Towards A Queer Weimar Cinema: Spaces, Narratives, and Influences

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Towards A Queer Weimar Cinema: Spaces, Narratives, and Influences

Senior Project Submitted to
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of Bard College

by
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“We must all ensure that a time will soon come when such tragedies are impossible, for knowledge will overcome prejudice, truth will overcome lies, and love will conquer hatred.”

- Magnus Hirschfeld
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**Introduction**

In 1920, *Das lila Lied* (*The Lavender Song*) was written by Kurt Schwabach and Misha Spoliansky in reaction to the first openly queer film of the time, *Anders als die Andern* (*Different from Others*). The song became widely known as a gay liberation anthem, often performed in the debaucherous, smoke-filled cabarets of Weimar Berlin. The lyrics take a strong stance against the persecution of homosexuality and exclaim the pride and acceptance that queer people had for themselves. From the chorus of the song, they proclaim that:

> "Wir aber wissen nicht, wie das Gefühl ist,
> (But we do not know what the feeling is)
> denn wir sind alle and’rer Welten Kind,
> (since we are all children of a different kind of world)
> wir lieben nur die lila Nacht, die schwül ist,
> (we only love the lavender night, who is sultry)
> weil wir ja anders als die Andern sind.
> (because we are just different from the others!) (Ashkenasi)

The song is a testament to the massive social and cultural shift that began in the Weimar period. On August 11, 1919, the German national assembly signed and proclaimed the new post-war constitution. Named for the town in which it was signed, the new Weimar Constitution marked the emergence of a new era in German history and culture. The Weimar Republic, as it is known today, was a period of economic instability, social unrest, and cultural metamorphosis. After its defeat in the First World War, Germany was subject to a humiliating loss of land, a forced demilitarization, and was required to cede their rights to all overseas colonies to the victorious Allies. The Treaty of Versailles, which outlined all of these consequences, was one such variable
that influenced the economic and social climate of the period. As Germany struggled under war reparations, rampant inflation, and unemployment, modernity and urbanization took German cities by storm. Paradoxically, Berlin, the capital of Germany during the Weimar Republic, had become a center of cultural and social exchanges and discourse. This would seem unlikely considering the dire situation Germany had found itself in the years following the war. Yet, the people of the Weimar Republic still found ways to create art and form communities with one another.

Known at the time as “the sex capital of the world” (Dyer 8), Berlin became a center for experimentation in art, culture, and science. Artists pushed the boundaries of acceptable representations and went beyond symbolic subjects toward abstraction. Subcultures of every kind were forming in the nightclubs and theaters of Berlin, attracting anyone who wasn’t deemed appropriate for respectable society. The Weimar period is synonymous with its burgeoning queer social spaces, subcultures, and communities that dominated Berlin’s underground. The city was an escape for all sorts of individuals and was host to the decadence and poverty of the period. British journalist Harold Nicholson described the charms of Berlin in this way: “At 3 A.M., the people of Berlin will light another cigar and embark afresh and refreshed upon discussions regarding Proust, or Rilke, or the new penal code, or whether human shyness comes from narcissism, or whether it would be a wise or foolish thing to turn Pariser Platz into a stadium” (426). Berlin was a hotspot for the bizarre, unconventional, and eccentric, and somewhere in the intersection of these things, queer people were becoming more visible than ever before. Artists of the time began representing a society with looser morals, decadent social scenes, and exceedingly androgynous individuals. These images give contemporary scholars an understanding of the period as one where cultural and
social shifts were being normalized, and these events were worth representing. As queer people garnered more visibility and awareness, representations became more prominent in literature, visual art, photography, and, most notably film. One could argue that queer cinema as a genre found its beginnings in the Weimar Republic, as Germany was the first country in the world to have had the early stages of a formalized and scientifically backed gay rights movement. The loosening of social norms allowed for such depictions to be produced, but their reception was an entirely different story. Calls for censorship of these films were often the norm. For instance, *Anders als die Andern* was banned in August of 1920 and could only be viewed by doctors and educators (Mennel 11). For this reason, films that wanted to depict queer characters had to be “respectably” queer and use coded language and mannerisms to avoid censorship and public outcry. According to Article 118 of the Weimar Constitution, censorship was deemed illegal but was acceptable for some instances of extremely indecent literature and film. According to James Steakley, professor of German cultural studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, “Because pictures were regarded as more persuasive than words, the cinema was subject to far more stringent controls than other media – all the more so because film attracted a less educated audience than the press or the theater” (188). This implies that people who go to see films are of lower social status and are more likely to be influenced by the “socially deviant” behaviors and people they see on screen.

When most people think about Weimar Germany, the first thing that usually comes to mind is the vibrant cabaret culture that existed during the period. Unpopular amongst conservatives, cabarets were hosts to the unorthodox and often ostracized members of society. As one of the most prominent forms of entertainment, cabaret was extremely popular among the underground queer communities of many German cities, especially in Berlin. Tourists would
often “slum” through the city’s queer neighborhoods and visit some of these cabarets as sites to see the deviants, cross-dressers, and homosexuals of Berlin. When viewing film as a medium, the experience of spectatorship begins to diverge from cabaret and theater. Film is unique in that spectatorship was one-sided and lacked a performer or a physical presence on stage, could be shown multiple times a day, and unlike cabaret and theater, left a physical object as a record of its existence. Conversely, films were often subjected to harsher censorship, were more expensive to produce, and were seen more as products and entertainment and less as a sophisticated art form. While the theater was another comparable format for social gathering, entertainment, and artistic expression, film was a revolutionary new way to do these things while being easily shared and a lasting, repeatable piece of work. Cinemas, like theaters, was another gathering place to share cultural and social ideas on a large scale.

The film of the Weimar period is characterized by a new sexual and artistic freedom, coupled with the haunting and profound memories of the First World War. Films such as Pandora’s Box or The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari are some of the most easily identifiable Weimar period films. The German Expressionists, Berlin Dadaists, and artists of the Neue Sachlichkeit all heavily influenced the surrounding art mediums of the time, and film is no exception. Most notably, Expressionism is often conflated with Weimar Cinema as a whole, with some using the terms interchangeably. The films of this particular style, while popular and well-received both domestically and abroad, are not the majority of films produced during the period. In reality, some scholars posit that only six truly Expressionist films were made during the period, and the rest featured subtle hints of the style (Mushett). The films of this project can be understood as a mixture of the period’s artistic movements, as scholars continue to debate the exact influences and categories of these films.
Queer subcultures had thriving communities in Berlin and in other urban German cities. Due to existing persecution from society and laws, such as the highly contested Paragraph 175, queer folks gathered in mostly clandestine in-person spaces, like bars, personal homes, and cabarets. These spaces were essential in forming the histories and identities of queer Germans and became an essential aspect of queer life and activism in the late twentieth century. As the culture surrounding gay and lesbian subcultures became more visible to a heterosexist society, attacks and hostility towards queer people became more of a problem. To combat this, the Institute for Sexual Science was founded by Magnus Hirschfeld on July 6th, 1919, in the Tiergarten district of Berlin. The institute was founded to establish a science and practice behind the understanding of human sexuality and gender expression. Hirschfeld hypothesized that human sexuality was innate and that homosexuality was found throughout nature; therefore, trying to “cure” someone of their natural desires was unscientific and cruel. His earliest theory was that gays and lesbians represented a third sex, but as his practice evolved, his hypothesis shifted (Dyer 18). This new attitude towards queer and transsexual people was the first of its kind in the West. Hirschfeld was an openly gay man himself, in addition to being Jewish and a socialist. His work in pathologizing homosexual desire and gender transition was met with vitriolic disdain and antisemitism, as many opposed what his institute stood for and conflated his work with his Jewishness. Paragraph 175 stated that “a male who indulges in criminally indecent activities with another male or who allows himself to participate in such activities will be punished with jail” (Plant 30). This was Germany's most prominent discriminatory law in Germany that criminalized homosexual men and transexuals. To combat this, Hirschfeld and the Institute for Sexual Science began creating educational films that provided audiences with new
information on issues often overlooked or misunderstood. One film that will be discussed, *Anders als die Andern (Different from Others)* 1919, is one such example.

Known in German as Aufklärungsfilme (or Enlightenment films), these films dealt with pacifism, alcoholism, venereal disease, prostitution, and homosexuality (Dyer 13). Films such as *Anders* were often highly criticized yet had commercial success until their subsequent censorship. During the last few years of the Weimar Republic, queer people had “...achieved an almost dizzying degree of visibility in popular culture” (Ross 10). Films such as *Mädchen in Uniform* 1931, *Geschlecht in Fesseln (Sex in Chains)* 1928, and *Michäl* 1924 offered queer audiences the first hints of representation. Though still not daring to be too explicit, they featured characters distinctly identifiable as queer and longing for connection. These films also tended to adopt similar narrative structures and tropes. This thesis will explore these tropes within the broader context of queer Weimar culture. Chapter 1 will focus on the settings in which these films take place and the representation of closed-off institutional spaces that often feel at odds with the cosmopolitan nature of Berlin. In addition, Chapter 1 will theorize why these spaces tended to be queer in nature. Chapter 2 will focus on the narrative structures and how these films doom their characters to ephemeral connections. This chapter will specifically look at several narrative tropes that, unfortunately, still can be seen in queer cinema today. Chapter 3 will consider how these spatial and temporal dynamics compare to those of queer stories told in other mediums - literature, painting, and on the stage. Additionally, this chapter will explore the origins of these films as either plays or novels, what makes them unique as films, and how these adaptations evolved their expressions of queer desire.

It becomes essential to acknowledge the word “queer” for this examination of Weimar cinema. Relating to the German word “quer,” meaning across, diagonal, horizontal. (Cambridge
Dictionary) A *Querdenker(in)* is a person who thinks laterally or outside of the box. During the period, the term used to describe individuals with attraction to the opposite gender or who diverged from traditional gender performance was homosexual. Homosexual isn’t necessarily incorrect or offensive terminology; it instead fails to encapsulate the political or social resistance of those who do diverge from the norm. While the term queer is technically anachronistic, I find that it situates these films in a shared history, and that the word homosexual is not inclusive enough. As an essential figure in the formation of queer Studies, Judith Butler proposes, “The term “queer” emerges as an interpellation that raises the question of the status of force and opposition, of stability and variability, *within* performativity” (Butler 226). Labeling these films as “queer” positions them in an oppositional light and context. They have faced intense hostility and scrutiny due to their representation of same-sex relationships. While the individual people in these films may not have identified as queer, the films themselves are part of queer history. For this reason, this examination will classify these films as a part of the foundation of queer cinema as a genre.

As maintained by German studies historian and author of *Gay Berlin*, Robert Beachy, the invention of homosexuality as one of many variations of the human condition was specifically German in its origin. Beachy elaborates that “This confluence of biological determinism and subjective expressions of sexual personhood was a uniquely German phenomenon, moreover, and it clearly underpins modern conceptions of sexual orientation” (XIV Introduction). Additionally, Siegfried Kracauer, one of the most prominent cultural critics of the period, claimed that modern technology and transportation “granted access to the beyond.” (75) In the context of Berlin, this “beyond” granted the potential of sexual freedoms to people from all over the continent, and in some cases the world (Beachy 188). This examination will further this
argument, but in the context of queer cinema and its origins. The cinema of this period founded and established many of the most common tropes and narratives found in contemporary queer cinema: such as the trauma of queerness, the visibly queer or gendered body, the single-sex environment as a location of queerness, and the ultimate demise of the queer character due to death or suicide. Fortunately, queer films have evolved in narrative structure and have begun to move away from these harmful tropes, although it is essential to understand where they come from and how we can continue to subvert them.
Chapter 1
Locating Queer Desire

For this chapter, I will discuss the spaces in which these films take place. Why is their location important to the context of the film and the greater queer community of the Weimar period? I will be examining how characters move through spaces and how they interact with one another within these specific locations. Some critical aspects of this chapter will be the hermetically-sealed nature of these spaces and what and how this affects queer characters and their futures. Why can queerness only exist in these types of spaces, and what are the implications of these representations? I will also investigate why these spaces are associated with state-run institutions and how this correlates to how queer people exist within society.

Of the films mentioned, the spaces and locations in which they occur are crucially important in understanding how queerness is constructed and represented on screen. These settings are often single-sex, hermetically sealed, and stereotypically associated with homosexuality, such as boarding schools and prisons. Additionally, these environments are also coincidentally located within state-managed institutions. These spaces' importance helps viewers conceptualize how queerness is understood, how queer desire is structured, and the futures of those they depict. The questions these environments posit are: can queerness exist outside of these spaces? Why are these locations sealed off from society, and how might they be bridged? The unfortunate implication in these films is that queer relationships cannot and should not be allowed in public or among “polite society.” Historically, queer communities have been forced to create spaces to remain safe from forces intended to harm or eradicate them. Interestingly, the environments in which audiences might view queer people in these films aren’t the spaces in
which they might feel safe, such as queer bars, cabarets, or private homes. The films mentioned above are radical in their depictions of queer people and their relationships but are a product of the time in which they were produced. To produce queer films, filmmakers had to make sacrifices in order to evade censorship and intense criticism.

The military school that houses the female students of *Mädchen in Uniform* is the first location where queer desire between women is represented. The building is constructed in Prussian neoclassical tradition, with images of dominating stone archways and statues of kings and military icons interspersed within the opening credits. The film's beginning establishes the space in which the entirety of the story takes place and is vital for understanding the hierarchy that affects every aspect of the girls’ lives. In literature scholar and poet Gregory Wood’s, *A History of Gay Literature*, he claims that “Boarding school is the citadel of the passing phase” (324). While he specifically discusses boys’ boarding schools, the concept that the boarding school serves a “dual purpose of containment” in the narrative can also be applied to girls’ boarding schools. These two purposes are to separate youth from the opposite sex and by extension, other adults, thereby favoring queer intimacies and isolating them. Secondly, and most importantly, the school serves to “confine homosexual behaviors within the progress of an individual's life, to its own “artificial micro-culture” and the limited period of an adolescent’s education (326). While Woods is referring to the specificities of gay men’s literature and of high-society, public education in England, I believe that the purposes of the boarding school in the literature he references can be easily applied to the boarding school of *Mädchen*.

