

# THE LIFE AND CULTURE OF LESBIAN BERLIN IN THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

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Senior Project: The Life and Culture of Lesbian Berlin in the Weimar Republic

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Weimar Berlin was well known as a nucleus for gay culture, even in its infancy. Berlin acted as a starting point for homosexual theory, activism, and science.<sup>1</sup> Less well known, however, was the lesbian side of Berlin, a subculture that flourished just as much in the interwar period with less than half of the renown. This was largely due to sexism. In a nation that had just begun to give women the right to vote, it is no surprise that there is less documentation and academic focus on a group of people that were already considered less than.<sup>2</sup> Women, as a baseline, are sexualized, fetishized, and taken less seriously than men. This remained constant for queer women in the Weimar Republic in Berlin. Despite this, a thriving subculture of queer women developed parallel to that of gay men. Key factors within the subculture made it possible. It was allowed to develop and prosper in Berlin particularly because of new social, cultural, artistic, and scientific milestones such as the invention of cinema as well as the newly born study of sexology, courtesy of Magnus Hirschfeld, a resident of Berlin himself.<sup>3</sup> Lesbian literature made lesbianism a more concrete idea in the minds of the public, which in turn allowed for the queer discovery and invention of the self.<sup>4</sup> The queer discovery being the evaluation of one's self and connecting the personal identity to queerness and the invention of the self being the reorientation of one's presentation and perception of self after discovering one's queer identity, both processes that queer people contemporary and classical would have to go through.<sup>5</sup> Upon individuals making this self-discovery, more physical spaces erupted. Once these two key

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> "Women in the Weimar Republic," *Facing History and Ourselves*, accessed March 19, 2022, <https://www.facinghistory.org/holocaust-and-human-behavior/chapter-4/women-weimar-republic>.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Beachy, "Chapter Six: Weimar Sexual Reform and the Institute for Sexual Science," in *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Laurie Marhoefer, "'The Book Was a Revelation, I Recognized Myself in It': Lesbian Sexuality, Censorship, and the Queer Press in Weimar-Era Germany," *Journal of Women's History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, June 10, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2015.0016>.

<sup>5</sup> Shoshana Rosenberg, "Coming in: Queer Narratives of Sexual Self-Discovery," *Journal of Homosexuality* 65, no. 13 (February 2017): pp. 1788-1816, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2017.1390811>.

aspects of the subculture were born, other artistic media could flourish. This project will focus particularly on cinema, which was new not only as an art form but also as a queer one.<sup>6</sup> When combined literature, spaces, and cinema formed a trifecta of what the lesbian identity meant in Weimar Berlin.

I decided to focus on Queer women in Berlin specifically in the interwar period because, at a first glance, the subculture does not exist. Almost like an oasis in a desert, material describing what life was like for queer women in Berlin at the time is hard to come by and can sometimes be mistaken for a mirage. Women in history are already chronically less visible than men on any given day. The same is true for queer stories which are the focus of a painfully small field of historical research, growing only with the help of time and archives.<sup>7</sup> Queer women have the distinct disadvantage of being both, despite an incredibly rich history that is not only centered in Berlin in the Weimar era but throughout time and space. Because queer men were also having a renaissance of life, arts, and culture in Berlin their history, though it does intertwine with queer women's history, masks the history of queer women that is there. When queer women are not focused on specifically, a great deal is lost simply due to them being tacked onto the end of men's stories, something that can be found in work with even the best intentions. Queer female history anywhere is difficult to stumble upon and even more difficult to hone in on if it is not so distinct from gay men. This is of no real fault of any queer person involved; however, it is an inherent bias in the field. There is simply less research done about women and

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<sup>6</sup> Richard W. McCormick, "From 'Caligari' to Dietrich: Sexual, Social, and Cinematic Discourses in Weimar Film," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18, no. 3 (1993): pp. 640-668, <https://doi.org/10.1086/494823>.

<sup>7</sup> Nan Alamilla Boyd, "Who Is the Subject?: Queer Theory Meets Oral History," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 17, no. 2 (2008): pp. 177-189, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sex.0.0009>.

Jamie Scot, "A Revisionist History: How Archives Are Used to Reverse the Erasure of Queer People in Contemporary History," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 1, no. 2 (January 2014): pp. 205-209, <https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.1.2.0205>.

less research done by women.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, there is less research done about queer people, and naturally, less research done by queer people. There is a gap in the literature, particularly when addressing queer women, and while that gap is filled more and more as time goes on, so is the rest of the literature about everything else.<sup>9</sup> Literature and historical research about other subjects will always be more pervasive than that done by, for, and about queer women simply due to the insurmountable head start. I had always wanted my research to focus on queer space because of a desire to learn the history of my own community, it was through first discovering literature about gay men in Berlin that led me to queer women. The first monograph I read was *Gay Berlin* by Robert Beachy. His work is a quick guide to gay Berlin, as was, I assume, his intention. It is not all-encompassing, nor does it address every detail of the culture in Berlin at the time. However, it is to gay men what does not yet exist for gay women, at least, for Berlin in the interwar period. There is no general source that can be referenced both by academics and a lay audience. Beachy's work is accessible and useful to both parties. It was my goal to, if not give that to others, then at least give it to myself in order to satiate my own curiosity. Many of the sources I have used are more specific than the focus of my own work, choosing to focus on particular aspects of queer women's lives and spaces in Berlin, rather than the subculture as a whole. I wanted to paint the specificity of Queer women's lives in Berlin in the interwar period while keeping the brushstrokes of what the culture was like. The Weimar Republic is sometimes regarded more for what came after it in World War II rather than what it was at its height. While

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<sup>8</sup> Ruth Rosen, "Sexism in History or, Writing Women's History Is a Tricky Business," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 33, no. 3 (1971): p. 541, <https://doi.org/10.2307/349851>. Andrew Kahn and Rebecca Onion, "Is History Written about Men, by Men?," Slate Magazine, January 6, 2016, [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/history/2016/01/popular\\_history\\_why\\_are\\_so\\_many\\_history\\_books\\_about\\_men\\_by\\_men.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history/2016/01/popular_history_why_are_so_many_history_books_about_men_by_men.html).

<sup>9</sup> Jen Manion, "The Absence of Context: Gay Politics without a Past," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 1, no. 2 (January 2014): pp. 115-131, <https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.1.2.0115>.

much historical attention has been paid to the ways in which its political culture was conflictual and even dysfunctional, the Weimar Republic was not simply a failed experiment. It was, for its time, revolutionary. It allowed for openness that is still impossible in many places today. It is not just the culmination of its faults, but also of all the things that made it beautiful, the things that made Berlin a place that fascinated and drew people in. I wanted to perceive queer culture in Berlin in its successes, the small victories and changes that make it historically notable.

Upon researching different avenues which I could use to explore lesbian Berlin, I decided to section off my study into three categories that I found often recurred in my research and which interested me as it would be impossible to research and synthesize every aspect of lesbian culture in Berlin and remain concise. The categories I devised are “The Discovery of the Queer Identity,” which focuses on literature and how it often contributed to queer awakenings in women, as well as their education. “The Spaces and Places of the Queer Identity” which functioned as a natural second step after literature, as often, after an “awakening,” people would be apt to engage in physical spaces such as bars, nightclubs, and masquerades. Finally, “Cinema, Lovers, and Cultural Impact” discusses queer film in its infancy and how it impacted queer women in Berlin, as well as the backlash that it caused. Additionally, all the chapters attempt to highlight a few key influential figures and sometimes individual voices in each area of study. This was done in order to make the broad strokes of a city more personal. The lives of individuals coming together shape any city life, and Berlin’s queer women were no exception.

As a disclaimer, in this paper, many contemporary terms are used to describe the people of the past. This is intentional and meant only to show respect as well as refrain from upsetting any readers with outdated language. For example, one individual in this paper will be referred to using “they/them” pronouns. This is due to their ambiguous gender identity which, due to lack of

terminology and updated perspectives on gender identity descriptors, is impossible to identify and therefore label. This tactic of using “they/them” pronouns was used by Dr. Katie Sutton in their work, an example that will be followed in this paper.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, modern umbrella terms such as “queer,” as well as “trans,” have been used heavily. While these terms were not historically accurate, they are more neutral than other language which would have been used historically which I am not comfortable using. Historically, the term “transvestite” was used the same way that transgender and trans are used now.<sup>11</sup> “Queer,” is also often used instead of “lesbian,” or other historical German terms because it is more inclusive of women who may have been bisexual or pansexual. In using the term “queer,” I hope to allow for more fluidity in determining the sexualities of people who have long passed on as it is not fair to assume one way or another, especially with constricting modern language and mislabel people who cannot correct for or defend themselves.

Next, the setting in which the environment of this project needs to be set. The Weimar Era occurred roughly between the First and Second World Wars. However, this project will span slightly outside of both dates in order to give context and a conclusion to certain points. The Weimar Era has been used as a label to be more concise in writing as, for the most part, it is accurate. “The Weimar Era,” has been used often along with “the interwar period,” as both have enough specificity to be accurate. The Weimar era was the era in which Germany, or rather, The Weimar Republic, was ruled by a republic with a constitution and elected leaders.<sup>12</sup> This era also saw several remarkable events. Germany, as it is perceived today, was involved in the First and

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<sup>10</sup> Katie Sutton, “Sexual Politics and the Legacy of the Weimar Republic,” ANU Reporter (The Australian National University), accessed March 19, 2022, <https://reporter.anu.edu.au/sexual-politics-and-legacy-weimar-republic>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> “Weimar Republic,” History.com (A&E Television Networks, December 4, 2017), <https://www.history.com/topics/germany/weimar-republic>.

