

Selling the Nazi Dream: Advertisement of the Musical Comedy Film in the Third

Reich

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Abstract:

In this study of film in the Third Reich, I examine the advertising and promotion of the musical comedy genre. Looking at sources, such as posters, promotional magazines and stills, I argue that even within such a restively harmless genre there were conflicting cultural tendencies. Points of contention include women's empowerment, American influence, materialism and cultural exoticism. Using two films, *Capriccio* (1938) and *Gasparone* (1937), as case studies, I examine how the marketing of the genre, plot and stars reveal these contentious issues. Contradictory messages within these two films suggest that Nazi-era cultural discourse was marked by an inherent instability rather than the conforming stability one would normally expect in a totalitarian regime.

Of all the 1097 films produced in Germany from 1933 to 1945, historians often consider the musical comedy films to be the most harmless, containing the least Nazi related images or ideas. These films never contained reference to contemporary politics or events – one did not see or hear Nazi party members, symbols or jargon. In fact, these films were often set in places outside Germany or in time periods far removed from the modern day. Characters wore fashionable costumes, sang silly songs and were involved in opulent dances numbers. Musical comedy films seemed to fall within the category of innocent diversions – an escape from the heavily politicized reality facing Germans in the Nazi era.

Historians have varied in their approach to these films. Some argue that they are not important to the study of film in the Third Reich and, therefore, they largely ignore them.¹ Others claim that the comedy musical films along with other light-hearted entertainment films played a key role in the Nazi regime by offering the German public a distraction away from reality.² However, these approaches fail to deal with the complexity of these films. Even within this relatively harmless genre, which seems on the surface to lack any serious meaning, there were conflicting cultural tendencies. At the forefront are the conflicting themes of traditional gender relations and women's empowerment. In addition, themes of American influence, commodification and exoticism seem to come into conflict with the highly regulated nature of the Nazi era film industry. Therefore, the messages within the musical comedy films are highly

¹ See, for example, David Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema 1933-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 3.

² Sabine Hake states, "It might be argued that the politicization of the public sphere could not have taken place without the celebration of the private sphere in film comedies that promised... 'freedom and deliverance from the deep worries of the daily life struggle.'" (*Popular Cinema of the Third Reich*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), p. 2.

contradictory suggesting that Nazi-era cultural discourse (in these films and perhaps in society as a whole) was marked by an inherent instability rather than the conforming stability one would normally expect in a totalitarian regime.³ I will examine the advertising and promotion of two films, *Capriccio* (Ufa, 1938) and *Gasparone* (Ufa, 1937), and will compare how the genre, the plot and the stars were marketed for each.

Plot Summaries

Capriccio, directed by Karl Ritter, is set in eighteenth-century France. It stars Lilian Harvey in the main role of Madelone whose grandfather has raised her to fence, ride, shoot and drink like a man. When he dies, however, her fate is left up to her greedy guardian who promises her hand in marriage to the Prefect Barberousse in return for a high payment. After being locked up in a convent and shown a handsome picture of the Prefect she finally acquiesces, but on the night of wedding she discovers she has been shown the wrong picture and the real Prefect is actually an overweight drunkard. Knocking out a page, she steals his clothes and escapes out the window. Disguised as a man she soon meets up with Ferdinand, whom she recognizes as the handsome man from the picture, and his friend Henri. They travel around town together, leading Madelone into a series of uncomfortable situations, including having to engage in bar fights, enter brothels and sleep in the same bed as the other two men, all the while hiding her gender and her deep love for Ferdinand. When the daughter of a Countess is discovered in Madelone's bedroom, Ferdinand challenges her to a duel in order to protect the honor of

³ Here my argument correlates with Ascheid's that "the National Socialist state needed to embrace its ideological 'enemy' to accommodate its public fantasies; that even a system as Hitler's Germany could neither dictate nor contain public discourse in an ideologically stable way" in *Hitler's Heroines: Stardom and Womanhood in Nazi Cinema* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), p. 5.

