

Film in the Second Degree: *Cabaret* and the Dark Side of Laughter¹

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EARLY FEMINIST FILM CRITICISM focused on the representation of women as commodities, as objects of exchange and objects of the male gaze. In her groundbreaking 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey undertook a psychoanalytic reading of film, reading visual pleasure as a scopophilic pleasure, a process in which the (male) spectator abets the castration anxiety associated with the (female) object of the gaze by exerting control over the object or disavowing it and turning it into a fetish.² The fetishization of the female body takes many forms, such as the reduction of the female form to parts or the cult of the star. Film criticism in the decade following, work by Mary Ann Doane, Tania Modleski, Kaja Silverman, and Teresa de Lauretis, among others, sought to complicate the duality of male subject and female object by paying attention to the position of the female spectator, to the enunciation of female desire, and to the possibility of fluid subject positions and multiple points of identification.³ Contemporary theories of performativity stress the processes

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²Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley, 57–68 (New York: Routledge, 1988). Mulvey understands these two defense mechanisms as sadistic voyeurism (a practice that is, according to Mulvey, exemplified in Hitchcock films) and "fetishistic scopophilia" (exemplified in Sternberg films).

³See, for example, Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); *Re-vision: Essays in Feminist Film*

by which identities are constructed, putting into question the notion of a fixed, stable, or essential identity itself. Judith Butler's theory of performativity, for example, demonstrates the iterative citational processes by which women are produced or en-gendered.⁴ Recent studies in the area of performativity have paid particular attention to strategies of performance, such as the use of masks, masquerade, drag, passing, and parody.

In twentieth-century cinema, female performance has provided rich terrain for performative practices. From the representation of women as patriarchal objects of exchange at the turn of the nineteenth century in films such as Max Ophüls's *Lola Montès* (1955), in which the life of the notorious nineteenth-century dancer-courtesan Lola Montès is "performed" in a circus; to the inversion and subversion of gender norms in films set in the era of the Roaring Twenties, such as G. W. Pabst's *Pandora's Box* (1928) and Josef von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel* (1930); to the sexualization of fascism in contemporary films treating the Nazi period, such as Luchino Visconti's *The Damned* (1969) and Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* (1974), narratives of female performance have provided fertile grounds for intersecting questions of sexuality, power, and politics. In this essay, I will focus on the relationship between performance and performativity in Bob Fosse's 1972 film *Cabaret*. *Cabaret* stands at a crossroads of the century's predominant representational modes. Set in a 1930s night club, it draws on the practices of sexual and social transgression established in *Pandora's Box* and *The Blue Angel*, both furthering feminist critiques of the circulation and exchange

Criticism, ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1984); Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988); Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); and Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). Film criticism by Linda Williams, Miriam Hansen, Lucy Fischer, and Patricia Mellencamp was also important in this domain.

⁴Drawing on Louis Althusser's notion of "ideological interpellation," Butler provides the example of "girling," the way in which a "girl" becomes a "girl" through cultural iteration. "Consider the medical interpellation which . . . shifts an infant from an 'it' to a 'she' or a 'he,' and in that naming, the girl is 'girded,' brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender," writes Butler in *Bodies That Matter*. "But that 'girling' of the girl does not end there; on the contrary, that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reenforce or contest this naturalized effect. The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm." Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 7-8. See also Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971) (first published in *La Pensée*, 1970), 127-86; and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).

of women and pointing to the "erotic allure" attributed to fascism in films such as *The Damned* and *The Night Porter*.⁵ *Cabaret* thus provides a unique optic by which we might analyze the interlocking domains of identity, sexuality, and politics in the field of performance studies.

In a contribution to a volume of collected essays entitled *Performativity and Performance*, Cindy Patton critiques performance theory on the grounds that it pays too little attention to the *stage* of performance, that is to say, real cultural, social, and historical conditions. "New work in queer and gender theories on performance and performativity emerged importantly in response to a critique of essentialized identity and debates about the end of identity politics," Patton writes. "Given this particular entrance of performance theory [. . .] into a highly political domain, there has been, I believe, an overemphasis on the actant-subject and a relative lack of consideration of the stage or context or field of the performance or performative act. There have been highly developed post-structural and postmodern accounts of these bodies-in-performance or their performative acts, but little in the way of poststructural and postmodern efforts to reintroduce concepts for what was once called the 'social.'"⁶

In this essay, I will pay particular attention to the "social," to socio-political conditions and the intersections between the individual and collective body. I will concentrate on the question of political parody, focusing on the function of cultural quotation in a number of pivotal scenes with overt political content. This essay seeks to demonstrate that the political dimension in *Cabaret* seriously undermines the effectiveness of performative practices in the film. While performative strategies, such as burlesque, travesty, caricature, and parody, have emancipatory potential in their subversion of cultural norms and their recasting of identities, this potential is limited by the "stage" of the performance, the socio-political circumstances in which the characters find themselves and the ways in which they adapt to these circumstances. Furthermore, the "superego" of the film, which is manifested in the eye of the camera, links unconventional sexual and social praxes to radically oppres-

⁵Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980) (originally published in the *New York Review of Books* 22:1; 6 February 1975), 103n. See Sontag's "Fascinating Fascism" for a discussion of the "eroticization of fascism" in contemporary culture, including literature, film, photography, pop art, and popular culture (98-105). See also Michel Foucault's analysis of the relationship between desire and power in Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien* and Cavani's *The Night Porter* in "Entretien avec Michel Foucault," in *Cahiers du cinéma* 251-52 (Juillet-Août 1974): 10-13.

⁶Cindy Patton, "Performativity and Spatial Distinction: The End of AIDS Epidemiology," in *Performativity and Performance*, ed. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 181 (New York and London: Routledge, 1995).

sive politics, thus coding performative practices as potentially dangerous and disruptive. Through an examination of two primary aesthetic devices in the film, the technique of cross-cutting and the use of political parody, this essay explores the complex play of gender identities at work in *Cabaret's* vision of the political and ideological battlefield of Berlin in the 1930s.

1. CABARET AND POLITICS: BERLIN'S SIREN SONG

Bob Fosse's *Cabaret* (1972), featuring Liza Minnelli as Sally Bowles, Michael York as Brian Roberts, and Joel Grey as the Master of Ceremonies, was based on Christopher Isherwood's 1939 novel, *Goodbye to Berlin*, and John Van Druten's 1951 stage play, *I Am a Camera*.⁷ The film also drew on the 1966 Broadway musical, with music by John Kander and lyrics by Fred Ebb, although it reworked fundamental aspects of the narrative, characters, and meaning of its predecessor. For the film version, three new songs ("Mein Herr," "Maybe This Time," and "Money, Money") were added, and almost all of the musical numbers were confined to the cabaret stage.⁸ The story, which is seen from the perspective of Isherwood character Brian, recounts Brian's experiences in Berlin in 1931: his growing friendship and love affair with cabaret performer Sally Bowles, his discovery of his homosexuality, and his eventual escape from the increasingly menacing city of Berlin. In a sense, *Cabaret* is a coming-of-age story of a promising young writer who discovers his own sexual and political integrity. Brian's story stands

⁷The original story by Christopher Isherwood has gone through numerous stage and screen versions. John van Druten's Broadway stage play, *I Am a Camera* (1951), which was based on the "Sally Bowles" story in *Goodbye to Berlin*, was adapted for film by Henry Cornelius in 1955. In 1966, Harold Prince's stage musical *Cabaret*, featuring Joel Grey as the emcee, opened on Broadway and ran for almost three years. Since Bob Fosse's cinematic adaptation in 1972, *Cabaret* has had numerous revivals, including a brief Broadway revival by Harold Prince in 1987 and a Broadway run at the Roundabout Theater Company in New York in 1998. See Linda Mizejewski, *Divine Decadence: Fascism, Female Spectacle, and the Makings of Sally Bowles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 4, and John Kander et al., *Cabaret, The Illustrated Book and Lyrics* (New York: New Market Press, 1999), 51.