Second World Wars, on the losing side of both. This unique position of being bookended by bloodshed already makes the Weimar Era quite remarkable. As well as the occurrence of both the Roaring Twenties, an age typically represented by America, marked by the introduction of film and commercial radio as well as the beginnings of credit and mass production as well as a certain reckless carelessness, and perhaps most notable of all, changing perspectives of women and women's suffrage.<sup>13</sup> Also relevant was the Great Depression which started in America and left shockwaves across the world's economy, including in the Weimar Republic where hyperinflation had previously been a problem after WWI.<sup>14</sup>

Berlin, despite all these problems, was flourishing culturally, particularly in the 1920s. The city was once described by Josephine Baker, famed performer and activist, as having a "jewel-like sparkle,"<sup>15</sup> and in 1892, before the Renaissance-like flood of culture occurred in the Weimar Era, Mark Twain had remarked about Berlin that it was the newest city he had come across.<sup>16</sup> Berlin was a hedonistic center of cultural evolution full of music and clubs and art and literature that made it a spectacle that everyone who was able wanted to experience for themselves, making it a tourist capital. Berlin existed as the height of German pluralism; the conservative and liberal, the urban and agricultural, economic ruin and growth. People could choose their own adventure, seemingly in any direction, they could live two lives, the political

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<sup>13</sup> Estelle B. Freedman, "The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s," *The Journal of American History* 61, no. 2 (1974): p. 372, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1903954>.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis E. Hill, Charles E. Butler, and Stephen A. Lorenzen, "Inflation and the Destruction of Democracy: The Case of the Weimar Republic," *Journal of Economic Issues* 11, no. 2 (1977): pp. 299-313, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00213624.1977.11503439>.

<sup>15</sup> "The 1920s – Cultural Life in Berlin," [visitBerlin.de](https://www.visitberlin.de/en/1920s-cultural-life-berlin), accessed March 19, 2022, <https://www.visitberlin.de/en/1920s-cultural-life-berlin>.

<sup>16</sup> Mele Pesti, "I Feel Lost in Berlin." The City According to Mark Twain," *Exberliner*, November 24, 2020, <https://www.exberliner.com/books/mark-twain-berlin/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CI%20feel%20lost%20in%20Berlin%2C%E2%80%9D%20admits%20Twain%20in%20his,Germany%20into%20this%20one%20report>.

and the cultural. Some queer men were fascist, and some conservatives believed that the love between two German men was the purest love that could exist.<sup>17</sup> There were contradictions everywhere and endless in combination in Berlin. In a place where so much was allowed, it is unsurprising that queerness blossomed.

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Beachy, "Chapter Six: Weimar Sexual Reform and the Institute for Sexual Science," in *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015).



## Chapter 1: Discovery of the Queer Identity

During the First World War, men were sent to the front lines, leaving Berlin mostly free of men, and leaving women alone and autonomous for the first time in a way they never had been before. This acted as a sort of prologue to lesbian culture in Berlin.

Berlin, intentionally or not, had become a nucleus, the center of a movement of queer people and queer spaces. Gay men had already formed a space for themselves in Berlin before World War I; the wartime absence of men along with an increase in queer female media, gave queer women opportunities they had not had before. Berlin was not the only growing space available for queer women, other major cities such as London, New York, California, and Paris, had growing sapphic populations as well. Berlin, however, was perhaps one of the most interesting places in which this growth could have happened. Berlin, unlike the other cities, was the home of sexual science and research. This research and general desire to answer questions and learn helped foster an environment in which queer populations could grow.

Literature was a huge part of what made Berlin a haven for queer women, as well as making self-education possible. While this literature could be accessed outside of Berlin, the city was the epicenter. Berlin was the root of it all, the first place that it would be printed and the place to be if one wanted the most recent updates on sexology. Literature offered an outlet for some and reached out a comforting hand to others. Some books were fictional novels, grounded in real experiences of queer women. Others were scientific books based on research and theory. Both began to bridge an important and largely unexplored area of interest: love and desire that women had for each other.

Women, beginning in the 18th century and moving forward, had a particular proclivity for the novel, consuming far more literature in that form than men. It is perhaps fair to say that

this trait aided queer women in their discoveries. Though a statement from a 21st century author and not at all affiliated with Weimar Era queer Berlin, Jonathan Coe captures women's feeling as a whole towards reading, particularly reading fiction, "women read books to understand themselves, and men to escape themselves,"<sup>18</sup> This was certainly true of the queer women of Berlin. Literature was an incredibly important part of Germany and Berlin's culture in its entirety.<sup>19</sup> In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Germany was trying to take pieces of other European neighbors and piece together what it wanted to keep within its borders. One of these pieces was the novel which rose in popularity like it had all over Europe in the eighteenth century. As women's role in society began to change with the growth of cities and the global economy their relationship to literature did as well. An increase in the education of middle-class women and a subsequent increase in literacy and therefore women's literature written by for and about women occurred.<sup>20</sup>

Queer women faced a great deal of isolation, from both each other and their other peers, feeling cut off from society in a way their heterosexual peers could not understand. A German woman said in reaction to the novel *Der Skorpion*, a lesbian novel written by Anne Elisabeth Weirauch in 1932, that it was her one joy and that, "With it, I feel that I belong to you, that no one can tear the innate feeling of happiness out of the heart,"<sup>21</sup> Presumably about the author, Anne Elisabeth Weirauch, herself or to some other distant love whom could not be reached in the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Gideon Reuveni, *Reading Germany: Literature and Consumer Culture in Germany before 1933* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2006).

Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900*, 1998.

<sup>20</sup> Charlotte A. Melin, "German Women's Poetry Circa 1900: A Forgotten Anthology." *The German Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (2014): 49–66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42751603>.

Gillian Dow, "Women Readers in Europe: Readers, Writers, Salonnières, 1750–1900," Taylor & Francis, accessed November 25, 2021, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09699082.2011.525003>.

<sup>21</sup> Angeles Espinaco-Virseda, "'I Feel That I Belong to You': Subculture, Die Freundin and Lesbian Identities in Weimar Germany," View of "I feel that I belong to you": Subculture, die freundin and lesbian identities in Weimar Germany, April 1, 2004, <https://soi.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/soi/article/view/8015/7175>.

small town in which the woman found herself trapped. This type of self-discovery was ignited in many women, providing them context for their own identities that would have otherwise been largely unavailable.

Another woman, Hilde Radusch, also reacted similarly to *Der Skorpion*, writing “For me the book was a revelation, I recognized myself in it,”<sup>22</sup> The concept of literature acting as a spark igniting an already existing tinder in queer women is wonderfully represented in Weimar Berlin, especially when considering how few role models and other types of media were available for women at the time. *Der Skorpion* offered up the idea that a woman could love another woman to women who had never been exposed to such a radical concept before. Recognizing oneself in the media one consumes is a powerful tool that helps one get that much closer to forging one's identity, and, in the case of many, begin to participate in one's own subculture.<sup>23</sup>

Novels were not the only spark of literature for queer women, however. Pamphlets and magazines were both immense parts of the lesbian awakenings happening in Weimar Berlin. Perhaps the most famous of the five lesbian magazines at women's disposal in Berlin at the time was *Girlfriend: The Ideal Friendship Journal*, or in the original German, *Die Freundin*. *Die Freundin* was responsible for many sexual awakenings of many queer women as well as the communication and exploration of many more.<sup>24</sup> *Die Freundin* was actively left in public spaces by some readers in order to spread their knowledge for another repressed person to discover, thus

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 69.

<sup>23</sup> Laurie Marhoefer, “‘The Book Was a Revelation, I Recognized Myself in It’: Lesbian Sexuality, Censorship, and the Queer Press in Weimar-Era Germany,” *Journal of Women's History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, June 10, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2015.0016>.

<sup>24</sup> Angeles Espinaco-Virseda, “‘I Feel That I Belong to You’: Subculture, Die Freundin and Lesbian Identities in Weimar Germany,” *View of "I feel that I belong to you": Subculture, die freundin and lesbian identities in Weimar Germany*, April 1, 2004, <https://soi.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/soi/article/view/8015/7175>.

hastening the already efficient media consumption of sapphic literature to the masses.<sup>25</sup> The idea of sharing the wealth is recurring in the study of queer women's history, with many ideas being shared out of a desire to enlighten others and give them what they did not have before, usually security in their identities.

*Die Freundin* was full of short stories, information about clubs, guidance on how to be a lesbian from how to dress, act, and cut one's hair, poetry, debates, and serials.<sup>26</sup> All of which aided the realization and inner process of coming out to oneself, the first steps to living authentically in one's identity. Women could experience queer love for the first time in the carefully printed pages of queer magazines. They could feel for themselves what may well have been missing from themselves throughout their whole lives and then, with the help of *Die Freundin* and *Garçonne*,<sup>27</sup> go to a lesbian club later and do the "terribly sexy" Wäschentanz (the "petticoat dance"). And, if they were lucky, get the kiss at the end.<sup>28</sup>

Women from all sorts of backgrounds read the local lesbian magazines and literature, especially if they did not have easy access to the clubs and bars that lesbians typically did more readily in cities like Berlin. Rural lesbians relied far more heavily on literature, sometimes taking out more personal advertisements to search for partners.<sup>29</sup> Community was hard to come by for queer women, both in rural areas and urban. What literature did for both parties was provide a structure, and at times a network to provide either lifelines to those who were more isolated or to

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<sup>25</sup> Laurie Marhoefer, "'The Book Was a Revelation, I Recognized Myself in It': Lesbian Sexuality, Censorship, and the Queer Press in Weimar-Era Germany," *Journal of Women's History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, June 10, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2015.0016>, 63-64.

<sup>26</sup> Laurie Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 66.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* p. 69.

<sup>28</sup> Claudia Schoppmann, *Days of Masquerade: Life Stories of Lesbians During the Third Reich* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996), 32.