the house. Madelone wounds him and is immediately arrested and taken to court in front of the Prefect. The Prefect, noticing that the perpetrator has a feminine appearance, makes a deal with Madelone to dress in women's clothing and appear as his wife at the wedding party, since he has been hiding the fact that his bride-to-be has escaped him. Ferdinand recognizes Madelone at party and she immediately confesses to him her love. When the Prefect discovers them kissing, they are both brought to court. All charges are dropped, however, when during the trial the Prefect notices a "well-rounded" convent friend of Madelone's that he would rather marry.⁴

Gasparone stars Marika Röck in the main role of Ita, the niece of a shady nightclub owner. "The devil is loose in [the town of] Olivia," reads a headline. This devil takes the form of a mysterious robber named Gasparone who is both "everywhere and nowhere."⁵ He is blamed for all the smuggling activity that is taking place within Olivia. He has also become a figure of popular legend and the movie opens with Ita performing a stage show in which she plays Gasparone. Ita is in love with the Governor's son Sindulfo; however, he is being pressured by his father to marry Countess Carlotta who is set to inherit a large fortune from her uncle who has disappeared in Africa. Meanwhile a handsome stranger named Erminio has appeared in Olivia and has managed to attract the amorous attention of Carlotta. Ita and Erminio join forces to secure the attentions of their lovers, but by the end of the film their plans have been thwarted. However, just before Sindulfo and the Countess' engagement is announced, the Countess' uncle returns from Africa, ending her chances of inheriting his fortune and Erminio reveals that he is in fact an undercover government agent who has discovered

⁴ *Das Programm von Heute*, Nr. 256 (Berlin: Ufa-Verlags GmbH, 1937).

⁵ *Illustriert Film-Kurier*, Nr. 2748 (Berlin: Franke and Co., 1938).

that Gasparone was only a ruse created by Massacio to hide his shady dealings. Now that all obstacles to their love have been removed, the two couples joyously unite in a song and dance finale.

I have chosen to study these two films for several reasons. First they have not received as much attention by historians as some other musical comedy films have like *Glückskinder* (1936) and *Viktor and Viktoria* (1933). Second they both fall within the early part of the regime, which was the heyday of the musical comedy film. Musical comedy films were very expensive to make: large casts, and intricate sets, and were often shot in foreign locations. Despite their popularity, therefore, they tended not to make a very large profit and especially when finances became tight during the war, their production numbers dropped.⁶ Third they were both big budget films (the *Vorstandprotokolle* lists *Capriccio* as costing approximately 894 000 RM and *Gasparone* 780 000 RM), which did very well at the box office, suggesting that their advertising was in a large part effective with the German public.

The Comedy Film

Before examining how the musical comedy genre was marketed specifically with these two films, it is important to note the overall position of the genre in German society. In general, the genre occupied an uneasy position in 1930s Germany. Of all the genres, it borrowed the most heavily from American Hollywood films, in particular the slapstick and screwball comedies and the revue films. In fact, one of the most prominent musical comedy films in Germany at the time, *Glückskinder* (1936), was a replica of the famous American film *It Happened One Night* (1934). Other films copied scenes from

⁶ Karsten Witte, *Lachende, Erben, Tollertag* (Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 1995), p. 45-46.

American films. For example, Marika Rökk's opening dance number in *Gasparone* was modeled on Eleanor Powell's tap dancing in *Broadway Melody of 1936* (1935). Comedy was perceived as a skill that did not come naturally to Germans; nevertheless, it was something of which Germans were in great need in order to lighten their spirits during harsh times of the 1930s.⁷ Thomas Saunders, in his study of *Americanism* in Weimar Germany, describes how the slapstick comedy was from its very first appearance identified as a genre for which Germany had no equivalent. He states, "Although archetypically American, thus un-German in mentality, style and tempo, it earned a place in German theatres and repeatedly compelled critics to qualify damning judgments of Hollywood."⁸ Therefore, German audiences demanded comedy films and the industry responded either by importing American films (especially during the silent period when dubbing was not required) or by making copies.

