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## **Karl Valentin's illogical subversion: issues arising from *Das Aquarium* and Liesl Karlstadt's *Verein der Katzenfreunde***

Valentin Ludwig Fey was born on 4 June 1882 in the Munich suburb of Au, effectively the only child of an artisan-class family – his sister and two brothers all died in early childhood before Valentin Ludwig was even six months old. Valentin himself only narrowly survived a childhood encounter with diphtheria (all of which, perhaps unsurprisingly, contributed to his ever-increasing hypochondria<sup>1</sup>), but he went on to become Karl Valentin, arguably the most famous German comedian and cabaret performer of his generation.

### **Popular Entertainment in Munich**

The popular entertainment scene in Munich in the early years of the twentieth century was a vibrant mix of the traditional *Volkssänger* culture, *Salonhumoristen* and the more overtly political cabaret established by figures like Frank Wedekind and frequented by the Bohemian intellectual community. *Volkssänger* is a notoriously difficult word to translate in this context. Literally meaning ‘folksinger’ (the term preferred by Robert Eben Sackett in his book *Popular Entertainment, Class, and Politics in Munich, 1900-1923*<sup>2</sup> it is important not to equate these performers with the agrarian working-class amateur singers who acted as the informants of the great folksong collectors such as Cecil Sharpe or Sabine Baring-Gould in England, nor with the professional musicians who emerged from the ‘folk revival’ of the 1950s and 1960s. The *Volkssänger* was a popular

entertainer who ‘came from the common people (...) lived among them and knew what troubled their hearts’<sup>3</sup> and a more useful comparison would be with the artists of the British Music Hall.

The tradition began in the back rooms of pubs and had been centered around music and song, but by the end of the nineteenth century it was becoming sketch-based, or at least ‘patter’-based. What was distinctive about the *Volkssänger* in Munich was that their work was distinctly Bavarian and politically conservative, nostalgic for a more rural Bavarian past.<sup>4</sup> The *Salonhumoristen* were considered more upmarket, performing in a better class of venue and in formal dress. They are best characterized by Karl Maxstadt, in whose honour the stage names of both Valentin and his long-time co-performer, Liesl Karlstadt, were conceived.<sup>5</sup> Valentin’s uniqueness is that he was able to span all these types of popular entertainment and appeal across the spectrum of popular audience. He was both *Volkssänger* and *Salonhumorist*, whilst also being courted by the political cabaret.

Much of Valentin’s career is characterised by his long-standing stage partnership with Liesl Karlstadt, whom he met in 1911 at the Frankfurter Hof in Munich, where both were performing. They worked together (except for a period in the late 1930s and 1940s following Karlstadt’s nervous breakdown) until Valentin’s death in 1948. Karlstadt (real name Elisabeth Wellano) was also born in Munich, in 1892 and had already a broad theatrical experience as a singer, dancer and actor in thrillers by the time she teamed up with Valentin. For over thirty years the pair dominated the German cabaret scene during its most politically turbulent years with their subversive sketches and monologues,

attacking the conventions of German *Bürgerlichkeit* with biting satire – fighting absurdity with absurdity. For comedians with such obvious anti-establishment (if not explicitly left-wing) leanings and anti-militaristic sympathies, these were potentially dangerous times. Although political and social comment is often implied, rather than openly stated, in their work, J. M. Ritchie makes the point that Valentin ‘was an outspoken pacifist, anti-militarist and anti-capitalist and was able despite censorship and police control to express these sentiments in his amusing sketches, though even he had trouble with the authorities because of his stage utterances.’<sup>6</sup>

### **Valentin and Nazism**

After 1933, however, when many members of Germany’s artistic and intellectual community fled the country for self-imposed exile or suffered even worse fates (such as Erich Mühsam who was killed in 1934<sup>7</sup>), Valentin chose to remain and continued to enjoy a successful career under Hitler, one of his greatest fans. Whilst still capable of criticizing the regime, Valentin found a way of accommodating himself within the Third Reich, in contrast to Weiss Ferdl, the other famous Munich *Volkssänger* of the time with whom Valentin is often contrasted. Weiss Ferdl’s act was fundamentally populist, often pandering to the worst conservative and right-wing instincts of his audience, yet he was not apolitical and would openly criticize the Nazis as well as support them. He spent a number of short spells in Dachau for his troubles,<sup>8</sup> a dubious privilege that Valentin managed to avoid. This is ironic since Weiss Ferdl joined the NSDAP in 1937, resulting in his being banned from performing by the denazification authorities after the war,

whereas Valentin never joined the party, although later admitting that he would have done – out of fear – if he had been asked to do so.<sup>9</sup>