<sup>29</sup> Laurie Marhoefer, "'The Book Was a Revelation, I Recognized Myself in It': Lesbian Sexuality, Censorship, and the Queer Press in Weimar-Era Germany," *Journal of Women's History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, June 10, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2015.0016>, 71.

strengthen the greater part of the community which could be found in the city of Berlin. In another example of divides within the community, poorer people relied more heavily on lesbian literature than the more financially secure. Bars and clubs were not free and were much harder to save up for than a monthly (or sometimes bi-weekly or weekly) magazine. Generally, from 1924 to 1932, the magazines cost around 20-30 pfennigs, a manageable amount, even during inflation while admittance to a club would be one mark at the same time.<sup>30</sup> A magazine, while still the most affordable way of participating in queer culture still cost as much as a meal would from a charity kitchen. For the poor during the Depression, the magazines were a luxury; rare, but no less impactful.<sup>31</sup>

The lesbian magazines of Berlin often evoked a very particular feeling of yearning in women who read them. The yearning was for a partner, a companion to share their newly expanded worlds with. This yearning and searching funneled back into the publication of the magazines themselves. Women would take out personal advertisements in the magazines, reaching out into what was no longer a vacuum in space for someone to share their experiences. One woman advertised: "Nuremberg. Lonely woman seeks same, educated but modern thinking girlfriend,"<sup>32</sup> another wrote to their "Dear sister Willina," that, "It would be a great pleasure for me to hear more from you and also from your wife herself. Warmest greetings. Your Georgette,"<sup>33</sup> Relationships were formed and, to an extent, maintained, through advertisements in queer magazines in Berlin making them a key part of the lesbian subculture that ran as an

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<sup>30</sup> Angeles Espinaco-Virseda, "'I Feel That I Belong to You': Subculture, Die Freundin and Lesbian Identities in Weimar Germany," View of "I feel that I belong to you": Subculture, die freundin and lesbian identities in Weimar Germany, April 1, 2004, <https://soi.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/soi/article/view/8015/7175>, 102-113.

<sup>31</sup> Laurie Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 69.

<sup>32</sup> Angeles Espinaco-Virseda, "'I Feel That I Belong to You': Subculture, Die Freundin and Lesbian Identities in Weimar Germany," View of "I feel that I belong to you": Subculture, die freundin and lesbian identities in Weimar Germany, April 1, 2004, <https://soi.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/soi/article/view/8015/7175>, 87.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 88.

undercurrent in the city during the Weimar Era, a part of education, a form of comfort, and, in the best of circumstances, a way to meet more queer people.

Another important sector of literature at the time was scientific. Spearheaded by Magnus Hirschfeld, the world's first and leading sexologist, was the study of queer people.<sup>34</sup> Hirschfeld founded the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft or the "Institute for Sexual Science," providing a haven, museum, research center, and even room and board for queer people. Hirschfeld studied sex as well as gender, pioneering modern ideas about both. Crucially, however, Hirschfeld offered education.<sup>35</sup> Not only did he provide general sex education to the public, but he also ensured the availability of information about queer identities to those who came to visit the institute. One of the main features of his institute was the picture wall which demonstrated Hirschfeld's sex and gender theories to all the visitors who came to the institute before it was destroyed by the Nazi party in 1933.<sup>36</sup> Hirschfeld's dedication to queer activism and liberation was ahead of its time, making him controversial both inside and outside of the queer "community".

Despite this controversy, Hirschfeld had no shortage of visitors, from patients who would beg him for sex-change operations to quiet observers like Christopher Isherwood, the famed English writer who lived in Berlin as Hirschfeld's own neighbor and tenant for a time.

The environment that both Hirschfeld and the readers of scientific papers and magazines like *Die Freundin* fostered was one of learning, both for individuals who identified as queer and for those who did not. The influx of information surrounding queer identities along with the

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<sup>34</sup>Robert Beachy, "Chapter Six: Weimar Sexual Reform and the Institute for Sexual Science," in *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015).

<sup>35</sup>"The First Institute for Sexual Science (1919-1933)," Magnus Hirschfeld und das Institut für Sexualwissenschaft, accessed November 7, 2021, <https://magnus-hirschfeld.de/ausstellungen/institute/>.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

influx of queer people mixed to form even more queer spaces. Together the institute and the surrounding literature made it possible for the already growing concept of communities to form at an even more accelerated rate, which in turn made the production of more media and more spaces possible creating an exponential growth. Cinema, literature, and magazines mixed with clubs, bars, and cabaret.

The mix of festivities and scientific research blended to create a unique space in time, the queer community in Berlin echoing individuals like Magnus Hirschfeld who famously hosted parties for all of his queer friends and colleagues while still maintaining his institute and research. This relationship between study and play, activism and intrapersonal relationships is clearly seen throughout the Weimar era in most queer spaces. This push and pull between motivations are indicative of the danger and controversy that was omnipresent, tugging at the edges of the spaces like shadows, always present and waiting for an opportunity to creep into the light of the free spaces that had been formed.

Guidebooks were also a sizable portion of literature for lesbians in Weimar Berlin. Ruth Margarete Roellig, a famous lesbian of the Weimar era in Berlin, was the author of the lesbian guidebook at the time. She had also worked for *Die Freundin* and what would later become *Garçonne*. Her guidebook, *Berlins lesbische Frauen*, which featured a preface written by Magnus Hirschfeld, was a city guide that specifically described fourteen bars and clubs for queer women to enjoy. The clubs included the famous Eldorado, more rowdy clubs like the Taverne and more quiet atmospheres like the Igel Club and the Mali.<sup>37</sup>

In her book Roellig emphasized that lesbians were just as human as any other person and wanted to inform readers about spaces that generally would not be thought of or acknowledged.

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<sup>37</sup> Claudia Schoppmann, *Days of Masquerade: Life Stories of Lesbians During the Third Reich* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996), 134.

She also was careful to point out that the clubs and bars she wrote about were crucial parts of the lesbian identity in Berlin. She insisted that safe spaces, especially safe physical spaces where lesbian women could simply exist as themselves without any pretenses or burdens of society outside of their walls were imperative to their freedom.<sup>38</sup>

A man wrote another important guidebook of the time. Konrad Haemmerling, a cultural critic who wrote under the penname, *Führer durch das 'lasterhafte' Berlin* or, *The Guide to 'Depraved' Berlin*. The guide, like Roellig's, offered unique insight into the culture and nightlife of Berlin, describing it for tourists who wanted to be able to see a more gritty, raw, and sexual side of Berlin. It featured popular clubs and bars as well as dance halls and smaller pubs.<sup>39</sup> The book was illustrated and mimicked other famous European guidebooks in its cover and outward appearance. Despite how it tackled the grittiness of Berlin, Haemmerling's book did little to delve into the life of queer women who most of society would rather have forgotten about than learn about. Still, his literature opened Berlin up to tourists who would come to the city to discover its darker side.<sup>40</sup>

One of the most notable tourists being Christopher Isherwood, a British writer who mainly wrote novels, a great deal of which had to do with Berlin in the interwar period.<sup>41</sup> Isherwood's close friend, another British gay man, a poet, W. H. Auden, also famously lived in

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Camilla Smith. "Challenging 'Baedeker' Through the Art of Sexual Science: An Exploration of Gay and Lesbian Subcultures in Curt Moreck's 'Guide to "Depraved" Berlin' (1931)." *Oxford Art Journal* 36, no. 2 (2013), 231. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43826014>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> "Biography," About Christopher Isherwood, accessed November 25, 2021, <https://www.isherwoodfoundation.org/biography.html>.



and took inspiration from Berlin in his works.<sup>42</sup> Christopher Isherwood, however, is perhaps the most synonymous figure when looking at Berlin's queer culture, specifically when looking at gay male culture and even more specifically within the Weimar era. Isherwood wrote many works based on his own experiences in Berlin, as well as many diaries that detailed his time there.

Though Isherwood does not offer much perspective on the specificities of lesbian life and culture in Berlin, His work, especially his diaries and his memoir, *Christopher and His Kind*, give a clear look at both Magnus Hirschfield's institute as Isherwood lived adjacent to it and had interactions with Hirschfield, as well as the overall culture of Berlin's party scene, especially within Cabarets.<sup>43</sup>

Isherwood's documentation of Weimar Berlin and the gay life it had within is incredibly significant and cannot be ignored when looking at lesbian lives and culture specifically. The two subcultures would intersect, though they did so sparingly because they were fighting different battles. Gay men were fighting more for acceptance, gay women were fighting more for visibility. Gay women did not face the same type of stigmas that gay men did simply because they were less visible to begin with. Women also had the added layer of misogyny in society that separated them further from gay men in Berlin at the time. While women had the privilege of not having any laws explicitly against them having affairs with each other, they also did not have all

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<sup>42</sup> Colin Storer "Weimar Germany as Seen by an Englishwoman: British Women Writers and the Weimar Republic." *German Studies Review* 32, no. 1 (2009), 129. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27668659>, 129.

<sup>43</sup> Christopher Isherwood. *Christopher and His Kind: 1929-1939*. (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015).

the same civil liberties that men started out with, gay or not. In summary, while women's rights were increasing, women were worse off being women than they would have been being gay.<sup>44</sup>

It would not be true to say, however, that queer women did not face discrimination. Queer women in Germany led different lives than their straight counterparts and were separated on a very basic level. Queer women were, as Ruth Roellig described them, treated as socially inferior, economically dependent, susceptible to blackmail, and, above all, ostracized because of their differences.<sup>45</sup> Queer women, sometimes before they themselves even realized that they were queer, would be told that women loving other women was a bad thing and something to be condemned, even if their identities were less visible than those of gay men. This was the case for Margarete Knittel, a lesbian who remarked in an interview that at an early age, "I had always heard that love and sex among women was something reprehensible,"<sup>46</sup> despite this sentiment, acceptance, however quiet, did happen. Again, with Margarete, whose father, "accepted [her] unconditionally, though [they] never spoke about it,"<sup>47</sup> allowed her to live with him authentically after her mother had passed on, never acknowledging the difference but nonetheless accepting. As Margarete said, "He had his girlfriend and I had my girlfriends."<sup>48</sup> They found a balance, living peacefully despite their times.