The sequence establishes the authoritarian power that the girls are subjected to as they parade through the school grounds. A non-diegetic military march plays as viewers follow the girls back inside and are introduced to our protagonist. The bell accompanying the opening
indicates a timely and rigid structure that imposes itself on the girls and how they interact with one another and the outside world. Scholar Barbara Mennel succinctly notes that “At the center of the film’s architectural composition are two staircases, one that symbolizes the official flow of power in the institution, which is forbidden to the girls, and the other, where submerged desires and forbidden knowledge are transmitted, to which the girls have access” (17). The building becomes a channel for power (and even desire) to be transmitted from the headmistress to the faculty and even to the students.

The influence of German Expressionism can be seen throughout the film, and more specifically in the interior hallway shots in which encounters between characters are charged with intensity and desire. It was believed that the influence of the German Expressionists had waned in the late twenties, but their impact can be seen in two stylistic choices made throughout the film. One of these choices is the high, dramatic contrast that is prominent in some of the film's most important sequences. Additionally, the architecture of the building is used to superimpose frames into shots. It can be seen as a way to enhance the emphasis on characters and their interactions with one another. These architectural divisions are used as a means to divide characters within a particular space; the arches that frequent the sequences of this film add depth to the shots and ground the film in the stylistic mode of the era. The two main staircases of the school often become sites of desirously charged encounters between Manuela and von Bernburg.

The first meeting between Fraulein von Bernburg, the gaunt, yet kind teacher, and object of desire for Manuela, is staged on one of these staircases. The camera follows von Bernburg as she walks through the dark hallway and toward a staircase. The location is familiar to the viewer because in the scene before Manuela is brought to change into her uniform, she is led up these
very steps. As von Bernberg reaches the steps, the camera faces her as she looks up to see Manuela. We then see that Manuela is oblivious to the presence of von Bernburg as she is nervously adjusting the cuffs and collar of her new uniform. The staircase offers some level of surveillance, but as Manuela is preoccupied, she does not see von Bernburg’s approach. What makes this first encounter so interesting is that the two are at staggered heights on the stairs, with Manuela above, the object of desire and von Bernburg below her. The power dynamic between the two is skewed towards Bernburg, who holds the gaze and possesses institutional power at the school as a teacher. Her positionality on the staircase complicates the dynamic between them, as von Bernburg looks up at Manuela. The camera is placed at a short distance from Manuela and von Bernburg, and as the sequence continues, the camera shifts to an angle to the left and slightly behind Manuela. With this angle, we can see von Bernburg’s face and expressions as she speaks to our protagonist. Based on the frequently utilized Hollywood trope of the object of desire being placed at the top of a staircase and their opposite being placed at the bottom. The person at the top has a certain degree of power over the other, given that they can see over them and are physically above the other person in every way. The power dynamic between the two is often shifting, with neither being able to hold onto it for very long. In this sequence, Manuela holds a position over von Bernburg, and therefore, in this instance, she is the dominant figure (see figure 1).
The interaction between them continues as von Bernburg scrutinizes Manuela’s dress and presentation saying, “Ich verlange absolute Ordnung,” or “I demand total discipline.” One compelling aspect of this statement is that von Bernburg uses the German verb, *verlangen*, which means to demand or require. When used as a noun, *ein Verlangen*, is a desire. She also explains the rules of the school that appear to police the communication between the girls. This sequence sets the tone for the other encounters between von Bernburg and Manuela, which become reversed and infused with a more intense desirous energy and tone.

Another encounter between Manuela and von Bernburg that shifts the axis of desire is at the same staircase at which they first met. After Manuela becomes flustered and humiliated in class, she attempts to confront Von Bernburg to explain herself. The camera faces down the hall and frames Manuela as she hurries ahead of her teacher. She quickly hides behind a large column as Von Bernburg enters the frame with two students following behind (see figure 2).
When Von Bernburg passes Manuela, it becomes apparent that she is willfully ignoring her. The two girls smirk and giggle at Manuela’s attempt and remain behind Von Bernburg as they begin to climb the stairs. There is a very high level of contrast within the shot, which enhances the shadows of the railing on the wall that faces the viewer. The shadows of the handrail and other parts of the architecture serve to emphasize a feeling of confinement and even control. German Expressionist filmmakers have used this technique in the past, as shadows become reflections of the brutal, cold, and often ornate space around the characters. The architecture serves as a concrete way to divide the frame, which aids in the impression of barriers between the students and faculty. Although Mädchen was released in 1931, the influences of German Expressionism are still very present in the mise-en-scène and serve the story in a precise way. While the scene is brief, it becomes crucial to understand how Manuela’s affections and attitude change throughout the film. She is enamored with her teacher, and the intentional disregard of Von Bernburg only makes Manuela more intent on seeing her. Manuela climbs the
stairs and waits until Von Bernburg is in her office, as the girls following her leave. While Manuela apprehensively waits on the stairs, she encounters Edelgard, another student and friend of hers.

There are some possible romantic entanglements between Manuela and Edelgard but they are subtextual to a certain degree. They speak briefly, with Manuela explaining her inability to perform in Von Bernburg’s class as the two girls exit the office and into view. The sequence ends with the two girls descending the stairs and walking past Manuela and Edelgard. As discussed earlier, the various staircases used throughout the film serve as a channel for desire and power, with faculty and students using both to their own advantage. With the staircase sequences, the film inverts the traditional Hollywood trope of the object of desire descending the stairs towards the individual possessing the gaze. The person at the top of the staircase holds a unique perspective and power over the person below, and Mädchen in Uniform appears to subvert this trope. While most of the film focuses on Manuela’s infatuation with her teacher, it becomes apparent at the end of the film that von Bernburg’s desire for Manuela is reciprocal.

Within the context of the film, those with institutional power often have their own private spaces. The girls, who would be at the bottom of the power hierarchy, have no spaces to call their own. They share a dormitory, bathroom, recreational, and class space and have no privacy. Additionally, within these spaces, they are policed by both teachers and other girls. The girls’ spaces are neat and uniform, lacking any real sense of individuality. Individuality and individual desire are heavily policed and monitored for deviance and dissent. What makes von Bernburg unlike the other teachers is that she invites students into her space, including Manuela. One such sequence occurs in her office, as Manuela is asked to explain why her undergarments are torn and ragged. Von Bernburg finds that Manuela needs a new undershirt and decides to give her one
of her own. It is important to emphasize that this is an incredibly intimate gesture on behalf of von Bernburg. She not only invites Manuela into her private space but also bestows upon her a very personal gift. When Manuela accepts this gift, she is overwhelmed with feelings of adoration and desire. She hugs von Bernburg, and there is a prolonged shot of von Bernburg looking down at Manuela as her arms are draped around her. Von Bernburg scolds her intense emotional reaction but holds onto Manuela. Her eyes are cast downwards, and the gaze is kept longer than what would be considered “normal.” The sequence continues as von Bernburg asks Manuela to sit and explain why she is crying, which reveals that von Bernburg does care about Manuela’s past and the reasons for her struggles. Through her intimate gift and careful consideration of Manuela’s feelings, von Bernburg’s true feelings are revealed. When considering the possible consequences of such an act, it becomes clear that von Berburg has much at stake concerning her feelings for Manuela and her position at the school. Even with this in mind, it appears that von Bernburg is willing to subvert her position to continue interacting with Manuela in this intimate way.

The turbulent relationship between Manuela and von Bernburg comes to a head after Maneula’s passionate and drunken confession of love for the latter is overheard by the authoritarian Headmistress, who rules the school with a frugal, disciplined, and iron fist. This proclamation of love and passion is extremely explicit in its sapphic implications and almost represents a coming-out for Manuela. The scene begins when one of the students begins playing the piano, resulting in several girls pairing up as dance partners. The entire student body vacates their seats to dance with one another in a show of pure, unadulterated joy between young girls. The camera often looks down from above the girls, but it also becomes one of them, as it focuses on the girls’ dancing feet or on three or four singing and dancing behind the pianist. When the
camera is above the girls, it pans from one side of the room to the other. In this way, the various movements and angles of the camera make the viewer feel like they are both spectators of the girls’ unbridled and drunken joy and one of the girls themselves. Due to her unintentional drunkenness, she proclaims her happiness to her dance partner and accidentally hurts her by squeezing her arm. Her partner recoils and reveals a hand-drawn tattoo; the letters, E. v. B., are enclosed inside a thick black heart. Seeing this on another girl’s arm is the catalyst for Manuela’s big confession. The sequence in which Manuela declares her love for Von Bernburg focuses on Manuela herself and the subsequent reactions of her fellow students. Manuela reveals that Fraulein Von Bernburg has given her an undershirt, which she interprets as a symbol of her love, desire, and devotion. Manuela is clearly under the influence of alcohol, but her unadulterated love and passion for her teacher are undeniable.

The camera has a shot-counter-shot exchange between Manuela on the stage, and the student body, who are impatiently and even confusedly listening. Between these shots, the audience becomes aware that one of the more authoritarian teachers watches them nervously from behind. She runs off to notify the headmistress, and the scene continues with Manuela singing praises of Von Bernburg. The shots of this teacher invading the space of these girls are reminiscent of how informants would quietly infiltrate and monitor queer spaces and bars in the service of the police. The teachers, excluding Von Bernburg, represent a force that is bent on preventing “perverted” desire and any sort of dissent more broadly. The film's climax occurs as the headmistress walks in on Manuela’s drunken proclamation. At this point in the film, stringent authoritarianism comes head to head with the rebellious queerness of our protagonist. What makes this sequence genuinely groundbreaking for its time is the explicit desire Manuela has for von Bernburg. Her position in relation to authority is higher, as Manuela is standing on the stage,
still in her Hosenrolle costume from her performance in a gender-bending *Don Carlos*. The scene ends with Manuela fainting in drunken exhaustion; the intensity with which Manuela declares her love for and allegiance to Von Bernburg is admirable and surprising within the context of the time and place. The school prides itself on its Prussian values and militarism, and Manuela’s speech appears to be a vehement rejection of authority, convention, and the values of her time.

The staircase, central to constructing the film’s narrative, gives the illusion of total surveillance. These blindspots are responsible for unplanned encounters and even are used for the entertainment of the girls. Earlier in the film, Ilse and another girl lean over the railing while spitting and throwing firecrackers down, to the dismay of one of their teachers. In the film's final sequence, after Manuela is thoroughly punished and spurned by von Bernburg, she decides that the only way to end her embarrassment and anxiety is to take her own life. Upon discovering she is missing from her room, her friends frantically search for her. During this scene, viewers return to the staircase where von Bernburg and Manuela first meet. With Manuela at the very top, the girls are initially unable to find her. The construction of the staircase can be compared to Foucault’s theory of the panopticon. The various levels of the staircase enhance the surveillance of the students by their teachers but also produce an inter-surveillance among the students. Yet issues arise in that one cannot see who is above or below them, which limits viewing in various instances such as this. With Manuela at the top, the girls below her cannot see where she is until she is over the railing and looking down at the girls below her. She recites the Lord's prayer while walking to the top of the staircase. Additionally, she is wearing a white nightgown, which could allude to a baptismal gown, often a long white garment worn by those receiving the sacrament. Before she can end her life, the girls save her from her despair, and von Bernburg
comes rushing to her side. The end of the film sees the supposed defeat of the Headmistress, who was primarily responsible for the acute misery experienced by Manuela after she had gotten drunk and confessed her love for her teacher. This final scene is the most exciting and chaotic use of the staircase as a site for queer desire and, more devastatingly, queer despair.

In November of 1928, residents of Berlin’s most “disreputable” and queer neighborhoods received mysterious envelopes emblazoned with the words, “Streng vertraulich” and “Nur öffnen, wenn Sie allein sind”.

These puzzling envelopes contained an advertisement for a film. The film's title, Geschlecht in Fesseln, promised a lewd spectacle for spectators, and Berlin’s queer subcultures flocked to the screening. This clever advertising tactic profited from the public's interest in the clandestine, which implicated the film as potentially pornographic. In opposition to this instance of arousing and suggestive advertising, the film also wanted to be taken seriously as a didactic piece of media that also had an opening at Berlin’s prestigious Tauentzienpalast (Rogowski).

William Dieterle’s 1928 film Geschlecht in Fesseln is a confounding and evocative film that exploits its lurid subject matter while purporting to be educational.

Similarly to Mädchen in Uniform, the title promises salacious content. While at the same time taking up the subject of prison reform. The film’s narrative follows Franz Sommer (William Dieterle) and his wife, Helene (Mary Johnson), trying to make ends meet. As a film of the later silent era, it is surprising to see such a multi-faceted film, given its depiction of complicated extramarital affairs and queer relationships in prison. In certain instances, the film becomes expressly didactic. During one particular sequence, the narrative is sidelined in order to

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1 “Strictly confidential” and “To be opened only if you are alone.”
reference issues regarding the German penal system. The inspiration for the film and the narrative was influenced by a study performed in a German prison by Franz Höllering.

Furthermore, the film features statements from Karl Plättner’s book, *Eros in Prison*, written from his observations during his eight-year imprisonment. In this way, the film seems to align with the contemporaneous Aufklärungsfilme, such as *Anders Als die Andern*, in that they intended to enlighten their audiences about specific social issues. The most apparent way *Geschlecht* deviates from the more standardized and socio-scientific Aufklärungsfilme is that the mise-en-scène is as important as the narrative itself. The single-sex prison is a place where queerness is reluctantly permitted or rather overlooked. Once someone is released, they are expected to return to their former heterosexual life if they ever lived such a life.