We can speculate on why and how Valentin not only survived, but continued to thrive in Nazi Germany,<sup>10</sup> but his enduring popularity probably ensured that he was never in any real danger (even if his brazen refusal to sell Hitler his extensive collection of photographs of old Munich seems a little reckless<sup>11</sup>), as long as he generally behaved himself. And so he did, although his relationship with the regime was not entirely unproblematic and involved several brushes with the censors. Neither, as Murray Hill rightly asserts, did Valentin purge his work of political satire, as can be seen from the monologue *'Der Vereinsrede'* ('Speech to the Membership', recorded in 1938) which unapologetically parodies the speeches of Goebbels.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, Valentin's relationship with the Nazis is complex and occasionally contradictory, but his ability to remain unaligned to any official political party was undoubtedly a key factor in enabling him to continue his work without too much interference.

We should be wary of being too critical of Valentin's decision to remain and prosper in Nazi Germany. In 1933 Valentin was firmly into middle-age and he may have felt too old to go into exile or nervous about abandoning his significant following in Germany to attempt to start his career all over again. He may simply have been reluctant to leave his beloved Munich. Either way Valentin, very much like the character of Galileo in Brecht's *Leben des Galilei*, chose to remain and survive. As Michael Schulte says, in spite of his

complete distaste for National Socialism, 'Valentin was anything but a resistance fighter. He was too frightened for that.'<sup>13</sup>

But it was in the period of political and economic uncertainty in the years immediately after the war that Valentin found himself out of fashion. Unable to find regular radio work, he was forced back onto the road, reunited with Liesl Karlstadt for a final set of performances, dying on February 9<sup>th</sup> 1948 in relative poverty.

### **Early career**

Valentin's early career was marked by a series of false starts and interruptions, in contrast with the success that would follow. In May 1902 he entered the Münchener Varietéschule, a training ground for *Volkssänger* and *Salonhumoristen* for the burgeoning cabaret and vaudeville scene in Munich, under the direction of Hermann Strebel. By October of the same year Valentin had secured his first professional engagement in Nuremberg. By the time he arrived there, however, he found that Strebel, who had already been in Nuremberg a month, had been performing Valentin's material, word for word.<sup>14</sup> We should be wary of reading too much into what was probably common practice amongst popular entertainers,<sup>15</sup> but it forced Valentin to write a whole new act for his debut performance. This he did and was an unqualified success.

The death of his father shortly afterwards, however, caused him to return to Munich to take over the family business. For the next four years he made occasional appearances on the Munich stage, but his main energies were devoted to the struggling family business

until he was forced to sell up in Autumn 1906. By the following year, after a disastrous attempt to tour as the ‘Musical Fantasist’ Charles Fey with his own invention, the Orchestrion, a multi-instrumental machine, he was penniless.

Then he met with some good fortune, finding lodgings with Ludwig Greiner, who suggested that he make use of his uncommonly lanky physicality, resulting in the establishment of his trade-mark image of ‘elongated boots, a nose of equally absurd length and a tightly-fitting costume which exaggerated his slight, gangling build.’<sup>16</sup> This awareness of physicality and physical appearance became a defining characteristic of Valentin’s work and marked him out from many of his contemporaries. It can be seen also in his choice of Karlstadt as a stage partner (whose physicality was in stark contrast to Valentin’s own) and his use of giants and dwarves to play many of the supporting roles in sketches, such as ‘*Der Christbaumbrettl*’ (‘The Christmas Tree Stand’) and ‘*Der Fotoatelier*’ (‘The Photographer’s Studio’). Valentin’s playfulness and sense of the absurd is physical as much as it is verbal.

At this time Valentin began performing as a *Nachstandler*,<sup>17</sup> the equivalent of what we might today call ‘open-mike’ spots at *Volkssängerlokale* and the more upmarket *Gastwirtschaften*, under the stage name *Skeletgiggerl*,<sup>18</sup> developing material specifically for these venues. ‘*Ich bin ein armer magerer Mann*’ (‘I Am a Poor, Skinny Man’) was written for the former type of venue, whereas ‘*Das Aquarium*’ (‘The Aquarium’) was written for the latter.<sup>19</sup> Valentin’s success bought him to the attention of Josef Durner, the

proprietor of the Frankfurter Hof and from that point on Valentin's career did not look back and his loyalty to Durner remained throughout.

The performance of these sketches marks a critical point in Valentin's career. It could be said that it was in these early monologues that Valentin found his comic voice, establishing a characterisation and performance style that led the Berlin journalist, writer and cabaret performer Kurt Tucholsky to call him *Der Linksdenker*.<sup>20</sup> By this he was primarily referring to Valentin's ability to think in illogical, unconventional and topsy-turvy ways. We should not, however, ignore the political implications of the moniker.