This type of life, while it lasted, was spent, when possible, in clubs like the Violetta in small but growing circles. If a trend was decipherable, Margarete Knittel would be a good baseline of it would be, 1) an inciting incident whereupon a woman's perspective changed whether because of a whisper from another woman or because of a scrap of literature was read

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<sup>44</sup> "Women in the Weimar Republic," Facing History and Ourselves, accessed November 20, 2021, <https://www.facinghistory.org/holocaust-and-human-behavior/chapter-4/women-weimar-republic>.

<sup>45</sup> Claudia Schoppmann, *Days of Masquerade: Life Stories of Lesbians During the Third Reich* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996), 133.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* p. 93.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* p. 94.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

opening up the door of homosexuality, if not for the first time, than for the first time positively, 2) a struggle between preconceived notions about homosexuality and relationships between women,<sup>49</sup> 3) research, usually via a queer magazine like *Die Freundin*,<sup>50</sup> then, finally, 4) exploration, either with a person or of a space like a bar or club.<sup>51</sup> Often lesbians would get a girlfriend who was more experienced than themselves who would show them around the lesbian community in Berlin and lead them through the door that had been opened, this was the case with Margarete Knittel.<sup>52</sup> Later in life they themselves might become the older and more experienced girlfriend as Ruth Roellig<sup>53</sup> did.

The key role of literature within the discovery of the lesbian identity in Berlin cannot be overstated. Literature plays some role in nearly every firsthand account of lesbian life in Berlin in the Weimar era. The lesbian community in Berlin was able to become as connected as it was because of beloved magazines like *Die Freundin* and *Garçonne*. They may not have provided a space for the “joy of dancing,”<sup>54</sup> but they did provide a network and the information necessary to find both other queer women and a place to dance with them.

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<sup>49</sup> Claudia Schoppmann, *Days of Masquerade: Life Stories of Lesbians During the Third Reich* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996), 93.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* p. 139.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* p. 133.

## Chapter 2: Spaces and Places of the Queer Identity

In Berlin, in the interwar period, there were many spaces that provided safety and community for queer individuals. From cabarets, clubs, Magnus Hirschfeld's institute, and the Tiergarten. These spaces, strewn across the city of Berlin, helped form a community that existed, however briefly outside of whispers and literature. Spaces were an important manifestation of the queer identity, the essence of what set queer people apart, spaces which helped combat the loneliness, isolation, and desperation of queer individuality, physical marks on the city of Berlin which ensured the survival of the lesbian identity as well as the formation of stronger bonds within the subculture.

Many of the queer spaces in Berlin were ruled by gay men, flourishing for spectators like Christopher Isherwood, a queer man who lived in Berlin from 1929 to 1933, giving him a first-hand account of the culture of gay Berlin.<sup>55</sup> Spaces that were full of men with perceived feminine qualities that could often entrance and delight tourists upon first sight.

In his memoir, *Christopher and His Kind*, Isherwood wrote a great deal about his struggle to find a home where he could be free to live openly as a queer man. He found that home in Berlin from 1929 to 1933. Isherwood was neighbors with Magnus Hirschfeld, living in a small apartment adjacent to his institute for a time.<sup>56</sup> Berlin, as Isherwood experienced it, was a wild and gritty city, in competition with Paris's sex appeal, but Berlin was made different, Berlin was full of boys.<sup>57</sup> It was in this boy-filled environment that Isherwood made his name, absorbing his

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<sup>55</sup> Christopher Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind: 1929-1939* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14

<sup>57</sup> Clayton Whisnant, "A Peek inside Berlin's Queer Club Scene before Hitler Destroyed It," *ADVOCATE*, July 19, 2016, <https://www.advocate.com/books/2016/7/19/peek-inside-berlins-queer-club-scene-hitler-destroyed-it>.

experience and transcribing them in what would later become the musical *Cabaret*, his book, *Goodbye to Berlin*.<sup>58</sup>

One of the most available places for queer people, particularly queer men, were spaces for prostitution. In Berlin, prostitution, particularly male prostitution, was pervasive, with around 90 separate places in Berlin ranging from specific corners to clubs to parks places where male prostitutes could be found as documented by Richard Linsert as well as 24 more prominent sites where interview partners of his had found “johns” themselves.<sup>59</sup> The many alcoves of the city in which it took place were spaces of quiet acceptance, if not safety. One of the most notable spaces of male prostitution was the Tiergarten, along with the Passage and Unter den Linden, where, even before the Weimar era, beautiful young boys ranging in price, looks, and sexuality would sell themselves to the first interested passerby.<sup>60</sup> This is a significant difference from lesbian culture in Berlin during the same era. Male prostitution saturated the gay male culture of Berlin, with most sources mentioning the monetary relationships that took place. Lesbian subculture by contrast has much less documentation of sex work actually impacting relationships, though there is significant overlap of the study of female prostitution and sex work and lesbianism, though the two are not in the same symbiotic relationship as gay men and prostitution.<sup>61</sup>

Still, prostitution did not offer the only spaces of acceptance, especially for queer women. There were everyday places too, bars, restaurants, cafes. On a smaller scale, there were dressmakers and hatmakers,<sup>62</sup> doctors and private investigators who could provide discreet

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<sup>58</sup> Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin* (London, England: Vintage, 1989).

<sup>59</sup> Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015), 223.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220

<sup>61</sup> Laurie Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015)

Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015)

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211

services for the right price.<sup>63</sup> These professionals, in making their businesses more inclusive, whether because of their own identities or due to a desire to expand their market,<sup>64</sup> created physical spaces where, at least for a time, queer identities were acknowledged and accepted.

One of the most famous spaces of all was a club, The Eldorado Cafe, or in German, *Tanzlokale für Herrenone*. The Eldorado hosted many stars of the time including film star Marlene Dietrich, and famous singer Claire Waldorf.<sup>65</sup> Customers could buy chips to dance with drag performers at the club. They would then be encouraged to guess the true gender of their dance partner.<sup>66</sup> The club, unlike many places in Berlin, was not meant for any specific orientation and instead welcomed queer men and women alike, as well as trans individuals (who were often hostesses) and drag queens.<sup>67</sup> The club was full of music, dance, and art, decorated lavishly with chandeliers and gilded ceilings that came alive at night. Though women were not the center of gay clubs, they were not forgotten. Another famous gay club, The Dorian Gray, had a special night just for lesbians.<sup>68</sup> Despite their degrees of separation, the gay and lesbian identities of Berlin were intertwined, sharing the same streets of the same city, overlapping, and influencing each other. Interesting.

Many of Weimar Berlin's most iconic spaces for queer people were shrouded in the night, unable to exist freely in the daylight. One of the very popular spaces for lesbian and queer women was an annual moonlight cruise, organized by Lotte Hahm, or Lothar as they sometimes

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 211

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 211

<sup>65</sup> Will Kohler, "March 5, 1933: The Infamous Gay Nightclub the Eldorado Cafe in Berlin Closes as Nazi Gay Persecution Begins - Rare Pictures," Back2Stonewall, March 14, 2019, <http://www.back2stonewall.com/2019/03/march-5-1933-eldorado-cafe-berlin-closes-nazi-lgbt-persecution-begins.html>.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Clayton Whisnant, "A Peek inside Berlin's Queer Club Scene before Hitler Destroyed It," ADVOCATE, July 19, 2016, <https://www.advocate.com/books/2016/7/19/peek-inside-berlins-queer-club-scene-hitler-destroyed-it>.

preferred to be called,<sup>69</sup> an activist who not only ran multiple women's social clubs, most famously the social club Violetta with their partner, Käthe Fleischmann.<sup>70</sup> Hahm was pictured in *Die Freundin* often in a suit and tie advertising their own events. Many of them involved cabaret performances, and some were balls.<sup>71</sup> As many of them as possible were kept free or at a low price in order to allow lesbians of all social classes to participate, they were also generally kept open for non-club members, giving queer women the chance to spend an evening dancing freely with their girlfriends.<sup>72</sup> Class differences, while they impacted accessibility a great deal in Berlin, impacted individual relationships less once lesbians were in the same physical spaces. This type of opportunity allowed queer women to exist as themselves without worry and without fear that they likely would have felt almost anywhere else, protected by each other and by the atmosphere that surrounded them. Similar to how literature was passed on from person to person, lesbian events, while sometimes separated by class, were meant to be accessible.<sup>73</sup> Lesbians wanted other lesbians to be able to participate freely in their own subculture without having to worry about financial or physical limitations. Because of this attitude, class divides, though they did exist, were often broken, with many interclass couples meeting and existing.<sup>74</sup> Class and status, when already in a subculture, mattered less because of the far more important parts of their identities that united lesbians as shown by relationships between women of different classes.

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<sup>69</sup> Katie Sutton, "Sexual Politics and the Legacy of the Weimar Republic," ANU Reporter (The Australian National University), accessed December 13, 2021, <https://reporter.anu.edu.au/sexual-politics-and-legacy-weimar-republic>.

<sup>70</sup> Laurie Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 57.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Laurie Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 57.

<sup>74</sup> Clayton Whisnant, "A Peek inside Berlin's Queer Club Scene before Hitler Destroyed It," ADVOCATE, July 19, 2016, <https://www.advocate.com/books/2016/7/19/peek-inside-berlins-queer-club-scene-hitler-destroyed-it>.