⁸Kander and Ebb also did the music for the 1972 film. The differences between the stage and film versions of *Cabaret* are substantial. The most significant changes include the replacement of the romantic subplot between Fraulein Schneider and Herr Schultz by the relationship between Fritz Wendel and Natalia Landauer, the elimination of almost all of the musical numbers occurring outside of the Kit Kat Klub, and the reorchestration of the music to allow it to be played by the all-female band. In terms of musical conventions, the film's use of music is untraditional and innovative. While the numbers take place almost exclusively onstage, they stand in a conceptual relationship to the action in the film. See below for a discussion of the function of the musical numbers in the film. For a larger discussion of the music in *Cabaret*, see Randy Clark, "Bending the Genre: The Stage and Screen Versions of *Cabaret*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 19.1 (1991): 53.

in an inverse relationship to the personal narrative of Sally Bowles and to that of the metropolis itself. As Brian's character develops, Sally Bowles becomes ever more decadent and the inhabitants of the city increasingly susceptible to the growing Nazi threat.

In the film, the space of the cabaret becomes a metaphor for the city of Berlin itself. The film opens onto a blurred, impressionistic pastiche of the audience, visible to us through wavy lines of glass. The distorted and heavily painted face of the emcee appears in reflection in the glass. The camera tracks at an angle around the room, pausing on expressionist figures reminiscent of the work of George Grosz and Otto Dix. As the narrator sings the refrain, "Wilkommen," Brian arrives at the Berlin Anhalter train station. The constant intercutting in this scene between the Kit Kat Klub and the larger city establishes the cabaret as a symbol of the metropolis itself. As Patrice Petro has pointed out, the city of Berlin has consistently been gendered as a woman. From playwright Carl Zuckmayer's vision of Berlin as a seductive siren to novelist Alfred Döblin's appellation of the city as "the Whore of Babylon," Berlin has been coded as a *femme fatale*, as a desirable, dangerous, and destructive woman.⁹ "This city devoured talents and human energies with a ravenous appetite," writes Zuckmayer in his 1966 memoirs, "grinding them small, digesting them, or rapidly spitting them out again. It sucked into itself with hurricane force all the ambitious in Germany, the true and the false [. . .]. People discussed Berlin [. . .] as if the city were a highly desirable woman whose coldness and capriciousness were well known [. . .]."¹⁰ The grotesquely made up figures, the distorted images, and the disorienting camera angles in the opening scene suggest the decadence and depravity associated with the loosened norms of the Weimar period. The opening number is Berlin's siren song, a tempting invitation to Brian to enter the den of iniquity.¹¹

The technique of cross-cutting that marks the opening scene is employed consistently throughout the film. Unlike the classic non-integrated musical, in which musical numbers are separate from narrative devel-

⁹ See Patrice Petro, "Perceptions of Difference: Woman as Spectator and Spectacle," in *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, ed. Katharina von Ankum, 41-43 (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1997).

¹⁰ Carl Zuckmayer, *Als wär's ein Stück von mir* (1966), 367, reprinted in translation as *A Part of Myself*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 217. Quoted in Petro, "Perceptions of Difference," 42.

¹¹ On Harold Prince's Broadway revival of *Cabaret* in 1987, *New York Times* critic Frank Rich used the symbol of a siren to capture the lure of the cabaret: "And when Mr. Grey sings, his voice is a piercing siren that doesn't so much welcome revelers to his cabaret, the Kit Kat Klub, as lure them into the hell lurking just out of view—Berlin, 1929." Frank Rich, "Theater: 'Cabaret' and Joel Grey Return," *New York Times*, 23 October 1987, C3 (*The New York Times* Archive).

opment, the numbers in *Cabaret* provide a running commentary on the action, rendering it a kind of *conceptually* integrated film.¹² In the 1966 staged version of *Cabaret*, director Harold Prince had already established the notion of a “concept musical,” creating separate spatial realms whose thematic interplay allowed greater meaning to emerge.¹³ As Laurence Maslon writes, “There would be separate areas of narrative space—a realistic area for book scenes and a limbo area, a kind of cultural ‘id,’ where shifts in the attitude of German society could be charted—delineated by a curtain of light. It enabled *Cabaret* to traverse the territory of a book show with the commentary of a Brechtian cabaret.”¹⁴ Expanding upon Prince’s innovative technique, Fosse used the eye of the camera to engender cultural critique, slicing unexpectedly between the real and the imaginary and blurring the space between the two. Critics have likened Fosse’s method to various avant-garde techniques in the arts, considering his approach “kaleidoscop[ic]” and “prismatic” and his style a kind of “associative” or “cinematic” montage.¹⁵ Through the consistent use of aesthetic association, Fosse rendered the cabaret itself an omniscient, metatextual space, a space that commented not only on itself, but also on culture at large, reflecting, refracting, and reviewing the social sphere.

The parallel editing, which has been called “a sort of shock editing,” provides a disturbing disjunction between the eerie unreality of cabaret culture and the grim reality of political life.¹⁶ In an early scene, for example, an upbeat performance by the Kit Kat girls is interspersed with shots of a brutal Nazi attack on the cabaret manager in the street. This scene, which opens at the subway station at the moment that Brian is about to launch into a primal scream, cuts rapidly between the dizzying

¹² Joe Blades writes, “What lyricist Fred Ebb has done is to represent the Master of Ceremonies’ routines (in fact, all the cabaret production numbers) as running commentary on life beyond the cabaret. . . . It can be said that each musical piece is intrinsic to the drama, although some are more fully integrated than others.” Blades, “The Evolution of *Cabaret*,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 1.3 (July 1973): 232–33.

¹³ See John Kander and Fred Ebb, *Colored Lights: Forty Years of Words and Music, Show Biz, Collaboration, and All That Jazz* (New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2003), 60. See also Laurence Maslon and Michael Kantor, *Broadway: The American Musical* (New York and Boston: Bulfinch Press, 2004), 313–14.

¹⁴ Maslon and Kantor, *Broadway: The American Musical*, 313.

¹⁵ Jane Stockwood, *Harper’s Bazaar*, May 1972, 71 (Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations); Pauline Kael, *New Yorker*, 19 February 1972, 85 (Billy Rose Theatre Collection); Roger Greenspun, “Liza Minnelli Stirs a Lively ‘Cabaret,’” *New York Times*, 14 February 1972, 22 (*The New York Times Archives*); Clark, “Bending the Genre,” 56.

¹⁶ Louise Sweeney, “Dark ‘Cabaret’—a Minnelli Musical-Comedy Documentary,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 19 February 1972, 4 (Billy Rose Theatre Collection). For a more detailed analysis of cross-cutting in the film, see Arlene Rodda, “*Cabaret*: Utilizing the Film Medium to Create a Unique Adaptation,” *Film/Literature Quarterly* 22.1 (1994): 37–39.

Bavarian "slapping" jig in the cabaret and the violent attack in the street. Slapping hands intercut with pounding fists, kicking feet with hammering boots; a domino of collapsing girls parallels the falling body of the manager. At the end of the number, the emcee places a foot on the leveled row of girls and crows like a cock, and the manager lies still and bloody in the street. Brian's silent scream is thus enacted as a kind of expressionist nightmare on the stage and in the city streets. In another instance of cross-cutting, images of Sally, Brian, and the Baron Maximilian von Heune on a drive are intercut with shots of a Jewish man lying dead in the street, covered in a tallit. The murder scene is presented as a film still, as the police officers and pedestrians stand in frozen poses around the motionless man. Oblivious to the political brutality around her, Sally exclaims, "Hey, Max, can we go to the Bristol Bar?" The movement in the car (the rolling wheels, the light mood, the flowing champagne) as they head off for the weekend stands in counterpoint to the solemn reality of the streets.