### **Illogic and subversion**

Over the centuries, many theorists have emphasised the importance of incongruity in comedy. Perhaps the earliest example of Incongruity Theory is the statement by Cicero that, 'The most common kind of joke is that in which we expect one thing and another is said.'<sup>21</sup> This idea that jokes spring from a deviation from the expected order certainly seems to fit Valentin's work, where apparently simple statements can lead to highly unexpected conclusions.

More recent Incongruity Theorists have begun to pick up on the sociological importance of this kind of deviation from expectation. Writing in 1968, Anton C. Zijderveld describes jokes as 'deviations from institutionalised meaning structures', and places them in 4 categories:

1. As deviations from the meaning of socio-cultural and political life at large;
2. As deviations from the meaning of language;
3. As deviations from traditional logic;
4. As deviations from traditional emotions.<sup>22</sup>

Two of these categories- those relating to language and logic- are particularly relevant to Valentin's work. Zijderfeld argues that deviations in jokes perform an 'unmasking function' in society:

'[Jokes] show that man's taken-for-granted world is not "normal" and "natural" as he himself often too easily assumes... Many of the justifications and explanations appear to be embellishments and empty ideologies.'<sup>23</sup>

Mary Douglas puts forward a similar argument in *Implicit Meanings* (1976). Stating that, 'All jokes have [a] subversive effect on the dominant structure of ideas',<sup>24</sup> she also suggests an unmasking function: 'The joke... affords opportunity for realising that an accepted pattern has no necessity. Its excitement lies in the suggestion that any particular ordering of experience may be arbitrary and subjective.'<sup>25</sup> However, for Douglas, the subversion in joking is ultimately toothless, because joking is both frivolous and subject to social control: 'Social requirements may judge a joke to be in bad taste, risky, too near the bone, improper or irrelevant. Such controls are exerted either on behalf of hierarchy as such, or on behalf of values which are judged too precious and too precarious to be exposed to challenge.'<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, this means that, 'the joker is not exposed to danger...



He merely expresses consensus. Safe within the permitted range of attack, he lightens for everyone the oppressiveness of social reality...<sup>27</sup>

Zijderveld's conclusions are less certain. Like Douglas, he believes that joking can be used as form of 'social sublimation of discontent and conflict',<sup>28</sup> but he also sees the possibility that it can be genuinely subversive. Pointing to the use of anti-Establishment humour by radical groups like the Dutch provos (like feeding sugar cane to police horses at a protest rally), he argues that joking can be 'an important means of non-violent resistance'.<sup>29</sup>

### **Illogic vs. conservatism**

Arguments about humour as subversion or as containment of subversion are central to Robert Eben Sackett's *Popular Entertainment, Class, and Politics in Munich, 1900-1923*. Based on strong historical research, Sackett compares and contrasts the early careers of Valentin and Weiss Ferdl. His key argument is that the Munich *Volkssänger* played to an economically insecure middle-class audience which, 'lived in fear of the day when they would have to relinquish their last advantages of status and income after a humiliating decline into the working class.'<sup>30</sup> The middle classes dealt with their insecurity by constructing, 'an edifice that was held together by their own widespread need for assurance. Within its walls and underneath its roof, everyone belonged; everyone felt like on "insider" and looked out at the rest of the world as though it were composed of "outsiders".'<sup>31</sup>

According to Sackett, both Valentin and Weiss Ferdl owed their success to providing reassurance to their audience, albeit in radically different ways. Weiss Ferdl represented the insider, reinforcing the audience's beliefs with comedy which, 'mirrored the yearning for a preindustrial way of life, the resentment of the Jews, and the patriotism of Munich's middle class.'<sup>32</sup> Valentin, on the other hand, represented the outsider, by deviating from accepted values: '[H]e made a career out of representing chaos for those in his audience, and whether he was aware of it or not, thereby gave them feelings of superiority... Worried that they were caught on a ladder of social decline, it reassured them to see Valentin on a much lower rung... By laughing, they "punished" Valentin for his failures; grateful for the chance to do so, they rewarded him by coming again and again to watch him fail.'<sup>33</sup>

However, this is where his argument becomes less convincing. Valentin's work is characterised by a gleeful disorder. In *'Das Aquarium'*, for example, he takes nothing for granted, so that even the simplest, most basic linguistic and logical assumptions are challenged. He cannot tell us 'there's a staircase that goes up to the first floor' without telling us that 'it also goes back down again', and further qualifying this with the explanation that, 'it's not the staircase that goes up, we're the ones that go up, *on* the staircase, it's just a figure of speech.' Similarly, he cannot tell us that his fish fell out of the aquarium 'onto the floor' without explaining, 'because in the room where the aquarium is we've got a floor'. There are also delightfully surreal descriptions, like explaining that he did not choose a round aquarium to sit in the corner of his room

because ‘there would have been bits of corner left over’; or that when he overfilled it, the water ‘stuck out over the top of the aquarium’.