However, as Saunders' statement attests, there was some unease among critics surrounding the comedy film. For instance, the frivolity, the opulence and nonsensical plots of American films were sometimes attacked.⁹ Even Goebbels qualified his admiration for *Broadway Melody* of 1936 by stating, "Fluid, made with great tempo. The Americans are good at this. The content may be utter nonsense, but the way they do things is really something."¹⁰ Also, some criticized the slavish imitation of American film, arguing that it would hurt the German national identity:

Nothing is more senseless than to doubt one's own capacities, which after all are solidly grounded in the myriad cultural endeavors of millennia, and

⁷ See Rentschler's footnote number 53 for Chapter Four for a list of *Film-Kurier* articles in 1936 and 1937, which proclaim Germany's need for more comedy in their films (*The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and its Afterlife*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 346).

⁸ *Hollywood in Berlin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 172.

⁹ Saunders discusses criticism of the slapstick comedy in the early 1920s on p. 175-176.

¹⁰ As quoted in Eric Rentschler's *Ministry of Illusions*, p. 109.

instead to imitate slavishly the flashy facades of a handful of foreign successes. The more German film reflects on its Germanness and takes its power, sources, and effects from the essence of the German folk, the sooner it will free itself from American films.¹¹

Of course, these types of criticisms did not seem to prevent the production of American-style musical comedy films, which, as a study of *Capriccio* and *Gasparone* show, equally relied on frivolity and opulent staging.

The Operetta Film

An important sub genre within the musical comedy genre was the operetta film. It constituted all those films whose plots were derived from operas or whose characters and style were based on opera archetypes. The sub genre was very popular in Germany and both *Gasparone* and *Capriccio* were among of the several operetta films produced in the 1930s. *Gasparone* is based on the opera of the same name composed by Karl Millöcker, which was first performed in 1884 Vienna. The plot and characters of the film and the opera are for the most part very similar.¹² The most apparent distinction between the two is that the original opera is set within early nineteenth-century and the film is set in the present day (the 1930s). Also, another important difference is the character Ita (in the film played by Marika Röck) given much more prominence in the film than in the opera.¹³ *Capriccio* also has a corresponding opera of the same name; however, its release (in 1942) actually came later than the film's (in 1938), although it apparently was being planned as early as 1934. Composed by Richard Strauss, the opera has very little in

¹¹ "Lehrer und Schuler," *Der SA-Mann*, Oct. 23, 1937 as quoted in Rentschler's *Ministry of Illusions*, p. 108.

¹² For a summary of *Gasparone* the opera see Mark Lubbock's *The Complete Book of Light Opera* (London: Putnam, 1962), p. 223-226.

¹³ Also, in the film she frequently adopts the role of Gasparone (the mysterious robber), whereas in the opera this is done more by the character Ermino. This component of her character will become very important in my discussion of the advertising of Marika Röck.

common with the film, besides the similarity in the names of the main characters (Madeleine in the opera and Madelone in the film) and the fact that they are both set in eighteenth-century France. Other wise, the plots and characters are completely different.¹⁴

Although *Capriccio* is not directly based on an opera, like *Gasparone*, the connection to long operatic and theatrical traditions was greatly emphasized. For instance, a *Film-Kurier* article on *Gasparone* read, “It contains all the elements that are essential for a great operetta – from Millöcker’s music, looked after by Peter Kreuder, to the pair of lovers, to the ballet, and from choir to the ‘buffo’ – pair.”¹⁵ Similarly, articles on *Capriccio* repeatedly claim that it is a film in the “style of an ‘Opera Buffa.’”¹⁶ Interestingly, advertisers for *Capriccio* make much more out its theatrical influences than *Gasparone*. For instance, an entire *Film-Kurier* article is devoted to pointing out *Capriccio*’s connection to the *Commedia del’arte* (*Stehgreifkomedie*).¹⁷

The main effect of promoting *Capriccio* and *Gasparone* as operatic films was to emphasize the illusory qualities. The world of *Commedia del’arte* and opera buffa is one very far removed from reality: people break out spontaneously in song and dance, characters are archetypes (without much complexity or detailed motives for their actions) and plots are often weak, acting merely as a backdrop for the music. The constraints of the real world do not always apply in these topsy-turvy worlds; often characters can act outside the normal societal bounds. All these characteristics apply to the operetta films.