Lesbian clubs existed too, though not nearly as numerous as clubs dedicated to gay men: there were 50 counted within the city at their height in the mid-1920s. They were noted as being quite similar to those of gay men, though on some occasions, rowdier.<sup>75</sup> The Chez Ma Belle Soeur, for example, was influenced by Greco-Roman design and had private booths for couples to meet behind closed curtains.<sup>76</sup> Present through them all, however, was music.<sup>77</sup> Music, like literature, provided a common thread through the subculture. However, while literature dominated the day, running parallel to the public personas of queer women, music was there at night following them from space to space, running parallel to the private personas that were kept secret until the sun had set.

Inextricable from lesbian clubs was cabaret. Cabaret, a type of entertainment usually with roots in music and often using drama, recitation, and dance in front of a seated audience at tables and chairs in clubs or bars, was born and bred in Paris but was made famous in Berlin.<sup>78</sup> Cabaret was one of the most notable characteristics of Berlin at the time, drawing in spectators independently of the rest of the city. Cabaret played in the realms of comedy and sexuality, entertaining wide swathes of crowds across Berlin, especially within the queer communities.<sup>79</sup> Cabaret, like Berlin in the Weimar era, was often perceived as endlessly wild and free, different from the rigid structure and rules that had come before it, breaking out of an old mold and redefining what entertainment and, in the case of the city, what culture could be.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Alan Lareau, "The German Cabaret Movement during the Weimar Republic," *Theatre Journal* 43, no. 4 (1991): <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207977>.

<sup>79</sup> "New Women in the Weimar Republic," accessed December 13, 2021, <https://sites.barbican.org.uk/intotheknight-berlin/>.

<sup>80</sup> Alan Lareau, "The German Cabaret Movement during the Weimar Republic," *Theatre Journal* 43, no. 4 (1991): <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207977>.



Often noted women involved in cabaret were Anita Berber and Valeska Gert. Berber, who focused on eroticism, wearing translucent fabric if any at all during her erotic performances, and Gert, who would perform dances about death and orgasm as if she was touching a live wire.<sup>81</sup> Her dances were jerky and erratic, eventually helping to feed into the punk movement. Still, more famous than them all was lesbian cabaret star Claire Waldoff. Waldoff was famous for her singing and her specific voice, husky and rough.<sup>82</sup> She often sang about relationships, about sex, and even about politics, Waldoff's gravelly voice was recorded, and can still be heard singing the folk-style, Berlin-specific music she often did in the blunt Berlin dialect, *Berlinerisch*.<sup>83</sup> One of her famous songs, *Ach Gott Was Sind Die Männer Dumm* complained about men, titled, in English, "Oh, God, Men are Dumb,"<sup>84</sup> a blatant contrast to one of her other well-known songs, *Hannelore*, which had the rather explicitly sapphic lyrics which described the androgyny of queer women.,

"A sweet and charming little creature;

Her little bobbed head is her cutest feature.

No one can even clarify

If you're a lady or a guy!"<sup>85</sup>

Waldoff also dabbled in opera and was sometimes credited with teaching the even more famous film star Marlene Dietrich how to sing before she gained fame outside of cabaret.

Waldoff was and is hailed as the epitome of Berlin's cabaret years. She bore the same edgy and

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<sup>81</sup> "New Women in the Weimar Republic," accessed December 13, 2021, <https://sites.barbican.org.uk/intotheneight-berlin/>.

<sup>82</sup> Claudia Schoppmann, *Days of Masquerade: Life Stories of Lesbians during the Third Reich* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996), 58.

<sup>83</sup> J. Elke Ertle, "Olga 'Olly' Von Roeder," *Walled In Berlin*, accessed December 13, 2021, <https://walled-in-berlin.com/tag/olga-olly-von-roeder/>.

<sup>84</sup> Laurie Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 57.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61

open qualities as Berlin itself, openly speaking of her relationship with her life partner Olga “Olly” von Roeder as well as living in and running a lesbian salon.<sup>86</sup> Waldoff represents quite perfectly the grittiness as well as the overflowing energy of lesbian Berlin and cabaret. Offering in many of her lyrics images of masculine women and distaste for men. It is this aesthetic, of a woman, quite masculine in her own right, standing on a stage and performing a song about other masculine women while also admonishing men which complimented the growing mindset of lesbian Berlin so well.<sup>87</sup> Of loving women instead of men and of being “new women,” instead of women of the past.

Another key part of Berlinese queer culture were drag balls, masquerades, and fancy-dress balls. Masquerades were both fun, and practical, offering drama beneath the safety of masks, allowing for wildness and freedom within the safety of preserving the secrecy of one’s identity.<sup>88</sup> Drag balls were quite common and a staple special event in the queer subculture of Berlin, often split into sections of men and women, with the women often wearing men’s clothing and vice versa.<sup>89</sup> These balls were often seasonal, in large venues like banquet halls and famous theaters. They were very well organized and would attract large crowds, generally of 500 people at a time.<sup>90</sup> These balls were a huge opportunity for large numbers of queer individuals, as well as outside spectators with a healthy curiosity, to engage in a new kind of community within a space that was safer and open than heterosexual society.

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<sup>86</sup> Trudy Ring, “Women Who Paved the Way: Cabaret Singer Claire Waldoff,” *ADVOCATE* (Advocate.com, March 22, 2017), <https://www.advocate.com/women/2017/3/22/women-who-paved-way-cabaret-singer-claire-waldoff>.

<sup>87</sup> <sup>87</sup> Laurie Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 59-60.

<sup>88</sup> Clayton Whisnant, “A Peek inside Berlin’s Queer Club Scene before Hitler Destroyed It,” *ADVOCATE*, July 19, 2016, <https://www.advocate.com/books/2016/7/19/peek-inside-berlins-queer-club-scene-hitler-destroyed-it>.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015), 77.

Prostitution and sex work provided a foundation for lesbian subculture in Weimar Berlin. Berlin was known around the world as a city of lust and homoeroticism. While male, same-sex prostitution was rampant, female prostitution was less so. There were many people, particularly female social workers in the mid-1920s which attempted to get young women who turned to prostitution off the streets of Berlin and urging them towards propriety.<sup>91</sup> Most female prostitutes were poor, young working-class women. The female social workers who worked to get them off the streets labeled their welfare “morally endangered,” and, in Hamburg, helped over 450 women find alternate employment as well as providing temporary housing for 40 women at a time.<sup>92</sup> It was in this world full of venereal disease laws and reforms and a government concerned with young girls’ purity, that queer spaces rose out of as well as making female prostitution less pervasive than male prostitution, which was an important marker of gay male Berlin.

Female same-sex prostitution was essentially unheard of, but because the lesbian subculture was surrounded by other sex work it is worth mentioning when discussing the spaces of queer Berlin, especially when considering the inherent politicism of lesbians in Berlin who were, by their very nature, a political statement.<sup>93</sup> Lesbians were often part of political movements, and when they weren’t it was generally acknowledged that they were a part of a subculture in which politics were a large factor. While some lesbians simply decided to opt out of political conversations within the subculture and enjoy dances, parties, and music, they were no less a part of political debates.

Space, and queer women’s place in it, was not just physical in Berlin. Also, in the foundation of queer Berlin, especially the sector of queer Berlin in which queer women existed,

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<sup>91</sup> Laurie Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 80.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. p. 58

was the idea of the femme fatal. Women as sexual criminals was perpetuated in the early formation of the Weimar Republic,<sup>94</sup> a contrast between what women were expected to be and the desire for women to be proper wives and members of society in the Weimar Republic as a whole and the heightened sexuality that Berlin contained. Women were seen as fundamentally different from men and in the Weimar era this was shown in growing media, particularly in film.<sup>95</sup>

The idea of women being sexually deviant creatures, separate from men and focused entirely on chaos and destruction through sex is hardly new or unique to the Weimar Republic, but, because of film, gained a new image and space in the minds of society. Women were beautiful, bewitching, and dangerous. Women, in their natural state, were just a bit eviler than men. Women would be good, albeit still lesser than men, if they chose not to give in to these natural evils and would be bad if they decided to use their inherent sensuality on purpose, or as described by Otto Weininger, a young Austrian philosopher, criminals.<sup>96</sup> This fed into ideas that men had about the collapse of the traditional family in Germany after the First World War. Women who had jobs during the war were deemed part of the problem. They were moving away from early marriage and children, towards their own careers and other goals. In becoming a part of the workforce, women, edged further from femininity and for the first time towards masculinity, resulting in the revolutionary becoming more standard: androgyny.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Barbara Hales, "Projecting Trauma: The Femme Fatale in Weimar and Hollywood Film Noir," *Women in German Yearbook: Feminist Studies in German Literature & Culture* 23, no. 1 (2007): pp. 224-243, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wgy.2008.0002>.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Barbara Hales, "Woman as Sexual Criminal: Weimar Constructions of the Criminal Femme Fatale," *Women in German Yearbook: Feminist Studies in German Literature & Culture* 12, no. 1 (1996): pp. 101-121, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wgy.1996.0016>, 103.

<sup>97</sup> Katie Sutton, "The Masculinized Female Athlete in Weimar Germany," *German Politics and Society* 27, no. 3 (January 2009): pp. 28-49, <https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2009.270302>, 42.