Surely audiences might have *enjoyed* this kind of wholesale disruption of language and logic, rather than simply looking down on it as a series of mistakes to be avoided? It seems more plausible to portray Valentin as a celebrator, rather than a denigrator, of illogic, subversion and chaos. From early childhood he was an anarchic character, for example playing havoc on a visit to a farm belonging to relatives:

‘I threw cats into the manure pile, which was located in the farmyard, made the farm dogs rebellious with all conceivable means, mowed down the prettiest garden flowers and the rose patch with the scythe, knocked in the windowpanes, tricked the cows by putting stickers up their noses, pinched the ears of the rabbits they were raising and of the goats with clothespins, and opened the doors to the pig stalls, in spite of being frequently warned that it was forbidden.’<sup>34</sup>

This subversive streak was reflected in the surrealism of much of his early material. A song called ‘*Rezept zum russischen Salat*’ (‘Recipe for Russian Salad’) listed increasingly bizarre ingredients in the salad, including turpentine, cement and two young white mice.<sup>35</sup> ‘*Rezept zum russischen Salat*’ was not a big success, but ‘*Das Aquarium*’ was similarly anarchic; and this routine, performed at the Baderwirt in 1908, was the breakthrough which represented the beginning of Valentin’s success. The success of ‘*Das Aquarium*’ success puzzles Sackett, as it fits uneasily into his argument. He

acknowledges that, 'trying to relate its elements...to specifically middle-class attitudes in turn-of-the-century Munich would be pointless,' and that it is not clear that it allowed Valentin's middle-class audience to feel superior to him.<sup>36</sup>

### **Performance style**

A major part of Sackett's problem is that he concentrates so heavily on broad sociological factors to explain Valentin's success. Clearly, comedians build their reputations on much more than this, not least their performance ability. '*Das Aquarium*' is a comic monologue very much in the same bracket of what we would now call stand-up comedy<sup>37</sup>: self-contained, addressed directly to the audience, and with the primary purpose of provoking laughter. This type of performance involves skills which are complex, multi-faceted and underexplored by academics. The most tangible are those exhibited by any performer: vocal delivery, tone, rhythm, pace; and physicality, stance, facial expression, gesture. Then there is characterisation, which can be ambiguous: is this a performer presenting a character, a comic persona, or a reasonable approximation of the performer's offstage self? This leads to a third category of performance skills to do with the direct connection between performer and audience: warmth, charisma, tailoring the performance to the audience's reactions and being able to incorporate the unexpected into the performance. This element of stand-up comedy performance is perhaps the most mysterious. Comedians form relationships with their audiences based on friendship, mutual antagonism, fear, flirtation and many other qualities- or more often on unique combinations of these qualities. The ways these relationships are formed, established and maintained is in need of further study.

There is plenty of evidence which can help us to imagine what Valentin's live performance might have been like. Surreal comedians tend to adopt one of two distinct performance styles: slow, subtle and underplayed, even deadpan (Jimmy James, Steven Wright); or manic and cartoonish, with exaggerated voice and facial expressions (Tommy Cooper, Harry Hill). Still photographs<sup>38</sup> of Valentin suggest his performance style was of the exaggerated, cartoonish variety. His face is often covered with improbable facial hair, pulled into grimaces, and topped with outlandish hats. He wears false noses, particularly a long, pointed one. However, his film work suggests that his actual performance tended more towards the subtle and underplayed. For example, in *Mysteries of a Barbershop*<sup>39</sup> (*Mysterien eines Frisiersalons*), the silent film on which he collaborated with Brecht, we see Valentin, wearing his trademark long nose, dealing with bizarre events in a very matter of fact manner. Whether taking a hammer and chisel to a customer's chin or bandaging another customer's head back on (having accidentally cut it off whilst shaving him), he remains calm and unhurried. His long body is loose and relaxed, his arms often held at his sides, his face impassive, registering emotions only subtly. There is a slow pace, a sense of inner stillness. Ultimately though, it is difficult to capture in words the distinctiveness of his underplayed surreal comedy. It is a far more subtle style of performance than the slightly cartoonish characterisation of his long time collaborator Liesl Karlstadt, or the rather hectoring style of his rival Weiss Ferdl.