The cross-cutting in the film provides a strong indictment of Weimar culture, implicating "Weimar decadence" in the rise of the Third Reich.¹⁷ On a figurative level, sexual depravity becomes the primary metaphor for political depravity, representing both violent political aggression and the lure of spectacular politics. On a literal level, the film seems to draw a causal relationship between decadence and fascism, suggesting that Weimar culture allowed, through indifference, neglect, or complicity, the development of a politically oppressive regime.¹⁸ From

¹⁷The term "Weimar decadence" has become a kind of cultural shorthand for the period. Referring largely to the cultural subversion associated with the emerging popular and underground culture of Berlin, including cabarets, amusement parks, transvestite bars, and "boy bars," the notion of decadence was employed by those on the left and the right. In his memoirs, for example, the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig wrote, "[...] Berlin was transformed into the Babylon of the world. Bars, amusement parks, red-light houses sprang up like mushrooms. What we had seen in Austria proved to be just a mild and shy prologue to this witches' Sabbath; for the Germans introduced all their vehemence and methodical organization into the perversion. [...] In the collapse of all values a kind of madness gained hold particularly in the bourgeois circles which until then had been unshakable in their probity." Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday* (London: Cassell and Company Ltd., 1953), 313. As Peter Gay points out in *Weimar Culture*, underground and entertainment venues provided only one aspect of the rich cultural scene. Berlin in the Weimar period was a center of art, theater, opera, political cabaret, journalism, film, and publishing. Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 119-45. This paper is less concerned with the historical relevance of the term than its importance in the political ideology of the period and the cultural imaginary of the film.

¹⁸In *Divine Decadence*, Mizejewski writes, "Considering how the cabaret has been characterized throughout the film, a historical cause-and-effect argument is suggested: the moral looseness of Weimar Berlin, in particular the sexual and bisexual play in Berlin nightlife, has made possible the tolerance of Nazism. The reflecting mirror wall further suggests that what the Nazis see onstage—the transvestites and sexually ambiguous emcee—are versions of themselves: grotesque, amoral, distorted—and homoerotic" (3-4).

a historical perspective, the connection between decadence and fascism is surprising. The "blood and soil" ideology of the National Socialist movement stood in stark contrast to the rising forces of modernity: cosmopolitanism, intellectualism, cynicism, materialism, and mass culture.¹⁹ The National Socialist regime consistently posited itself in opposition to "decadent" culture. For many far-right critics, the entertainment industry was emblematic of the overall corruption of the modern metropolis. Associated with a network of Jewish producers and directors, "degenerate" cultural forms such as African-American dance and jazz, and "decadent" foreign influences, the popular cabaret was seen as a visible sign and symptom of cultural decay.²⁰ Furthermore, many of the most important figures in the Weimar cultural scene, such as Jews, African Americans, homosexuals, and Communists, among others, were persecuted under the Nazi regime.²¹ When the film appeared in 1972, a

¹⁹As Jeffrey Herf points out in *Reactionary Modernism*, the conservative, anti-Enlightenment stance of the far right was not without its paradoxes. In both theory and practice, the National Socialist regime integrated modern technology into the irrational romanticism of German nationalism. See Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984). See also James Glass's "Life Unworthy of Life" for a discussion of the Third Reich's use of technology to enable the dehumanization and extermination of entire groups of people. James Glass, "Life Unworthy of Life": *Racial Phobia and Mass Murder in Hitler's Germany* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 23–65.

²⁰One far-right critic, for example, decried the "cultural Bolshevism" of the entertainment industry in the Weimar period: "German visitors to these amusement locales were served up the strongest doses of Zionist, erotic, and perverse vulgarities! One has every right to assert: Since 1918 everything exalted and holy, belief in God, sense of family, sublime German womanhood, glowing love of people and fatherland, was sullied, throttled, and undermined. *That was a pure culture of cultural Bolshevism!*" Max Wolf, "Nationalsozialistische Kleinkunst!" in *Die deutsche Artistik*, 29 September 1935. Quoted in Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), 242. For far-right ideologues, the theater world lay largely in "foreign" hands. Envisioning a vast network of Jewish producers, directors, and critics, National Socialist critics attributed modern forms of performance art, such as jazz, the fox-trot, and the Charleston, to African Americans and Jews. For a discussion of the connections drawn between jazz and Jews, see Lilian Karina and Marion Kant, *Tanz unterm Hakenkreuz: Eine Dokumentation* (Berlin: Henschel Verlag, 1996), 41–52; Kater, *Different Drummer*, 3–56; Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 155–86 and 228–57; and Joseph Wulf, *Musik im Dritten Reich: Eine Dokumentation* (Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, and Wien: Ullstein, 1983), 383–95.

²¹This reality was illustrated in the closing number of the 1998 performance of *Cabaret* at the Roundabout Theatre Company in New York. Upon bidding the audience goodbye, the emcee slowly removes his coat, revealing the outfit of a concentration camp inmate. For a discussion of the fate of performers in the Third Reich, see Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 228–82; Kater, *Different Drummers*, 29–56; and Lilian Karina and Marion Kant, *Tanz unterm Hakenkreuz*, 57–79. Works on the persecution of homosexuals include Heinz Heger, *The Men with the Pink Triangle: The True, Life- and Death Story of Homosexuals in the Nazi Death Camps*, trans. David Fernbach (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1994); Richard Plant, *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War against Homosexuals* (New York: Henry Holt, 1986); Alexander Zinn, *Die soziale Konstruktion des homosexuellen Nationalsozialisten: Zur Genese und Etablierung eines*

number of critics questioned the unlikely association between cultural decadence and German fascism. "The basic connection between the decadence of a sleazy Berlin night club in the early '30s and the rise of Nazism, though continually hinted at, and sometimes leeringly rubbed in, is never truly demonstrated . . .," writes one critic. "Is Nazism a product of the decadence, or is the decadence an attempt to escape from, and so a product of, Nazism? And was there no political-economic crisis that begat them both?"²²

In her invaluable study, *Divine Decadence: Fascism, Female Spectacle, and the Makings of Sally Bowles*, which traces out the development of the Sally Bowles myth in the major stage and screen adaptations of *Cabaret*, Linda Mizejewski examines the troubled relationship between decadence and fascism in the cultural imaginary of the postwar period, arguing that Fosse's *Cabaret* links repressive politics to unconventional sexual practices through mirroring and metaphorical association.²³ As Mizejewski points out, fascism had become a "split sign" in the 1970s, signifying both oppressive political authority and subversive cultural practices often associated with homosexuality, sadomasochism, transvestitism, drag, and camp.²⁴ According to Mizejewski, the film provides a variation on "fascinating fascism," linking the sexually promiscuous Sally to the increasingly shady emcee, who himself embodies the carnivalesque spectacle of the cabaret which is eventually associated with Nazism.²⁵ As Mizejewski indicates, the insistent cross-cutting implies that the transgressive performances on stage are the cultural counterpart to the politically aggressive acts outside, thus "performing" or enacting unconscious violent and illicit desires.²⁶ Like Brian, who is lured into the corruption of the cabaret/city by the politically indifferent Sally

Stereotypes (New York and Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997); and Friedrich Koch, *Sexuelle Denunziation: Die Sexualität in der politischen Auseinandersetzung* (Frankfurt am Main: Syndikat, 1986).

²² *New Leader*, 20 March 1972, 23 (Billy Rose Theatre Collection). In a review of *Cabaret* that appeared in the *New York Times* in February 1972, Steven Farber was equally critical: "Through a very effective but very specious use of cross-cutting [. . .], the film makes it seem as if the decadent atmosphere of Berlin is not merely a symptom of social disorder and disillusionment, but somehow directly responsible for the rise of Nazism." Steven Farber, "'Cabaret' May Shock Kansas . . .," *New York Times*, 20 February 1972, D3 (*The New York Times Archives*). In a similar vein, Andrew Sarris wrote in the *Village Voice*, "I'm not about to buy Bob Fosse's tap-dance routines that are supposed to lead us from the Blue Angel to Buchenwald." Andrew Sarris, "Films in Focus," *Village Voice*, 24 February 1972, 65 (Billy Rose Theatre Collection).

²³ For a more thorough discussion of the relationship between decadence and fascism in Fosse's *Cabaret*, see Mizejewski, "'Doesn't My Body Drive You Wild with Desire?': Fosse's *Cabaret*," in *Divine Decadence*, 200–35.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 208.

