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### Tracing Queer Femininity through Weimar Cinema

Weimar Germany, especially in its cities, is regarded as one of the most progressive gay spaces in modern history. The country was infamous for its gender breakdown, its queer press, and bustling nightlife. In addition to the social aspect of queerness present, there were landmark studies by Magnus Hirschfeld, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, and Richard von Krafft-Ebing exploring homosexuality and the gender/sex binary, as well as a critical understanding of the relationship between gender and sexuality. Despite these societal advancements, there are very few explicitly gay German films. Therefore, to find sociocultural and scientific notions of queerness to be present, one has to do a cross-reference between understandings of homosexuality in general cultural understanding and filmic portrayals of womanhood. This essay will explore the relationship between the understanding of lesbianism in general culture and the way that understanding manifests itself in Weimar cinema at the time, primarily through sexual agency and the breakdown of femininity and masculinity. This essay will also explore *Mädchen in Uniform* as the only explicitly lesbian film of the time period and the film's relationship to the cultural conversation.

I acknowledge the imposition of modern ideas and terminology have an effect on this essay. In an attempt to mitigate the confusion of modern and old language, I will define a few terms. I use the term "queer" in reference to non-normative, or non-

heterosexual, practices of intimacy and gender expression. Heterosexuality in the essay is not merely the relationship-building between a man and a woman, but also the practices and associations that uphold a society where those relationships where those relationships are normative. I will be using the term lesbian to define a woman that is attracted to women. Terms that were used at the time to describe queer sexuality that are no longer used, such as "third sex" and "gender invert," will be defined as they are utilized. Much of this essay is written with the influence of retrospect, so I may be providing interpretations of films that were not initially present.

Unique to Germany at the time was the explicit scientific study of queer gender and sexuality. The most famous example of this study is the Hirschfeld Institute of Sexology, which studied and advocated for queer and transgender people. The primary way of thinking about homosexuality at the turn of the 20th century was that of the "gender invert," a term coined by Ulrichs (Bauer H. 90). Gender invert references the belief that homosexual men and women were mentally and emotionally the opposite gender, despite inhabiting a body of their birth sex. Ulrichs described a hypothetical lesbian as "a male soul confined to the female body" (Bauer H. 90). This understanding of sexuality points to an inherent tie between gender non-conformity and sexuality, and this tie influenced people's general conception of what it meant to be a gay man or lesbian woman. Gay men were defined by their effeminate nature, lesbian women were defined by their attachment to masculinity. For Ulrichs, queer sexuality is inextricable from queer gender (Bauer H. 94). Hirschfeld expanded the idea of the gender invert with his idea of the "third sex." The term began as a way of renouncing individuals as wholly feminine or wholly masculine and embracing the diversity of the sex binary, but

the third sex became an identity in and of itself and became immediately tied to queer people (Bauer J. 2). Hirschfeld recognized the “classification into man or woman” to be an “extremely superficial scheme” (Bauer J. 9). Freud, a popular Austrian psychologist that pioneered psychoanalysis, had similar notions of the relationship between gender and sexuality. Freud argued that people can exist anywhere on the spectrum of masculinity and femininity (Bauer, J. 6). These ideas of gender inversion and a third sex came to affect German’s understanding of sexuality.

Although queerness was not generally accepted in Weimar society, queer community was built and established through the nightlife scene and through press. Oftentimes, queer societies would “[disguise] themselves as bowling societies or savings clubs” (Marhoefer 68). The nightlife scene included cabarets with performances meant to blur gender and sexuality boundaries. These cabarets became famous tourist attractions. The nightlife scene was dangerous, though, as the clubs were often victims of police raids. Some queer magazines “warned its readers about the dangers of exposure when the owners of an establishment too openly advertised its lesbian chic” (Kuzniar 27). Queer press offered advice for protection and suggestions for lifestyle. There were two prominent lesbian magazines at the time: *Garçonne* and *Die Freundin*. The first title is in reference to a popular boyish look in the Weimar era that was associated with lesbians, and the second title means “girlfriends.” Through these magazines, lesbians found information about bars that cater to them, “how to dress, and how gender functioned in the subcultures” (Marhoefer 71). Therefore, there is documentation of what it meant to look and act like a lesbian. For example, many lesbians adopted a dress of tuxedos and monocles, largely influenced

by Anita Berber, a lesbian icon. Lesbian icons provide another way of understanding lesbian subculture. Marlene Dietrich, particularly after the release of *Morocco*, an American film in which she wears a tuxedo and kisses a woman, became a large lesbian icon in both Germany and America. There is a clear connection between lesbianism and masculine dress. In Krafft-Ebing's essay "Congenital Sexual Inversion in Women," he describes a typical lesbian as "masculine features, deep voice, manly gait...small breasts, cropped...hair..., and made the impression of a man in women's clothes" (Paradis 27). Lesbian fiction dictated lesbian identity "by renouncing passion and claiming masculinity" (Marhoefer 70). There is a strong association between presenting as the opposite gender and sexuality, that was grounded in both scientific exploration and cultural establishment.

