

ALFRED DÖBLIN

Dionysus

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Far off on the northern side of town, large, garish movie posters hang before a tenement block; an arrow points down from the second floor toward the entrance below. You shuffle past a bar and into a dark corridor, where an old woman can be seen gazing out from a little wooden shed—a sort of attendant's hut—onto the bright street in an effort to entice passers-by. And as you stroll, almost involuntarily, into this corridor, you are utterly dismayed.

For here you find—them—the patrons of the cinema.

It is 6:00 p.m. on Saturday, and there they are, sniffing back and forth before the posters. All of them, men and women alike, wear droopy jackets, skirts, or pants; everything just hangs from their bodies. Their faces, generally of a pale gray color, are utterly lifeless and devoid of expression. The women, their hair unkempt, wear shawls over their shoulders or under their arms. They fiddle in their pockets for their purse. Men and women speak to one another in hushed tones; their expressions show no change as they look at the thrilling posters. Worn out, like crumbling clay statuettes, they give their money to the grinning cashier and creep into the dark—stall. For this is the space into which these people crawl whenever they can escape the noisy, tormenting factories or the little musty rooms where they live. Inside, the air is damp and stuffy. One sees only blackness, a hopeless and profound blackness, pierced down the middle by a solitary bundle of shimmering light rays. Hardly as thick as a finger at the back of the theater, this beam of light expands toward the front to cover a large cloth hung before the wall. There, mucky gray spots wobble and flicker over a background of glaring white that strains the eyes. And as soon as the patrons take their seats, they begin to stare at this cloth. They are happy just to sit with their hands on their knees, holding their hats and shawls. During the entire show, a piano repeats the same two or three stupid pieces, making the same mistakes each time. Suddenly the shrill voice of a woman rings out and begins reciting in a Berlin accent; so this is the first class lecture promised at the entrance. A detective story is playing. But what does that matter to these people? They could just as well be watching newsreels of races or various social disturbances, or an interlude of *The Interrupted Dinner*.

Throughout the evening, their faces remain lifeless, never once exhibiting the slightest change of expression; when a young girl laughs and turns around, she encounters an empty gaze. Numbers are called out; the men and women stand up and return through the corridor; the hut is now closed. On the street, night has fallen. The patrons exchange no words. With their shawls over their heads and their fists in their pockets, they haul themselves home.