Between

The Art of Dwelling in Public. Domestic and Public Space in Milena Jesenská's Fashion Reportages of 1920-22 Vienna

Mariaenrica Giannuzzi

Abstract

Drawing on feminist urban studies (Stratigakos 2015, 2008; Blau 2015, 1999; Fitz-Krasny 2019), I revisit the early journalistic work of Milena Jesenská: the fourteen pieces that report from Vienna under siege in the aftermath of WWI for the Czech-language Prague-based periodical *Tribuna*, and yet, in a fashion column. As I argue, these texts illustrate new spaces of dwelling, namely how it is possible to dwell "in public". Jesenská's narratives capture eating habits according to wealth, occupation, class, personal expectations, ideology and gender. Her literary ethnography of 1920s Vienna blurs the public/private divide. Specifically, her texts render the coffeehouse as a site of "fashionable poverty" that allows for the emergence of a new flaneuse, bohemian (and Bohemian), lifestyle. In Jesenská's literary practices, the café becomes an icon of a libertine and decadent life for all, with a radical aesthetic: the obsession with a single idea (self-branding), expensive meals on credit (financial credibility and gift economy), and allegedly promiscuous sexual bonds connotes the coffeehouse as the most liminal of the spatial negotiations.

Keywords

Viennese cofeehouse, New Woman, Red Vienna, Domesticity, Private/public divide, flaneuse.

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The Art of Dwelling in Public. Domestic and Public Space in Milena Jesenská's Fashion Reportages of 1920-22 Vienna

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Milena Jesenská (1896-1944) is best known as the addressee of Franz Kafka's posthumous *Letters to Milena* (1952), but her journalistic work deserves attention in its own right. Jesenská had a fashion column in the Czech newspaper *Tribuna* (1920-1922) that covered urban culture in Central Europe. She wrote for the column from Vienna, where she had moved after marrying Ernst Pollak in 1918 and after being disinherited by her conservative and influential father (see Steenfatt 2002). She used the opportunity to report on fashion to offer critical observations on a wide variety of contemporary phenomena, current books, personalities, and places of modern urban life, such as city-types, the woman-concierge, the shop window, the café, etc. While seemingly apolitical, the column became a covert social critique, dealing with urban segregation and the consequences of inequality under the label of fashion. It was not uncommon at the time for "female" journalists to use the fashion column for social commentary and as a springboard for their literary careers: Elsa Herzog (writing for the *Berliner Tageszeitung*), Anita Daniel (publishing in *Die Dame*), Johanna Thal and Stephanie Kaul (writing for *Die Dame* and *Uhu*), Helen Grund (writing about fashion for *Die Frankfurter Zeitung* and other publications), to name a few. It was not common, however, to use the fashion column to inscribe socialist or even communist views. As Lucyna Darowska has documented in her 2012 biography, Jesenská had embraced radical political practices long before the Czech Communist Party launched a (dubious) internal investigation into her affiliation with Western intelligence services; and long before she began organizing Jewish exiles from the occupied city of Prague.

Exemplary feminist studies such as Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1990) address how literature in general, and the novel in particular, contributes to segregation, i.e. the confinement of women in the modern apparatus of the household, by focusing on processes of "domestication," including reading at home. Research rooted in urban studies, however, has reclaimed "the domestic" as a set of practices for generating affects between the intimate and the foreign, home and environment (cf. Stratigakos 2015, 2008; Blau 2015, 1999; Fitz-Krasny 2019). According to recent feminist literature, the category of domesticity[1] can appreciate spheres of autonomy that are neither the family nor the party, for it also interrogates the role of domestic labor in a variety of urban sites, that is, the labor invested to produce the affect-machine that is a house.