²⁵ See *ibid.*, 216.

and the proto-fascist Max, the viewing audience is lured into the pleasures of the erotic spectacle of the film.²⁷

In this way, the film has a broad critical dimension. Because the viewing audience often assumes the position of the diegetic audience, the cross-cutting in the film suggests a critique of the complacency both of the German population during the Nazi period and the American public in the Vietnam era. Contemporary critics have pointed to the growing awareness in 1972 of the horrors of the Vietnam War and to the use of the rhetoric of "fascist" to designate figures of authority in the U.S. government and police force.²⁸ Critiquing the film for its simplified portrayal of historical events, a 1972 reviewer contends that the film's significance lies solely in its contemporary relevance: "The fact is that *Cabaret's* wistful treatment of Germany during the rise of Nazism is only a part of our own society. *Cabaret* is only worth thinking about as a document of our times, not as a commentary on someone else's."²⁹ A number of critics who viewed the film when it was released commented on the sense of unease caused by the response of the American audience. In a 1972 review in the *Christian Science Monitor*, for example, Louise Sweeney wrote, "Director Fosse also frames the cabaret scenes with the reactions of the German audience. And at the public preview I attended, there was the unnerving realization that the contemporary American audience was reacting to much of the material very much like the '30's German audience of the film."³⁰ According to Mizejewski, the parallels between Nazi Germany and Vietnam-era America can be found not so much in the political narratives as in anxieties attending passivity and spectatorship: "[*Cabaret's*] continual play with spectatorship and

²⁶ On the Bavarian folk dance number, for example, Mizejewski writes, "The violence outside is choreographed seamlessly as the underside of the stage performance, as if the distinctly German folk dance were the acceptable public enactment of unconscious cultural violence and intolerance" (*ibid.*, 209).

²⁷ Arguing that spectatorship is equated with political passivity in the film, Mizejewski writes, "Yet the 'guilty' spectator is drawn into a world that is highly erotic and visually pleasurable, if morally reprehensible" (*ibid.*, 208).

²⁸ Randy Clark points out that it was the 1972 film, rather than the 1966 Broadway show, that invited parallels between Nazi Germany and Vietnam-era America. "When the Broadway show appeared, resistance to the Vietnam war was relatively scattered and personal, compared to the massive protests that came later. By 1972, it not only was apparent that Vietnam involved atrocities similar in kind, though not in magnitude, to those of the Nazis, but the Presidency had been implicated in various corruptions that led soon after to Nixon's near-impeachment. Calling the U.S. government and related institutions 'Fascists' had become a catch-phrase. The epithet may have been less than historically accurate, but it was certainly indicative of widespread disgust and disillusionment" (Clark, "Bending the Genre," 58).

²⁹ Colin L. Westerbeck Jr., "The Screen," *Commonweal*, 21 April 1972, 167 (Billy Rose Theatre Collection).

³⁰ Sweeney, "Dark 'Cabaret'—a Minnelli Musical-Comedy Documentary."

performance as a continuum of politics reworks a constellation of anxieties that had been latent in the ongoing historical confrontation of that era: the 'guilt' of passivity (spectatorship) as a motivation for activism, the conflation of spectator/spectacle, the radical positionings that quickly cast figures of authority on the side of the 'fascist pigs.'³¹ As Mizejewski suggests, Brian's escape from Sally and the city of Berlin is both a rejection of political complicity (coded as passive spectatorship) and a disavowal of "the sexual/political Other."³²

2. CABARET AND PALIMPSEST: THE PROBLEM OF LAUGHTER

In the Weimar period, a general distinction was drawn between "literary" cabarets (now referred to by the term *Kabarett*), satirical cabarets with social and political value, and entertainment cabarets (now referred to as *Cabaret*), "Tingeltangels," variety shows and music halls whose function was largely that of distraction.³³ The Kit Kat Klub in *Cabaret* stands on the border between these two genres. The self-reflexivity, the insistent gender parody and play, and the latent (and at times blatant) socio-political content render *Cabaret* a kind of "political musical."³⁴

³¹ Mizejewski, *Divine Decadence*, 208.

³² Concerning the Bavarian folk dance number and Brian's and Sally's screams, which introduce it, Mizejewski writes: "This scene encapsulizes Sally as the conduit through which Brian experiences Berlin as violent and erotic, thrilling and corrupting, but most of all as a sexual/political Other that must eventually be disavowed" (*Divine Decadence*, 209).

³³ In *Berlin Cabaret*, Peter Jelavich writes, "As for the Isherwood stories, in the 1920s bars with sleazy entertainment often dubbed themselves cabarets, to the horror of the cabaret purists. Indeed, in order to avoid this linguistic confusion, the German language now differentiates *Cabaret* and *Kabarett*. The words were used interchangeably through the Weimar era, but since the 1950s, *Cabaret* has referred to a strip show, while *Kabarett* is reserved for social criticism or political satire." Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 1. As Alan Lareau points out, the distinction between artistic ("Kabarett mit K") and entertainment cabaret is not as neat as the popular understanding would have it, as artistic cabarets did not always have a satirical or critical function, nor were they necessarily politically progressive. According to Lareau, literary cabaret was a mixed genre, a genre "caught between art and commerce" that sought to bring high art into the realm of popular culture. Alan Lareau, "The German Cabaret during the Weimar Republic," *Theatre Journal* 43 (1991): 471. See Alan Lareau, *The Wild Stage: Literary Cabarets of the Weimar Republic* (Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, Inc., 1995), 1-22. See also Lareau, "The German Cabaret Movement During the Weimar Republic," 471-79.

³⁴ In a review of *Cabaret* that appeared in the London *Sunday Times*, one critic wrote, "Cabaret [*sic*] brings the background of Berlin into the foreground. It might almost be called a political musical." Dilys Powell, "Bowled Over," *Sunday Times* (London), 4 June 1972 (Billy Rose Theatre Collection). On the genre of *Cabaret*, Randy Clark writes, "Neither the Hollywood nor the Broadway musical is noted for a high political content, although music has formed an important component of a rather distinct tradition of political theater, especially that of Brecht, and Federal Theater Project productions of the Thirties. [. . .] *Cabaret* falls into [the] trend [of mainstream musicals treating oppression], but the quasi-political musicals that precede it function more as problem plays: they depict a situation. *Cabaret* too includes

In an article that appeared in the *New Yorker* in February 1972, Pauline Kael wrote, "'Cabaret' is the only expensive American movie musical [...] that takes its form from political cabaret. The political satire here might be thought to have too easy and obvious a target, but, as it works out, the associations we have with this target—from art and literature and journalism—enable the satire to function at a higher level of ironic obscenity than would be possible with a more topical subject. And the picture goes way beyond topical satire into a satire of temptations."³⁵

The opening (and closing) number, "Wilkommen," sets the film in an ironic register. The shots illustrating the refrain "Life is beautiful" ("In here life is beautiful/The girls are beautiful/Even the orchestra is beautiful") repeatedly belie the meaning of the words: the transvestite Elke putting on a wig, the Kit Kat "girls" performing an overtly sexual send-up of a big band Busby Berkeley number, and a garish all-female orchestra in the tradition of the burlesque. This technique is common to the score. In many of the songs, such as "Mein Herr" and "Money, Money," there is a sharp disjunction between the upbeat, jazzy style and the dark message of the lyrics. Critics from the 1970s described the music as "metallic songs . . . [with] a distinctive, acrid flavor," "sardonic and evocative of the period," and "bawdy, cheeky little numbers" that only heighten "the impression that Berlin in 1931 was anything but beautiful."³⁶ The title song, "Life is a Cabaret," reinforces the ironic mode, as is suggested by a 1972 *New Yorker* cartoon featuring a man on a psychiatrist's couch, under which the caption reads, "And when did it first occur to you that perhaps life is *not* a cabaret?" (fig. 1). In keeping with the ironic mode, the predominant technique is, in French literary theorist Gérard Genette's terms, palimpsest, the rewriting of previous genres or tropes through modes of imitation (pastiche and caricature) or transformation (parody

such depiction, but the depiction is offered along with devices that implicate the audience in *Cabaret's* milieu. A review of a recent revival of the Broadway version calls *Cabaret* 'the first pointedly self-conscious musical.' In Broadway terms, this is basically true. 'Self-consciousness,' or better put, *reflexivity*, was not a common feature of Broadway shows prior to *Cabaret*." Clark, "Bending the Genre," 57. Embedded quote from Steven Winn, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Datebook*, 7 June 1987.

