The German expressionistic cinema notices this specific reality, for example with the film *Metropolis* (1927) directed by Fritz Lang. This cinematic work focuses on the illustration of social conditions of the factory workers who are shown as slaves. Their portrayal is quite different from Zech's style of visualizing, it is more stylized, abstract and schematic as can be seen in the following picture (see Figure 11).



Figure 11: *Metropolis* (scene "Shift")

The personality of the individual vanishes as a consequence of monotone procedures, workflows and masses. The human being alienates from his work and from itself. It becomes a part of a whole entity, which cannot be overviewed anymore. This confusion is symbolically expressed as the “Babel Tower”, where the upper class of Metropolis is living. A powerful antagonism between the paradise world of the higher society and the underground world of the fabric workers is set and the film traces the big social difference. Unfortunately the topic of social inequality transforms into a philosophical dimension rather than in a political one. It is demonstrated that the process of alienation is determined through the separation between the body on the one hand and the mind or soul on the other, what is symbolically presented as the distinction between brain and hand. The main character — the young Freder — tries to overcome this distinction and to re-establish a unity between his father and the workers. The film shows also a big fascination with the technical progress. Compared to the other expressionistic films such as *Cabinet des Dr. Calligari* by Robert Wiene that uses almost a cubistic distorted setting, the film *Metropolis* is more futuristic.



Figure 12: *Metropolis*

The problematics of alienation and isolation of individuals who stay in middle of the anonymity of the city is not only visualized in Kirchner's pictures or in Lang's film but it is

also often thematized in the expressionistic poetry. Alfred Wolfenstein's sonnet *Städter* is built upon a contradiction between the urban housings and the citizens living in there:

*Nah wie Löcher eines Siebes stehen
Fenster beieinander, drängend fassen
Häuser sich so dicht an, daß die Straßen
Grau geschwollen wie Gewürgte sehn.
Ineinander dicht hineingehakt
Sitzen in den Trams die zwei Fassaden
Leute, wo die Blicke eng ausladen
Und Begierde ineinander ragt.
Unsre Wände sind so dünn wie Haut,
Daß ein jeder teilnimmt, wenn ich weine,
Flüstern dringt hinüber wie Grgröhle:
Und wie stumm in abgeschlossener Höhle
Unberührt und ungeschaut
Steht doch jeder fern und fühlt: alleine.* (PINTHUS 1997:45-46)

The first stanza introduces the atmosphere of tightness, the windows are compared to the wholes of a sieve, the gray streets multiply the claustrophobic feeling and the alliteration in the fourth verse uses the phoneme /g/ which creates the impression of gagging. In the second stanza the claustrophobic feeling becomes a part of daily life, the people sitting in the trams are metaphorically compared to the face of a building. The motif of the look is a part of this scene, but there is no communication based on the eye contact. The look is totally empty despite the fact that the whole space is loaded with desire. The enjambements used in both strophes correspond with the association of narrow space, linkage or close connection; the last two strophes are avoiding this poetic technique. The third and fourth stanza refer to the isolation of the people who live in rooms their walls are literally thin as a human skin. But despite the fact one can actually hear every noise from the neighbours, everybody feels lonely and abandoned. Wolfenstein's poem seems to be

very close to the experience of our present time, where the modern individuals of the 21st century living in cities can sometimes feel the same way.

There are some more poems which are marked by the everyday life experience and which focus on a variety of motives and sketches of the life in a city. Ernst Stadler's poem *Abendschluss* shows for example a peaceful and quiet evening in the city, however, it is full of dissonances (PINTHUS 1997:47-48). The walk through the city is surrounded by pleasure, joy, laughter and colours. The young salesgirls accompanied by their lovers are leaving the shops and are on their way home. The good mood contradicts the thoughts of the life in the suburbs of the city. The contrast between the beautiful city centre and the dirty and dark peripheries is a reference to the unavoidable social difference and the misery of the real lives of the salesgirls.

In light of the hectic and irritating lives the people try to escape from the city, like in the poem *Der Ausflug* by Alfred Lichtenstein. The mentally and physically devastated subject is impacted by his life in the city: its eyes are "hollow" and "pulped", its hands are "accursed" and "crying", that is why it is trying to relax and to leave the city (PINTHUS 1997:60). Although he finds refuge in the nature, lying on the meadow he observes the sky as "deadly blue". This means, that the escape from the city and return back to nature is not even possible for him, because of the radical alienation he has experienced.

Conclusion

Kurt Pinthus, the publisher of one of the best-known anthologies of the expressionistic poetry named *Menschheidämmerung*, wrote that the lyric poetry always has functioned as a barometer for the state of mind, for psychic movements or social emotions (1997:22-28). The generation of expressionists gives us a great example of how the art can be able to show us the reality, the wildness and chaos of the particular time. Our study has shown how the expressionistic artists reacted to the social changes at the beginning of the 20th century, revealing reactions of desperateness, excitement or desire and how they dealt with the new challenges of modern city life. Many of their works demonstrate a serious social engagement. But the expressive and pathetic way of portraying the unpleasant reality is maybe only a substitute for the real political activity or change. Nevertheless the look into the many social processes and the revealing of the alienation of individuals based on urbanization may help us to understand where we stay nowadays, how we handle to work and to live in the metropolises and what affects our relationships with the city.

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