Drawing on the latter body of literature, in this contribution, I offer a narrative map of *four sites of the domestic outside "the house"*: (1).communal kitchens, (2).coffeehouses, (3).grand hotels and (4).thresholds. These sites are extensively described by Jesenská in her fashion reportages for *Tribuna* (1920-1922) along with other places such as the beach and the household that, as I argue, do not become new sites of domesticity because they do not rearrange social habits around dining substantially, while the four sites proposed do rearrange the art of dwelling after the First World War, precisely, as an art of living (dining) in public. As a consequence, the four sites make visible the presence of women in the public space as new forms of domesticity emerge, displacing domestic labour to a variety of new sites that maintain, develop, produce and reproduce the creativity of writers.

[1] A vast literature on "domesticity" has emerged in history and the social sciences. Relevant examples include: Fraiman, Susan, *Extreme Domesticity: a View from the Margins*, Columbia University Press, 2017; Michael Rembis, *Disabling Domesticity,* Palgrave Macmillan, 2017; Brigitte Van Tiggelen, et al. *Domesticity in the Making of Modern Science,* Palgrave Macmillan Ltd, 2016; Pratt, Geraldine, and Victoria Rosner, eds., *The Global and the Intimate: Feminism in Our Time,* Columbia University Press, 2012; Boym, Svetlana, *Architecture of the off-Modern,* Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture, 2008; Cooper, Alix, *Inventing the Indigenous: Local Knowledge and Natural History in Early Modern Europe,* Cambridge University Press, 2007; Rice, Charles, *The Emergence of the Interior: Architecture, Modernity, Domesticity,* Routledge, 2007; Heynen, Hilde, *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial Productions of Gender in Modern Architecture,* Taylor & Francis, 2005; Schabas, Margaret, and Neil De Marchi, eds., *Oeconomics in the Age of Newton,* Duke University Press, 2003.

As I show, of all sites presented, Jesenská portrays the house as a site of impossibility and, on the opposite side, the coffeehouse as a site of possibility and "fashionable poverty" and home, in which the *flaneuse* or bohemian (and Bohemian) lifestyle can be embraced as a new lifestyle that challenges segregated forms of living. The coffeehouse is not only a cross-gender meeting place, but we will soon see a point of contact between classes, as it hosts the entrepreneurial practices of the immigrant writer's self. In Jesenská's literary practices, the café becomes an icon of a libertine and decadent life for all with radical aesthetics. The obsession with a single idea (self-branding), expensive meals on credit (financial credibility and/or gift economy), and allegedly promiscuous sexual relations connoted the coffeehouse as the most interesting of urban eateries.

1. The Household

Giulia Palladini has studied the transformations in the ways in which women performed domestic labor in Vienna. Drawing on the action-research of the Viennese urbanist and curator Elke Krasny, Palladini argues that the mobility of a massive domestic labor force at the end of the nineteenth century created a new social group in which the identity of the *flâneuse* was added to the negative figurations of women in the public spaces such as the hysterics, the maids, and the prostitutes. The public sphere of male creativity, instead, relied on rhetorics of staged mobility, unpredictability, and freedom as intrinsic qualities of public life – Baudelaire's *The Painter of Modern Life* being emblematic of these rhetorics – as opposed to the safety, the routine, and the stability of domestic life. It also relied on the supply of a massive domestic labor force that was «ironically enough, constituted primarily by women on the move: persons who had left their homes to work as domestics in other people's houses in the city» (Palladini 2009: 5). It is this mass of rural migrants who maintained "the private" above all. No less familiar is the unpaid domestic labor that women have performed in their own homes, during their supposed "free time": a work of reproduction (or art?) that, at least since the 1960s, feminist activists and theorists such as Silvia Federici and the *International Wages for Housework Campaign*, or artists such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles, author of the 1969 *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*, have made visible and addressed as a crucial political issue, in society as well as in art. In light of this, I ask how Milena Jesenská's early work can be interpreted as domestic art: acts of literary homemaking.