Although Valentin made a number of films (both silent and sound) and numerous studio-based sound recordings,<sup>40</sup> there is a dearth of live recordings. What this means is that we

can only guess at the subtleties of how his distinctive, relaxed, underplayed performance style might have worked in encounters with live audiences, and at the kind of relationship he forged with them. Nonetheless, given how compelling his performances in film are, it seems likely that a significant reason for his success was his strength and distinctiveness as a performer. It may even be that *'Das Aquarium'* was a career breakthrough because it marked a significant development in Valentin's performance skills. There is often a moment in a comedian's career when he/she 'finds his/her voice': when the process of performing suddenly becomes easier, when the contact with the audience becomes more intense, when the comic's worldview becomes more sharply defined. The seminal British alternative comedian Tony Allen has hypothesised about how this process occurs. He argues that confronting a live audience in stand-up comedy, 'appears to trigger a sort of strategic identity crisis'. This leads us to draw on 'minority personalities', and to become successful we must, 'assemble an individual palette of available emotional states...learn to switch seamlessly from one to another, and how we laugh at ourselves and the world around us.' He calls this process, 'discovering our own unique range of Attitude', and he points out that the acquisition of comic Attitude can occur suddenly, citing Jack Dee as an example of this.<sup>41</sup>

### **Delight in disorder**

Whether or not *'Das Aquarium'* was the point at which Valentin discovered his Attitude, it seems likely that his performance was driven by the minority personality of the childhood anarchist who wreaked havoc, and that at some point he learned to share with his audience the way that he laughed at the world around him. This suggests that when

Valentin broke the rules of language and logic, the audience would not look down on him for his mistakes (as Sackett suggests), but instead share with him his delight in disorder. This idea is supported by listening to the 1928 recording of *Das Aquarium*. We should approach this with caution. Made 20 years after the original stage performances, it seems unlikely that it was a particularly faithful recreation.<sup>42</sup> The text differs significantly from the published script, and the performance has a mannered quality which suggests that the material is being somewhat laboriously recited rather than being performed. However, if the delivery bears any resemblance to that which was seen on the stage in 1908, the character Valentin was portraying was not someone to be looked down on. The tone is confident, and lacks any hint of hesitancy or uncertainty which might suggest pathos.

Even if Valentin's audience was as insecure and conformist as Sackett has argued, his skill as a performer could have given him the license to share his anarchic worldview with them, perhaps even to challenge their conservatism. Whilst some comedians undoubtedly work by reasserting the values of their audiences, it is simplistic to argue that this is always the case. For example, the British alternative comedy scene of the early 1980s championed the idea of challenging the audience's beliefs, even if they were similar to those of the comedian.<sup>43</sup>

But if Valentin enjoyed a license to challenge his audiences' conservatism, this license was not as simple as that suggested by Mary Douglas' argument. According to her, the joker can never be subversive because he or she is bound by restrictions imposed on behalf of hierarchy. Valentin was no respecter of such restrictions, and there were times

when he clearly transgressed them. For example, in 1917, he performed a monologue which satirised the King Ludwig III of Bavaria. When the Munich police became aware of this, Valentin was banned from performing on any stage for six weeks.<sup>44</sup> An earlier incident highlights Valentin's ability to transgress restrictions on comedy even more sharply. At the very beginning of World War One, theatre directors ordered acts to present only serious, patriotic performances. Valentin found himself forced to sing a war morality song 'in dead seriousness'. His subversive comic outlook was so well known that this made audiences laugh.<sup>45</sup> He was sending up the song- and more importantly, the attitude, sentiment and ideology of the song- without even trying to.

If *'Das Aquarium'* works by disrupting the normal rules of language and logic, elsewhere Valentin challenged conservative values by directly satirising them. For example *'Verein der Katzenfreunde'* ('The Cat Lover's League'), performed by Liesl Karlstadt,<sup>46</sup> portrays the General Secretary of the League conducting a General Meeting. The piece works by exaggerating an obsession with order, procedure and social status to the point of absurdity. Indeed *'Verein der Katzenfreunde'* was written around the same time as the Goebbels parody *'Vereinsrede'*<sup>47</sup> and can also be read as a none-too-subtle satire on the ideology of the regime. Those very middle-class obsessions with order, hierarchy, respectability and status, that Karlstadt mercilessly satirises, found their ultimate expression within the values of the Third Reich.

The entire meeting consists of Karlstadt reading out lists of the members' names. First she reads out the names of the entire membership, taking care to note the profession of



each the 26 members' husbands to emphasise their social standing ('...Mrs. Chamberlain, the Postmaster General's wife; Mrs. Bunting, the Diocesan Senior Administrator's wife...'48). She then reads out the names of the 10 members in attendance, before berating the 16 members who have not turned up in a series of sentences which incongruously pause between clauses- or even mid-clause- as she repeats the names of the list of absentees. It is a brave and innovative piece of comedy, in which there are few words beyond the lists of names. It risks being boring and trying the audience's patience, but succeeds in drawing humour from a blend of anticipation and surprise. The repeated list of 16 absent members is signalled in advance by words and phrases like, 'namely', 'that is' or 'the following members', letting the audience anticipate another repetition of the list; and the final suspended clause ('with a reprimand'; 'will receive and official warning') is surprising and incongruous because it has been so long in coming. This routine pours further doubt on Sackett's argument, being a direct satire of the very middle-class values and craving for order which he says Valentin's work reinforced.

