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On (Homo)Sexuality in Weimar Visual Culture

For male and female homosexuals Germany's first liberal democracy—the Weimar Republic (1919–1933)—represented a period of hopes and frustrations. I use the term "Homosexuality" deliberately here as it was a positive term of self-identification during the 1920s, and it was a term also used in Sexual Science. Homosexual emancipation was a conflicted and uneven process, and so too was the acceptance of texts and images that engaged with the subject. The opening of Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science (Sexology) in 1919 in Berlin served as important legitimization. It became a contentious public *Schauplatz* in which sexuality was tried and tested, explored and questioned. Yet despite tireless campaigning for the repeal of Paragraph 175 of the German *Strafgesetzbuch*, which made sodomy punishable with imprisonment of up to five years, the German law remained unchanged. There was no equivalent law for women.

Studying sexuality during this period opens up histories of identity, space, and the law. Visual culture plays a vital role in shaping these historical narratives and has much to offer. It brings to the fore entangled histories of the marginalized or forgotten and is therefore crucial to histories of inclusivity. It also moves away from a canonical set of art objects (and artists) and foregrounds productive tensions between "high" and "low" mass cultures. It promotes an analysis of images in the developing homosexual press, sexological photographs, and illustrated guidebooks. Some works (still) test the troubled categories of art, eroticism, and pornography. On-going battles with Reich censorship help further challenge the neat teleology of the Weimar Republic. Often characterized as a

period of unprecedented cultural progress set against a backdrop of political instability, the study of culture and sexual subject-formation overall demonstrates just how closely politics and the visual were intertwined.

The modern urban experience was defining for homosexual communities with some fifty thousand gay men and women living in the republic's capital, Berlin, by the mid-1920s. Studying the nightlife history of Berlin reveals the formation of sexual identities, and the start of an internal diversity to gay culture through nightclub and bar spaces. This culture challenges Michel Foucault's much discussed contention in volume one of his *History of Sexuality* (1976) that there was a moment of epistemic change in the late nineteenth century when homosexuals became a "species" through medical and criminal discourses. Although other European cities had developed a "scene"—a spatial expression of a new identity—Berlin had a far greater number of gay venues than London or Paris. And by the 1930s there were possibly more self-consciously gay bars in the city than at any time since. Recent research examines alternative tourist guidebooks, including the richly illustrated *Führer durch das "lasterhafte" Berlin* published in 1931 by Curt Moreck (Smith; Prickett, "We will show"). Devoid of maps, currency convertors or descriptions of mainstream historical monuments, *"Lasterhaftes" Berlin* can be considered an important precursor to our modern day *Rough Guides*. It explores Berlin's backstreets visiting its illegal gay bars and "Flüsterkneipen." Moreck's descriptions underscore the habitual sociability and stability these venues offered their homosexual "Stammgäste." His text is accompanied by reproductions of artworks by Heinrich Zille, Christian Schad, and Jeanne Mammen among others. Both Schad and Mammen visited such bars and their images could therefore be considered "authentic." Mammen's

watercolor "Sie repräsentiert, Faschingsszene" (c. 1928), which featured in the original guide, as well as in popular magazines, can be fruitfully read as theorizing the strategies of embodiment of gender.[1] In it two women dance together in a carnival-type setting. Considered an empowering iteration of same-sex desire, one woman wears a figure-hugging "feminine" red dress in contrast with her partner's "masculine" suit. The viewer is left to decide, however, whether the work simply reinforces gendered performativity or actually celebrates female masculinity as a queer category in its own right. The guidebook's enduring interest (its third re-edition was published 2018), is testament to its critical ambiguities overall, offering the reader/viewer an uneasy blend of supposed anti-tourism and commodified sexuality. But, as Moreck's title suggests, just *who* exactly was "depraved"?

The impact of Magnus Hirschfeld's work on the study of (homo)sexual emancipation remains divisive amongst scholars. By the 1920s the broad discipline of sexual science encompassed a complex synthesis of endocrinological, biological, psychological, and physiological methods. It considered the categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality, the study of wider experiences of sexual selfhood, as well as expressions of gender identity and sexual experience. Consequently, sexual science had a significant impact upon contemporary visual culture: artists both articulated and filtered its ideas, flouting sexual conventions and subverting gendered categories in their work—be it through the *Neue Sachlichkeit* realism of Anton Räderscheidt's and Christian

[1] https://www.flickr.com/photos/hen-magonza/32008868566.

Schad's oil paintings or the collages of Hannah Höch (Meskimmon; Makela).[2] But this relationship was certainly dialogical. The way in which sexual science utilized cultural sources for the purpose of diagnostic case studies or historical legitimization is also gaining interest (Schaffner). Hirschfeld claimed that "Bilder sollten bilden"—accordingly he mobilized images, including film, to promote his ideas. The literary genre of *Sittengeschichten* proved popular in this respect. Produced for educated middle classes, these histories were richly illustrated with reproductions of artworks and photographs that problematized the relationship between text and image, which in turn tested the limits of Weimar liberalism (D'Alessandro,1998). So too did Hirschfeld's 1919 film *Anders als die Andern,* in which he enlisted Weimar "celebrities," cabaret dancer Anita Berber and actor Conrad Veidt, to explore the devastating impact of criminalizing homosexuality to dramatic effect (Steakley; Bollé). The film self-consciously reinforces sexology's emphasis on the visual, showing Hirschfeld in a cameo role (as himself) teaching at a lectern.