³⁵ Kael, *New Yorker*, 88.

³⁶ Kael, *New Yorker*, 86; Farber, "'Cabaret' May Shock Kansas," D1; Kathleen Carroll, *Daily News* (New York), 14 February 1972, 60. Along similar lines, Maslon writes that the "revue of numbers from the Kit Kat Klub . . . [was], in keeping with the period, mordant, tart, and mocking" (*Broadway: The American Musical*, 313). In contrast with the ironic mode, the one song set outside the Kit Kat Klub, "Tomorrow Belongs to Me," a ballad sung by a golden-haired youth in an open-air beer garden, is performed in a sincere register. The sincerity of the National Socialist Youth anthem suggests a lack of self-reflexivity and critique in the Nazi party and ideology. The style of the numbers and the socio-political nature of the lyrics have led critics to compare the film to works by Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht.



"And when did it first occur to you that perhaps life is not a cabaret?"

FIGURE 1. Cartoon from *The New Yorker*, 16 September 1972. © The New Yorker Collection 1972 Frank Modell from cartoonbank.com. All rights reserved.

and travesty).³⁷ While irony operates on a double register (the said meaning and the implied meaning), palimpsestic modes operate on a double level (the altered text and the original text). Grounded in the traditions of travesty, burlesque, caricature, and parody, the film functions primarily through cultural quotation, presupposing the viewer's awareness of predominant cultural tropes and traditions. For example, Sally Bowles's first solo number, "Mein Herr," recalls in form and function Marlene Dietrich's famous *femme fatale* number in *The Blue Angel*, "Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuß auf liebe eingestellt" ("Falling in Love Again") (fig. 2), while the so-called "anti-Semitic" number, "If You Could See Her," references Dietrich's performance in a gorilla suit in Sternberg's *Blonde Venus*.³⁸ In the initial conception of the musical play, the opening num-

³⁷ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky, foreword Gerald Prince (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 1–30.

³⁸ See Mizejewski, *Divine Decadence*, 202.



FIGURE 2. Fosse's *Cabaret* (1972): A Dietrichesque Liza Minnelli as Sally Bowles in "Mein Herr." Photo courtesy of Photofest. Allied Artists—ABC Pictures, 1972.

ber was to foreground this mode of imitation. The show was to open with a long "Welcome to Berlin" number in which the emcee would perform a series of imitations of famous figures from the Weimar era.³⁹

The extensive use of palimpsestic modes puts identities into play and puts into question the notion of identity itself. The opening scene immediately establishes the cabaret as a grotesque, distorted space. As Daniel Berardinelli points out, the use of a "fun-house" mirror in the opening scene foregrounds the importance of mirroring in the film. "It is this fun-house backdrop through which we enter the film," writes Berardinelli. "The bizarre, sculpted mirror behind the cabaret stage reflects and distorts the face of the master of ceremonies and his audience. In some sense, the grotesque perspective of that mirror is always with us in the cabaret scenes by means of a peep-show editing."⁴⁰ As a distorted

³⁹See Kander and Ebb, *Colored Lights*, 61, and Maslon and Kantor, *Broadway: The American Musical*, 313.

⁴⁰Daniel Berardinelli, "Swastika in the Fun House Mirror: *Cabaret's* Parting Shot," *Varieties of Filmic Expression; Proceedings of the Seventh Annual International Film Conference of Kent State University* (April 1989):164-65.

reflection of the "real," the cabaret itself functions palimpsestically, signaling from the outset that this is a film to be read "in the second degree." The complex play of identities on the stage suggests that identity itself is an unstable category. Sally's identity, for example, is performative on and off the stage. She is a faux *femme fatale* ("as *fatale* as an after-dinner mint," in Brian's words), a wide-eyed American whose deliberate display of "divine decadence" masks a more desperate and vulnerable interior. As Mizejewski has pointed out, the "Money" number, which presents the emcee and Sally as mirror images of one another, suggests a greater identification between the two than may be initially supposed (fig. 3).⁴¹ Finally, the diegetic audience, which reflects the norms of the time, becomes a reflection of us, the viewing audience. The performative play in *Cabaret* thus functions ultimately to serious intent. Through parodic practices that get ever darker, the film charts a progressive descent of the city of Berlin to its eventual "Tingeltotentanz," in the words of a German critic at the time the film was released.⁴²

The Mud Wrestling Scene: Slapstick Comedy and Blind Laughter

The first sign of overt political content appears in the female mud wrestling scene early in the film. A bawdy and burlesque piece whose slapstick qualities delight the audience, the number is interspersed with shots of a soliciting Nazi youth whom the manager violently ejects from the premises. At the end of the number, the emcee dips his finger in the mud and dabs on a moustache, extending his arm in a Hitler salute. This unexpected finale, which makes use of the elements of the number itself, suggests both continuity and break, continuity with the norms of the past and a radical break with it. The dark turn in the comedy comes as a surprise to the viewer, underscoring the political menace lurking beneath the gay surface of the cabaret. In *Humor: A Semiogenetic Approach*, Susan Vogel outlines three general theories of humor: "Incongruity Theories," which attribute comical effect to disjointed pairings or elements of shock, surprise, or unexpectedness; "Relief and Release Theories," which hold that humor serves to produce relief from constraint or a release of excess tension; and "Superiority Theories," which locate humor in the mockery or disparagement of a target.⁴³ While the functioning of humor is complicated, this delineation can provide a rough

⁴¹See Mizejewski, *Divine Decadence*, 210, 216.

⁴²Wolf Donner, "Tingeltotentanz: Die fünfte Version eines frühnazistischen Stoffes," *Die Zeit*, 15 September 1972, 26 (Billy Rose Theatre Collection).

⁴³See Susan C. Vogel, *Humor: A Semiogenetic Approach* (Bochum: N. Brockmeyer, 1989), 5-17.



FIGURE 3. Fosse's *Cabaret* (1972): Liza Minnelli as Sally Bowles and Joel Grey as the emcee in the "Money" number. Photo courtesy of Photofest. Allied Artists-ABC Pictures, 1972.

guide to the ways in which laughter operates in the film. The humor in the political caricature arises from incongruity and surprise, from the disjointed pairing of light entertainment and dark politics and the unexpected nature of this pairing. The intercutting in this scene, which places the cabaret's value system (as represented by the manager) in opposition to Nazi ideology, suggests that this early use of "gallows humor" has critical worth. As Vogel points out, gallows humor has a collective function, promoting a sense of group solidarity and cohesion in the face of oppression. According to sociologists, black humor in the political arena plays a dual role, providing both a morale-raising sign of resistance and a weapon against oppression.⁴⁴

Yet, laughter in this scene is not so much a mark of collective resistance as collective unawareness. From the outset of the film, *Cabaret* draws our attention to the problem of laughter and its significance as a cultural sign. Rather than emphasizing the public's response to the joke, to which we are not privy, the camera highlights the audience's unadulterated pleasure at the scene's slapstick humor. As the mud wrestling number becomes more chaotic, the camera pans across the appreciative

⁴⁴ See Vogel, *Humor*, 107. For studies of political humor, see A. J. Orbdlik, "Gallows Humour"—A Sociological Phenomenon," *American Journal of Sociology* 47: 709-16, and G. A. Fine, "Sociological Approaches to the Study of Humor," in *Handbook of Humor Research*, ed. J. H. Goldstein and P. E. McGhee, 159-81 (New York and Berlin: Springer, 1983).

audience, focusing increasingly on the faces of individual audience members. Reminiscent of the cabaret dance scene in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, in which a montage of leering male eyes covers the screen, this number closes with a sequence of mouths swollen and distorted in laughter. Through the use of low camera angles, rapid cuts, and close-ups, the laughter of the audience becomes an increasingly abstract, grotesque, and menacing phenomenon. The blind nature of the public's laughter is underscored by the parallel shots of the soliciting Nazi youth. In this scene, the filmic viewer stands apart from the diegetic audience, aware of a political menace of which the diegetic spectator appears to be oblivious.