In "The Household and Overalls" (Jesenská 2003: 73-76), for instance, Jesenská discusses how domestic labour might look in the future. If "a

woman's place is in the kitchen," the question overall is: whose kitchen? An ironic praise of "the American housekeeping" encodes the answer. Such reflections indeed fall under the rubric of "fashion," although Jesenská does not necessarily avoid sarcasm where she is at pains to show why:

> If in this column, headed Fashion, if I were to report only on the most recent developments, from winter to summer and from summer to winter, I would soon bore myself and you as well. We are not, after all, so pathetic as to think constantly only about what new pleat, what new color, what new skirt fashion has brought into the world. We are concerned not only with modern, but also with attractive clothing, which is not always the same thing. We are concerned with everything connected to clothes and with all relations between clothes and life. For this reason, I would like to write here about everything (in addition to news about all sorts of developments in clothing) that concerns fashion even only remotely and yet concerns us very closely. Today, for example, I want to tell you something about American housekeeping. (71)

The piece is very amusing. It goes on to gently mock the sentimental importance attached to «every jar of preserve and every parquet floor» (73) that wives and worn-out servants devote to domestic objects and surfaces. These are sarcastically defined as «the highest achievements of life» (*ibid*.); that the stove gleams like a mirror. In America, instead, housekeepers do not attend the stove, they use the slow cooking pot. They make use of «a delightful roller-brush on a pole» instead of scrubbing brushes; of «a vacuum cleaner instead of our dirty rugs» (74). Consequently, in America women do have time to read a book, or to dress properly. The American dream appears as fantastic, but it is also a figure of critical thinking. In this sense it addresses an ideal site of agency in which someone would actually have time to care about fashion in the first place. Therefore, the household is NOT a new site of the domestic. It needs a vast utopian rethinking, but a first try in this direction in fact displaces the project too far away (in America, in the American dream). Thus, we might conclude that for Jesenská and for us the house is the zero point of dwelling in public at this historical junction.

2. Communal Kitchens

By carving out a lens to magnify socially stratified ways of procuring and consuming food during a food-crisis, Jesenská begins a literary

ethnography of the city that unfolds over two years. As she observes in the first of her fashion columns, the article "What People Eat in Vienna," current dining habits include attending communal kitchens. Communal kitchens had been among the objects of vast socialist building initiatives commonly named "Red Vienna" (1919-1934). Best known for its housing programs, this radical municipal project also entailed comprehensive social improvements that included health care, education, child care, and cultural reform efforts[2].

For Jesenská, «most ordinary mortals eat in the so-called communal kitchens. There are of various kinds – for journalists, artists, academics, clerks, and ordinary people; […] they all stink unbearably of sauerkraut and cheap grease» (Jesenská 2003: 49). Frequented by a crowd with great hopes but small salaries, communal kitchens do offer much more than what one could cook at home for the same six Austrian crowns, but they also offer a strategic standpoint to observe how urban social partitions shift during political crises. The independence of Hungary after WWI had largely cut off Austria's food supply (Hayes 2003: 47) and Viennese bureaucrats were the worst hit by the food crisis, since they were not equipped to take up working-class jobs and could not avoid funding the expensive attires required by their profession (Janik-Toulmin 1973): «Either [they] do not have enough money to eat decently or enough courage not to eat at all» (Jesenská 2003: 50). And «if they are going to wear shoes, they cannot eat that month; or if they are going to eat, must walk on tiptoe through the mud» (*ibid.*). Such impoverishment was not just material, nor transient, since it also pointed to a loss of respectability, influence, and legitimacy once white-collar employees were no longer on the imperial payroll.

The group was tied up in unsustainable conventions, such as those underlined by urban historian Despina Stratigakos who argues that, according to the conventions of the time, professional women who dined and worked in public were often confused with prostitutes (Stratigakos 2008: 53-96; also, Smith 2013). To avoid these embarrassing – if not exhausting – situations, wealthy women began to challenge what people associated with dining and working in public, especially by organizing all-women places.[3] If Stratigakos's study of Berlin posed the problem of proper abodes

[2] See Duma-Lichtenberger 2017.