¹⁴ For a summary of the opera *Capriccio*’s plots see Stanley Sadie’s (ed.) *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* (New York: MacMillan Press, 1992), p. 721-723. *Capriccio* the opera was first preformed in Munich.

¹⁵ “*Ein Kuss und seine Folgen*,” 27 September 1937, Nr. 225, p. 3.

¹⁶ “*Lilian Harvey in einer Hosenrolle*,” 22 January 1938, Nr. 18, p. 3.

¹⁷ *Commedia del’arte* was semi-improvised play popular in Italy from in the sixteenth and seventeenth-century, which always involved a set group of stereotypical characters (Pantaloone, Harlequin, Columbine, etc.).

In particular, in the advertisements for *Capriccio*, they are used to explain Madelone's cross-dressing:

One has to go back into the costumes of [the eighteenth-century], since the heroine plays her role in pants. *Hosenrolle*, well, they seem real when Shakespeare is performed on stage, then it is easy to believe the confusions that result from them. But the reality of a film set in the present would counter the illusion. For that reason the film went back in time to the costumes of the late eighteenth-century – which are very beautiful. And to remove the plot even further from the real world, different scenes are sung in the slightly satirical style of the playful Italian 'Opera Buffa.'¹⁸

Therefore, a very conscious effort is made to separate the imaginary realm of *Capriccio* from the real world by associating the film so closely with the world of Shakespeare and opera in order to make the presentation of cross dressing seem justified. Setting *Capriccio* in a time period far removed from the present (which in contrast is not done in *Gasparone* even though its original is actually set in the early nineteenth-century) also achieves this goal.

In addition to emphasizing the illusory nature of these operatic films, the advertiser also put much emphasis on the sensory experience of the film. Primarily music, dance, costumes and elaborate were being sold in the advertisements for *Capriccio* and *Gasparone*. For each film, the lyrics and scores of the song were included in the *Illustrierter Film-Kurier*. In the *Presseheft* for *Gasparone*, Ufa directed the distributors to heavily promote each imagistic quality of the film:

It is advisable to offer plenty of advertisement material to music and record stores, to fill shop windows and store rooms with the images of the "Gasparone – Millöcker – Ufa – Operetta" posters. The possibility of dressing the ushers in Dalmatian costumes or other colorful fantasy dress of a similar kind should also be considered. Please also think about the effectiveness of music advertisements in concert cafes and dancing halls! Propose that these places to have special concerts or a special dance event

¹⁸ "Lilian Harvey in einer Hosenrolle," *Film-Kurier*, 22 January 1938, Nr. 18, p. 3

under the motto “from Millöcker’s realm of operettas” or “a merry evening with *Gasparone*” or similar events, where at the same time the songs from the film are played and special announcements inform about the showings of the movie.¹⁹

The effect of all this advertising was to emphasize that these films were foremost an experience of the senses. Other considerations, namely the plot, took second place. A *Film-Kurier* article discussed how *Gasparone* broke all the “theoretical” or “dramaturgic” guidelines for films, which directed that plot, character development – what makes the audience think rationally about the film narrative – should always come before any musical elements. However, the operetta films ignored these guidelines: “If one wanted to put a strict dramaturgic measure on the plot of the operettas, then the results concerning this artistic genre would be quite negative. When watching these works, however, the audience does not think of logic, but allows the enjoyable music to carry them across the light illusions of the plot.”²⁰ Indeed, the plots defied rationality; each film is very convoluted and difficult to follow.

The emphasis on sensory and emotional appeal over intellectual appeal seems to coincide with German fascist values. Anti-intellectualism was to a large degree behind the banning of art criticism in 1936, as the Nazis attempted to disassociate art from what they saw as the overly critical, intellectual realm of the Weimar period.²¹ However, there is also something very contradictory in how the sensory is conceived in the musical comedy film. These films and their sensory images promote a level of material and even sexual fantasy strongly tabooed in Nazi Germany.

¹⁹ Berlin: Franke and Co., 1937.