The Tiller Girls: Performing Gender

The gallows humor that appears briefly in the mud wrestling scene takes fuller form in the Tiller Girls number in the second half of the film, in which the cabaret troupe assumes the form of a military troop. The Tiller Girls were the most popular cabaret troupe in the interwar period, performing in variety shows and music halls across Europe. Trained by the Manchester industrialist John Tiller, they were known for the art of mechanized movement, evoking images of the military and the mass-produced machine in the popular press. In the Tiller Girls number in *Cabaret*, the Kit Kat performers, as well as the emcee in drag, appear on stage with bowler hats and batons. Their lively performance at the club is juxtaposed with menacing shots of Jews being hunted in the street. A drum roll signals a change in tone, and the camera cuts to the estate of the well-established Jewish Landauer family, where Natalia discovers the body of her dead dog on the stoop. Turning their cloche hats into storm trooper helmets and their batons into rifles, the girls take on the appearance of soldiers and perform a synchronized military march to the steady beat of drums. The diegetic audience laughs in appreciation and applauds enthusiastically.

Placed in its cultural context, this scene both reflects its times and anticipates the appropriation of the entertainment industry that will occur in the Nazi period. As Peter Jelavich points out in *Berlin Cabaret*, the notion of the "revue" itself has military connotations. A derivation of the military inspection or parade, the revue came to signify a theatrical production consisting of satirical sketches and, later, the popular music hall shows known for their variety numbers and kicklines.⁴⁵ In keeping with this legacy, the Tiller Girls and other dance troupes in the

⁴⁵ Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 181.

interwar period, such as the Hoffmann Girls, the Fisher Girls, the Jackson Girls, and the Lawrence Girls, often performed pieces with militaristic overtones on the stages of Paris and Berlin.⁴⁶ Although cabaret culture was associated in the minds of far-right critics with "Weimar decadence," kicklines remained a central feature of popular entertainment in the Nazi period, providing a diversion from harsh political realities and an aesthetic vehicle for political propaganda.⁴⁷

The motif of "Girls in Uniform" is thus a complex cultural sign in the cultural imagination of the period, which allows for a number of possible readings of the Tiller Girls scene in the film. On one level, we can read this number as a political parody. According to Gérard Genette's classical definition of parody, parody is a technique of imitation and transformation that is designed to deliver a critical message. The disjunction between the copy and the original, the hypertext and the hypotext, produces a comic effect.⁴⁸ In its caricatural depiction of German soldiers, this scene serves to satirize both the repressive and reactionary politics of the growing Nazi party and the automatic or unthinking nature of the party members—and the population at large. The menacing expressions that appear on the faces of a number of dancers reflect the sinister nature of the threat, the "reality" of the political situation hiding underneath the surface. The parodic portrayal could also serve to mediate cultural anxieties about the rising tide of Nazism. By staging the military in a controlled forum, the performers could give the audience the illusive sense of controlling forces that are increasingly out of their control. In this sense, the number operates according to "Release and Relief" theories of humor, affording the diegetic audience momentary relief from political realities and a much-needed release of tension.⁴⁹

We can also view this performance as a parody of cabaret culture itself, as an implicit critique of gender norms and the larger systems of production that produced "Girl Culture," as it was called at the time.

⁴⁶ Referring to a performance of the Jackson Girls in Berlin, dance critic André Levinson wrote, "The other day, when the Jackson Girls, helmeted and be-plumed, descended the great staircase of the German Reichstag, hands on hips, in a goose-step, were they not alluding to the pomp of the vanished Empire, to the solemn splendor of its *Wachtparade*?" André Levinson, "The Girls," in *André Levinson on Dance: Writings from Paris in the Twenties*, ed. Joan Acocella and Lynn Garafola (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1991), 91.

⁴⁷ As Jelavich points out, the appropriation of the revue in the Nazi period points to complexities and hypocrisy in the rhetoric and practices of the Third Reich (*Berlin Cabaret*, 251). For a larger discussion of the revue under National Socialism, see Jelavich's "Cabaret under National Socialism" in *Berlin Cabaret*, 228–57. See also Terri J. Gordon, "Fascism and the Female Form: Performance Art in the Third Reich," in *Sexuality and German Fascism*, ed. Dagmar Herzog, 164–200 (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005).

⁴⁸ Genette, *Palimpsests*, 25.

⁴⁹ Vogel, *Humor*, 6–7.

While the frame of reference for a 1970s viewer would be a Busby Berkeley chorus line or the Radio City Music Hall Rockettes, the gender dimension of the sketch would be apparent. In *Parody//Metafiction*, Margaret Rose extends Genette's definition of parody, reading certain kinds of parody as "metafictions," parodic practices that comment on the fictional nature of fiction itself. According to Rose, parodic texts serve as "meta-fictional mirrors," highlighting the intertextual and imitative nature of the practice of literature itself.⁵⁰ This notion of parody as metafiction takes on a cultural dimension in the theories of performativity developed by Judith Butler and others. For Butler, practices of drag and cross-dressing make manifest both the lack of an original gender identity and the iterative processes by which gender identities are constructed. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes,

The notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities. Within feminist theory, such parodic identities have been understood to be either degrading to women, in the case of drag and cross-dressing, or an uncritical appropriation of sex-role stereotyping from within the practice of heterosexuality, especially in the case of butch/femme lesbian identities. But the relation between the "imitation" and the "original" is, I think, more complicated than that critique generally allows. Moreover, it gives us a clue to the way in which the relationship between primary identification—that is, the original meanings accorded to gender—and subsequent gender experience might be reframed. [. . .] *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.*⁵¹

Not only does the emcee in *Cabaret* appear in various forms of cross-dressing and drag, but the Kit Kat girls themselves are parodies of gender ideals. Drawing on conventions of the burlesque, the cabaret dancers consistently perform in a grotesque and hyperbolic mode, thus staging, pointing to, and potentially breaking down gender norms. The Tiller Girls number also makes manifest the citational processes by which gender is constructed. Repetition was the primary principle in the production of revue girls in Europe in the interwar period. As a number of critics of the time pointed out, the troupes existed only as plural entities. "Girls are a so-called *plurale tantum*," wrote Alfred Polgar in a piece entitled "Girls." "That means that the concept appears linguisti-

⁵⁰ See Margaret A. Rose, *Parody//Meta-Fiction: An Analysis of Parody as a Critical Mirror to the Writing and Reception of Fiction* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 61–106.

⁵¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 137. Italics in original.

cally only in the plural."⁵² "Indissoluble female units," in Siegfried Kracauer's words, the girls were parts of the whole, resembling one another like unfolding carbon cutout figures. For Kracauer, the highly synchronized numbers of the Tiller Girls provided the aesthetic counterpart to the larger systems of mass production in which they were embedded.⁵³

Unlike the chaos and commotion that mark most of the numbers at the Kit Kat Klub, the Tiller Girls performance is based on the logic of the machine: the dancers are dressed identically, perform synchronically, and move automatically. Thus, the Tiller Girls number draws attention to the iterative processes at work in "Girl Production" itself, to the ways in which gender norms are produced and disseminated in popular culture.