Moreover, Dieterle’s film is neither sympathetic towards Sommer, the film’s queer protagonist, nor his wife. Due to their separation, both engage in extra-marital affairs to control their sexual desires and surprisingly, both are punished for this equally. As articulated by German studies and film scholar Christian Rogowski, “Sommer’s same-sex encounter, like Helene’s sexual lapse before, is presented as something that, given the circumstances, can happen to anyone. All “normal” categories have been reversed: in her “active” pursuit of a random sexual partner, after she has been denied access to her husband, Helene Sommer exhibits male characteristics; conversely, the “passive” response to the emotional solicitation of a loving individual completes the emasculation and feminization of Franz Sommer” (227). The excess of sexuality seems to be the most noticeable issue the director takes with the film’s characters, and the end of the film demonstrates this succinctly.

As mentioned earlier, the film takes place in a men’s prison, which is managed similarly to the girl’s boarding school in *Mädchen*. The single-sex environment becomes a site for queer
exploration and desire, which becomes highly apparent in this film. *Geschlecht in Fesseln* takes a more subtextual approach in depicting queerness, given that homosexuality among men was considered a crime under Paragraph 175 of the German penal code. Therefore, to extract and understand the queer desire in this film, viewers have to extrapolate from what is depicted. This subtextual queerness is present in many German films of this period, as Freud’s theories on human sexuality were at the forefront of intellectual and artistic discourses. The various spaces and locations where the film occurs are essential to understanding how queerness develops between characters. One aspect of this film that correlates closely to *Mädchen in Uniform* is the use of the staircase for sequences of charged emotional and sexual desire.

While *Geschlecht in Fesseln* only has one such scene, the crime occurs there is the reason for Sommer’s stint in prison and is a significant turning point in the film. Due to Sommer’s joblessness, his wife, Helene, finds a job to help support them. She finds a job as a cigarette girl in a cafe, and one day at work, she becomes burdened by the unsolicited attention of another man. Sommer’s wife and the man bothering her are on a set of stairs, which, ironically, is the location in which excessive masculine desires clash. The wife’s position on the staircase is higher than the man opposite her; she is uncomfortable with being the object of his gaze. While visiting her workplace, Sommer becomes aware of his wife’s problem. She continuously asks the man to leave her alone but finds herself cornered. The camera angle switches and moves behind them, facing Sommer as he hurriedly approaches. He tells the man off, steps to a higher point on the staircase, and they begin to fight. The fight is shot close to Sommer’s face, with the opposite man’s head in the frame. Then suddenly, the man is pushed from the shot, with viewers seeing Sommer’s face contort in discomfort as he witnesses the other man’s head hit the stairs. The brief shot does not linger on the unconscious man but on Sommer’s reaction.
Witnesses suddenly surround them, and within seconds, police officers appear. They arrest Sommer, and he is sent to jail until the man he pushed either recovers or dies from their fight. Ultimately, the man dies, which results in Sommer being charged and imprisoned for involuntary manslaughter. How the staircase is used in this instance differs from the staircase scenes in *Mädchen in Uniform*. This staircase becomes the site of patriarchal and even paternalistic violence. The sequence thus links inappropriate heterosexual desire with violence.

As mentioned earlier, Sommer was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to three years in prison. The introduction of the prison as a location of surveillance and subdued sexual desire is apparent in the first few scenes. The establishing shot of the inside of the prison shows various guards on duty, and the screen is divided by prison bars and surrounded by iron rails that border the walkways (see figure 3).

Figure 3: A single guard stands watch during establishing shot of the inside of the prison. The lives of the men are meticulously controlled, with their days dictated by the will of the officers and indicated by a bell rung by one of the guards. Akin to the girls of the Prussian military school, they sleep in identical beds and in the same basic uniform. We are introduced visually to each inmate as they begin to fall asleep until the camera lands on Sommer. The use of light to emphasize him among his peers appears intentional. The camera focuses solely on him and fades into his subconscious as he
desirously dreams of his wife. Through his dream, his body and mind seem to have been miraculously removed from prison to be with his wife. Through a short series of superimposed shots, we see him and his wife having sex, with Sommer kissing her arm. As the audience, we know that this dream sequence is revelatory of Sommer’s most intense desires. Concludingly, another superimposed shot of his body reappearing is utilized to show that he has woken up from his dream and is now cognizant of his emotional tumult (see figure 4).

Sommer is profoundly distressed and leaves his bed. The unfulfillment of Sommer’s and the other prisoners’ sexual desires is one, if not the most prominent, issue that arises in this film. This is emphasized when the men of the prison question why the fulfillment of their sexual needs aren’t considered essential for their wellness. Sommer and his cellmates use every available way to express their sexuality, which includes making clay dolls of naked women, drawing images of women on their walls, and using their imaginations. Dieterle utilizes techniques popularized by
and characteristic of the French Impressionists, namely the superimposition of two shots as a means to distort reality and even reveal the interiority of a character (see figure 5).

Figure 5: A silent and motionless shot of Helene is superimposed on top of a shot of Sommer and the inside of his prison cell.

This technique is utilized again while Sommer is in prison and yearning for his wife. This shot superimposes a motionless and naked shot of Helene and the interior of Sommer’s prison cell as he anxiously moves from one side of the room to the other. This frame situates Helene as the object of Sommer’s desire, as her naked body dominates the frame and is still and sensuous. He walks from his bed to the corner of the cell and back again. The superimposition of the image of Helene is revelatory of Sommer’s continuous internal struggles with his sexual impulses. As Sommer’s prison sentence continues, shots that are meant to show his inner sexual cravings are no longer present, as it is implied through their absence that he has found sexual fulfillment elsewhere.
The relationship between Sommer and Alfred begins with the latter’s imprisonment and introduction into the shared prison cell. The relationship shared between the two men is limited to only two on-screen touches due to the illegality of homosexuality between men in Germany at the time. The film was subject to censorship upon its 1928 release, with parts of the film being removed, in addition to a universal ban on youth viewership. The film’s depiction of a sympathetic yet implied queer relationship was the most prominent reason for its censorship. According to the report that documented the reasons for its censorship. In English, “A homosexual approach was quite strongly implied” was just one of many instances of censors taking issue with the film's representations. The scene they are referring to in the report, “3. A Night in the Common Dormitory” is the first tender moment shared between Alfred and Sommer (6). Ending just after the superimposed shot of Sommer’s wife discussed earlier, this scene begins with one of the guards’ invasion of the prison cell for no discernable reason. Then, one of the unnamed cellmates is shown to have been awake and aware of the guard’s presence. After the guard leaves, the man turns upright and begins to lean over Alfred’s bed as he sleeps. The man slowly creeps his hands over Alfred’s face and then suddenly shakes him awake in a cruel attempt to play a joke on him. Alfred, visibly distressed and jolted from his sleep, is then consoled and comforted by Sommer from the bed next to his own. The two men speak, but there are no inter-titles to explain their conversation, allowing audiences to read into the scene's subtext. The moment shared between the two men is tender, as Sommer takes on an almost protective role in relation to Alfred. The scene continues, and as the camera cuts to show different angles of their cell, Alfred affectionately places his forehead on Sommer’s arm in a gesture of genuine intimacy. Even though the nature of their sexual relationship remains implied,

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2 “Homosexuelle Annäherung wird ziemlich stark angedeutet”.
3 “3. Eine Nacht im gemeinsamen Schlafsaal” [original formatting].
the on-screen dynamic between the two men is more than obvious. They hold each other's gaze for a prolonged period, and then the scene ends as they slowly lay back in their beds. This short sequence is later followed by a more complex scene in which the men of the prison are being preached to by a clergyman, who is situated high above the men as he raves about piety and restraint. The men are separated into individual sections, and eventually, the camera fades to Alfred sitting next to Sommer at the service. Audiences watch as he nervously draws a circle around his and Sommer’s (first) name and apprehensively shows it to Sommer. This act is reminiscent of a childlike crush, where one offers a simple recognition of their feelings towards another in a small, perhaps trivial manner. As a symbolic gesture of their relationship, their names enclosed in a circle might not appear significant, but it's quite revelatory within the context of their current location. Alfred legitimizes his relationship with Sommer with this small gesture, assuming that he wrote this in the blank pages of his bible. When viewing this with a contemporary queer lens, the act of quietly proclaiming one’s love for another man within the pages of a bible during service is subversive. After the service, Alfred and Sommer are back in their cell, both lying in their respective beds. The camera establishes the semi-private space of their prison cell and then closes in on Alfred. He is lying on his back, breathing heavily, and distressed. Sommer notices this and appears to inquire about his state of mind. The camera moves slowly between the two men and cuts to inter-titles of their dialogue. The movement back and forth implies a steady flow of conversation and seems to indicate the intimacy they share. They go back and forth several times, and the conversation culminates in a seeming confession of love by Alfred, which the audience is not privy to. By reading into the scene with an understanding of their implicit relationship, in addition to Sommer’s reaction, we can assume
that Alfred has confessed his true and most intimate feelings for the man next to him. Alfred asks Sommer not to make light of his confession, and the scene culminates with the two men grasping hands, with Sommer suggestively moving towards Alfred (see figure 6). The shot fades to an image of the outside of the prison, but not before the previous scene suggests a sexual encounter between Alfred and Sommer. From within the confines of the prison, their relationship can be understood as a way for both men to release any pent-up sexual tension but also appears to be a bond built on actual fondness for one another. The intimacy of this scene, and the two discussed earlier, are the most notable instances of queerness in this film, which upon first watch, is a didactic narrative on the issues arising from the sexual policing and repression occurring in the German prison system. There is also an implication that Sommer might be attracted to Alfred due to his association with the outside world. Since Alfred is the last to arrive, his fellow inmates are curious to ask him about the outside world. One of the cellmates even goes as far as to smell him and claim that he still smells like the world beyond their prison. Sommer watches him and
scolds one of his cellmates for his antics, glances at Alfred, and then averts his gaze as he looks out their solitary window. Sommer’s gaze upon Alfred directly compares him to the outside world, and with a single cut, the camera moves directly upwards towards the clouds. This first initial meeting between Alfred and Sommer appears rather unimportant, but the associations made between Alfred and the world beyond the prison are significant. The scene after this is directly juxtaposed with the limits set upon Sommer’s freedom and is a sequence of fading landscape shots from the point of view of his wife. The emphasis on smell in this scene also suggests that the deprivations of prison might make the men more sensorially aware— and possibly more sensuous.

Although the film takes a subtextual approach to depict the relationship between these two men, censors still took issue with the film. Geschlecht is thought-provoking because the narrative is based on real-life observations and experiences. As a state-managed, single-sex, hermetically sealed institution, the prison can be understood as a catalyst for the queer relationships and encounters portrayed on screen. The heightened control of the space makes it difficult for queerness to flourish outside of it, as the film takes an almost indifferent approach to its existence. While conversely, the role of the state acts antagonistically and is solely focused on the policing of non-normative sexuality. Interestingly, the film posits “non-normative sexuality” as an excess of sexuality or sexual drive. For the men in prison, queer sex is almost represented as a mitigation of this excess.

One scene that takes this sentiment to its most radical conclusion features one of Sommer’s cellmates recalling how a former prisoner self-mutilated to mitigate his intense sexual cravings. He then grabs a sharp tool in an attempt to do the same. He is stopped and apprehended by the guards and brought to the doctor. The guards and the doctors attempt to subdue his
uncontrollable desire, but ultimately he ends his life. This scene demonstrates that the policing of
desire within this prison extends to all forms, homo- and heterosexual. The very nature of the
space is its absolute control over those who find themselves within it. The sexuality that emerges
between the men, namely Sommer and one of his cellmates, Alfred, is a product of the space in
which they are forced to remain.

The narrative is by no means sympathetic towards its queer characters, but this distinction
is important to note. Relating to Mädchen in Uniform, the space of the state-run school or men’s
prison become sites of queer desire and charged sexuality due to their closed-off nature and the
policing of each individual’s sexuality. Queer desire permeates the space and is both subjected to
harsh repression and is oddly permissible in certain circumstances. The paradoxical argument
these films seem to be advancing is that it is in ostensibly the most heavily policed spaces that
queer desire can flourish.

With this in mind, the next chapter will consider how the narrative structures of these
films compare and how certain tropes are reproduced to this day. The films discussed earlier,
Geschelcht in Fesseln and Mädchen in Uniform, can complement one another, as they are
exceedingly similar in their depictions of queer relationships and in the ways that queer sexual
desire is policed and, in certain circumstances, oddly permissible. The other films that will be
discussed in this project, Michäl (1919) and Anders Als die Andern (1919), are films that anchor
their characters’ queer desire not in any particular space or institution but in the power dynamic
resulting from the relationship between master and apprentice, teacher and student. These two
films can be understood as a pair like the ones mentioned above. While Anders is one of many
Aufklärungsfilme, Michäl is a less didactic story and explores the relationship between the
teacher and student more intensely. With this next chapter, I intend to question the relationship
between characters in each film, and as a whole, extrapolate how and why queerness is represented as an ephemeral life experience. Additionally, all four films take a particular narrative stance on queerness, specifically that all of the characters who have engaged with queer desire ultimately die or decide to take (or attempt to take) their lives.
Chapter 2
Narrative Structures and the Formation of Queerness

In chapter two, I will be discussing the narrative structures of the films and how they construct queerness as an ephemeral experience linked to a particular time in a person’s life. Two of the most prominent narratives are the teacher/student relationship and the death/suicide of the queer character. The student and teacher dynamic comes from the pedagogical eros of ancient Greece and is represented in three of the four films I will be discussing. The second trope that can be found in all four films is the death or (attempted) suicide of the main queer character. This structure can even be found in contemporary queer films, and its history expands beyond the Weimar period. These two narrative structures can be examined in order to help us understand the nature of queer desire, queer solidarity, and queer futures.