Androgyny, in Weimar Germany, meant the masculine woman, *Vermännlichung der Frau*, or the masculinization of woman was a common idea in the Weimar era. After The Great War, women's skirts were shorter, hair was shorter, and, for the first time, their physicality came into consideration, a different kind of physicality, less based on traditionally feminine aesthetics and leaning towards more masculine ones. Physicality and women as athletes were first introduced as an idea during the Weimar period. This new genre of woman and the space that this genre took up in the minds of people, particularly men, intertwined deeply with lesbianism in Berlin.<sup>98</sup> Masculine and feminine lesbians in Berlin presented quite differently, masculine lesbians leaning heavily to the new athletic genre of women, sometimes wearing men's clothes and feminine lesbians dressing as any other modern woman would. Fashion trends were changing all around for women, of course, with simpler and shorter designs than before designed for convenience being produced.<sup>99</sup> Still, both feminine and masculine lesbians were different from their heterosexual counterparts, instead, retaining masculine energy, making them separate and other and therefore forming their own space in society.

Finally, perhaps the most important space of all in Berlin in the Weimar era for queer individuals which tied all the other spaces together was Magnus Hirschfeld's institute. It was founded in 1918, located on the northern edge of Tiergarten park, another physical manifestation of queer Berlin.<sup>100</sup> The institute was not just a museum, but also a hospital, and a waystation, it was the beacon of queer Berlin and the starting point of many cultural trends. The institute was a hub of information, gathering new knowledge through study and research and compiling it in an

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Karina Reddy, "1920-1929," Fashion History Timeline, May 11, 2018, <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1920-1929/>.

Mila Ganeva, *Women in Weimar Fashion Discourses and Displays in German Culture, 1918-1933* (New York, NY: Boydell & Brewer Group Ltd, 2014).

<sup>100</sup> Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015), 4.

accessible way. The Institute for Sexual Science had a library with over 20,000 books.<sup>101</sup> There were medical files and questionnaires full of sexology research. There were posters, photographs (around 35,000), and pieces of art.<sup>102</sup> There were also display cases with artifacts across the museum as well as poster-board with information about sex and sexuality.<sup>103</sup> The institute was colorful, full of constant life, of young and pretty boys and drag queens.<sup>104</sup>

The institute had medical exam rooms and lecture halls, offices, and housing for staff and those who needed it. The institute was even used as a venue for events.<sup>105</sup> The institute was open to all, those who simply wanted to learn about birth control, those who were simply curious, and those who were on a road to self-discovery.<sup>106</sup> The institute was what allowed queer Berlin to flourish and grow, providing a foundation of knowledge and acceptance. Having a cloister in the middle of the city, a physical space in which to live freely and take refuge or begin to understand one's identity, or, in the case of some trans people, receive medical treatment, was imperative for the subculture growing and remaining as prominent as it did for so long. One of the surgeons who worked prominently at the institute, and originally gynecologist, Ludwig Levy-Lenz remarked, "...never have I operated on more grateful patients," a surely true statement after cases including a young trans boy who mutilated his own chest in order to be granted a mastectomy out of necessity.<sup>107</sup>

When discussing Weimar era Berlin, queer Berlin, or even Berlin at all, it is impossible not to discuss Hirschfeld's life and work. His institute, his museum, dedicated to improving the

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 264

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 264

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 264

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 4-5

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 4-5

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 133-134

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 200-201

lives of his fellow queer people and educating the public does not only have a place in the city of Berlin on the edge of Tiergarten Park<sup>108</sup> but also in the history of the world.

Spaces, within the queer subculture of Weimar era Berlin, were a crucial part of queer identities, for both gay men and gay women. While gay men had more of a cornered market, gay women undeniably had their own unique spaces. Lesbians banded together and found each other and formed spaces that were safer and more accepting of them than anywhere else. What started as small groups of lesbian women<sup>109</sup> grew with time and the influence of people like Magnus Hirschfeld and Lotte Hahm grew to be a community, modern in every sense of the word, and the first of its kind.

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 4

<sup>109</sup> Laurie Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 57.

## Chapter 3: Cinema, Lovers, and Cultural Impact

Film, like the other mediums employed by queer people in the Weimar Republic, was changing with the times. Film especially went through many changes. At the beginning of the Weimar era, films were all silent— as they remained until the late 1920s. The first notable film for queer Germany was called *Anders als die Andern*, or, in English, *Different from the Others*. The film, while not focused on queer women, was a bounding step in cinema for future films. *Anders als die Andern* was one of the premier films which not only featured queer characters but also featured queer characters who were intended to be protagonists, sympathetic to the audience.<sup>110</sup>

The film, written in part by Magnus Hirschfeld,<sup>111</sup> opens on Paul Körner, as he reads a newspaper about a string of suicides, which, it is revealed, Paul knows is because of Paragraph 175, the legislation that made sexual relations between men illegal. From there the film introduces Kurt Sivers, a young man who approaches Paul who is a known violinist and asks for lessons. Körner agrees to tutor him and the two form a romantic relationship. The two-faced backlash from their parents, leads Paul to send his parents to consult with a doctor, his mentor.<sup>112</sup> The crucial role of the Doctor, played by Magnus Hirschfeld as himself, as well as clips of club scenes in which gay men and women can be seen dancing, are some of the most revolutionary parts of the film. In the end, Paul is extorted. He loses all hope and all position in society. His family asks him to do the only decent thing left. Paul commits suicide like many gay men in the Weimar Era. Kurt finds him and almost does the same before he is stopped by the doctor.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> James D. Steakly “Cinema and Censorship in the Weimar Republic: The Case of Anders Als Die Andern.” *Film History* 11, no. 2 (1999): 181–203. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815322>.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182

<sup>112</sup> *Anders Als Die Andern* (Richard Oswald-Film Berlin, 1919).

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*



The film opened with some success before being met with backlash by those who thought the content in the film was amoral. Religious groups and antisemites (mainly due to Hirschfeld's involvement) protested the film, and, in doing so, led to public screenings of the film being banned a year after its release in 1919.<sup>114</sup> Magnus Hirschfeld would hold screenings of the film at his institute but it would never have its initial reception, especially after most of the footage in its original form was lost, survived by only one 50-minute fragment.<sup>115</sup>

From *Anders als die Andern* queer cinema only grew. In 1929, the film *Die Büchse der Pandora* (*Pandora's Box*) does not necessarily deal with queer themes in its plot, however, it does feature an openly lesbian character. The main character, Lulu, is followed by a trail of men who are enamored with her and, amidst the sea of men, is the Countess Geschwitz who tangos with Lulu in one of the scenes in the film. The Countess is elated to dance with Lulu, easily the most vied-for woman there.<sup>116</sup> When their dance is over, the Countess is saddened and refuses to dance with a man, ensuring that her character's true sexuality comes across clearly on film. The almost casual nature in which a lesbian character is openly portrayed as well as the casualness with which the already promiscuous Lulu interacts with her is noteworthy of the time, it also shows the range of representation that appeared in media like cinema beginning in 1919.<sup>117</sup>

In 1930, *Der Blaue Engel*, (*The Blue Angel*) a film starring openly bisexual actress Marlene Dietrich, was released.<sup>118</sup> The film follows Dietrich as Lola, a cabaret performer and an older teacher who falls in love with her, tracing out the resulting mess of both of their lives.

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<sup>114</sup>James FD. Steakly "Cinema and Censorship in the Weimar Republic: The Case of Anders Als Die Andern." *Film History* 11, no. 2 (1999): 190. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815322>.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181-182

<sup>116</sup> *Die Büchse Der Pandora* (Nero Film , 1929).

<sup>117</sup>James FD. Steakly "Cinema and Censorship in the Weimar Republic: The Case of Anders Als Die Andern." *Film History* 11, no. 2 (1999): 183. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815322>.

<sup>118</sup>Richard W. McCormick, "From 'Caligari' to Dietrich: Sexual, Social, and Cinematic Discourses in Weimar Film," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18, no. 3 (1993): pp. 654, <https://doi.org/10.1086/494823>.

While the plot is not remarkable when considering queer culture and representation in media in Weimar Berlin, the resulting notoriety of actress Marlene Dietrich, a woman who lived authentically as herself for the duration of her very prestigious career is.<sup>119</sup> The film was received with wide open arms by the lesbians of Berlin, becoming a cult classic that was often played in lesbian clubs in the city.<sup>120</sup>

Perhaps one of the most important films of the time for queer women in particular, however, was the 1931 film *Madchen in Uniform (Girls in Uniform)*. Like *Anders als die Andern*, *Madchen in Uniform* plays with a student-teacher type relationship.<sup>121</sup> The film focuses on Manuela von Meinhardis, a young woman who enrolls in an all-girls boarding school and becomes enamored with her teacher, one of the mistresses of the boarding school. From the very beginning, it is made clear that the teacher whom she falls in love with, Fräulein von Bernburg, is desired by all of the girls in the school, not just Manuela. One of the first interactions that Manuela has at the school is with a girl, Isla, who approaches her by saying to her, “I’m in love with? In to? Fräulein von Bernburg,” to which Manuela replies: “Oh me too!” Then, the girl warns her, “Be careful you don’t fall in love!” “Why?” “Because all of the girls have a crush on her.” She tells Manuela that all of the other girls who aren’t in her dormitory are jealous, and all complain about how lucky she is. Manuela seems shy about this at first but giggles, nonetheless. They are forced to part ways and after being fitted with her new uniform, Manuela meets Fräulein von Bernburg herself.<sup>122</sup> She asks Manuela if she is nervous because she is shaking. She

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<sup>119</sup> “Marlene Dietrich,” Queer Portraits in History, accessed March 8, 2022, <https://www.queerportraits.com/bio/dietrich>.

<sup>120</sup> Richard W. McCormick, “From ‘Caligari’ to Dietrich: Sexual, Social, and Cinematic Discourses in Weimar Film,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18, no. 3 (1993): pp. 662, <https://doi.org/10.1086/494823>.

<sup>121</sup> *Anders Als Die Anderen* (Richard Oswald-Film Berlin, 1919).  
*Mädchen In Uniform* (Deutsche Film-Gemeinschaft, 1931).