²⁰ “*Das ewig Junge bricht sich Bahn*,” 21 December 1937, Nr. 296, p. 3.

²¹ For instance, Goebbels reasoned that, “Artistic criticism no longer exists for its own sake. In future one ought not to degrade or criticize a well-meaning or quite respectable artistic achievement for the sake of a witty turn of phrase.” As quoted in Welch’s *Propaganda and the German Cinema*, p. 45.

The Exotic

Although the plot is overshadowed in *Capriccio* and *Gasparone* by the music, dance and costumes, elements of it are central to the advertising of each. One such element is exoticism. As previously mentioned, both *Capriccio* and *Gasparone* are set in worlds quite apart from their contemporary Germany; *Gasparone* is set on the Adriatic Sea and *Capriccio* is set in eighteenth-century France.²² In *Gasparone*, the exotic setting is particularly important to the plot and, thus, the advertising. The original opera is set on the coast of Sicily and similarly the film was shot in Ragusa, Sicily (although, some of the outdoor scenes were shot along the Dalmatian coast).²³ However, the film's narrative is set on the Dalmatian coast. Actually the town in which it is set, Olivia, is fictional as its promotional magazines strongly emphasized. For instance, *Gasparone's Das Programm von Heute* began by describing the setting as "A beautiful, sunny country somewhere on the shore of a southerly sea, somewhere in magnificent mountains and forests, a merry, joyful people inhabiting it. Let's call it with a nice name that fits to its citizens, Olivia."²⁴

The imaginary nature of the setting is immediately emphasized so that the reader knows that he or she is dealing with a realm where the rules of reality do not apply. It was also an excuse that allows for the representation of disruptive behavior. Indeed, Olivia is a sinful world inhabited by smugglers and nightclub singers and ruled by a

²² Schulte-Sasse discusses in her book, *Entertaining the Third Reich*, how many Nazi-era films are set in the eighteenth-century. She argues that the Nazis had a fascination with the Enlightenment period, since "If eighteenth-century culture 'gave birth' to modernity National Socialism so reviles, it also generated the first sentiments of anti-modernism, their logical extreme in National Socialism" (London: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 9.

²³ "Berliner Weihnachtspremieren," *Bremen Nachrichten*, 23 December 1937

²⁴ Nr. 256, Berlin: Ufa-Verlags GmbH, 1937.

robber: “Only a robber? Happily hand him the crown – He is duke in the land of operettas, gives us laughter as the pledge of fortune! And laughingly shout: ‘Long live Gasparone!’”²⁵ However, the primitive nature of the setting is not completely removed from reality. A *Film-Kurier* article points to a historical basis for the pirate infested nature of the setting: “In ancient times, Ragusa was the most renowned hiding place of a pirate fleet that posed great problems to the then mighty lord of the seas.”²⁶ The article then goes on to describe how when the filming crew arrived on the Dalmatian coast the director of photography went out on a search for “realistic smuggler and pirate characters” and that the tourist town of Dubrovnik was easily transformed into pirate-inhabited town of its past. Therefore, the advertisers suggest that, whereas this was a realm that is far removed from Germany, it was not so far removed from the wild and dark energy supposedly present along the Dalmatian Coast.

Racial commentary continues with the portrayal of the fictional Balkan characters in the film. All of those who are in the employ of Massacio, the shady nightclub owner, have darker skin and wear traditional Balkan costume. In the film, these characters are portrayed as more devious and simple-minded – basically as thugs for hire. The two main Balkan characters, a couple that runs Massaccio’s bar, cannot seem to control their sexuality as they are constantly shown in each other’s arm, kissing even at the most inappropriate times. The *Film-Kurier* article states that many of these characters were played by local Bosnians, whom the film crew had difficult time controlling:

A great number of young men from the surrounding villages had been hired to play the prosecutors who staged the wild hunt of *Gasparone* on horseback. During this hunt, they were supposed to become increasingly exhausted. That was the most difficult part because the wild hunt of

²⁵ *Presseheft* (Berlin: Franke and Co., 1938).