After examining the spaces in which these films take place, it becomes important to consider their narrative structures and how they construct the foundations for our understanding of queer desire and relationships. The sexualities of the characters aren’t necessarily claimed identities but rather a way of moving through space and time. In this way, certain tropes become associated with homosexuality. One particular example is the relationship between the older teacher figure and the younger student. This configuration finds its roots in the pedagogical eros between the older and younger males in Ancient Greece. This relationship's structure appears to be depicted between the characters of these films. Gay men during this time often idealized this dynamic, as Richard Dyer articulates, “Taking its cue from how classical antiquity had been constructed by nineteenth-century arbiters of taste, gay culture distinguished two Greek ideals, of male beauty, the ephebe, the boy poised on the brink of adolescence, and the older athlete” (Dyer
The relationship itself was idealized and naturalized from within the community of gay men, and also made its way into films like *Mädchen in Uniform*. Drawing from a nineteenth-century German literary tradition, the Bildungsroman serves as an important precursor to many of these films. Narratively centering around the protagonist's development from childhood to adulthood, the films can be understood as pulling from this tradition, albeit not identically. Although these films, with the exclusion of *Mädchen*, are about adults or young adults. This sub-genre connects to these films through their representations of the development of the individual character, which comes into conflict with society at large. Typically, the values of society are eventually accepted by the protagonist and they embody the growth seen throughout the story, but in these films, society’s values overtake them, resulting in their demise. By extension, another more unfortunate aspect of these films’ narratives is the death or (attempted) suicide of their main characters. This trope, which is still prevalent in contemporary queer cinema and television, is used to subdue the transgressive existence of the queer character. Due to censorship, allowing the queer character or any other nonconforming character to live beyond the scope of the film was to be seen as promoting that character’s actions. The death of the character symbolizes the negation of a future, a future where queerness can be embraced. This narrative strategy has also been deployed against other characters that may have transgressive qualities: such as sex workers, femme fatales, thieves, gangsters, or others of a supposedly “villainous” disposition. Interestingly, the characters who die for the narrative’s sake are typically the older teacher figures. Excluding *Mädchen*, the older men who do either die or kill themselves are seen as the instigators of the relationship and perhaps are assumed to be more responsible and reprehensible. Their younger counterparts can be understood as “fixable” or more easily malleable to the will of a heterosexist society. Film historian, Gay Rights, and AIDS activist Vito Russo’s pioneering study of historical...
images of queer subjects, *The Celluloid Closet*, includes a sobering necrology section, naming and listing the causes of death for the dozens of queer and queer-coded characters of his in-depth study. Included in this very intentional index are *Anders als die Andern, Mächen in Uniform*, and *Pandora's Box.* The lineage of this trope runs deep and finds part of its origins in this era of filmmaking. In this regard, the narrative of a film like *Anders* makes obvious use of this trope but also a much more tolerant stance on homosexuality. As an educational film produced by Germany’s leading sexologist, Magnus Hirschfeld inserted himself into the film's narrative as a didactic device to teach the greater public about tolerance towards homosexuals. *Anders* takes a strong stance against Paragraph 175 of the German Penal Code, which criminalized “unnatural vice between men.” With this history in mind, *Anders als die Andern* takes a firm stance against the legal persecution of homosexuals (particularly gay men).

As observed by film historian Richard Dyer, a film like *Anders* is one of two films of the Weimar Period that places homosexuality “centrally, unambiguously and positively” (1). In earlier scholarship, Dyer elaborates that Gay Rights activist and film historian Vito Russo’s comprehensive study of queer images, *The Celluloid Closet*, only led to a discovery of very few representations of queer people, most of which could easily be overlooked by an unfocused eye. The film is explicit in its sympathies towards queer individuals and stands out amongst the other films of this project. As an Aufklärungsfilm, *Anders* takes an instructive approach to narrative story-telling and enjoyed a fairly wide release in German cinemas during the period. After the rise of the Third Reich, most of the copies of the film were destroyed alongside all of the research and historical records that were to be found in the Institute for Sexual Science.

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4 Although Manuela does not die at the end of the film, she does attempt suicide, which qualifies her inclusion on this list.
5 Today, this trope is colloquially referred to as “Bury Your Gays”.
6 Paragraph 175 was enacted in 1871, and challenged as early as 1897.
7 The other being *Mädchen in Uniform*. 
Hirschfeld also produced a documentary-style version of the film, and from this version, the film was reconstructed. This footage was discovered with Cyrillic intertitles in Ukraine, and was restored, reconstructed, and released in 2006. The film in its original form was first exhibited at the Apollo-Theater in Berlin, received a full press review, and was highly contested. Banned outright in Vienna, Munich, and Stuttgart, the film elicited an uproar of vitriol and even a walkout in Berlin. The film was not banned outright and was still permissible to show to doctors

![Image: Paul affectionately watches Kurt play the violin.](image)

Figure 7: Paul affectionately watches Kurt play the violin.

and researchers as a scientific documentary of sorts. The film follows a famed violinist, Paul Körner (Conrad Veigt), who falls in love with one of his students, Kurt Sivers (Fritz Schulz). Kurt attends all of Paul’s concerts and soon becomes a disciple-like figure, and later it is revealed that they are seeing one another (see figure 7).
As the men share a walk in the park, they encounter Franz Bollek (Reinhold Schünzel), who is implied to be a former acquaintance of Paul’s (see figure 8). Franz is revealed to be the villain of the story, as he continues his blackmail scheme against Paul. After Kurt moves in with Paul, Kurt’s parents try to persuade him to marry. After an explanation of sexology and Kurt’s sexual nature from Hirschfeld, Paul, and Kurt happily appear in a concert together. After this, Franz breaks into Paul’s apartment, encounters Kurt, and the two begin to fight. Paul then enters the fight, which results in Franz’s defeat and escape. The encounter is deeply upsetting for Kurt, who ultimately leaves Paul and later finds work performing in a tavern. This event results in a deeper understanding of Paul as he reminisces on his life as he processes the loss of his lover. Audiences are given access to Paul’s memories, which include: memories of his first love for a young boy at his boarding school, his attempts to cure his homosexuality by visiting a brothel and through hypnosis, an enlightening visit to Dr. Hirschfeld, who tells him that he can be both a productive member of society and a homosexual, and lastly a revealing memory of Paul meeting
Franz at a gay dance. This last memory establishes that Franz himself might be a homosexual himself, who weaponizes his knowledge of the sexualities of others to blackmail them. These recollections animate Paul to action, and he defiantly rips up one of Franz’s blackmail letters. In this film, Dr. Hirschfeld makes another appearance as a leading sexologist and lecturer. Paul and Kurt’s sister, Else, who admits to being in love with Paul, learn through the lecture that his nature is unchangeable. Concurrently, we learn that Franz has gone to the police to report Paul as a homosexual but is ultimately arrested for blackmail. After serving his sentence, Paul

![Figure 9: Kurt is surrounded by his family as he mourns for Paul](image)

has lost all of his former acquaintances and his position in society. He ultimately decides to poison himself, which devastates Kurt. He threatens to kill himself, but not before having a conversation with Hirschfeld, and is persuaded into action on behalf of the homosexual cause. Due to the damaged state, the film was found in, the image featured above is only a single frame in what is left of the film after its extensive restoration. Surrounded by his family, Kurt mourns over the loss of Paul (see figure 9). The image is truly distressing and explicitly depicts a man lamenting over the loss of his lover, who is also a man. This fragment is representative of a large,
more fleshed-out scene that Christopher Isherwood describes in his memoir, *Christopher and His Kind*: “The next scene is a vision which Veidt (Paul Körner) has a long procession of kings, poets, scientists, philosophers, and other famous victims of homophobia, moving slowly and sadly with heads bowed. Dr. Hirschfeld himself appears. I think the corpse of Veidt, who has committed suicide, is lying in the background. Hirschfeld delivers a speech (that is to say, a series of titles) pleading tolerance for the Third Sex” (qtd. in Russo 21). The difficulty of studying and researching this film in particular is how much of it has been lost to intentional destruction, erasure, and decay. Furthermore, in 1927, the film was remade as *Gesetze der Liebe*, and featured an abridged version of *Anders*. German cultural studies professor, James D. Steakley, frames the film as “… a lecture by Hirschfeld in five ‘chapters,’ the film depicted sexual intercourse in the animal kingdom, moved on to gestation, birth, and nurturing of newborns, dealt in chapter four with ‘sexual intermediacy’ (hermaphroditism, transvestism, and homosexuality) and concluded with chapter five, a re-edited and drastically abridged version of *Anders als die Andern* now entitled ‘Schuldlos gedacht! Tragödie eines Homosexuellen’.⁸ Like its predecessor, the film was subject to specific bans on the basis of its interest in penal code reform and its overt depictions of homosexual intimacy. The importance of this particular film cannot be overstated, as the abridged version of *Anders* that was discovered in Ukraine in the 1970s comes from the fifth ‘chapter’ of this film. Due to the eight years between its first release, and its second re-framed release, the story represented in both films had become stylistically outdated. The acting style and aesthetics of 1919 were considered exceptionally stilted by the release of *Gesetze* in 1927. Steakley notes that historical accounts of the film considered the last chapter of the film to be “mawkish and kitschy”, and was even more negatively reviewed by the small yet opinionated homosexual press (194). The fragmentation and loss of this film, or rather

⁸ In English, ‘Innocently Outlawed! Tragedy of a Homosexual’.
its original content is representative of the loss (and more so, intentional erasure) of queer history. A history where queer people can see themselves in a positive light and that their experiences are not just their own but shared by a collective.

Although the film ends tragically for its protagonist, the narrative intends on revealing the realities of life for queer people in Germany at the time. Queer people (but especially queer men) were subject to the threat of blackmail and social exile, and *Anders* demonstrates the consequences of this. Beyond the didactic narrative, the film is still subjected to contemporary film conventions, as Richard Oswald was not, as far as historians know, gay. Hirschfeld was responsible for the medical accuracy of the film and is also assumed to have had a hand in the scriptwriting (Dyer 12). The film has a clear, sympathetic protagonist, a deuteragonist, and a villainous, self-serving antagonist. Additionally, the film has a standard linear narrative and features several flashbacks, which help illuminate the present events and reveal its protagonist's interiority. The plot of *Anders* posits that the most pressing issue hindering homosexual acceptance are the social attitudes held by individuals and society at large, as was codified in the law by Paragraph 175. Its purpose as a tool of social change is to alter attitudes and in turn eliminate the law that is responsible for the persecution of homosexuals and by extension, the tragedy of their suicides.

The relationship between Paul and Kurt is, as was mentioned earlier, a dynamic skewed on age-related lines. Paul, the older instructor figure is what the ancient Greeks would have called the *erastes*, and Kurt, being the younger, is the *eromenos*. When examining the relationships Paul has with both Franz and Kurt, the film takes a fairly clear stance against the former. Dyer offers a distinction between the two relationships of Paul’s life:

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9 With queer women relegated to invisibility and “non-existence”.
“The ideals of friendship and ‘pedagogic eros’ structure the ‘good’ relationships in Paul’s life. His relationship with Max at school is a ‘spiritual unity’, his relationship with Kurt a classical master-pupil one…By contrast there is a physical expression between Paul and Franz, Franz puckering his lips when he makes a play at the dance, Paul caressing him back home. It is in the queer subcultural spaces where Paul finds his ultimate downfall, namely the bars and dances where queer people flocked in droves to escape persecution and find acceptance. The ‘good’ sexuality in Anders, represented by Max and Kurt, as opposed to the ‘bad’ sexuality embodied in Franz…” (25)

These two categories of desire delineate the boundaries of the “bad” and “decadent” versus “good” or “productive” queers. The logic of this dichotomy is intriguing, in that it attempts to justify that not all queer people are of a “villainous, extravagant disposition”, and invokes an image of classical antiquity in order to do so. Film historian Barbara Mennel concludes that, “Squarely situated in the sphere of high culture, they (Paul and Kurt) do not venture into subcultural spaces together. The two relationships, of which each is associated with a different understanding of homosexuality…mark Paul as a dual character, a continuing code for homosexuals” (13). It becomes important to note that in order to produce this film and have it tell an expressly political story, Hirschfeld most likely had to make some concessions. The film advocates for a ‘male-identified gayness’ and is decidedly less radical than Hirschfeld’s actual views on homosexual acceptance in society. Anders, widely considered to be the first sympathetic, on-screen depiction of gay men, aims to be a positive representation of queer respectability. The narrative replicates a possible scenario, like blackmail and the threat of imprisonment, in order to demonstrate the struggles of being a homosexual person in modern society. Like in the Bildungsroman, the young protagonist is forced to reckon with the pressures and expectations of society as they come of age. Although Kurt is a young adult, this narrative structure is present in his story as he grieves for his lover and is subsequently spurred into activism. Kurt, unlike Paul, has not been “corrupted” by the decadence of queer subcultures,
therefore, does not need to die for the sake of the narrative. Based on Mikhail Bakhtin’s understanding of Goethe’s work with Bildungsromane, an individual is “...no longer within an epoch, but between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other. The transition is accomplished in him and through him. He is forced to become a new, unprecedented human being” (qtd. from Miller 1). The emergence of a new, different person who is fully realized and integrated into society is the traditional ending of Bildungsromane. The devastation and tragedy of Paul’s death is the reason for Kurt’s turn towards advocacy, and similarly, the film intends to ask the audience to do the same.