[3] For an historical account of women's elitist participation in the editorial market, see Krechel 2015.

for professional women increasingly revolving around newly organized, women-run and women-built, architecture (Stratigakos 2008), in the same vein, Eve Blau observed how the city of Vienna went through the most ambitious project of social housing in Europe (Blau 1999) that redefined both the profile of "KK Vienna" (*Königlich und Keiserlich*, royal and imperial) and the question of a woman's place, once communal kitchens became the mark of socialist democracy on the city and dining "out" the mark of progress, as the bourgeois household had failed to provide affordable and desirable space to prepare for an active life.

3. Coffeehouses

After communal kitchens, the coffeehouse is the second literary site that expands the household absorbing the city inside the realm of the domestic. The reconstitution of the urban texture that occurred in parallel with the establishment of interwar republics is not only seen through narratives of communal kitchens, but also and emblematically through Jesenská's narrative of the informal and unwritten rules of the coffeehouse. According to Jesenská the coffeehouse is the public/private interface *par excellence*. It is an institute halfway between the communal kitchen and the grand hotel, between the household and the literary club. The coffeehouse is «a neutral place for conversation» (64).

As Nancy Fraser theorizes, the neutrality of a theater for conversation informs a vision of politics in which space is unmarked and «political participation is enacted through the medium of talk» (Fraser 1990: 57). Considered in this light, Jesenská's presentation of the coffeehouse reinforces this deliberative idea of politics. Her "neutral place for conversation" is, ironically, a political theater of plots and intrigues rather than a stage for rational and well-engineered resolutions to conflicts via speech:

> People used to meet in the forums, in the monasteries and in the salons. Today, there are no forum or monasteries for this purpose, or salons with this atmosphere. Today, there are cafés. I do not mean those elegant cafés where mothers take their daughters on Sunday afternoons and where one goes to drink hot chocolate or eat a few pieces of cake. Nor do I mean those that during the day are tired, dim and sleepy, that hang a red lamp on the gable and come to life in the evening with a band, a few girls wearing make-up and a few "soldiers of fortune". (Jesenská 2003: 64)

In Jesenská's portrait of the coffeehouse as a turbulent and transgressive form of domesticity, the privilege of emerging from the anonymous mass of the metropolis belongs distinctively to the small kingdoms of "literary" elites. As Jesenská's map of "literary" coffeehouses evinces: «known far and wide, known to the entire city, [they are] the meeting places of the intellectual and bohemian world, such as the Prague 'Union,' the Vienna 'Central,' the Berlin 'des Westens,' the Parisian 'Montmartre'" (*ibid.*)». These cafés had served as "communal homes" (66) during the war; some continued to warm their visitors up with cups of Turkish coffee, or to amuse them with scenes of *comédie humaine*:

> In the café, one writes, makes corrections, converses. In the café, all family scenes are played out; in the café, one cries and rails against life. In the café, one eats on credit; in the café, the most reckless financial transactions take place. In the café, one lives, one idles and the hours pass. (*Ibid.*)

This and similar excerpts actively construct a bohemian lifestyle in which class divisions are suspended, in favor of a new form of the domestic. All subjects trade and gamble as they see fit. In contrast to the aspirational universality of the general café, the "literary" coffeehouses favor the socialization of cultural elites in unique ways, as these meeting places of the intellectual and bohemian world «gather a population that is made of "capitalists of the spirit"» (65). "Capitalists of the spirit" are authors for whom the division between revolutionary and bourgeois is inaccurate: for «insofar as a person is a pioneer of a new idea, insofar he has a new thought or inspiration, every person is a revolutionary» (*ibid.*). New divisions based on gender, generation, and ethnicity replace the class divide, as creativity (not property) is the specific asset of literary elites.

Challenging the association between revolutionary ideals and class, Jesenská constructs a new revolutionary interior, one capacious enough to host the business of literature as well as socialist demands. As Jesenská ventures, all writers can be remembered as revolutionaries if they keep creating according to one idea: «those who have more, don't have any, or at least, any of their own» (*ibid.*). The expectation to think and work according to "only *one idea*" can be read as a practice of capitalist self-branding. This process facilitates inclusion of parvenu writers. It is a mutual interest in literature that constitutes membership in the coffeehouse as a new site of the domestic.