### **Valentin and Brecht: Illogic as *Verfremdungseffekt***

As well as being a highly significant performer in his own right, Karl Valentin is often considered in the light of his influence on Bertolt Brecht, who claimed in *The Messingkauf Dialogues* that he 'learnt most from the clown Valentin'.49 The two met for the first time at some point between 1918 and 1922, although the precise date is unclear.50 Certainly Brecht's admiration for Valentin is not in doubt and the two collaborated on more than one occasion, most notably perhaps in the cabaret *Die Rote Zibebe* at the Munich Kammerspiele in October 1922.51 Unquestionably Brecht admired

Valentin more than Valentin admired Brecht – Valentin was well known for his general dislike of high culture and intellectualism – but by the 1920s when Brecht was just launching his career as a young playwright, Valentin was already established as a highly successful performer. He is hardly likely to have collaborated with Brecht had he not held him in some regard.

Brecht was clearly attracted by the social milieu of the cabaret scene in Munich, in which he saw possibilities for the kind of theatre he wanted to create – a theatre of fun (*Spaß*) and social comment, where audiences could drink, smoke and discuss the play between each scene. As J. M. Ritchie says, ‘it is clear that Brecht was enamoured not only of the ambience, but also of everything about this kind of theatre’.<sup>52</sup> What particularly drew him to Valentin (beyond the rather obvious fact that he found him extremely funny) was Valentin’s ability to criticize bourgeois convention and, through comedy, deliver subversive social comment, albeit often implicitly rather than explicitly. It was through his observation of Valentin that Brecht, at least in part, developed his theory of *Verfremdung* in relation to acting.

In recounting a scene from Valentin’s play *Die Raubritter vor München*, Robert Eben Sackett describes a moment when an actor steps out of character to deliver an aside to the audience. For Sackett this is a classic moment of *Verfremdung*: ‘It was as though Valentin wanted to jolt his audience out of the past, to remind them that they were not actually at the old city wall, but seated in a theatre in the 1920s, and to suggest that the significance of this story about an earlier citizens’ militia lay in the present.’<sup>53</sup>

Deliberately breaking theatrical illusion for political effect is only part of what connects Valentin's theatre with *Verfremdung*. It is well documented that Brecht's decision to whiten the faces of soldiers preparing for battle in *Edward II* was inspired by Valentin.<sup>54</sup> Perhaps Valentin's most important influence, though, was what Lisa Appignanesi has called 'the comic's use of an estranged or alienated thinking process'.<sup>55</sup>

Brecht defined the *Verfremdungseffekt* as 'turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one's attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected.'<sup>56</sup> This is exactly how much of Valentin's comedy works. For example, in '*Das Aquarium*' his description of where he lives (in the High Street/in der Sendlingerstraße), which might normally be passed by without further comment, becomes a tortuous wrestling match with the linguistic logic of the sentence, which ultimately gives us an insight into the character's housing conditions and, therefore, his social status. An ordinary, throwaway line becomes something extraordinary which allows us greater insight. Another example might be his description of the aquarium itself as having four sides and a bottom so that the water does not run out. This encourages us to see the aquarium in a more critical way – not as an 'aquarium', but as a manufactured structure with a purpose. Interestingly, in the recording of the sketch, but not in the published text, Valentin does something similar with his description of the birdcage, which he describes as being made of wire so that the air can flow in and out.

This is also classic *Verfremdung*, making the familiar seem strange so that we see it critically as if for the first time. It is comparable to Brecht's own example of *Verfremdung*, for which he offers the Eskimo definition of a car as 'a wingless aircraft that crawls along the ground.'<sup>57</sup> For Brecht, the defamiliarising effect of this kind of thinking was not containment (as Mary Douglas's argument implies) or reassurance (as Sackett argues), but the beginning of political awareness.