Like *Anders*, *Michäl* (1924) features a same-sex, master-pupil relationship, albeit with less sympathy and more subtextually. The film follows Zoret, or the Master, and his relationship with the young, frivolous, and beautiful Eugene Michäl. Originally adapted from Hermann Bang’s novel of the same title in 1904, the original text was supposedly based on the life of master sculptor Auguste Rodin. *Anders* and *Michäl* clearly mirror one another narratively but are decidedly different in notable ways. Although they both depict a pseudo-pederastic relationship between an older, more masterful artist, and his younger, beloved student, the social-scientific pleas for integration and tolerance that are present throughout *Anders* are nowhere to be found in *Michäl*. The relationship between Zoret and Michäl is tumultuous, with the latter being an “ungrateful opportunist” and frivolous with Zoret’s affections for him. Michäl is not only the object of Zoret’s desire but is also his muse. After the arrival of a young, supposedly rich princess, Michäl is swept away from Zoret. The master painter becomes increasingly jealous, and his work subsequently suffers. In order to please his princess, Michäl sells a cherished portrait that was done of him by Zoret, and also steals and sells several sketches in order to sustain his more extravagant lifestyle. This devestates Zoret, and in his sadness, he begins his final painting.
The image is of a dying man, which is clearly meant to symbolize himself, as he slowly dies of heartbreak. Michāl continues to be extravagant in his behavior, which results in the slow death of his former lover and master. Zoret’s final words, which also serve to introduce the film, “I can die in peace, I have known a great love.” The death of Zoret is yet another example of the loss of a queer future. While Zoret’s death was not his own doing, it can be inferred that his broken heart, a result of his former relationship with Michāl, is to blame. The result is still the same as in Anders, the pressure society places on an individual for their desires is too much to bear, so that pressure must be mitigated. Michāl and Anders are alike in this way, but different in that their overall attitudes towards homosexuality are diametrically opposed. While the deaths of both Zoret and Paul are framed as tragic, the reason for their deaths is different. Ostensibly, Zoret dies of a broken heart, which places the blame on Michāl as the reason for his demise. Unlike Anders, his death isn’t a result of societal pressure or social abandonment, but rather his own desire. His death is “necessary”, in that he is a queer character who has been led astray by his own “decadent nature”. In order for society to retain hetero-supremacy, the subversive queer individual must be removed. Even with its sympathetic and pro-queer narrative, Anders still falls prey to this, but the pressure originates externally and is internalized.

In contrast to Anders, Michāl received a limited release in the United States under the title, Chained: The Story of the Third Sex. During its time playing at the Fifth Avenue Playhouse in New York, the film was followed by a “scientific lecture”, and was additionally not credited to Carl Theodor Dreyer as the film’s director. Despite not originally being an instructive (or Enlightenment) film on the lives and social position of homosexuals, the addition of this so-called “lecture” would have placed the film in a different light for audiences of the time. With this in mind, Russo elaborates, “The subtitle, The Story of the Third Sex, reveals how any story

11 His perhaps his age was also a factor.
dealing, however seriously, with homosexual love is taken to be a story about homosexuality while stories dealing with heterosexual love are seen as stories about the individual people they portray” (Russo 23). Beyond the purposes of educational enlightenment, there was seemingly no place for queer story-telling or representations of queer life. In some respects, this remains to be an issue with films depicting the lives and issues of queer individuals, caught between representing queerness in relation to society or portraying an individual character with their own problems who also happen to be queer. The legacy of these films is one that is deeply complicated while also being subversive in their intentions to depict queer people in a new and different light.

The temporality of the films discussed in this chapter and earlier allow for the exploration of queerness within confined spaces and in short, limited time frames. Within this period of time, the experience of queer desire is relegated to specific periods of one’s life, and often in hermetically-sealed environments, such as boarding schools or single-sex prisons. The time that is given to queer characters is purposefully shortened and denies queerness a future or even a glimpse of one. Forced separation, but most often, death or suicide inevitably divides the two individuals from one another, and by extension, from their desires. In this way, queer relationships are seen as ephemeral, or “just a phase”, and are sidelined as illegitimate and perverse. By examining the temporality of these films, we can more accurately conceptualize how and why queerness is limited in its longevity and potentiality.

In returning to *Mädchen in Uniform*, we can start to unravel the particular issues and temporal aspects of the film as it relates to its representation of queer desire between women. One of the most overtly queer scenes of this film is the sequence where Fräulein von Bernburg visits the girls’ dormitory, and wishes each girl a ‘goodnight' with a kiss. Akin to the regimental
nature of the school, the girls patiently wait for von Bernburg to say ‘goodnight’ and turn the lights off. The scene begins as each girl is instructed to lie in bed and wait for their teacher to enter. Each girl wears the same white nightgown, and sleep in identical beds. Von Bernburg enters the space, and asks if everyone is ready to go to sleep. All of the girls reply in one conjoined statement. Each girl then kneels at the edge of their bed, impatiently waiting for their nightly kiss. The regimented routines the girls partake in are a function of the absolute authoritarian control of their bodies and lives, which in turn, attempt to control their desires and sexuality.

To the girls, von Bernburg is different from their other teachers in that she is kind to them and allows them a sense of agency in a space where they are often denied it. Even though she is less severe and absolute in her punishments, she continues to police the actions of the girls. Additionally, she holds a very distinct level of power over them, which seemingly adds to the collective infatuation over her. As von Bernburg begins her rounds, the scene becomes imbued with a feeling of romantic and climatic suspense. The score is utilized to enhance the feelings of desire among the girls but becomes solely focused on Manuela as she watches the spectacle of von Bernburg kissing each individual girl on the forehead. Viewers are spectators to this act, just as Manuela and the other girls are. When Manuela turns to her friend, Ilse, she states: “Knutsch jeder ab – Wunderbar!” This statement from Ilse breaks our focus on von Bernburg and infuses another person’s desire for her into the scene. Film scholar Barbara Mennel remarks that “She (Ilse) accords agency to Fräulein von Bernburg and enjoys her own voyeuristic pleasure in the homoerotic spectacle.” (19)

12 And by extension the sexualities of the girls
13 “Lingering kisses for everyone – Wonderful!”
The scene continues with von Bernburg going from one girl to the next until it becomes Ilse’s turn. After Ilse receives her kiss, von Bernburg moves on to Manuela, who has been patiently waiting for this moment. She maintains a very intense gaze upon von Bernburg and vigorously throws her arms around her. The camera then cuts to a close-up side profile shot of their faces, both of which are intently fixed upon one another. At this point, the music swells, implying that this is the moment the audience has been waiting for. With Manuela positioned below von Bernburg, the two are placed on a diagonal, with one person’s gaze fixed on the other below. This is the same positioning we see in the intimate scenes between Alfred and Sommer in *Geschlecht*. What differs from that film and from von Bernburg’s kissing of the other girls is that she and Manuela share a mouth-to-mouth kiss, rather than just one on the forehead. Their kiss is the result of a culmination of the past few encounters they shared on the stairs and is widely considered the first authentically queer on-screen kiss between two women in film history.\(^\text{14}\)

Although the school prides itself on stripping identity and individuality from girls, the sequence reestablishes the individual desires of the girls from within their shared collective space. The lingering camera wants audiences to relish in this highly charged spectacle of youthful desire. We are granted access into the space of these girls, who are shown to be relishing in the attention and affection of their teacher.

While the sequence is only two minutes in length, the camera remains fixed on the individual reactions of several girls, inter-mixed with Manuela’s and even her friend Ilse’s. Within these two minutes and in the semi-private space of the girl’s dormitory, queer desire is allowed to express itself on-screen, in full view of the audience. The dormitory itself is not completely devoid of surveillance and inter-communal policing by various students, yet it is still

\(^\text{14}\) Some could argue that Dietrich’s kiss in *Morocco* was the first, but that kiss appears more performative, a kiss between two women for the sake of titillating men of the audience.
the only place where the girls have some degree of privacy from teachers and the headmistress. The space is situated as both a private and public space, and this scene explores how this spectacle is both an individual and collective experience. Mennel elaborates that “…the formation of individual desire does not take place outside of institutional spheres. The girls are not only victims of the hierarchy but also positioned within it, being made to oversee each other and receiving swooning notes from younger students who are their female admirers. Desire for the teacher as an attempt at differentiation is bound to fail because she becomes an erotic object as a result of her position at the institution” (18). The space of the boarding school (or men’s prison) curiously allows a fair amount of latitude in the expression of queer desire. While the space itself is hermetically sealed off from the world around it, this seemingly aids in the creation of a queer microcosm. Interestingly, Queer desire seems to blossom and thrive in the most authoritarian and policed of spaces. With this in mind, spatial freedom comes at the cost of limited temporality. The time spent in these spaces is constrained, policed, and sometimes difficult to discern. This temporal obscurity lends itself to the intentional limitations placed on the queerness of these characters and will be discussed further in the following section.

Queer Temporality and the Denial of Queer Futurity

Although the girls’ lives are heavily structured, the film possesses a temporal ambiguity in that the length of time that passes from the beginning to the end of the film is not entirely clear. The ambiguity about the amount of time that has passed works in tandem with its narrative structure and the impervious nature of the space to produce the ephemerality of queer desire. Like the scenes between Alfred and Sommer in Geschlecht, the sequence discussed above situates queer desire within a short, fleeting period of one’s life. Queerness can only exist within
these time frames, as the world outside the prison or boarding school attempts to preclude the emergence of queerness. The temporality of Geschlecht is substantially easier to track than that of Mädchen or the other films discussed in this project. Geschlecht takes place over the course of three years, and within these years, the queer relationship between Alfred and Sommer emerges. The other films take place over a few days to a few weeks, with the exact time that passes within them being difficult to pinpoint definitively. Within these time frames, queer life and desire are permitted but not beyond. The narratives of these films determine that queerness can only exist freely within a particular space and within confined time frames. In other words, the spatial and temporal constraints dictate where and when queer desire and life can be seen in Weimar cinema.

Beyond the representations of queerness on screen, confinement can be seen in the ways queer people group themselves in order to find community and safe spaces for expression, albeit with more intention in where these spaces are and what occurs in them. The representations of queer life and queer futures on screen, in certain ways, determine how queer lives are given value in society. All four films culminate in the death (or attempted death) of a queer character, most often by means of suicide or acute emotional devastation. With this in mind, it becomes necessary to understand how queerness beyond film images relates to temporality and by extension, queer futurity.

Scholars have argued that queer time differs from heterosexual time. For some, the emergence of queer time was a product of the invention of the commercial camera and the moving image; for others, it is a phenomenon of the post-AIDS era. In simplest terms, the “normative” indications of growth over one’s lifetime are skewed by societal forces of heterosexism; thus, the milestones of adult life are often not reached for queer individuals. Queer and trans scholar J. Jack Halberstam theorizes that “queer uses of time and space develop… in
opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction” (Halberstam 1). Queer people were seen as degenerate, decadent, and unproductive, as queer life was considered antithetical to the reproduction of the nuclear family. In the opinion of French philosopher and queer theorist Michel Foucault, “homosexuality threatens people as a ‘way of life’ rather than as a way of having sex” (qtd. from Halberstam 1).

The complexities of contemporary queer life aren’t necessarily comparable to that of the early 20th century. However, as a whole, queer people pose the same “threats” to heterosexual society as they did then. These supposed threats (to things such as traditional/patriarchal masculinity, the nuclear family, etc.) are then utilized as a means to persecute queer individuals, both in real life and in representations of their lives. The temporality of these films situates queerness within boundaries that are controllable, and these imposed boundaries are set to limit the representations of queerness on screen. Even Anders, a film that was made to instruct its audience on homosexuality and tolerance, falls prey to these constraints. Paul’s death serves as the catalyst for Kurt’s new life but also represents the loss of a queer future. The contemporary terminology for this unfortunate trope is referred to as “Bury Your Gays” and originated in 19th-century literature as a way for queer authors to offer readers a minuscule degree of representation while also conforming to the necessity of removing “anti-social, deviant queer” from the end of the story. Narratively, the romantic relationship must be separated by the end to maintain that these types of relationships could not and never be given time or space in society. While queer writers did not actually subscribe to these beliefs themselves, they were required to conclude their stories this way in order to get them published—or directors to get their films exhibited.
In the documentary adaptation of Vito Russo’s expansive study of queer images and subjects in film, Harvey Fierstein remarks on the negative stereotypes and tropes often associated with queer people. He claims that although these images were degrading, the representation was enough to counter the negativity, proclaiming “visibility at any cost” (Epstein and Friedman). Ultimately, to understand oneself as queer, one must see oneself as a part of a collective. In order to do this, some degree of visibility is necessary, and in many ways, these films provided very early examples of this. Beyond the complexities of these films and their representations, these early visuals of queer life and existence on screen cannot be undervalued. I found that these films were essential indications of a queer past. While the films examined in this project are austere and not very permissive in their allowances for “queer time,” they do embody some of the earliest examples of queer desire on screen, which begs the question: is the mere representation of queer or queer-coded characters enough to warrant the study and appreciation of these films. Through scholarship, we can unearth the complex and often intentionally erased past of individual queer people and a more expansive, collective queer past. Although these films often feature disturbing and, by contemporary sensibilities, morally questionable things, they are still a part of a uniquely queer past that is worthy of study and deconstructing.15

Halberstam’s assertion in his final chapter of In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives is that queer temporality “...disrupts the normative narratives of time than form the base of nearly every definition of the human in almost all of our modes of understanding, from the professions of psychoanalysis and medicine to socioeconomic and demographic studies on which every sort of state policy is based, to our understandings of the affective and the aesthetic” (152). Simply put, “Queer time” is a specifically divergent

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15 These things would include, relationships between student and teachers, suicide pacts, blackmail, and more.
understanding of the experience of temporality that insists on an alternative to the heterosexual, non-queer conception of time and space.

**Notes on Retroactively Assigning Queerness to Subjects of the Period**

To reiterate a point made earlier in this project, the term queer is used intentionally and precisely to describe a particular way of moving through space and time. Noted in the introduction, the English word “queer” can be seen as relating to the German word “quer”, meaning across or horizontal. According to Faye Stweart’s *Queer Approaches*, “The shared etymology of the English *queer* and the German *quer* points to another meaning, one that validates the awkward and the material, the ambiguous and the contradictory. Queer theory is the practice of *quer denken*, thinking outside of the box, viewing one’s object of study in ways that disturb established scholarly norms or disciplinary boundaries” (205). To be a *Querdenker*innen are people who think (horizontally) or beyond the boundaries of what has been considered to be the standard. While scholars continue to disagree on the exact etymological relationships between these two words, some believe that *queer* was adopted into the German language from English. In German and comparative literature scholar Alice Kuziar’s *The Queer German Cinema* notes that “Although “queer” may thus not be a frequent word of self-designation for German gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered persons, nonetheless its range of significations can be indispensable for discussing the socially transgressive, anti-straight cultural production of gay and lesbian German cinema” (7). Kuzniar concludes with the idea that the films of her survey of German films are drastically different in aesthetic, form, and narrative. The usage of the word “queer” is not meant to “taxonomize or compartmentalize” these films into a category.
Rather, the term’s usage can be attributed to a need to “...articulate the erotics of transgression” (256).