In the description of the "capitalist of the spirit" Jesenská articulates the syntax of literary flânerie.[4] As a trope of modernism, from Apollinaire to Benjamin and Krakauer, the flaneur drifts through the city without purpose, thus aesthetically, enjoying phantasmagoric sights of the city. Jesenská refashions the type by exploring on the one hand, the language of rumors and tacit judgement that comes with the dining halls, on the other hand, illegal ways of dining. Once again, her work redesigns the limits of the domestic, without abstracting from the needs of the body, but grounding the urban experience in these natural needs.

If in "The Café" (Jesenská 2003: 64-66) we encounter nostalgic and sentimental tones to present a site of the domestic that blurs private/public distinctions because all writers must commodify their lives and ideas, whether they write at home or at a public dining table, the celebratory tones were not present, instead, in the article "What People Eat in Vienna" (Jesenská 2003: 49-53) that both expands on the invasive sexual politics in the café and surveys alternative dining options for the wealthy, and yet, critically. This text is more attuned to social dynamics and less inclined to mystify the "literary" as it presents the interlocking factors of gender and credit at their tightest correlation. Here Jesenská foregrounds the gender divide in the coffeehouse. In contrast to the neutral deliberative vision of political speech, public discourse becomes invasive through frequent unspoken assumptions. The fact that "everyone knows" about the private life of the bohemian (and Bohemian) intellectuals once they step in the café comes with a cost: women's loss of privacy. This goes hand-in-hand with an elaborate web of gifts and meals on credit, according to which «it is sometimes cheaper to have an expensive dinner on credit than to have a cheap meal and pay»:

[4] In 1985 Janet Wolff called for a feminist sociology of modernity to shake the ideological assumptions behind the masculine and contemplative *dérive* of the modern flaneur. In the wake of this intervention, a vast literature began to survey the invisible figure of the flaneuse. This was supposed to erode the masculine right to represent the public in the 19th century city (Wolff 1985; D'Souza-McDonough 2006; García 2011). The framework of feminine *flânerie*, although important for understanding social change in Modernist cities, actually downplayed the outspoken writerly and political practices with which committed Modernist writers like Jesenská experimented. These practices included being a member of the communist party, helping to coordinate Jewish emigration from Prague, and aggressively reporting street violence, as Lucyna Darowska reconstructs in *Widerstand und Biografie* (2012).

> As far as the women are concerned, everyone knows when and who first brought them here. It is known with whom they were unfaithful to their first lovers and if they are getting divorced, why and because of whom. They move from table to table and see their former lovers and husbands every day at different tables and with other women. […] Well then, one can dine even here and what's more – one can dine here on credit. The waiter, either Anton or Franz, is always here – and he knows his poets and critics and how much can be expected from them on the first of the month. And according to that, one can dine on credit – on cheese, or today corned beef, even boiled eggs and sardines. Of course, everything is terribly expensive. Yet it is sometimes cheaper to have an expensive dinner on credit than to have a cheap meal and pay – a mystery not everyone will understand. (Jesenská 2003: 51)

The contradiction – or "mystery" – does not appear clearly enunciated, but it emerges through a rather cautious use of codified feminism (cf. "A Few Old-Fashioned Comments About Women's Emancipation," Jesenská 2003: 115-119). The "mysterious" ability to have expensive meals on credit in the café suggests, in fact, dependency on the bill-settling male patrons, according to whose creditworthiness women's consumption possibilities are circumscribed. Eating on credit reinforces a binary system of gender based on who can sustain debt and who cannot. Although writers gendered as male or female can all dine on credit in theory, "women" receive unequal treatment because public discourse intrudes on their privacy. As Jesenská suggests, due to the rumors, everyone knows who their patron is; everyone knows when and who has first brought them here. The unspoken rules Jesenská alludes to in fact dictate that women cannot be members of this democratic society without a man to endorse them. Men scrutinize women, and then confuse severe scrutiny – that is in fact gossip – with ethical judgement. Their tentative love affairs are the object of conversation, perhaps more than their works.