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<sup>1</sup> Schulte, Michael, *Karl Valentin: Eine Biographie*, Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1982, p.21

<sup>2</sup> Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1982

<sup>3</sup> From Weiss Ferdl, *Bayerische Schmankerln*, Bertl Weiss (ed.), Munich, Süddeutscher Verlag, 1960, p.34, quoted in Robert Eben Sackett, *Popular Entertainment, Class, and Politics in Munich, 1900-1923*, Cambridge Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 1982, pp. 1-2

<sup>4</sup> *Popular Entertainment, Class, and Politics in Munich, 1900-1923*, p.5

<sup>5</sup> *Karl Valentin: Eine Biographie*, pp.30, 49, *Popular Entertainment, Class, and Politics in Munich, 1900-1923*, p.28

<sup>6</sup> Ritchie, J. M., 'Brecht and Cabaret' in Bartram, Graham and Anthony Waine (eds.), *Brecht in Perspective*, London and New York: Longman, 1982, p.165

<sup>7</sup> Jelavich, Peter, *Berlin Cabaret*, Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1996, p.230

<sup>8</sup> Hillenbrand, F. K. M., *Underground Humour in Nazi Germany 1933-1945*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, p.59

<sup>9</sup> Hill, Murray, 'Karl Valentin in the Third Reich', *German Life and Letters*, Vol. 36, No.6, 1983, p.53

<sup>10</sup> For a fuller exploration of this issue, see 'Karl Valentin in the Third Reich'.

<sup>11</sup> According to Michael Schulte in *Karl Valentin: Eine Biographie*, p.185, Hitler imposed a condition that the money from the sale of the collection should not be spent on the making of a film. This was precisely what Valentin had in mind and so refused to sell.

<sup>12</sup> 'Karl Valentin in the Third Reich', pp.48-9

<sup>13</sup> *Karl Valentin: Eine Biographie*, p.165

<sup>14</sup> From a letter from Valentin to his parents, quoted in *Karel Valentin: Eine Biographie*, p.22

<sup>15</sup> It is certainly the case that performers in the British Music Hall and Variety regularly plagiarized each other's material.

<sup>16</sup> 'Karl Valentin in the Third Reich', p.41

<sup>17</sup> The *Nachstandler* performed, without any billing, at the end of the official programme of entertainment. It was a way for young up-and-coming performers to showcase their work and develop a following and a reputation.

<sup>18</sup> Literally, 'The Skeletal Dandy'.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Schulte in *Karl Valentin: Eine Biographie*, p.30, asserts that 'Ich bin ein armer magerer Mann' was performed in costume at the Baderwirt, a *Volksängerlokal* in Dachauerstraße, whereas 'Das Aquarium' was performed in formal dress in the *Gastwirtschaften*. Murray Hill, however, suggests in his article 'Thinking Sideways: Language, Object and Karl Valentin (1882-1948)', *New German Studies*, Vol.18, 1980, p.131, the latter sketch was also performed to huge claim at the Baderwirt, and it was this performance that brought Valentin to the attention of Josef Durner.

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<sup>20</sup> Tucholsky, Kurt, 'Der Linksdenker' in *Das Valentinbuch: Von und über Karl Valentin in Texten und Bildern*, Michael Schulte (ed.), Munich and Zurich: Piper Verlag, 1984, pp.71-4. The term means literally 'left-thinker' and suggests a person who thinks in an unconventional way, just as *ein Linkshänder* (a left-hander) is somebody who does not write in an orthodox manner.

<sup>21</sup> From *On the Orator*, Ch.63, quoted in Morreall, John (ed.), *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987, p.18

<sup>22</sup> Zijderveld, Anton C., 'Jokes and their Relation to Social Reality', *Social Research*, Vol.35, No.2, 1968, p.299

<sup>23</sup> 'Jokes and their relation to Social Reality', p.303

<sup>24</sup> Douglas, Mary, 'Jokes' in *Implicit Meanings* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), London: Routledge, 1999, p.150

<sup>25</sup> 'Jokes', pp.150-51

<sup>26</sup> 'Jokes', p.152

<sup>27</sup> 'Jokes', p.159

<sup>28</sup> 'Jokes and their Relation to Social Reality', p.306

<sup>29</sup> 'Jokes and their Relation to Social Reality', p.311

<sup>30</sup> *Popular Entertainment, Class, and Politics in Munich, 1900-1923*, p.5

<sup>31</sup> *Popular Entertainment, Class, and Politics in Munich, 1900-1923*, p.6

<sup>32</sup> *Popular Entertainment, Class, and Politics in Munich, 1900-1923*, p.9

<sup>33</sup> *Popular Entertainment, Class, and Politics in Munich, 1900-1923*, p.10

<sup>34</sup> Karl Valentin, *Der Knabe Karl*, quoted in *Popular Entertainment, Class, and Politics in Munich, 1900-1923*, p.24

<sup>35</sup> *Popular Entertainment, Class, and Politics in Munich, 1900-1923*, p.31

<sup>36</sup> *Popular Entertainment, Class, and Politics in Munich, 1900-1923*, pp.36-37

<sup>37</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first recorded use of the term is from 1966, although it was almost certainly being used before then.