Although there are only two films explicitly about homosexuality, there are multiple films that have a sense of queerness and gender-play. Cross-dressing comedies were particularly prominent in early Weimar cinema that allowed for comedic queer situations to occur. Some classics of Weimar cinema have found their way into queer canon, such as *Nosferatu* (1922) and its suggestive nature of the vampire as predator and the narrator as sex object (Dyer 23). The two films that were explicitly about homosexual were *Different from the Others*, a 1919 silent film directed by Richard Oswald, who co-wrote the film with Magnus Hirschfeld. The film faced mass censorship efforts despite being a critical and commercial success.

Films where women cross-dress often had an implied influence of the societal construction of the lesbian who is masculine in dress and mannerism. Asta Nielsen became famous for her androgynous *Hamlet*, a 1921 film adaptation directed by Svend

Gade and Heinz Schall. Nielsen acts in a histrionic manner, parading her anxieties, “mockingly masquerading heterosexual love for Ophelia,” and expressing desire for Horatio (Kuznier 32). The film does not hide the fact that Nielsen is cross-dressing, making the gender play and sexuality play in the film even more prominent. An earlier prominent role of Nielsen’s that explores the relationship between gender and sexuality is *Das Liebes-ABC*, a 1916 film directed by Magnus Stifter that features Nielsen’s character how to be a man by wearing a tux and having women sit in her lap, clearly invoking the masculine lesbians of the time. Alice Kuznier, author of *A Queer German Cinema*, notes Nielsen’s “strikingly handsome” presentation, and that Nielsen’s gestures are “suggestively queer” (42). *Der Geiger von Florenz*, a 1926 German film directed by Paul Czinner, features a plot of a young woman cross-dressing as a man. Lesbianism is implied in the film when the leading male character’s sister enters the cross-dressing woman’s room and touches her breast and kisses her after the discovery she is a woman. There is an inherent sense of gender recognition and sapphic attraction present throughout the scene.

The most famous cross-dressing film is Lubitsch’s 1918 comedy *Ich möchte kein Mann sein*, in which a woman cross-dresses to escape her strict life under a new guardian. The main character (named Ossi after the actress playing her) is established by her manly traits—the first scene shows her playing poker and smoking with young men. An older woman expresses disdain at Ossi, stating, “I don’t really see how a lady could smoke.” However, she then smokes and clearly enjoys it. Already in the first scene do we see the filmmaker make an argument that gender differentiation is nonsensical and clearly societally constructing. Ossi calls out a man for drinking after

she is chastised. Ossi expresses discomfort at the box that womanhood puts her in and desperately wishes she were born as a man. She expresses an immense joy when being fitted for a tux. However, she grows frustrated at manhood too, stating “A man does not have it easy.” With her dissatisfaction at both manhood and womanhood, Ossi could be interested in the idea of Hirschfeld’s “third sex” as a separate category. At a ball, Ossi makes plans to seduce a woman and toast “to brotherhood!” Although not lesbian, there is the implication of a queer relationship, as she is kissing Dr. Kersten when he has the understanding of Ossi as a man. The film has a heterosexual happy ending, when the two lovers embrace at the end as man and woman. However, we see exploration of the arbitrary nature of gender performance and construction, lesbian dress and expression, and a romance that leans queer in the film. The tuxedo-wearing and masculine mannerisms clearly invoke the expectations for lesbian dress at the time.

Sexuality and Gender in culture is not a static phenomenon, and shifts in presentation of queer femininity become clear as cinema moves into the 1920s and 1930s. In the latter part of the Weimar period, some lesbians rejected the emphasis on masculine expression previously associated with lesbianism “but rather stressed notions of femininity” (Dyer 50). The shift in the embracing of the feminine lesbian can be seen in *Der blaue Engel*, a 1930 German film directed by Josef von Sternberg. In analyzing this film, retrospect becomes particularly important to acknowledge. This film launched Marlene Dietrich into stardom, who would later become a lesbian icon. Lesbians then became attached to *Der blaue Engel* in a manner of retrospect. However, this film was not considered a film associated with lesbianism upon its