Sexology's mobilization of photography contributed to the caustic debate regarding social constructivism (*erworben sein*) and essentiality (*angeboren sein*) in sexual subject formation. Whilst Hirschfeld emphasized biological determinism, his photographic images of LGBTQ "patient" case studies, show figures performatively enacting gender, using clothing and other "props" to do so (Prickett, "Magnus Hirschfeld"; Sutton, "Sexology's Photographic Turn"). Hirschfeld's own emphasis in his writing on the correlation between

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2 https://www.schirn.de/en/magazine/context/weimar/weimar_republic_anton_raederscheidt/; https://www.centrepompidou.fr/cpv/resource/c88XKkK/ro58xg; https://www.artsy.net/artist/hannah-hoch.

homosexuality and cross-dressing, along with the erotic compulsion to cross-dress, detracted from such determinism further. In some photographs Hirschfeld himself is also visible. There is a fine line between the medico-authority of sexual science and spectacle, and in many ways these photographs crossed it. Consequently, his ideas were often the butt of the popular press—particularly in the satirical magazine *Simplicissimus.* Karl Arnold's "Lotte am Scheideweg" (1925) is a case in point.[3] With her quintessentially modern bobbed haircut, Lotte wears clothing associated with both genders and thus stands undecided in front of the male and female toilets. Besides revealing widespread anxieties conflated with the social transgressions of the "new woman," Arnold's work implies that one's sexual preference is donned, like a fashionable item of clothing.

Studies of the developing homosexual press during this period reveal how vital it was as a form of self-articulation and identification. One of Hirschfeld's most vocal critics, Adolf Brand and the *Gemeinschaft der Eigenen*, promoted a very different type of elitist and essentialist "homosexual aesthetic" showcased by Brand's magazine *Der Eigene.* This aesthetic emphasized links between homosexuality and male friendship based upon classical antiquity and Greek *paiderastía* using black and white photographs by cousins Wilhelm von Gloeden and Wilhelm Plüschow, or artworks by Max Liebermann, Sascha Schneider, and Elisàr von Kupffer (Prickett, 2003; Bollé).[4] The study of *Der Eigene* raises wider

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[3] https://www.queer.de/bild-des-tages.php?einzel=1750.

[4] https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Pictures_by_Wilhelm_von_Gloeden_with_fur?uselang=de; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Wilhelm_von_Plueschow_-_Images_without_catalogue_number?uselang=de

questions as to the conflicting role of mass culture in the promotion of elitist ideals, which resurfaces more profoundly during the 1930s. The importance of same-sex relations for women as a distinct experience enjoys attention in more recent scholarship too (Meskimmon; Sutton, *The Masculine Woman*; Marhoefer 2015). There was no equivalent Greek aesthetic for women, but there were nonetheless many magazines aimed at gay and straight women–such as *Die Freundin* and *Die Ohne,* which visualized modern women together (Sutton, *The Masculine Woman*). The importance of Sappho as a figure of self-identification should also not go unnoticed here. Renée Sintenis and Jeanne Mammen produced graphic works that depicted erotic encounters based on Sappho's circle that presented same-sex relations between women as a homonormative experience (Meskimmon).

It remains much debated to what extent the sexual politics of the Weimar Republic led to a backlash from the right. In other words, whether Weimar's lax morality characterized or gave rise to National Socialism. Some scholars argue that its so-called liberalism did not, ultimately, drive people to vote for the NSDAP (Marhoefer). What is clearer is the extent to which the study of sexual identity exposes the limits and tensions of Weimar's liberal democracy. Articles 118 and 142 of the Weimar Constitution protected against censorship. Article 142 in particular put art above the law based on "artistic merit." But what constituted artistic merit was entirely open to debate. Further loopholes in the law, including the retention of Paragraphs 166 and 184 of the StGB of 1871, meant that the state was able to intervene *after* the publication and production

of material it deemed *unzüchtig* (Jelavich; Smith). Thus the publication of Moreck's guidebook, Hirschfeld's sexological treatise, and much of the gay press was blacklisted and locked away in "Giftschränke." Much of this material went on to be pulped or burnt under the Nazis. In terms of censorship and prohibition there is therefore much to challenge the dynamic discreetness of Weimar. Yet the Nazi crackdown went further, brandishing artworks like those by Christian Schad, Hannah Höch and Jeanne Mammen "degenerate." All this is not to underestimate what the republic did accomplish—greater toleration towards homosexuals was realized. Whilst medical photographs and nightclub scenes perhaps represent two image extremes, without a doubt visual culture played a vital role in shaping, and often celebrating this toleration.

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