²⁶“*Aufnahmen im Seerüberparadies*,” 12 October 1937, Nr. 237, p.3.

Gasparone made the good Bosnians more and more fiery and excited as time passed. Of exhaustion, as it was prescribed by the script, nothing could be seen until the early afternoon.²⁷

The article further observed that it was not until this group of men was allowed to play wildly for a couple of hours that they were able to portray exhaustion. With its patronizing tone, the article seems to liken the local actors to animals. However, this article and the film displayed great confusion when portraying racial and cultural elements. Despite its title, “Film shooting in a pirate’s paradise: *Gasparone* in Ragusa,” the reviewer discussed Bosnians. Another article described the setting as “Spanish-Moorish.”²⁸ Therefore, it is very difficult to determine exactly which part of southern Europe the film is supposed to depict. In fact, this confusion led to a bit of controversy with the Italian ambassador in Germany when he demanded to see the script in order to censor out any insensitive portrayals of Italians. In the end, Ufa refused to ascent to his request, claiming that the film’s narrative had nothing to do with Italy.²⁹ Although certainly not unique to Nazi-era films, racial stereotyping (which was taken to the extreme in the anti-Semitic films, as I will discuss the next chapter) was often a distinguishing feature of Third Reich film.³⁰ Even when it threatened diplomatic tension, the members of the film board would not curb the insensitive or inaccurate portrayal of other cultures.

There is one other form of exoticism that is important to both *Gasparone* and *Capriccio*: the nightclub. Both films have important scenes within the nightclub; *Gasparone* opens with a long scene of Ita’s performance in her uncle’s nightclub and

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ “*Eine Kuss und seine Folgen*,” 27 September 1937, Nr. 225, p.3.

²⁹ *Vorstandprotokolle* 12.10.1937

³⁰ *La Habanera* (1937) is another example of a popular film where a ‘non-Aryan’ (in this case Puerto Rican) culture is treated as wild and dark.

then has several scenes in the backrooms and cellars of the club. *Capriccio* has scenes in several bars and in a bordello in which Madelone must prove her manliness by seducing the prostitutes dressed in belly dancer costumes. Advertisers used expressive language to describe the nightclub scenes. For instance, an article on *Capriccio* promised viewers, “There is no lack of pompousness, of the grotesque, of enchanting costumes, of daredevil confrontations of short-tempered cavaliers and seductive cheeky dancers, but also of the ‘intoxicating fogd’ of drinking comrades of very different social standing.”³¹ In ads for *Gasparone*, the nightclub is referred to as one of those “Taverns of the world” and colorful phrases promise “never-ending youth,” and “racy entertainment.”³² Suggestions of promiscuous sex were thus used to sell both these films. Therefore, the exotic was used both in a racist manner typical of Nazi era rhetoric, but also it was used to entice the viewer into a world more in line with Weimar era cabarets.

Gender and Sexuality

Another element of the plot that is at the forefront of the advertising is gender. Both *Capriccio* and *Gasparone* have very strong women lead characters and it is really they who dominate the films and the advertisements. In particular, *Capriccio* presents an interesting study of gender, since the main character, Madelone, disguises herself as a man in order to escape marriage to the ugly Prefect. Harvey’s cross-dressing for this role is an issue in every newspaper ad, promotional magazine and review article. In fact, the titles for these usually run as “Lilian Harvey in a Hosenrolle” or “Lilian Harvey: A girl becomes a man.” Also, the main promotional picture for this film features Harvey

³¹ *Rezensionen Film-Bühnes*.

³² *Programm von Heute*, Nr. 162 (Berlin: Ufa-Verlags GmbH, 1937) and *Presseheft* (Berlin: Franke and Co., 1937).

dressed in her cavalier outfit, aggressively swiping her sword in hand (see Fig. 1). The advertisements maintained that her cross-dressing both represented maintenance and breaking of traditions. For instance, as has already been discussed, several articles pointed to the long cross dressing tradition in theatre and opera dating back to when young men played the female roles. Other advertisements, however, used bold statements like “She burst the ties of sanctified tradition and slashes with a drawn sword in her fist as a knight and cavalier through amorous and joyous adventures,” to emphasize the breaking of traditional gender relations.