release, although *Lola Lola* is certainly unconventional. I believe that the attachment lesbians have for the film is worth exploring, though, so there are clear references we see in this transitional period of constructing lesbian identity, especially in the gender play of the film. The clothing in the film exists as an exaggerated sense of femininity with an influence of the masculine. *Lola Lola* is “small-breasted, naked but for black stockings, fancy garters, and an elaborate head-dress, sometimes incorporating a male hat” (Baxter 178). The garters and stocking are more traditionally feminine than the outfits associated with lesbianism, but the boyish figure and male hat clearly show influence. Her clothes as she performs present an exaggerated femininity, but a false one. In her first outfit, she wears an exaggerated French bust, but there is nothing behind it and it is see-through. Femininity is a facade that *Lola Lola* can gleefully manipulate. *Lola Lola* also has a queer sensibility in her rejection of heterosexual expectations. She has agency in her sex life, laughs when Rath proposes, and throws the male gaze back onto the crowd with a spotlight. Although we only see her interested in men, there is a queer sensibility in her independency, gender play and agency. Like *Ich möchte kein Mann sein*, *Der blaue Engel* features only relationship dynamics that are generally denoted as heterosexual. However, throughout the films of the weimar cinema, women engage in exploration of gender and sex expression that falls outside of the expected binary, reflecting Hirschfeld ideas of the third sex. Therefore, we can establish a queer sensibility in the films.

*Mädchen in Uniform*, a 1931 film directed by Leontine Sagan, is the only film to explicitly discuss lesbianism from the Weimar period. The film was written by a lesbian as an adaptation of her novel and directed by a woman. Sagan’s writings were popular

amongst lesbians of the time, and reflect issues with mother figures that hearken to lesbian mythology of a seductive older woman that guides a younger woman (Paradis 32). In this film, we see a complete shift in the presentation of lesbians, as both women are feminine in mannerism and expression. A powerful aspect of the film is the normalizing of lesbian expressions of affection, with young girls setting up dates, holding hands and showing affection. As Manuela enters the school, the first thing she hears about is the crush all of the girls have on the teacher. There is a blurring of homosociality and homosexuality that feels natural rather than condemned. There are scenes where girls express attraction to men, such as one of the girls having her locker be covered in posters of a male actor that she kisses. Some critics see this scene as “an attempt to assure the viewer that the girls are ‘really’ heterosexual” (Dyer 56). I disagree with this assertion—the film uses the girl’s attraction to men to further normalize their attraction to each other, placing both attractions as just as expected. The world of *Mädchen in Uniform* is one in which all forms of attraction are valid and attraction is irrespective of gender. The girls at the school are united by a sense of humor, “solidarity against patriarchy, and erotic feelings for one another” (Dyer 56).

*Mädchen in Uniform* makes deliberate commentary to the link between authoritarianism with heterosexuality. The headmaster reflects the societal rise in authoritarianism, in her strict nature. She advocates for a return of a great Germany and enforces harsh discipline. For her, the main purpose of the school is “teaching the daughters of shoulders and...[producing] the mothers of soldiers” (Dyer 57). Through this speech, we see the clear impetus towards heterosexuality and authoritarianism—homosexuality presents a threat to established gender dynamics and expectations



around reproduction. The film begins with images of classical German art and architecture and the girls marching in a determined line, clearly invoking history and order being prominent at the school. However, the film makes its anti-authoritarian stance clear—it places our sympathy on Manuela and Fraulin von Bernberg. A large difference between the novel and film is that Manuela survives her suicide attempt. There is a happy ending that “feels like an affirmation of lesbianism” (Dyer 38). The romance between Manuela and von Bernberg is romanticized, with a halo around the older woman after the kiss. The schoolgirls’ support of each other and acceptance also feels like a strong affirmation of lesbianism.

Despite its anti-authoritarian themes, narrative support of a lesbian relationship, and lesbian director, the Nazi regime upheld *Mädchen in Uniform* as a great film and even screened it (Weinstein 145). Although heterosexuality and authoritarianism are intertwined, the Nazi regime largely went after male homosexuality and saw female sexuality as less of a direct threat (Weinstein 147). A cross-dressing film *Viktor und Viktoria* marks the end of cross-dressing comedies with a queer edge as cinema transitioned into the Nazi period.

Throughout these films, there is a clear narrative constructed around femininity, the blurring of lines in gender expression, and expressions of queer sensibilities. Queer flagging is important in analyzing these films of Weimar cinema, and through these flags, the queer community of the past becomes clear. As queerness is often portrayed in regards to the inhibition of censorship, retrospect becomes important in understanding past identities, and that retrospect informs our understanding of the present. Several Weimar films with a sense of queer femininity take a post-structuralist

approach to identity, an approach that is making its way back into the cultural zeitgeist after a century.

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