As Butler points out in *Gender Trouble*, parody in itself is not necessarily subversive. It may replay cultural codes without disrupting predominant norms and conventions.⁵⁴ Unlike many other figures of speech, parody is dependent upon recognition by the reader to function. Rose designates two models of communication in the operation of parody: an initial communication between the author and the text in which the author encodes a "source" text in altered form and a subsequent communication between the author and the reader in which the reader decodes the new text by comparing it with the original.⁵⁵ Reader reception is thus crucial to the operation of parody itself. In *Parody//Metafiction*, Rose lays out four types of potential readers: (1) a reader who does not recognize the parodic nature of the text, (2) a reader who does not understand the intention of the parody, (3) a reader who identifies with the parodied text and thus feels him/herself to be the target of the joke, and (4) an "ideal" reader who understands the signals in the text and enjoys the satirical or ironic nature of the parodic practice.⁵⁶ While the audience members in the Tiller Girls scene would fall into the fourth category in that they appear to recognize the target of the satire and to take pleasure in it, they do not seem to understand the grim nature of the reality in play. Here the camera operates much in the same way as an omniscient narrator, directing the viewer to recognize

⁵² Alfred Polgar, "Girls" (1926), in *Auswahl: Prosa aus vier Jahrzehnten* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1968), 186. Quoted in translation in Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 180. In a *Paris Soir* article that appeared in 1930, one critic wrote, "Nothing resembles a girl like another girl if it is not a troop to another troop." Hervé Mille, "Je voudrais avoir l'âme comme elles ont le corps," *Paris Soir*, 29 August 1930, trans. mine (La Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris).

⁵³ Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," trans. Barbara Correll and Jack Zipes, *New German Critique* 5 (Spring 1975): 67, 70.

⁵⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 139.

⁵⁵ Rose, *Parody//Meta-Fiction*, 26.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

the gap between the diegetic audience's experience and reality. The insistent cross-cutting in this scene suggests that the audience is in denial of political reality, choosing either to ignore or to escape from the Nazi threat. The disjunction between the merry laughter in the cabaret and the brutal realities of political persecution outside it suggests a cultural accommodation on the part of the public rather than a cultural awareness. As one critic writes, "[T]he lascivious MC and sleazy chorines of the Kit Kat Klub [are] a microcosm of the decay of a nation . . . indifferent to the oncoming political terror of Nazism, jaded and desperate for diversion."⁵⁷ Thus, in the Tiller Girls number, parody may function in a non-subversive way, mediating anxieties and encouraging escape rather than engagement.

The Gorilla Number: Diabolical Laughter and Black Humor

As the film progresses, complacency blends slowly into complicity. While the aesthetic of the Kit Kat Klub is countercultural, breaking with norms and drawing on satirical traditions of the artistic cabaret, the Master of Ceremonies reveals a surprising reactionary bent. In one of the final performances in the film, the emcee does a sentimental song and dance number with a gorilla, which ends on what appears to be an anti-Semitic note: "If you could see her through my eyes, she wouldn't look Jewish at all." The gorilla number has been the most troubling one for audiences and critics alike. In the tryouts for the stage play in Boston in 1966, the audience responded to the punch line with shocked horror. Because of protests from Jewish groups, the line, which was restored in the cinematic version, was given a milder form: "She isn't a meeskite at all."⁵⁸ Lyricist Fred Ebb explained, "During tryouts, that line, 'She wouldn't look Jewish at all,' got the exact reaction that I had hoped for from the audience. There was a collective gasp, which was followed by a moment of silence, and then applause. But when we were about to open in New York, we received a letter from a rabbi who claimed to represent millions of Jews. He found the line decidedly anti-Semitic and threatened to encourage all the Jewish groups to boycott us if it wasn't changed."⁵⁹ Joel Grey considered the line to be "anti-anti-Semitic," a dark comment on the virulent anti-Semitism of the National Socialist party.⁶⁰ According to Grey, the punch line was a "kick

⁵⁷ Gail Rock, *Women's Wear Daily*, 14 February 1972 (Billy Rose Theatre Collection).

⁵⁸ "Meeskite" is Yiddish for an ugly face or an ugly person. In the play, it referred to a song sung by Herr Schultz which made a plea for tolerance. See Clark, "Bending the Genre," 55.

⁵⁹ Kander and Ebb, *Colored Lights*, 66.

⁶⁰ Maslon and Kantor, *Broadway: The American Musical*, 315.

right to the groin to the audience," a "killer" line designed to provoke shock, to convey experientially the horror of anti-Semitism in an atmosphere of increasing normalcy.⁶¹

As parody is contingent upon reader recognition to function, it is important to take note both of the cultural context and of the distressed reactions of viewers and critics. Given the widespread nature of anti-Semitism in Berlin in the early 1930s and its grave historical consequences, this deployment of anti-Semitic discourse may appear to be an exercise in bad taste, at best, or a demonstration of cultural complicity, at worst. As Peter Jelavich indicates, humor is an unstable medium whose effect depends upon cultural context. Jewish jokes, which were the common fare of Jewish entertainers in literary cabarets in the imperial age, become scarcer and less funny in the Weimar period. On the other hand, Jelavich points out, political satire ran the risk of making light of politics and appeasing the audience's fears. Satires of Adolf Hitler, for example, which were meant to underscore the absurdity of far-right discourse, unwittingly underplayed the enormity of the threat posed by the rise of the Nazi party.⁶² Along similar lines, Alan Lareau emphasizes the political and aesthetic restrictions satirists encountered at the end of the Weimar Republic, suggesting that the function of comedy may be limited in the face of political catastrophe.⁶³

The character of the emcee provides an important clue to the relevance of the gorilla number. When the film came out in 1972, many critics viewed the emcee as a diabolical figure. In the press at the time, he was considered "ringmaster and marionette," "a satanic and sardonic painted puppet-like figure," the "pure-tin evil heart of the period," "a cadaverous George Grosz caricature brought to life," "a parody of Hitler . . . slick and evil, tempting everyone to cruel and easy solutions."⁶⁴ For critics, he ranged from a perverse puppet embodying the decadence and decline of an increasingly corrupt society to a *Führer* figure himself, luring the audience into blind complacency. The colorful prose that marked the reception of the period indicates the extent to which the figure of the emcee captured the imagination of the public. A number of critics commented on the seductive quality of this satanic figure. According to one critic, "He has all the repellent fascination of evil and, like the devil, gets

⁶¹This excerpt is drawn from the transcript of an interview with Kantor for *Broadway: The American Musical*. Transcript courtesy of Laurence Maslon.

⁶²Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 6-7, 200-02.

⁶³See Lareau, *The Wild Stage*, 152-54.

⁶⁴Kael, *New Yorker*, 86; Judith Crist, *New York*, 21 February 1972, 60 (Billy Rose Theatre Collection); Kael, *New Yorker*, 86; Frank Rich, "Theater: 'Cabaret' and Joel Grey Return," C3; Rock, *Women's Wear Daily*, 14.

all the best tunes."⁶⁵ Another writes similarly, "Joel Grey, recreating his stage role as the androgynous master of ceremonies, has a sly, insinuating presence; his eyes contain a really dirty secret."⁶⁶ Grey himself saw his character in political terms: "Hitler presented himself as 'There'll be food on every table, so come with me.' I always thought my character was very similar in terms of what I offered the audience. I always thought he was a bad guy but there were people who come to see that show that keep thinking, 'Oh, he's fun.' People read into it what they like."⁶⁷

In the course of the film, the emcee becomes an increasingly reactionary and omniscient figure whose "fall" is marked by the darker nature of the humor itself.⁶⁸ The opening number, in which the narrator's distorted, all-knowing smile appears in reflection in the glass, sets the scene for his sinister role. In "The Essence of Laughter," a study of caricature in the arts, Charles Baudelaire associates laughter itself with the satanic. For Baudelaire, the comic is a dark art, a "monstrous phenomenon" of "diabolical origin" whose attraction lies in its appeal to the all-too-human failing of pride.⁶⁹ A consequence of the Fall, and the resulting birth of a moral consciousness, laughter reflects the individual's delight in his/her own superiority.⁷⁰ The physiological nature of the phenomenon itself is, for Baudelaire, a sign of the human weakness that gives rise to it.⁷¹ The mud wrestling number in particular emphasizes the convulsive and spasmodic qualities that Baudelaire attributes to laughter. In contrast to the kind of uncontrolled pleasure displayed by the public in the mud wrestling scene, the emcee's laughter is sinister and knowing. At the end of the Tiller Girls number, for example, the emcee appears shirtless on stage, holding a cigar in one hand and his wig and hat on a stick in the other. Throwing back his head, he laughs a diabolical laugh. As the emcee becomes more sinister, he becomes omniscient as well, an all-knowing presence whose facial expression provides a corollary to the commenting dance numbers. In a scene with Max at the bar, for example, while Sally pleads in vain with Brian to

⁶⁵ Tom Vallance, "Cabaret," *Focus on Film* 10 (Summer 1972): 6 (Billy Rose Theatre Collection).