The people of the Weimar period and the subjects of the films discussed earlier may not have identified intentionally as queer. However, through their way of life and being, they embody a queerness that this project intends to understand. Through this intentional usage, I hope to resist and avoid binary categorizations of sexual orientation and, in doing so, contextualize and unearth queer pasts to connect with queer presents, which helps to imagine and re-imagine queer futures. Butler asserts that “If the term “queer” is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and future imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes” (228). In short, the situation of the term “queer” as a deeply political and collective term is an essential part of understanding the continuum of queer history and the films of this project.
Chapter 3:
Situating Queer Cinema in the Cultural Landscape of Weimar Germany

Visual arts, theater, and literature (novels/poetry/songs) all played an essential role in the formation of Weimar culture, and comparing them with some of these films would help to contextualize the queerness of the era and how audiences may have understood these films at the time of their release. How is cinema different from these other mediums of representation or what can cinema do that these other forms of art cannot? How would queer people of the period identify with these films, and what did queer spectatorship look like in the Weimar Era? Lastly, how do these films contrast with other more mainstream films of the period, such as *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* (1920) and *Pandora’s Box* (1929)

As a medium for artistic expression, cinema appears to diverge from other art forms during this time. As stated earlier, film is a medium that is accessible to the masses, is both artistically expressive and commercially viable, and is a collective viewing experience for audiences. In these ways, film differs from other mediums, such as the theater, the novel, and the visual arts. The theater can be considered the closest relative of cinema, yet was not as easily accessible to the lower class and is an entirely ephemeral experience. Screenplays and theater plays can often be easily adapted for one or the other, depending on the logistics of their narratives and locations. For instance, *Mädchen in Uniform* was adapted from a novel called *The Child Manuela*, then into a play, and was later adapted into a screenplay. Narratively, the film occurs predominantly in one location and even depicts theatrical performance, specifically when Manuela and the other girls at the school perform *Don Giovanni*. 
In comparison to film, the novel could be considered in second place, as there is almost always a narrative to be found. Some of the films discussed earlier draw inspiration from the Bildungsroman, a genre of novel originating in 19th-century Germany. These types of novels explore a “coming-of-age” story of a protagonist. *Mädchen in Uniform* and, in some ways, *Michäil* and *Anders als die Andern* incorporate this type of story-telling into their narratives. The Bildungsroman is a quintessential German genre, and to this day, coming-of-age films are a staple in contemporary queer cinema. Lastly, visual arts appear to be the furthest from the film in terms of medium, yet the two often overlap stylistically, in content, and tone.

German Expressionism was one of the most prominent artistic styles of the Weimar period and reflected the intense, turbulent, and violent events of the First World War and the years that followed. Filmmakers of the period were also very eager to shed cinema’s lowbrow, lower class image among the arts, and establish the medium as a legitimate form of artistic expression. The Expressionists rejected representations of reality in favor of depicting the interior emotional realities of their subjects in forms such as sculpture, painting, film, dance, theater, and even architecture. According to *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, the style emphasized “stylization, abstraction, and theatrically over Hollywood’s realism; mise-en-scene and atmosphere over narrative and suspense; camera movement and composition over montage; and character gaze over action” (617). While the films this project examines are not German Expressionist explicitly, they can be understood as coming from and inspired by this tradition of filmmaking. Some of these influences can be seen in the staging, lighting, and overall mise-en-scène of films such as *Mädchen in Uniform* and *Geschlecht in Fesseln*. Additionally, all of the films discussed in this project examine the internalized struggles of individual characters and how they are dealt with externally. The other major artistic style of the period was produced
by artists of the Neue Sachlichkeit. This movement was in direct opposition to the expressionists and was in favor of a more political, exaggerated realist aesthetic. Artists of the Neue Sachlichkeit intended to expose the ills of society, and utilized these styles as a way to do so. Artists of this movement included: Otto Dix, Max Beckmann, George Grosz, and more. The films such as *Anders als die Andern* and *Geschlecht in Fesseln* can be linked to this movement, being that they were produced as tools to alter social prejudices and expose issues in German society, such as Paragraph 175 and the German prison system. Lastly, all of these films would have been heavily influenced by Freud’s theories of psychoanalysis and sexuality. According to Hannes Meyer, a Swiss architect and urbanist, by the 1920s psychoanalysis had become “the common intellectual property of all” (qtd. from Erica Tortolani 7) and this new way of understanding human sexuality is undeniably present in the films examined in this project. The artistic and intellectual worlds of the Weimar Period were undoubtedly altered by these new ways of conceptualizing the interiority of the human mind, and this interest was profoundly expressed through cinema.

Theatrical performance, as cinema’s direct predecessor, shares many similarities in terms of spectatorship and production. Both are made to showcase a story, with characters, dialogue, themes, and motifs, are produced to be shared with large audiences, and are both forms of commercially viable entertainment and artistic expression. Conversely, a theatrical production is an expressly ephemeral experience, with each performance being unique in minute ways. Audiences are granted access to the performance as a single live event, which one might only witness once. On the other hand, films are precise art objects that can be viewed more than once, are produced to exact specifications, and are not performed live. One style of German filmmaking that derives its origins from the theater is the *Kammerspiel*-film. This style of

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16 Translated as “New Objectivity”, but also as “New Matter-of-Factness”, “New Sobriety” or “New Resignation”.

filmmaking, of which scholars can only point to a handful of examples, translates to Chamber-play film. Film and art historian, Lotte Eisner correlates the *Kammerspiel*-film to its theatrical relation, “is the psychological film *par excellence*; it was to comprise a limited number of characters living in an everyday ambiance…was a naturalist slap in the face for the Expressionist snobs” (177-178). The intimacy between the performers and audience is what made this type of theater production more elitist, given that there was limited space within the physical theater and were not made purely for entertainment purposes. One such *Kammerspiel*-film is Carl Theodor Dreyer’s film, *Michál*.

Films such as *Mädchen in Uniform* lived out short, yet popular stints on the stage as theatrical productions before they were adapted to the silver screen. The play was first put on in 1930, in Leipzig, under the title, *Ritter Neréstan*, and later in Berlin as *Gestern und Heute*. The performances' success prompted the film's production, released finally as *Mädchen in Uniform*. After the subsequent success of the play and the film, Christa Winsloe decided to rewrite and finally publish the story to emphasize the explicit lesbianism of Manuela, which had been hinted at, but had not been fully realized in either. This order of adaptation, from unfinished manuscript to play to film to published novel, is unlike most pieces of literature as a whole. Typically, a novel or play is translated into a screenplay for a film, rather than the other way around. Winsloe’s rewriting of Manuela’s story is especially noteworthy, considering that she believed that neither the film nor the play were as explicit as they should have been. While *Mädchen* is one of the more explicit films representing queer desires, it's rather intriguing that Winsloe was intent on the narrative being even more explicit than it already is. The more conservative queerness that Winsloe took issue with is shared with the other films of this project, which adopt a politic of respectability in order to avoid censorship and vitriolic public backlash.
David Herbert, a gay British socialite, and writer, characterized Berlin’s theater scene as “...the best in the world; modern and imaginative, it was far in advance of its counterparts in other capitals” and considered Berlin “an orgy of fun” (qtd. in Beachy 198). Unlike cinema, the theater was often gate-kept from the lower classes. However, it was available in other forms of low-brow entertainment, often found in music halls, circuses, and most notably in cabarets. The appeal of cabaret culture stemmed from, according to theater and performance scholar Laurence Senelick, the melding of “the vivacity and sensuality of the popular arts with the refinement and mental stimulation of the traditional arts” (1). Similarly, Friedrich Hollaender characterized and personified cabaret as “the happy child of an eleventh muse, conceived in an easy-going love affair with theater, variety shows, and political tribunals” (566). While the representations and influences of cabaret on the films examined in this project are limited, the overall effect of its popularity in queer culture and spaces of the period is not to be underestimated. In many ways, Weimar queer culture and cabaret culture are synonymous, given that so many subcultural spaces featured the style of music and performance. The El Dorado Club was at the center of one of Berlin’s queerest neighborhoods, Schöneberg. One of several locations that catered to a specifically queer clientele, the space once saw performances from the likes of bisexual icon, Marlene Dietrich. Located on Motzstraße, and only a fifteen-minute walk to the contemporary Schwules Museum, the club was popular among both locals and slumming tourists.17

Unfortunately, the club was raided and repurposed into a Sturmabteilung (SA) headquarters and

Figure 10: El Dorado Club’s replacement, an apartment complex and organic grocer18

17 The Schwules Museum was founded in 1985, and is a space dedicated to preserving, researching, and displaying queer history and culture. I was lucky enough to visit it during my time in Berlin.
18 Image taken in Berlin by the author (2022).
was razed to the ground during the bombing of Berlin by the Allies. Upon visiting the former location of the club, I was horrified to see that the once iconic space had been replaced by an organic supermarket, with the only indication of its former identity being the club’s name under the dreaded logo of the market (see figure 10). The loss of the original El Dorado and its contemporary transformation into a site of upper-class consumption is something that I personally find to be a devastating loss of queer culture and history. Beyond the loss of the physical building, a vibrantly queer community still thrives within the neighborhood, and is still a part of a larger history of subcultural performance space and queer life.

Thinking beyond the influence of theater, the novel comes to mind as another contributor to the narrative developments of the cinema of the period. This style of fiction writing has a long, complicated history, and many important works of the period (and slightly before) played
important, influential roles in the films of this project. German novels (and novellas) such as
*Death in Venice* (Thomas Mann) and *The Confusions of Young Törleß* (Robert Musil) have direct
similarities between their narratives and those of films such as *Michäl* and *Mädchen in Uniform.*\(^{19}\) Within the genre categories of the novel, the Bildungsroman is a prominent genre that
influenced the structures of these films. From the Bildungsroman, cinema has created the
“coming-of-age” film, which depicts the emergence of youth into adolescence, and then into
adulthood through trials and tribulations built into the narrative of the story.
Formally, the differences between the novel and cinema are drastic, but in terms of narrative
structures, they often converge, with one being adapted into another.

Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* follows Gustav von Aschenbach, a renowned and
aristocratically-titled German writer and public intellectual on his trip to Venice. There, he
becomes deeply obsessed with a young upper-class Polish boy named Tadzio. The novella
describes von Aschenbach’s “move from the realm of abstract ideas to actual experience,” which
ultimately leads to “homosexuality, decadence, disease, and destruction” (Meyers 42). The story
of von Aschenbach mirrors that of Zoret and his profound obsession with Michael. Both men are
deeply infatuated with younger, idealized images of youth and beauty and subsequently die at the
end as a result of their passions. While von Aschenbach dies of cholera, and Zoret, from what
appears to be acute emotional heartbreak, their infatuations are ultimately responsible in one way
or another for their deaths. Von Aschenbach discovered that the city of Venice was covering up a
cholera outbreak and subsequently became implicated in the cover-up. He does not even consider
leaving until he sees Tadzio’s family’s suitcases in the lobby of their hotel. Von Aschenbach then
rushes out to the beach, where he spends hours watching Tadzio play with his friends. For the

\(^{19}\) Both of which were also adapted from (and into) novels, *Mikaël* by Hermann Bang and *The Child Manuela* by
Christa Winsloe.
last time, he watches “the beauty” rough-house with his friends and witnesses one of them nearly suffocate him in the climax of their game. The novella concludes as Tadzio walks out into the low tide of the Adriatic, “And suddenly, as if recollecting something, as if obeying an impulse, he put his hand on his hip, turned his upper body in a beautiful contrapposto and peered over his shoulder at the shore” (Mann 366). Von Aschenbach watches, nearing his death, and is beckoned into the unknown by “the pale and charming psychagogue, the guide of the spirits” (366).

According to American literary critic and scholar Jeffrey Meyer, “Aschenbach’s homosexual passion teaches him that he cannot control his fate, indeed cannot even save his own life in the face of overwhelming emotion. Tadzio, the love object, links art with death, and becomes at once the symbol of perfect form that eludes the artist and the rigidly repressed passion that destroys him” (45). Death in Venice was a deeply unsettling novel that gave intense, detailed descriptions of a child’s delicate, ephemeral beauty. Tadzio straddles adolescence, which Aschenbach finds extremely desirable in him. His disgust with his aging form is juxtaposed with this intense desire for youth and beauty. While Aschenbach’s obsession with Tadzio stems from his physical form, he observes that he has bad, particularly translucent teeth, appears sickly, and mused that he probably would not grow old (322). Meyer elaborates that “Tadzio’s poor teeth connect him with the aged homosexual…and this symbol of his anemic disease and human mortality is pleasurable to Aschenbach because it equalizes youth and age, beauty and ugliness, and diminishes Tadzio’s god-like power over him” (49). Aschenbach connects youth with beauty and godliness, and this is something he is deeply jealous of. He consistently scrutinizes the appearances of other older men. He even goes so far as to change his appearance and dye his gray-speckled hair to appear younger and more attractive. His plans ultimately fail, resulting in a bad makeover, which takes
form as a physical manifestation of his corruption as he ironically attempts to search for true beauty.

In many ways, this story emulates the narrative arc of the painting master Zoret and his own “love object,” Michael. Both narratives invoke classical antiquity as their standards of ideal beauty, which are represented in younger men (and, in Tadzio’s case, a 14-year-old boy). The masters, Zoret and von Aschenbach, by extension of their obsessions, die as a result. The novel, *Mikaël*, by Hermann Bang was supposedly based on the life of famed French master sculptor Auguste Rodin. In a 1924 *New York Times* review of *Michał*, film critic, Mourdant Hall notes that German producers, “delight in taking an occasional fling at France, England and Russia by filming stories dealing with historical characters who were not exactly a credit to their respective countries, even though they did furnish colorful inspiration for plays and novels”, referring to Dreyer’s depiction of the iconic French sculptor (1). Hall considered *Michał*, known alternatively as *Chained*, as a “dull piece of work…also handicapped by queer titles” (1). At their cores, both *Death in Venice* and *Michał* represent the master artist’s descent into obsession with what von Aschenbach describes as

“...the burning shock that the feeling person suffers when laying eyes on an image of eternal Beauty …the lust of the impious and evil man, who cannot conceive of Beauty upon seeing its effigy and who is incapable of awe…the sacred terror that overcomes the noble person when he beholds a godlike countenance, a perfect body” (Mann 334).