4. Grand Hotels

The third literary site of domesticity after communal kitchens and coffeehouses is the grand hotel. Although public building initiatives had tried to solve the problem of food insecurity with communal kitchens, white-collar workers, veterans, immigrants, and all those without a recognizable identity – but with expanded homes, as large as the city – remained destitute, while Vienna's wealthy could eat and drink to their fill. As Jesenská reports further in "What People Eat in Vienna", «the black market was extremely well-stocked. Hotels and restaurants, too, offered simply every-

thing. One had just to be posh and discrete»; to order illegally stocked or rare food, the visitor of the restaurant at the grand hotels had to act according to a secret script, a script Jesenská reveals to the readers:

> In every large restaurant in the center of the city (the Opernrestaurant, Imperial, Schönermozartrestaurant, Hopfner and dozens of others) one can get poultry and roasts, cooked in various ways, excellent soups, splendid cakes and pastries. The menu innocently offers only what is permitted. When you are making your choice, however, the waiter bends over you and whispers mysteriously: 'Will that be Hungarian sauerkraut?' Sauerkraut! You are startled and ask: 'What's that?' 'Oh, something delicious,' he answers condescendingly and compassionately. If you have to ask what it is, you are not very 'posh', my dear; if you were, you would have known. 'Well then, bring me sauerkraut,' you decide. A moment later, with an undulating motion he carries over a plate that looks like a heap of sauerkraut. Under the heap, however, there really is always 'something delicious', for example, roast pork! Or: roast veal! Wiener Schnitzel! A braised chop! A piece of chicken! A leg of goose! A haunch of venison! Miracles! (50)

If the exemplary coffeehouse-type was "the capitalist of the spirit," the grand-hotel-type is "the wartime profiteer". Targeted consumer of these delicious meals on the black-market, the wartime profiteer is a figure of sly, clever, cunning, sometimes "bloodthirsty cunning" intellect; but also, inevitably shallow, "money-minded," and strenuously concentrated on the task of generating more money. As she more extensively reports in two critical articles, "The New Big-City Type" and "The New Big-City Type II," this profiteer «yawn[s] during the good and guffaw[s] during the bad plays»; why? she asks – because «he is someone who takes his luxury to impossible extremes of ostentation» (60). Ostentation lies at the heart of a secret script at the dining table and it is fostered by ambition. Ambition is an affect that often springs from «a bizarre, unsuspected and surprising source: not a longing to go forward, but a fear of what lies behind» (61). Often encapsulated in some bizarre personal anecdote, the fear of poverty is the greatest drive of great statesmen, «perhaps even that of Napoléon Bonaparte» (*ibid.*). With no hesitation, Jesenská defines the new group of "wartime profiteers" moved by ambitions well-rooted in fear as the most successful among the wealthy, as «the mushrooms that spring up after a catastrophe» (60). In these articles, they are gendered as "men". Although financial rapaciousness seems to be quite normalized today, in Jesenská's perspective it is an attribute of masculinity. Except, it always recalls a di-

alectical opposite in the hungry but creative bohemian whose will is not completely absorbed by the Sisyphean task of accumulating capital.