<sup>122</sup> *Mädchen In Uniform* (Deutsche Film-Gemeinschaft, 1931).

says that her nerves are fine and that she demands discipline, relaying the rules of the dormitory to Manuela, clasping her forearms. That evening, Isla explains that every night, Fräulein von Bernburg comes to the girl's dormitory to turn their lights off and kiss them each goodnight on the forehead. Manuela receives a kiss on the lips. This sets the tone for the rest of the film, with Manuela continuously getting some sort of special attention from Fräulein von Bernburg. When, at one point in the film, Manuela is called to meet with Fräulein von Bernburg she reveals to Fräulein von Bernburg that she is saddened because when she sees her after the kiss every night she aches because she cannot go with her. She confesses her love to her to which Fräulein von Bernburg tells her that she cannot make exceptions, or the other girls would become jealous. She also admits that she, too, thinks often of Manuela.<sup>123</sup>

Eventually, things escalate, and Manuela is told she can never see Fräulein von Bernburg again. Manuela tells Fräulein von Bernburg when she says goodbye that she will kill herself if that is true. Fräulein von Bernburg dismisses her, telling her not to say that. This is devastating for her and, in a similar theme to *Anders als die Andern*, Manuela decides her only option is to commit suicide.<sup>124</sup> She is only prevented from jumping down the stairwell by her fellow classmates who bring her back to the other side of the railing. Horrified, Fräulein von Bernburg and the headmistress who had forbidden Manuela from seeing her in the first place look on in shock after the fact. Fräulein von Bernburg tells her that she is glad nothing happened that they would both always regret. The headmistress says nothing and walks past all the girls still clinging onto the railing as the film ends.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

If *Anders als die Andern* was the beginning of queer cinema as a whole, *Madchen en Uniform*, its parallel in many ways, was the beginning of lesbian cinema. One of the earliest queer films that was not silent, it is already remarkable, more than that it is remarkable because of its clear story and preservation.<sup>126</sup> Unlike *Anders als die Andern*, *Madchen en Uniform* is completely preserved, watchable in its original form. Perhaps because it is 12 years *Anders als die Andern*'s junior and perhaps because the film focuses on same-sex love between women it remains relatively unscathed by time and censorship. It was welcomed easily in the lesbian club scene upon its release and inspired many other works for decades after, both German and elsewhere, some of which even cast the same lead actors. Despite all of this, however, it still received less renown in the club scenes at the time than *Der Blaue Engel*.<sup>127</sup>

The themes found in early queer cinema in Weimar Berlin were easy to find and easy to differentiate from one another. Films about gay men were often slightly more tragic and those with lesbians were often better received by critics and legislation.<sup>128</sup> This is perhaps a mix of the male fetishization of women, particularly the fetishization of those in same-sex relationships as well as the harsher treatment of gay men as a whole throughout Weimar history, particularly with the introduction of Paragraph 175 and later censorship laws that would target gay men while leaving gay women unscathed in comparison.<sup>129</sup>

Some themes run through both, however. The archetype of an older, more experienced lover and their junior,<sup>130</sup> who often, in film at least, seems detached when compared with the

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Richard W. McCormick, "From 'Caligari' to Dietrich: Sexual, Social, and Cinematic Discourses in Weimar Film," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18, no. 3 (1993): pp. 662, <https://doi.org/10.1086/494823>.

<sup>128</sup> James D. Steakly "Cinema and Censorship in the Weimar Republic: The Case of Anders Als Die Andern." *Film History* 11, no. 2 (1999): 181–203. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815322>.

<sup>129</sup> Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015).

<sup>130</sup> Claudia Schoppmann, *Days of Masquerade: Life Stories of Lesbians During the Third Reich* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996), 93

earnest counterpart. Other tropes lack of acceptance, separation from one's love, and, darkest of all and incredibly based in real experiences on both sides of the community, suicide.<sup>131</sup> Queer Weimar films, behind the torrid love affairs, reflected the reality of queer culture in Berlin, the pain, the loneliness, and, often, the unhappy endings.

Despite all the innovations that occurred in queer cinema in the Weimar era, these innovations were not without a cost. *Anders als die Andern*, the beginning of it all, in 1919, was the first victim of censorship in Germany.<sup>132</sup> The film, upon its release, was well received by audiences. It was released after the end of the First World War in a period which local censorship laws were all suspended and relinquished to the highest level, unifying the country for a short period of and confusing time from late November 1918 to mid-April, 1920 where before they had been a complex patchwork of different rules.<sup>133</sup> During this period, many films were produced which normally would have been torn to pieces by censors, allowing *Anders als die Andern* as well as more than a hundred films that heavily featured female sexuality.<sup>134</sup> *Anders als die Andern*, however, was the most heavily criticized. As the only film to feature an explicitly queer story it was attacked by both groups and individuals with significant influence over German censorship laws such as Dr. Karl Brunner, a former school teacher who later spearheaded censorship for the Berlin Police and who later became a Nazi who described cinema as "being incapable of clearing up the 'moral rot'".<sup>135</sup> The film was contested for its queerness but was only banned entirely in October of 1920 under the label of being a threat to 'public order and

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<sup>131</sup> James D. Steakly "Cinema and Censorship in the Weimar Republic: The Case of Anders Als Die Andern." *Film History* 11, no. 2 (1999): 186. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815322>.

<sup>132</sup> James D. Steakly "Cinema and Censorship in the Weimar Republic: The Case of Anders Als Die Andern." *Film History* 11, no. 2 (1999): 190. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815322>.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 191

security,' as it was argued that those who didn't know better and watched the film could be swayed to think that male friendship was punishable and would therefore reflect badly upon the German State as a whole. In reality, it was banned because of blatant and common homophobia, but the more flowery way of phrasing it framed their reasoning with morality. By banning the film, the state was protecting the impressionable minds of audiences from dangerous ideas.<sup>136</sup> This reflected not only homophobic views of the time but also the fear of free-thinking. People like Magnus Hirschfield campaigned for scientific and humanistic-based reasoning, the German government, which was steeped in conservatism and, to a degree, feared the education of its own people. In cinema especially, censorship was a tool used by the government to keep its people uninformed and safe from being radicalized.<sup>137</sup> Cinema, as it was made of pictures and not of words, was far more accessible to a wider audience. Therefore, it had more limitations than other media such as literature which, while still supervised, was allowed more loose circulation. Many films of the time were viewed as pornographic by conservatives and were even criticized for driving women to prostitution by certain evangelical women's group, Evangelischer Frauenverein.<sup>138</sup> Still, in the case of *Anders als die Andern*, after it was banned to general audiences, there were a few specialty screenings, mostly organized by Magnus Hirschfield himself from 1921 to 1923, where the last known screening of the film ended in the assault of multiple audience members as well as stink bombs and shots being fired by Nazis in Vienna.<sup>139</sup> Which, while in Austria and not in Berlin, followed the same downward trajectory that had occurred in Berlin with the film.

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 191

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 190

<sup>138</sup> James D. Steakly "Cinema and Censorship in the Weimar Republic: The Case of Anders Als Die Andern." *Film History* 11, no. 2 (1999): 190. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815322>.

<sup>139</sup> James D. Steakly "Cinema and Censorship in the Weimar Republic: The Case of Anders Als Die Andern." *Film History* 11, no. 2 (1999): 191. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815322>.

Lesbian film had the distinct advantage of being focused on women, who, like in other mediums, had more leeway due to the unique mixture of lack of visibility coming from their place in society and the religious roots of Germany, the fetishization of the male gaze and simultaneous underestimation that came with being female.<sup>140</sup> One of the most explicitly lesbian films of the era, *Madchen in Uniform*, was debated after its release for decades by those trying to decipher if it was, in fact, queer at all instead of just a schoolgirl crush.<sup>141</sup> This blindness to blatant acts of lesbianism is indicative of the same blindness that allowed lesbian films to be produced over the course of the Weimar era. Female sex and sexuality were taken less seriously than their male counterparts. In a sense, being a lesbian in Berlin canceled out some of the disadvantages of being both a woman and experiencing same-sex attraction while also leaving behind a whole new set of disadvantages.

Lesbian film also had roots connected to the German idea of the “new woman,” a woman who no longer was confined to the home, but radically, was employed outside of it, in shared spaces with men. These women were liberal and autonomous, controversial because they were believed to use birth control and vote.<sup>142</sup> The new woman was everything conservative Germany: groups of pastors, evangelicals, and the growing fascist population was afraid of and everything that queer subcultures in Berlin were continuing to produce. The new woman was modern, a forward-facing figure that was just as uncertain as the future of the Weimar Republic.<sup>143</sup> In this

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<sup>140</sup> Richard W. McCormick, “From ‘Caligari’ to Dietrich: Sexual, Social, and Cinematic Discourses in Weimar Film,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18, no. 3 (1993): pp. 640-668, <https://doi.org/10.1086/494823>.

<sup>141</sup> James D. Steakly “Cinema and Censorship in the Weimar Republic: The Case of Anders Als Die Andern.” *Film History* 11, no. 2 (1999): 193. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815322>.

<sup>142</sup> Richard W. McCormick, “From ‘Caligari’ to Dietrich: Sexual, Social, and Cinematic Discourses in Weimar Film,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18, no. 3 (1993): pp. 641, <https://doi.org/10.1086/494823>.

<sup>143</sup> Rüdiger Graf, “Anticipating the Future in the Present: ‘New Women’ and Other Beings of the Future in Weimar Germany,” *Central European History* 42, no. 4 (2009): pp. 647-673, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0008938909991026>.

way, the new woman and queerness ran parallel to each other, both new and strange in the Weimar Era, revolutionary in their time in their openness and modernity.