⁶⁶ Farber, "'Cabaret' May Shock Kansas," D1.

⁶⁷ Maslon and Kantor, *Broadway: The American Musical*, 314.

⁶⁸ According to Harold Prince, the emcee becomes more reactionary as the film progresses. Commenting on the creation of the 1966 stage play, he says, "He started out as this pathetic bad-taste entertainer and then became a Nazi." Kander and Ebb, *Colored Lights*, 63.

⁶⁹ Charles Baudelaire, "On the Essence of Laughter," in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne (New York: Phaidon Press, 1964), 150-52.

⁷⁰ Baudelaire summarizes his "theory of laughter" as follows: "Laughter is satanic: it is thus profoundly human. It is the consequence in man of the idea of his own superiority." Baudelaire, "On the Essence of Laughter," 153.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 152.

trust her, we cut to the lewd face of the emcee, whose leering smirk is mirrored in the half-closed eyes of a ventriloquist's dummy. Twice, the narrator's face appears out of context entirely. As Sally tries to insinuate her way into power at Max's estate, the grinning face of the emcee fills the screen, whispering "Money." Similarly, as Brian, Sally, and Max leave the beer garden, the refrain of "Tomorrow Belongs to Me" ringing out behind them, the camera cuts unexpectedly to the emcee's nodding face.

The emcee's descent parallels that of the diegetic audience, and the viewing audience as well.⁷² In the final scene of the film, the emcee bids the audience "adieu," leaving only the eye of the camera. The film closes with the distorted reflection of the spectators, many of whom are now wearing red Nazi arm-bands. Unlike the laughing audience of the beginning of the film, the audience in the closing scene is a silent and sinister one. The space of the cabaret and the space of the city have become one.⁷³ In this light, the gorilla number emerges as a pivotal moment in the narrative. Its punch line is shocking both because of its anti-Semitic content and because it implicates *us* in the sentiment. Like the diegetic audience, we have been unwittingly drawn into the pleasures of the cabaret. "Fosse first lures us into a position of secure voyeurism, like the closet-witnessing of Browning's bad dreamer," writes Berardinelli, "only to turn the film's Gaze on the voyeurs themselves."⁷⁴

Like the preceding numbers with overt political content, the gorilla scene operates through shock effect. In all three numbers, the sudden shift from lighthearted entertainment to brutal reality jolts the viewers' consciousness. Yet, while the emcee's political caricature and the Tiller

⁷²Pauline Kael comments on the "insidious complicity" of the emcee: "In the smoky atmosphere, the little m.c. is both ringmaster and marionette. His professional, insidious complicity with us, the audience—his slyness and malice—make us draw back to objectivity." Kael, *New Yorker*, 86.

⁷³According to Ebb, the point of the gorilla number in the 1966 stage version was to illustrate the ways in which Nazi ideology had infiltrated the public consciousness: "I wanted it to be about anti-Semitism, and it all worked from there, to show how anti-Semitism had crept into the cabaret. That was my intent, and eventually the line 'If you could see her through my eyes,/She wouldn't look Jewish at all' generated the whole number [. . .]." Kander and Ebb, *Colored Lights*, 64.

⁷⁴Berardinelli, "Swastika in the Fun-House Mirror," 164. At the remake of the staged musical at the Roundabout Theater in New York in 1998, the stage was set up as a nightclub precisely to collapse the space between the diegetic and the viewing audience. In the introduction to *Cabaret: The Illustrated Book and Lyrics*, Linda Sunshine writes, "We are in on the joke until his 'If You Could See Her' duet with the lady gorilla that marks the turning point of the evening. Up until this number, the musical is filled with the life-force but when [Alan] Cumming breathes the last line, 'She doesn't look Jewish at all,' the mood shifts from burlesque to grotesque. We don't know how to react. What have we been laughing at? This, according to [Sam] Mendes, is when 'the musical turns into a black-as-pitch play.'" Kander et al., *Cabaret: The Illustrated Book and Lyrics*, 14.

Girls number privilege the filmic viewers, giving them access to the failings of the diegetic spectators, to their blindness or desire to escape political realities, the Gorilla number targets the viewers themselves, operating in accordance with "Superiority Theories" of humor, which locate the "roots of laughter" in "triumph over other people (or circumstances)."⁷⁵ The object of parody is no longer the Nazi ideologue or adherent, but the sentimental liberal who doesn't recognize the true nature of the "Jewish threat." While the diegetic spectators take pleasure in the joke, suggesting that they share the reactionary political position of the emcee, the viewer recoils in alarm, disconcerted at the reversal of the "film's Gaze," in Berardinelli's words. The punch line in the gorilla scene thus functions as a kind of black humor, which aims both to illustrate our potential complacency and to shock us out of it, an aim that would have particular resonance for the American Vietnam generation. As Mizejewski points out, the position of the spectator is split. The viewer is meant to feel simultaneously aware and unaware, aware of the critique being made and implicated in it at the same time.⁷⁶ In this twisted hall of mirrors, which incriminates the diegetic audience and the contemporary spectator as well, Brian's exit from the Babylonian city is a cathartic one, one that heals the viewer's split consciousness and his/her guilty conscience.

CONCLUSION

In the end, *Cabaret* seems to work against itself. On the one hand, the ironic commentary and "shocking" jokes allow the film to make an important social critique both of the passivity of the population in the Nazi era and of our potential compliance or complicity in the face of various forms of oppression. Through the character of Sally Bowles, the film makes a sharp indictment of the egoism, self-interestedness, and superficiality that may enable repressive political systems. Furthermore, the cabaret's various modes of camp and parody serve to expose and critique predominant sexual and social norms. At the same time,

⁷⁵ Vogel, *Humor*, 6-7. On the final shot, Daniel Berardinelli writes, "*Cabaret's* parting shot is indeed a shot, and one aimed directly at the audience. The cabaret's perversion of Alice's looking-glass has swallowed so much: Sally's fingernails, Sally's whole body and the bodies of all the dancers, the Master of Ceremonies. If you pass through the cabaret mirror, you find yourself in the alley with the corpse of the manager. And now, it has absorbed the audience and stamped on its brow the swastika." Berardinelli, "Swastika in the Fun-House Mirror," 167.

⁷⁶ See Mizejewski, *Divine Decadence*, 204. In many ways, *Cabaret* presents an American fantasy of Weimar Germany, one designed to appeal largely to an American audience and American concerns.

the film draws our attention to the complexities surrounding gender identities, demonstrating the ways in which performative practices may be constrained by the social structures in which or against which they operate. Like the cabaret dancers parodied in the Tiller Girls number, Sally Bowles is caught in a system of circulation from which her self-styled identity does not free her.

However, the close association between decadent values and Nazi ideology and politics reveals a more conservative undercurrent. Through a progression in the use of political humor, the film collapses the triangular relationship between the emcee, the Nazi target, and the diegetic audience, undermining the subversive potential of the cabaret and implicating the viewer in this collapse. Furthermore, the persistent use of decadence as a metaphor in this "satire of temptations," in Pauline Kael's words, codes unconventional practices as perilous and perverse, suggesting a deeper relationship between illicit desire, power, and politics. While cultural quotation in this film draws attention to the constructed nature of gender and sexual norms, the sexual-social dynamics at work ultimately further a larger mythology of sexual culpability.

Despite the film's ideological failings, *Cabaret* provides a valuable tool for our understanding of continuing work in the areas of gender and cultural studies. By drawing attention to the possibilities of performative practices and their limits, the film emphasizes the importance of both cultural context and reception. It is through an awareness of the complexities of the interplay between the actor and the viewer and the actor and the "stage" that performative strategies may enable the re-orientation not only of individual identities, but of social, cultural, and political praxes as well.