Even as both men die of external (or supposedly non-related reasons), their deaths stem back to their infatuations with the elegance, perfection, and ephemerality of beauty and youth, starkly contrasting to their own deteriorating corporeal forms.

Another novel that connects narratively and thematically with one of the films of this project is Robert Musil’s *The Confusions of Young Törless*. Set in a Catholic boys’ boarding
school in the far reaches of the Austro-Hungarian empire, Musil intentionally limits the
descriptions of the school, opting for a vague outline of the space. Törless is the novel’s
protagonist and is a deeply sensitive, cerebral, and precocious adolescent boy. Upon his arrival at
the school, he becomes gravely homesick and spends his time in solitude, often ending his
solemn days, crying himself to sleep. This description likens this novel’s subject to the
protagonist of *Mädchen in Uniform*, Manuela von Meinhardis. Both are the children of
upper-middle-class, German-speaking parents who find themselves in strict, stifling,
authoritarian spaces. Most notably, Törless and Manuela reckon with their deepest desires
through explorations of homosexuality. Another noteworthy comparison between the two is their
respective relationships with their mothers. On the one hand, Törless’ relationship with his
mother connects to his internal struggles with his sexuality, with the novel alluding to Freud’s
theory of the Oedipus Complex. On the other hand, Manuela’s relationship with her mother is
severed after her death, with her grief following her throughout the narrative. Early
interpretations of *Mädchen* link Manuela’s infatuation with von Bernburg to the idea of her being
a sort of surrogate mother figure to the latter. This interpretation, albeit somewhat
understandable, is at odds with the film’s origins as a queer piece of literature, with Manuela
being intentionally coded as a lesbian.

The setting of the boarding school as a site of burgeoning queerness and sensuality is
what both of these works feature most prominently. While *Törless* paints an overall negative and
alarming image of young, violent, sadomasochistic homosexuality, *Mädchen* takes a more
sensitive approach. Meyers notes in his study of homosexual literature from 1890 to 1930 that
“the cloistered atmosphere of the school provides no acceptable outlet for the boys’ sexual
desires—“seething, passionate, naked, and loaded with destruction” and inevitably forced to
release these feelings most chiefly through homosexual encounters with other boys (55). The boys’ desires are considerably darker and more violent than those of the girls in Mädchen. Additionally, the girls of the school appear to care for one another deeply as both romantic and platonic companions, as opposed to the boys who apparently despise one another and often struggle to maintain guises of tolerance towards their classmates. The most prominent themes shared between the two works are “the political, maternal, military, religious, and sexual” (Meyers 55). They are entrenched in the histories of the Prussian and Austro-Hungarian Empires and are both interested in the significance of their decline. In Mädchen, the headmistress stresses discipline and invokes the image of the orderly, self-restrained Prussian woman. Similarly, Törless describes the “Draconian severity” of his school’s “nasty, malignant Headmaster” (Musil 55). The narratives of both take strong stances against authoritarianism, yet neither actually confronts power in substantial and oppositional ways. Mädchen concludes as the Headmistress defeatedly walks away after Manuela’s attempt on her own life, yet the hierarchy of power within the schools appears mostly intact. Similarly, the power structures of the boys’ school appear to be formless and intentionally vague yet omnipresent in their lives. At the end of the novel, after the violent events that Törless has witnessed, he leaves the school. The institutions that have inflicted so much pain and that police so stringently remain intact at the ends of these narratives.
Queering the Weimar Canon: 
*Pandora’s Box* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*

While the films examined in this project are and were important touchstones of Weimar Era cinema, they are significantly lesser-known works compared to the likes of *Die Büches der Pandora (Pandora’s Box)* and *Das Cabinet Des Dr. Caligari (The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari)*. These two films are representatives of two prominent German art movements, the Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) and German Expressionism. While the films of this project represent queerness in still subtle and intentional ways, the queer aspects of these films are even more subtextual and coded within certain characters. While the films discussed in this section are quite different in form and narrative, they share the same thematic preoccupations as those discussed here: anti-authoritarianism, a heightened awareness of sexuality, interest in the subconscious, and the emergence of new social and cultural norms.

Scholars widely consider G.W. Pabst’s silent, adapted-stage play drama *Die Buchse der Pandora*, a Weimar Era masterpiece. Film scholar Thomas Elsaesser observes that the film has become one of the most famous of the period, and along with von Sternberg’s *Der blaue Engel (The Blue Angel)*, is “paradigmatically for the period’s twin identity around modernity and decadence, self-assured glamor and anxious descent into chaos” (259). The film follows the seductress, Lulu, played by the American expatriate Louise Brooks, through various trials and tribulations with a wealthy man, his son, a lesbian-coded Countess, and even Jack the Ripper. Pabst’s films are marked by their interest in social and political changes, deep psychological questions, memorable female characters, and human disagreements with society and culture. His style of filmmaking is directly linked to the New Objectivity movement, which was invested in exposing the ills of society through realistic settings, conventional camerawork and editing, and
a lack of overt idealism and exaggerated performances. A substantial amount of the intrigue in the wake of the film’s release came from Pabst’s decision to cast an American in a decidedly German film, which caused both distaste for Brook’s acting while also making her into a desirous and novel within the German film industry. Elsaesser, in discussing the film’s artistic influences, notes that Kracauer:

“overlooks the extent to which the film actively re-interprets the inner relationship between Expressionism and the Neue Sachlichkeit. For this ‘American Lulu’ gives Pabst a vantage point on both Expressionism and the Neue Sachlichkeit, as well as on the fundamental shift that the cinema (compared to the theater) has brought to the representation of sex and class, libidinal and political economy” (261).

In the film, Lulu is representative of a new, modern, and subversive woman whose sexuality is weaponized against men. Lulu’s connection with the lesbian Countess Augusta Geschwitz adds to her intrigue as an object of mens’ desires. As a character who embodies a form of queerness that is both socially subversive and a source of interest and desire, Lulu’s fate at the end of the film ends similarly to those of Geschlecht in Fesseln, Anders als die Andern, and Michāl. While Lulu does not take her own life, her death is similarly symbolic of the demise of the perfidious, anti-social, and immoral individual. Lulu’s existence is deemed a threat to the order of society, and is considerably beyond the help of reform. While it would be easy to denounce her death as the writing of a man who blatantly despises women, Lulu as a character is much more complicated. Based on plays of Frank Wedekind, Lulu is both a “radical critique of bourgeois notions of sexuality”, but also a deconstruction of the illusory, “man-eating” femme fatale (263).

Wedekind certainly seems to critique the modern transformation of the “new woman”, but is also interested in the fabrication and personification of a “primitive sexuality who inspires

20 The decidedly Germaness of the film comes from its source material, the plays of Frank Wedekind, who was a very popular playwright and poet of the period.
evil unaware” (qtd. from Elsaesser 267). In Pabst’s interpretation, Lulu’s sexuality is “entirely naturalized” and can be understood through her individual encounters with both men and women. Elsaesser observes very keenly that this is “perhaps one of the most startling and revolutionary aspects of the film, when compared to the ‘Aufklärungsfilme’ from the early 1920s where ‘deviancy’ was clearly thematised as such” (266). The didactic nature of the ‘Enlightenment Films’ is intentionally overt, while Pandora’s Box takes a more subtextual approach to its understanding of sexual and gender ambiguity. Lulu as a character walks a tightrope, as she both titilates and disgusts audiences as an openly sexual woman, with Pabst taking a seemingly passive approach to her ultimate demise.

Another film, arguably even more closely associated with the Weimar Period, is Robert Wiene’s avant-garde masterpiece, Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari (The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari). The film, written by Hans Janowitz and Carl Meyer, is to this day surrounded by myth and distortion, which adds to the mythology surrounding the film’s production and style. Unlike some of the films of this project, Caligari was very well received, both in Germany and abroad. One of the first films to find its footing in ‘high-culture’, German-American media scientist and art psychologist, Rudolf Arnheim noted that ultimate success of the film was attributed less to the story-telling and acting, but rather to the expressionist sets, seen for the first time on screen (qtd. From Elsaesser 70). While the sets of the film are extraordinary, the acting of one particular character is of great importance and interest to this project. The film tells the story in a series of flashbacks of a man, his friend, and their shared love-interest. They soon come to meet the titular character, Dr. Caligari, in a road-side carnival show, where he displays his prize possession, the entranced and gaunt somnambulist, Cesare. A year earlier, Conrad Veigt played Paul Körner in Anders als die Andern, and who was brashly described by American screenwriter Anita Loos on
a visit to Berlin in 1927 as “the prettiest girl on the street was Conrad Veigt” because “any Berlin lady of the evening might turn out to be a man” (Beachy 165).

While Veigt had been married three times and appeared to be publicly heterosexual, in his private life he could be observed at men’s costume balls and had a surprisingly strong homosexual fandom. Veigt’s performance as Cesare is one of the defining aspects of the film and was incredibly intriguing to watch. Described by Richard Dyer as a “tall, gaunt figure, drawn, pallid, even skeletal face and dark, brooding eyes, also gave him a tragic and sinister air,” Veigt embodied a particular image in his role as Cesare (165). The in-betweenism of Cesare’s consciousness and unconsciousness, his uncontrollable violence, and perhaps femininity in his cat-like movements and approaches can be attributed to the subliminal fears of a wild, debaucherous sexuality. Cesare acts as a spectacle to draw the audience's gaze and arouses “an indefinable anxiety and curiosity yet also desire…a figure on which to project spectatorial ambivalence about homosexuality” (Kuzniar 31). This “spectatorial hesitation” about Cesare’s identity is, according to Kuzniar, plays into the audience’s fears of not being able to identify him as a homosexual. Thus, the film plays with the “thematics of revelation”, or in simpler terms, the mystery of what is kept in the closet, or in Caligari’s case, the cabinet (31).

The ending of Caligari was and still is contentious among its screenwriters, producers, and scholars alike. The final scene of the film adds a twist ending, with the narrator, who the audience has been relying on to relay the series of events that have unfolded throughout the film, is revealed to have been a mental patient and has been living in an asylum alongside other characters of the story we have just witnessed. The doctor, whom the audience knows as the conniving Dr. Caligari, runs the asylum, and claims he has the cure for our protagonist’s psychotic issues. Before this sequence, we see the villain of the story receive his punishment and
be forcibly placed in a straight jacket like he presumably has done to others in his care. This sudden reversal of the narrative, which was not intended, according to co-screenwriter Hans Janowitz, is a darker and more ambiguous end to the anti-authoritarian plot of the original script. The system of power remains intact at the end of the film, and the protagonist's narration gets called into question.

Com oppositely, *Mädchen in Uniform* ends in a similarly ambiguous and chaotic way. The Headmistress, who wrought shame and suicidal ideations onto Manuela, slowly saunters off with her back turned towards the audience. This scene indicates a temporary defeat of the headmistress, but as a whole, the institution of the school and its chaste, stoic, Prussian values still stands. Both films take strong stances against tyranny and authoritarianism but ultimately end with the same systems of power in place. Film critic and historian Siegfried Kracauer, famously argued that these display “a ‘German soul… tossed between rebellion and submission’”, and subsequently, these ‘souls’ were “attracted to extreme politics, and extremely contradictory fantasies, often mixed with aggression and violent anger” (qtd. from Elsaesser 29). These fantasies acted as, according to Elsaesser’s interpretation of Kracauer’s argument, “a concave mirror in which their class-conditioned moral and material misery could be read” (29-30). While Kracauer’s work has been called into consideration by historians and scholars, his examination of these films was an attempt to retroactively understand the rise of Hitler and the Third Reich through Germany’s cinematic imaginaries.

As films that are categorically located in the canon of Weimar cinema, *Pandora’s Box* and *Caligari* have similarly provocative aesthetics and narratives yet only hint at a queerness that is made explicit in films like *Anders* and *Mädchen*. The films examined in this project exercise a politics of respectability that inhibits expressions of a more dynamic queer sexuality and

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21 Carl Mayer, the co-screenwriter of *Caligari*, died of cancer in 1944.
interiority. In many ways, the unobtrusive queerness that these films feature can be understood as a consequence of working in a studio system and a society unwilling to produce films that cross the boundaries of respectability. Given the circumstances, it is quite extraordinary that films like _Anders_, which affirm and espouse tolerance for homosexuality, could even be produced.

Although the narrative arcs end in tragedy, some would argue that the mere representation of a gay or lesbian person on screen is worth the negative endings in many ways. As queer cinema evolves, these concerns might be better mitigated and addressed. However, historically, the sheer ability to represent queerness on screen, both negatively and indifferently, is groundbreaking in many ways.

**Speculations on Queer Subjects and Spectatorship of Weimar Era Cinema**

In film scholars Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin’s theoretical companion to _The Celluloid Closet_, they suggest four potential definitions of “queer film.” One of these concerns is who is in front and behind the camera. Another, which they argue makes a film decidedly “queer” is spectatorship. In their words, “a queer film is viewed by lesbian, gay, or otherwise queer spectators…all films might be potentially queer if read from a queer viewing position—that is to say, one that challenges dominant assumptions about gender and sexuality” (10). A complex question that became a recurring interest in this project was: how did queer individuals of the period view these films, and in what ways was their viewing experience distinctly queer?