It was because of this same blindness that women were allowed, in some cases, to live and love each other and survive to be documented. Classic queer female figures of the Weimar era in Berlin included Marlene Dietrich, and as previously mentioned, Ruth Roellig, and Claire Waldoff.

Marlene Dietrich was more famous than both Ruth Roellig, renowned lesbian author of the first queer guidebook to Berlin for women.<sup>144</sup> She was more well-known than Claire Waldoff, who was, in fact, a mentor to Marlene Dietrich herself and easily the most prominent cabaret stars.<sup>145</sup> In all, Dietrich was one of the most famous women of the era. Outside of being a queer woman, she was an actress and a singer who became even more well-known after her career in Berlin, whereupon she moved on to Hollywood.<sup>146</sup> Dietrich was famously bisexual, both before her Hollywood career in Berlin and after. She was an early model of the German “new woman,” a trouser-wearing, woman-kissing, and androgynous star. Dietrich was known for her androgyny, her subtle but persistent queerness, and, later in her career, her sexuality and sensuality which were distinctly Berlinesque<sup>?</sup> in nature.<sup>147</sup> Dietrich was a product of her environment whose career experienced its infancy in smoky cabaret clubs and queer balls, surrounded by queer people of all identities. It was this wild, foreign, and European quality that gave Dietrich some of the allure that was cultivated as a part of her famous image.<sup>148</sup> In her

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<sup>144</sup> Claudia Schoppmann, *Days of Masquerade: Life Stories of Lesbians During the Third Reich* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996), 134

<sup>145</sup> Claudia Schoppmann, *Days of Masquerade: Life Stories of Lesbians during the Third Reich* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996), 58.

<sup>146</sup> So Mayer, “My Best Girlfriend: Queer Dietrich, on Screen and Off,” BFI (BFI, December 14, 2020), <https://www.bfi.org.uk/features/my-best-girlfriend-queer-dietrich-screen>.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.



Berlin days, one of her most famous performances was that of the classic lesbian cabaret song, “Wenn die beste Freundin” (in English, “My Best Girlfriend,”) a song from the perspective of a woman who is singing about her best friend, a woman, a woman who she repeatedly expresses her love for, comparing her to her “cute, little husband,” later in the song is a conversation between all three characters where the partners accuse the woman of cheating on them with each other. At the end of the song is again the first woman praising her girlfriend in a lengthy list of traits she loves about her, clearly overshadowing the affection she has for her husband. The song also mentions a houseboy who it is insinuated an affair had been had with previously, but that he was old news.<sup>149</sup> Dietrich sang the song as a duet with fellow cabaret star, Margo Lion. This content as well as the act of being sung as a duet with Lion highlights the queerness of the song, making it more explicit as well as implying not just Dietrich’s love for women, but also for men, a rare but no less potent indication of bisexuality. It was this bisexuality that made Dietrich accessible and desirable by both men and women, heterosexual and homosexual, a difficult feat but one that she performed all her life. Throughout the many affairs she had with both men (from Gary Cooper to John F. Kennedy)<sup>150</sup> and women (many members of the Sewing Circle, a group of Hollywood lesbian and bisexual women who were dedicated to living queer lives or experimenting),<sup>151</sup> one thing remained: Marlene Dietrich was a goddess of lust whose charm seemingly no one was immune to.

Though Dietrich was not ashamed of her sexuality, she was not allowed to live completely authentically. Nor were any of the women who walked the streets of Weimar Berlin.

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<sup>149</sup> So Mayer, “My Best Girlfriend: Queer Dietrich, on Screen and Off,” BFI (BFI, December 14, 2020), <https://www.bfi.org.uk/features/my-best-girlfriend-queer-dietrich-screen>.

<sup>150</sup> “Marlene Dietrich,” Bi.org, accessed March 8, 2022, <https://bi.org/en/famous/marlene-dietrich>.

<sup>151</sup> David Freeman, “Closet Hollywood,” The New York Times (The New York Times, January 7, 2001), [https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/01/01/07/reviews/010107.07freemat.html?\\_r=1%3B](https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/01/01/07/reviews/010107.07freemat.html?_r=1%3B).

Despite all of the smoke and mirrors of Berlin's club culture, no queer person, female or male lived a life that came easily.<sup>152</sup> In all of the films that depicted queer characters and relationships in the Weimar era the queer characters, while important in their revolutionary roles by showing the reality that queer people lived amongst the rest of society, were also always tied to another in reality: the inescapable pain and loneliness that came with having a queer identity.<sup>153</sup>

In *Anders als die Andern*, as well as *Madchen en Uniform*, *Der Blaue Engel*, and *Die Büchse der Pandora* themes of loneliness, separation from the rest of society and otherness, as well as even darker themes of suicide as a solution to the former are common.<sup>154</sup> Also common are themes of blackmail, which was so common that gay men in Berlin at the time who could afford it would budget a portion of their finances specifically for the occurrence.<sup>155</sup> The queer films of the era walked a line between thinly veiling their queerness and simultaneously attempting to address some of the biggest problems that queer people faced regularly. The limited representation that both gay men and women were allowed in cinema had to be subtle enough to not be immediately scorned and censored,<sup>156</sup> and if not subtle enough then certainly not happy enough to inspire queer joy and liberation. Queer films, while acting as an artistic outlet had to be mindful of the stories they were telling, more so than any other films at the time under German and Berlin laws.<sup>157</sup> This mindfulness of their creators was indicative of every queer person in Berlin at the time. Berlin was a queer capital, arguable the queer capital of the world at the time and despite even that reputation, it was not entirely a safe haven. There was

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<sup>152</sup> Claudia Schoppmann, *Days of Masquerade: Life Stories of Lesbians During the Third Reich* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996)

<sup>153</sup> James D. Steakly "Cinema and Censorship in the Weimar Republic: The Case of *Anders Als Die Andern*." *Film History* 11, no. 2 (1999): 186. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815322>.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181–203

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

danger in being queer, even in being a queer woman, something that was far less punishable than being a queer man. The danger that even when in a club meant to bring together a community of queer people made them look over their shoulders, afraid of being caught.<sup>158</sup> No matter the status of the person, being queer and choosing to live as such was a risk, a risk that not everyone could stand once they had made it, but still, one that many decided was worth taking. Germany may have regressed after this period of modernity and openness, but the queer and new women of the time were worth noting nonetheless.

Being a lesbian in Berlin in the Weimar republic granted a kind of invisibility. The marginalization of being both queer and a woman canceled each other out leaving lesbians and other queer women with an advantage that neither gay men nor straight women had. They became so far removed from the binary that many of the restrictions that both groups face no longer applied to lesbians. While men had the advantage of being men, they also faced more discrimination under Paragraph 175, which criminalized their very existence. Women, on the other hand, had hardly any written legal rights that did not tie them to men they were related to by either blood or marriage. Lesbians and queer women developed a particular world view that could only be acquired from both perspectives, leaving them with a perspective that was simultaneously higher and lower than the other two in the social hierarchy. They were a step above women in their liberation to a degree, not as constrained by older standards of society; the marriage with children, and in another sense lower, still bogged down by queerness, unable to live as freely as heterosexual individuals in society.

This invisibility allowed for the formation of a lesbian subculture in Berlin. In the beginning, spaces were small and so were the groups that met there. However, as awareness of

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<sup>158</sup> James D. Steakly "Cinema and Censorship in the Weimar Republic: The Case of Anders Als Die Andern." *Film History* 11, no. 2 (1999): 181–203. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815322>.

the lesbian identity grew, so did the queer female community. Magazines like *Die Freundin* were vital, as they allowed for outreach from the forming community to new “members,” and became pillars of the subculture, famous for allowing women to discover themselves and explore the possibility of queerness for the first time, as well as presenting some role models such as Lottie Hahn, figures of the masculine woman’s identity. This culture of discovery seeped into a growing nightlife full of music, balls, theater, and raw sexuality. The palpable energy that Berlin as a city became famous for came from the gay and lesbian subcultures that had also formed there, making it a place that countless tourists and explorers wanted to be a part of, even if only temporarily.

Berlin’s lesbian subculture was not the most prominent part of the city, nor was it ever. It was, in almost every way, overshadowed, either by other events, by time, or by the subcultures that ran parallel to it. However, the city that Berlin was in the Weimar Republic would be markedly different were it not for the unique qualities that queer women contributed to it. From the edges of society, queer women helped shape what Berlin was during its interwar Renaissance. By shaping the spaces in culture, media, and the city for themselves queer women left a mark on the city. The music, film, literature, and theatre of the era would be changed if not for the queer women who helped produce it. Cabaret singers, authors, actresses, all were touched in some way by queer women. When allowed to flourish and grow, queer women did so and in doing so created a space that is still talked about a century later. The wonderful city life that Christopher Isherwood wrote about for the duration of his life would not have been nearly the same if not for queer women, nor would the consequential works that were produced.

The documentation of the love and lives of Berlin’s queer women from the Weimar era are few and far between, often eclipsed by World War II. A city, a country that pioneered gender

politics regressed, snapping back in place like an elastic band. Still, however, queer Weimar Berlin is not remarkable because of what it lost, nor of how it ended. It was and is remarkable because of its radicalism, the same radicalism which allowed for the queer women that made spaces for themselves in a world that did not provide for them naturally. Tales of happier, or at the very least, freer queer lives with precious moments of queer joy and prosperity are sometimes cut short. Many accounts rush past what a monumental, revolutionary environment Lesbian Berlin was at the time in favor of getting to what came after. This is important work, it is true, but no less important is acknowledging and relishing how radical Berlin was in the interwar period. It was an important victory in its time that deserves to be seen separately from the events that happened around it. No matter how unimportant it may be to some, the ghosts of the queer women who lived in Berlin deserve to have happy memories of the space that was theirs, untarnished and saturated in music and life.

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