5. Thresholds/The Streets

A fourth site of literary domesticity along Jesenská's fashion reportages is a threshold rather than a place, one that embodies exclusionary rhetorics and revolves around the presence of undesired humans in the public space. As the pedagogist Bertha von Bülow wrote in 1912 (under a male pseudonym), since professional women had occupied urban spaces of work and leisure, «the creature that we used to call an 'old maid' has ceased to exist» (Ehrenpreis, 26-27, in Stratigakos 2008: 12). As Stratigakos observes in the context of the development of all-women architectural companies, building initiatives in Berlin «challenged negative stereotypes of the New Woman, such as her self-defeating naïveté that abounded in contemporary German-language novels, social and scientific tracts, and popular magazines» (*ibid.*). The most relevant of these stereotypes is "the creature": the spinster, the parasitic, old maid, who lives tightly circumscribed in a domestic world she can only overcome through imagination. This creature was once abused or an unsuccessful rebel in her youth – as Stratigakos finds in Gabriele Reuter's 1895's novel, *From a Good Family*. But problematic rhetorics of the "creature" filter into Jesenská's reportages, too. The creature demarks the limit of the domestic. If fashionable poverty – even hunger – is the mark of communal kitchens, coffeehouses, and paid-for meals in grand hotels, rhetorics of the creature disentangle the writer's voice from the indistinct mass of the starving humans. Here the basic meaning of the slur *Kreatur* in the German language—a dispossessed, *monsterized*, and dehumanized person – tends to shift toward identifying a condition of existential fragility.

Signaled by the use of *existence* in Jesenská's Czech text,[5] the German

[5] Milena Jesenská used the term "existence" translated in English as "creatures," Cf. «Nezměnily se však jen základní, světové poměry; změnily se všechny částečky světa, všechny drobnosti, všechny tváře měst a ulic. Zde ubylo, zde přibylo. Vynořily se existence, o nichž všichní víme a o nichž vlastně svět ještě neví, poněvadž nebyly oficiálně konstatovány. Jsou zde. Šinou se mezi námi a jsme-li na chviličku překvapeni a ptáme-li se: „Odkud se zde vzali", odpovídáme si: „Inu, válkou". A tak osamozřejměny, zůstávají mezi námi zdomácněny, už se usazují, žijí, tyjí, zabírají přitomnost, mají budoucnost.» (Jesenská 2016: 23-25). Thank to Annette Kraus for having verified the original texts in Czech and the most frequent translations of "existence" including "*Kreatur*" and "creature" in

Kreatur that inspired the English translation (creature) is an uncomfortable signifier. "Creaturely life" means a difficult existence on the edge of animalization, illness, or madness. It is existence deprived of choice or will. Historians of German Modernism have devoted ample space to such an ontological partition of worthy and unworthy existence and it is emphasized through the biopolitical question whether bodies without will can still be considered human.[6] In Jesenksá's text, however, creaturely life gains a more specific attribute. The creaturely stigma marks a persistent exposure to hunger as an effect of catastrophic events such as total war. This following passage exemplifies the torsion Jesenská imputes to the powerful and exclusionary narrative of *die Kreatur*:

> Creatures have emerged about whom we all know and about whom the world does not yet know, because they have not been officially identified. They are here. They edge among us and when we are surprised for a moment and ask ourselves, 'how did they get here' we have to answer, 'the war, of course'. (Jesenská 2003: 53)

There is something ontological in the way Jesenská describes the creature in these phrases. We share the impression that some inhabitants of the city cannot, by design, experience urban space in terms of creative self-realization. These "creatures" are banned from the house of pleasure; their haunting presence conceals a watershed dividing fashionable from unfashionable poverty. They are *still unidentifiable*: «They have not been officially identified; They edge among us». These expressions reflect a preoccupation over what identity becomes under extremely harsh conditions, revealing the traditional oscillation of *Kreatur* between the principle of self-generation and external creation or *generatio equivoca* (produced by

the dictionaries of the first half of the 20th century at the national library in Prague.

[6] As an example, Helmut Lethen envisions the trope of the creature as constituted by literary renderings of "war-cripples" and criminals (Lethen 2002). Others, like Eric Santner, prefer to interpret the frequent occurrences of the figure in terms of an ontological vulnerability of the human in general (Santner 2000), or, as Sigrid Weigel has it, as an imprint of Benjamin's rejection of the Schmittian theory of secularization (Weigel 2013). Giorgio Agamben takes yet another view: the creature signals an inscription of the animal within the human in the state of siege (Agamben 2004).

an external agent).[7] Therefore, creatures that "edge" through the familiar and cannot be officially identified represent, in fact, a structural uncertainty: the threshold of self-determination after which the individual is completely created by social conditions. In other words, creatures are the failed self-entrepreneurs. This peculiar condition involves being unrecognizable in the public space.