Contemporary scholarship has increasingly discussed how queer spectatorship differs from the “ideal” or normative spectatorship implicit in classical Hollywood films. Despite the research and scholarship written about queer culture as such in Weimar Germany, there has been little to
no study of queer film spectatorship of that period. The representations of queer relationships and experiences within these films are consistently subtextual, which requires the spectator to extrapolate their queer interpretations of various scenes. Christopher Pullen’s chapter on queer gazes and identification in *Straight Girls and Queer Guys* theorizes that the “processes of identification are complex, allowing multifarious subjectivities and positions of viewing and reading” (41). This accounts for the multiplicity of interpretations of certain relationships within these films and allows for a distinctly queer reading of these films.

While the films examined in this project deal with the objects and consequences of desire, there are almost no instances in which the viewer is invited or encouraged to desire the subjects themselves. Even with licentious titles such as “Girls in Uniform” or “Sex in Chains”, the overt spectacle of sexuality that audiences would have expected from such films is never actually exhibited. As mentioned in the first chapter, *Gechlecht* was advertised and promoted clandestinely, thereby adding intrigue and insinuating that there would be a lascivious spectacle for audiences to consume. In many instances, the viewer is invited to learn, understand, empathize, and critique, but less to desire themselves. The sequences that demonstrate queer desire are unsurprisingly between women since any overt displays of sexuality between men would have been censored and deemed unacceptable by audiences. The kiss shared between Manuela and von Bernburg is the only sequence that succeeded in representing anything beyond just holding hands or brief physical touch. This is juxtaposed with the scenes between Sommer and Alfred, where desire is embedded in infrequent physical touch and insinuated when they hold hands. The role of the spectator is to extrapolate meaning from these sequences and leaves many charged scenes to the viewer's imagination. The characters of these films are representative of an intentionally subdued queerness that favors respectability over truthful and exuberant
expressions of one’s interiority. This is contrasted with Pandora’s Box and Caligari, where sexuality and explicit interior expressions are more prevalent and permissible. The queerness of these two films is implied differently than that of the films of this project, the former of which situates queerness in specific spaces and within shortened temporalities. Additionally, Lulu and Cesare are objects of spectatorial desire and distrust while also being imbued with specific characteristics that would allude to possible homosexual inclinations.

The differences in representing queer men and queer women in these films are also important to note, given that the queerness of men was considered vile and a societal nuisance. Inversely, while the overall sexuality of women was societally policed, queer women were relegated to non-entities, thereby making laws that would target them almost non-existent. The allowances made for queer women of the Weimar Period cannot be attributed to a more tolerant attitude towards them but rather because their existence was so invisibilized and unimaginable to some that enforcing laws against them wasn’t a priority. Furthermore, the films examined in this project are skewed toward representations of queer men. While visibility for all queer people was present but intentionally limited in film, queer women represented the minority. This inverse of visibility, where queer men are legally persecuted yet seem to have more filmic representation, while queer women lack visibility, and experience significantly less legal persecution for their sexual orientation, is particularly important to consider. The lack of films that represent queer women prominently and positively is even more limited than those that depict queer men, and in many ways, this issue is still present today.

In Elizabeth Freeman’s rigorous analysis of queer time and erotic history, Time Binds: Queer Temporality, Queer Histories:

22 While it wasn’t illegal explicitly for women to have sex with one another, social stigma was intense.
Film, then, creates a historically specific shared temporality, setting limits on how long the spectator can dwell on any one object or experience any one story, and thus socializing (or, may we say binding) the gaze. Thus, to pause on a given image, to repeat an image over and over, or to double an existing film in a remake or reshoot become productively queer ways to “desocialize” that gaze and intervene on the historical condition of seeing itself.” (xviii Freeman)

Films such as *Anders als die Andern* are innovative in their attempt to combine entertainment with “scientific” (in the sense of *Wissenschaft*) education. *Anders* was also a film that was censored, and therefore restructured, and was re-released as a proto-documentary divided into several “chapters.” The first version of *Anders*, which was lost due to the thoroughness of the Nazis’ destruction of the Institute for Sexual Science and every copy they could get their hands on, was radically reconfigured into the version we have today. This “desocialization” that Freeman notes is a “productive” way to reorient the spectator and possibly could aid in the reformation of norms, values, and cultural attitudes. *Anders* was made to guide audiences toward a more tolerant and scientifically-backed consideration of queer people. Furthermore, queer film scholar Michele Aaron boldly claims, "Hasn’t there always been something, fundamentally, if obliquely ‘queer’ about spectatorship?” (187). The queerness of the spectator lies in the viewer's ability to engage with the subjects of the film fluidly and acts to destabilize predominant non-queer ways of viewing. The position of the spectator is constantly changing based on the form and aesthetics of the film but also based on the cultural context. These variables account for the differences between contemporaneous spectators and those viewing these films presently.
Conclusion

As violent and complex as the transition from World War I to the Weimar Period was, its end on January 30, 1933, marked the beginning of a new era of authoritarian brutality against Europe’s most marginalized populations. After Hitler was appointed chancellor, the fifteen years of artistic, social, and cultural advances came to a grinding halt, and a new order was installed in its place. While queer people living during the Weimar Republic were still subjected to society's prevailing attitudes, in major cities like Berlin, they were granted a staggering degree of freedom and visibility that had never been seen before. Sexologists like Magnus Hirschfeld were at the forefront of science-based advocacy and were accumulating research and scholarship on the new interest in human sexual differences. Journals like Die Freundin and Der Eigene offered readers a glimpse into the lives of others like themselves and bolstered a new sense of commonality between queer people. Art, theater, literature, and queer culture were mixing in new and unique ways, as gay and lesbian artists and writers had more freedom to imbue queer themes into their works. Additionally, queer subcultural spaces were seen as tourist attractions and were largely ignored by authorities for the time being. These specificities allowed for a new queer collectivity to flourish in the wake of the First World War and the German Revolution.

Unique to Germany’s new democracy was the sexological research and advocacy of Magnus Hirschfeld and the scientists, activists, and scholars that came a few years earlier, such as Karl Heinrich Ulrich and Richard von Krafft-Ebing. This interest in human sexuality can be attributed to Freud’s theories of psychoanalysis, with many of the theories of Hirschfeld and others being in conversation with and subsequently evolving from his work. Through a combination of these new scientific and social theories and the collaboration of Germany’s sexual minorities, a new attitude and study towards the latter formed and was, in many ways, the
first of its kind. The German “invention of the homosexual” is one of the central arguments of German studies scholar Robert Beachy’s *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity*, which relates the complicated and reclaimed history of Berlin’s homosexual groups and the progression of the period from its inception to its violent, devastating conclusion. By extension of this argument, if the conception of homosexuality as a claimable, collective, and individual identity can be found in Germany, then perhaps it is also the birthplace of queer cinema.

The cinema of the Weimar Period marked a new and arguably the first chapter in queer filmmaking. These films straddle two opposing movements, Expressionism and the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, with certain aspects of both found in the mise-en-scène and narratives of all of these films. With attitudes and sensibilities toward sexuality changing, more filmmakers were interested in exploring and depicting queer individuals and relationships on screen. The films of this project, *Mädchen in Uniform*, *Geschlecht in Fesseln*, *Michäl*, and *Anders als die Andern*, are just four surviving films that represent queer lives and desires in ways that are both positive, negative, and surprisingly ambiguous. *Geschlecht* and *Anders* take expressly didactic approaches to filmmaking but diverge in their attitudes towards subversive and excessive sexuality. Conversely, *Mädchen* and *Michäl* represent films that are less interested in educating their audiences and are more invested in narrative explorations of intense queer desire between young individuals, and their older mentor figures.\(^{23}\) All of these films exhibit queer desire in a myriad ways, from the coded and subliminal to the very intentionally explicit. Additionally, the spaces and, more prominently, the time frames in which most of these films take place are intentional the and limit the potentiality of queerness beyond their borders. As *Geschlecht* and *Mädchen* are the two films that feature the hermetically-sealed environments in which queer desire is

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\(^{23}\) *Anders* fits into the teacher/student, artist/muse category, but exhibits a very explicit agenda in how it wants its audience to understand the characters/plot.
temporarily allowed to flourish, all of the films examined in this project are narratively restricted in their temporalities. Through these limitations, queer time and by extension, queer futures are denied.

As mentioned before, the spaces and, more profoundly, the temporalities of these films found a future precedent for the queer (and queer-coded) films and media of the future. In some ways, the period can be considered a mirror image of these two variables, but more specifically, in terms of temporality. The Weimar Era was, in many ways, an unprecedented period of visibility for queer people and culture and ended in an incredibly violent manner. This limited period, the fifteen years of the Weimar Constitution, and its brutal conclusion can be linked to the shortened temporalities of the queer characters of the films considered in this project. Furthermore, the spaces where queer individuals and culture were permitted to exist were not necessarily hermetically sealed from the rest of society; they were marginalized in many respects and were often located in performance spaces, single-sex clubs, and private homes. While this comparison can never be understood as intentional on behalf of the filmmakers, rather the coincidental timeline of the Republic's rise and fall, the time and space in which queer life was allowed to flourish and be seen are comparable in these specific circumstances.

The conception of this project can be attributed to a series of unintentional converging interests and personal experiences. Most profoundly, my all-consuming passion for queer cinema, both historical and contemporary, was the basis for my interest in this specific period of queer history. Before this, a semester abroad in Berlin brought a new language and perspective to my attention and helped solidify my scholarly interest in the study of the German language and its adjoining culture. While studying abroad in Berlin, I stumbled across the old El Dorado on a walking tour of Schöneberg, one of Berlin’s historically queer neighborhoods. Seeing the
building, not as a nightclub and former gathering space for queer Berliners but as an apartment complex and *Bio Markt*, was an oddly unsettling and upsetting experience. This encounter was one of the many events of my time abroad that led me closer to finalizing my project on this topic.

The scholarship and research that has already been completed on this period and these films by the likes of Siegfried Kracauer, Lotte Eisner, Richard Dyer, James D. Steakley, Robert Beachy, Barbara Mennel, Alice A. Kuzniar, Thomas Elsaesser and more have been invaluable to this project, in addition to cinema, queer, and German cultural studies as a whole. Through further research on this period, more lost films with queer themes might be discovered and restored, and our historical understanding of queer lives and desires will deepen and expand. The challenges of studying and theorizing queer history and culture stem from both intentional and pernicious erasure and the natural ways in which histories, events, and memories are forgotten. In order to preserve the little information and historical documents that remain, scholars, archivists, film restorers and conservators, academic institutions, publications, and other entities invested in preserving these histories must work together to create a more permanent interest in their exhibition and examination.

What makes cinema a distinctly powerful phenomenon is its capabilities as a mode of artistic expression, commercially viable entertainment, and social and political commentary. Like other forms of art, the films of a particular period are reflections of the political, social, and cultural upheavals of the moment. However, cinema is particularly unique in that, unlike theater, a physical object remains after the presentation of the work. Situated between theater and the visual arts, cinema is marked by both visual performance and narrative. It is easily produced and distributed through its form as a reproducible roll of film. Although films are tangible objects,
the difficulties that arise while studying the cinema of this period are revealed as time takes its
toll and alters the condition of the images. According to Deutsche Kinemathek, eighty to ninety
percent of the films made from the medium's birth to the emergence of sound and slightly after
have been “irrevocably lost.”

The loss of these films can be attributed to several factors, which include censorship,
carelessness, nitrate deterioration, post-production alterations, consideration as “a worthless
commodity,” changes in technology and attitudes towards silent films, and an overall lack of
interest in archival preservation. Films like *Anders als die Andern* would have been relegated to
this category if it had not been for a dedicated archive in Ukraine which fortunately had the last
copy featuring only a portion of the original film. The irretrievable loss of these films is akin to
the destruction or degradation of any piece of art. It is a profoundly saddening erosion of our
understanding and knowledge of history. Within the context of this project, the loss of these films
can be connected to the intentional and unintentional erasure of queer histories. Like most
micro-histories, some get forgotten by the natural processes of individual memory and human
error. However, when examining the larger, more collective experiences of queer history, the
specifically queer details are often neglected and negated. By continuing to view, research, and
present the remaining queer Weimar films we still have access to, historians and educators can
bring these films to wider audiences and help to contextualize them as an essential part of queer
history.
Filmography


*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari/The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.* Directed by Robert Wiene, performances by Werner Krauss, Conrad Veigt, Friedrich Fehér, Lil Dagover, Hans Heinz v. Twardowski, Rudolf Lettinger, 1920. DVD


*Geschlecht in Fesseln/Sex in Chains.* Directed by William Dieterle, performances by William Dieterle, Gunnar Tolnæs, Mary Johnson, Paul Henckels, and Hans Heinrich von Twardowski, 1928. https://kolektiva.media/w/1e8ed07e-5d38-4913-9ffe-06c3e0c4a267

*Mädchen in Uniform/Girls in Uniform.* Directed by Leotine Sagan, 1931, performances by Herthe Thiele and Dorothea Wieck https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0s0WWmx3J0U


Novels

*Der Tod in Venedig/Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann

*Die Verwirrungen des Zögling Törleß/The Confusions of Young Törless* by Robert Musil

Images

Figure 1: Manuela and von Bernburg meet on the staircase for the first time

Figure 2: Two students and von Bernburg walk past Manuela

Figure 3: A single guard stands watch during establishing shot of the inside of the prison

Figure 4: Sommer wakes up from his disturbing dream
Figure 5: A silent and motionless shot of Helene is superimposed on top of a shot of Sommer and the inside of his prison cell.

Figure 6: Sommer and Alfred hold hands, suggestive of a possible sexual encounter

Figure 7: Paul affectionately watches Kurt play the violin

Figure 8: Kurt (left) and Paul (middle) are interrupted by Franz (right)

Figure 9: Kurt is surrounded by his family as he mourns for Paul

Figure 10: El Dorado Club’s replacement, an apartment complex, and organic grocer

Works Cited


Widerruf Der Zulassung Des Bildstreifens "Geschlecht in Fesseln". http://www.difarchiv.deutsches-filminstitut.de/zengut/16562w1x.pdf. p. 6-7