[http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00236110/00236110se2?single=1&query\\_type=word&queryword=stand-up+comedian&edition=2e&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10&hilite=00236110se2](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00236110/00236110se2?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=stand-up+comedian&edition=2e&first=1&max_to_show=10&hilite=00236110se2), 31/10/03

<sup>38</sup> For example, see [http://www.chuck-fotografik.de/valentin-karlstadt/galerien/06masken/seite\\_01.htm](http://www.chuck-fotografik.de/valentin-karlstadt/galerien/06masken/seite_01.htm)

<sup>39</sup> *Mysterien eines Frisiersalons*, 1922/23, dir. Erich Engels and Berolt Brecht

<sup>40</sup> A collection of Valentin's audio recordings (*Gesamtausgabe Ton 1928-1947*, Trikont/ Indigo, CD-300, 2002) fills 8 CDs

<sup>41</sup> Allen, Tony, *Attitude: Wanna Make Something of It? The Secret of Stand-Up Comedy*, Glastonbury: Gothic Image Publications, 2002, p.35 and p.37

<sup>42</sup> As Murray Hill points out, the recorded and filmed versions of sketches are often different from the published texts, as Valentin's work was constantly subject to revision through improvisation ('Thinking Sideways: Language, Object and Karl Valentin', pp.129-30)

<sup>43</sup> See Double, Oliver, *Stand-Up! On being a Comedian*, London: Methuen, 1997, pp.182-187 for an account of this

<sup>44</sup> *Popular Entertainment, Class, and Politics in Munich, 1900-1923*, pp.91-92

<sup>45</sup> *Popular Entertainment, Class, and Politics in Munich, 1900-1923*, p.75

<sup>46</sup> It is generally accepted that this particular sketch was written by Liesl Karlstadt, yet is to be found in numerous anthologies of Valentin's work, sometimes with and sometimes without due credit. Undoubtedly Karlstadt had a hand in the creation and writing of many of the other plays and sketches attributed to Valentin – such was the nature of their professional relationship. The strand of improvisation that also runs through their work also meant that material was constantly being developed collaboratively through performance. We should be wary, however, of accusing Valentin of misogyny or selfishly denying Karlstadt due credit. Although it has been argued that 'Valentin's best work is unthinkable without Liesl Karlstadt' (Calandra, 1974, 90), Valentin was always the senior partner and enjoyed top billing over Karlstadt and there is no evidence to suggest that Valentin made anything other than the major contribution to the writing of their material. For the sketches to be published under Valentin's name does not seem out of line with common practice of the time and to accuse him of unfair practice would be as misguided as John Fuegi's denunciation of Brecht on similar grounds

<sup>47</sup> Valentin, Karl, *Alles von Karl Valentin*, Michael Schulte (ed.), Munich: Piper Verlag, 1978, pp.59-60

<sup>48</sup> The individual names of the league members used by Karlstadt serve a number of comic functions. Some of the names are commonly found names, whereas others are more obviously comic, either because of their

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meaning, or more usually because of the unlikely juxtaposition of two words. Occasionally the names reflect – or hint at – the jobs of the women’s husbands and not always in a flattering light. Most importantly, Karlstadt has given consideration as to how the names will sound when spoken, both separately and together – that is the actual sound of the word and the performed rhythm of the entire list. We have attempted, at different times, to reflect all these strategies in the translation. Therefore, Frau Brandt becomes Mrs Brand, Frau Stangl becomes Mrs Fandangle, Frau Lochpichler becomes Mrs Holesnifter (Loch = hole, anus or vagina; picheln = to booze, but is also a pun on ‘picken’, meaning ‘to peck or ‘to pick’), Frau Sollfrank becomes Mrs Ledger the Finance Minister’s Wife, and Frau Löffelberger becomes Mrs Spoonhill, etc.

<sup>49</sup> Brecht, Bertolt, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, John Willett (trans.), London: Methuen, 1965, p.69

<sup>50</sup> *Karl Valentin: Eine Biographie*, p.104. Denis Calandra in ‘Karl Valentin and Bertolt Brecht’, *The Drama Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1, March 1974, is convinced that ‘Brecht had considerable contact with Valentin prior to 1919’ (p.87).

<sup>51</sup> ‘Karl Valentin and Bertolt Brecht’, p.87

<sup>52</sup> ‘Brecht and Cabaret’, p.166

<sup>53</sup> *Popular Entertainment, Class, and Politics in Munich, 1900-1923*, p.132

<sup>54</sup> For example, see Martin Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice of Evils*, London: Eyre Methuen, 1980, p.16

<sup>55</sup> Lisa Appignanesi, *Cabaret: The First Hundred Years*, London: Methuen, 1984, p.151

<sup>56</sup> Brecht, Bertolt, *Brecht on Theatre*, John Willett (trans.), London: Eyre Methuen, 1978, p.143

<sup>57</sup> *Brecht on Theatre*, p.145