A mechanism of deferral structures Jesenská's description of urban creatures. It occurs as the triangulation of *we*, *the world*, and *they*, as in the excerpt above that situates the narrative voice. Paraphrasing Jesenská's words: we have an esoteric knowledge of the creatures because the world has not identified them yet. They infiltrate and threaten our space, the familiar space of customary relations. The writer embraces the task of identifying creatures on behalf of a world in apparent denial, while differentiating herself from this symbol of exclusion. Hers is a perspective from the liminal space between the world and the creature. Gendering the creature as homecoming soldier, or ungendered disabled and traumatized bodies, Jesenská deconstructs worrisome identifications with the creature by twisting the figure upside down. The safety she gains for women in public translates into another stigma upon other bodies. These must be the domesticated carriers of difference giving the writer the privilege of unencumbered deliberation in public.

The literary displacement of the household outside the bourgeois household develops over the course of her fashion column by balancing entertainment and critique. «Bathing Costumes» (57-60) or «Superficial Small Talk About a Serious Subject» (98-101) indulge in more frivolous tones, although the levity preludes darker affects, like those encountered with the recursive manifestation of hunger. What ultimately defines the

[7] In 19th-century lexicography, whether *Creatur* is a natural or a supernatural state of being, created by itself (self-generated), or created by God (*generatio equivoca*), is still a bone of contention. Even contemporary usage registers the same ambiguity of the modern idea that oscillates between a created and increate entity. Contemporary uses of "*Kreatur*," – or, according to the DWB, "*Creatur*" https://woerterbuchnetz.de/?sigle=DWB#1 – complicate the modern ambiguity even more, adding on the entry of *a human thing without will or value*; a man who is indebted with another, to whom he owes his fortune is a *Kreatur* (https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Kreatur). Thereby, dictionaries show a torsion of the meaning of this derogatory expression from the theological to the economic realm, while implicitly maintaining that creatures are the object of a "ban" and certainly not capable of full citizenship.

creatures in Jesenská's eye is this traumatic incapacity to become satiated. It is often confused with poverty, «but there is a border between poverty and hunger; […] A poor person has a small, secure capital. A hungry person has nothing but uncertainty, or the certainty of hunger […] A hungry person is not able to satiate his hunger» (cf. Jesenská, 2003: 104-105). Hunger can change the personality forever, Jesenská argues. It gives identity.

The poor who Jesenská observes from behind the doors of the coffeehouse does not eat with the *flaneurs*' attitude. The poor invest all their belongings in a single, luxurious, meal. Or, they eat rare delicacies immediately, standing at the threshold of the butchery (cf. "Dance over the Abyss," 76-80). The hungry poor neither drift from communal kitchens to grand hotels in order to gain anthropological insights, as Jesenská's own point of contact with the figure of the bohemian *flaneuse* suggests, nor do they conduct typically contemplative and masculine philosophical practices that de-identify the *flaneur* from the realm of commodity (Benjamin 1986; Wolff 1985; Garcia 2011).

Conclusions

Jesenská's reportages intervene in a wide range of debates that characterize poverty and violence in the Czech *Protektorat*. But Jesenská also weaponizes a woman's supposed interest in fashion – especially early on in her career as a journalist – to conjure wider transformations in women's rights and public morals. Under the innocuous label of "fashion," Jesenská often draws attention to the spatial partitions of the city. She emphasizes new liminal spaces between private and public such as dining tables, the black market, communal kitchens, coffeehouses, and grand hotels. These are new spatial partitions that reflect emerging forms of autonomy. Dining habits such as attending communal kitchens, sojourning in grand hotels or even dining at home – if the house turns out to be "home" – all give us a trajectory to think paradoxically about forms of domesticity that become public, as they emerge with the ascent of women in the professions. As I have shown in my close reading of a few reportages by Jesenská, these new sites of the domestic both empowered and contained women's autonomous construction of the public space.

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