Madelone’s manly disguise leads to several sexually tense scenes in the film. Promotional stills and discussions of these scenes were included in the advertisements in order to capture the viewer’s attention. For instance, in one scene, Madelone is forced to sleep in a small cramped bed with two men, one of which (Ferdinand) she secretly loves. The potential viewer can both catch glimpses of this scene in promotional stills (see Fig. 2) and read about it in newspaper ads: “she pretends to be [a man] and sees herself urged to spend her nights together with two more or less suspicious cavaliers and comrades.”³³ Along with heterosexual tension, there are several homosexually suggestive scenes. In the scene described above, although the viewer knows that Madelone is really a woman, on the surface the scene depicts three men snuggling closely together, wearing only their nightshirts. Also, Madelone and Fernando are much more physical with each other when she is disguised as a man than when she comes to him as a woman at the end (see Figs.3 and 4). When Madelone, aptly named Casanova in her male disguise, accompanies the two men to a bordello, they challenge her to prove her machismo and so she performs a

³³ Ufa newspaper ad (journal and date unknown). Found in *Filmmuseum* collection on *Capriccio*.

seductive dance with the scantily clad prostitutes and sings the following song, the words of which are published in the *Illustrated Film-Kurier* for the public:

With bravado, I want to conquer the world,
With bravado, no girl will be spared,
With bravado, all women will be won.
Yesterday brown, today black, tomorrow blonde!³⁴

National Socialism banned homosexuality in Germany; homosexuals lost their lives in concentration camps. In contrast, homosexual themes and tensions were not exterminated from Nazi-era film. In fact, as the case of *Capriccio* shows, advertisers used sex, both the heterosexual and homosexual, to entice Germans to buy tickets.

In both *Capriccio* and *Gasparone*, women are the romantic and sexual aggressors. They hold the phallic weapons and use them to steal and penetrate the hearts of men. In *Capriccio*, this weapon is the sword and, as we have seen, almost every advertisement depicts Lilian Harvey holding it and describes how she “fences” and “slashes” with it. In one scene, she actually has a fencing duel with Ferdinand (over the honor of the Countess’ daughter whom Madelone has supposedly enticed to her bedroom), which she wins when she lightly stabs him in the chest. One article describes her use of the sword: “She knows well how to use the weapon and uses it to conquer her husband (Victor Staal), since she has set her mind to choose herself, instead of having a marriage arranged for her. This, she does masked as a man so that the other cannot deceive her, but shows himself as he really is.”³⁵ Being disguised and armed as a man gives Madelone the upper

³⁴ Nr. 2814 (Berlin: Franke and Co, 1938).

³⁵ “Lilian Harvey in einer Hosenrolle,” *Film-Kurier*, 22 January 1938, Nr. 18, p.3. The remark here that Madelone must disguise herself as a man in order to learn Ferdinand’s true nature is interesting. Klaus Theweleit in *Male Fantasies* (vol. 1, Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 1987) describes how fascism involves a turning away from women towards male companionship – that men were only truly comfortable when around other men (the military then becomes the ideal social homosocial atmosphere). Perhaps this statement, while providing evidence for Theweleit’s argument, also expresses a sense of women’s frustration with the homosocial nature of fascist society.

hand in the relationship, allowing the right to freedom of choice and to avoid the deception of men in romantic affairs.

In *Gasparone*, the weapon is a knife which Marika Röck carries when she twice dresses up as Gasparone: once at the start of the film when she plays Gasparone on the nightclub stage and then again when she disguises herself as Gasaprone, kidnaps her love interest, Sindulfo, ties him to a tree and then throws daggers at him (in order to scare some sense into him to propose to her). In both films, therefore, the women are the ones who figuratively penetrate the men and they are the ones fighting to secure the relationship. The men are only really the passive objects of attention and when they do make sexual advances they are often punished. For instance, when Ferdinand finally kisses Madelone they are both dragged into court on charges of deceit and adultery and when Sindulfo kisses Ita she slaps him (“Heinz Schorlemmer [playing Sindulfo] receives a light, but audible slap in the face – plainly the right response for a ‘robbed’ kiss!”).³⁶ In this manner, the women are also the ones strongly associated with violence and sexuality. For example, advertisers clearly make this association by publishing the lyrics to the song “Ja, die Frauen sind gefährlich”:

Yes, women are dangerous,
Because they are stealing your heart!
But they don't only do it in passion,
They often also do it for fun...
Even the evil Gasparone is not as dangerous,
Because you can shoot at the robber –
But try to shoot when you kiss!
Therefore, be careful of your heart,
When a red mouth laughs at you.
False love is very hurtful
For the soul and in your wallet!
Yes, women are dangerous,
Because they are stealing your heart!

³⁶ “Eine Kuss und seine Folgen,” *Film-Kurier*, Sept. 27, 1937, Nr. 225, p.3

What to you is deep love,
For them is only fun!³⁷

In the advertisements for both films, it is women were the predators in courtship; they wielded the weapons, break the hearts and emotionally and sexually manipulate the men.

The role of women in Nazi society has been debated in numerous historical studies. However, in general historians perceive Nazi ideology to be reactionary in its approach to women. Women were encouraged to take up their traditional roles as wives and mothers (although during the war, this idea lost much of its feasibility) and to disregard many of the sexual liberties promoted during the Weimar period.³⁸ Do advertisements that promote female lead characters as sexual aggressors then present a contradiction to this ideology? In a sense they do not, since at the end of both films traditional gender relations are restored when the couples marry. At the end of *Capriccio*, Madelone puts down her sword, returns to her overly feminine dresses and is soon seen swooning in the arms of Ferdinand. A promotional pamphlet reads “But nature cannot be forced...And when then cupid approaches with his trickery, / She gave into her happy fate, quite quickly.”³⁹

Yet despite their marriages at the end, it really the assertiveness, rebellious and energetic nature of Harvey and Röck’s characters that sticks with a viewer. Besides the resolutions at the end are over far to quickly to make much of an impression. Also, the male characters, despite the fact that they were played by the young and handsome actors Victor Staal and Heinz Schorlemmer, lack ego-strength and often appear insipid next to their strong female counterparts, so it is difficult to accept that they reestablish their

³⁷ *Das Programm von Heute*, Nr. 162 (Berlin: Ufa-Verlags GmbH, 1937).

³⁸ See, for example, Anke Gleber., “Female as Void in Nazi Film,” *Gender and German Cinema* (Providence: Berg, 1993).

³⁹ Ufa pamphlet (found in *Filmmuseum* collection on *Capriccio*).

dominance in the end.⁴⁰ There is no taming of shrew at the end of the films, but rather it is the men who are brought into line. In addition, some of the most right-wing groups in Germany complained about the morals presented by these films. For example, the National Socialist *Frauenwarte*, a party-sponsored women's publication, vehemently complained that revue film continued to present the "Jewish imagery" prevalent in Weimar films, namely the portrayal of women as overly sexualized and hostile to traditional roles of marriage.⁴¹ Therefore, the messages presented in these films with regards to women and sexuality were controversial. They were not by any measure wholly conformist or defiant, rather they suggest that ideological conflict was still very much present in films.

Stars

An essential factor in the promotion of *Capriccio* and *Gasparone* is the star cult surrounding performers in each film. The star cult in 1930s Germany occupied a somewhat uneasy position in Nazi society for several reasons. Firstly, the celebrity status afforded to actors in a star cult was something that was only supposed to be associated only with Adolf Hitler and his leading politicians in the Nazi regime; film stars, whose behavior was often questionable, threatened to outshine the political stars.⁴² Secondly, all the make-up, wild parties, fashion and conspicuous consumption normally associated with a stars' lifestyle was associated with a Jewish and deviant lifestyle by the Nazis. Thirdly, although male actors could become very popular celebrities, it was really female

⁴⁰ Historians who discuss the insipid nature of male leads in Nazi-era films are Karsten Witte, "The Invisible Legacy of Nazi Cinema," *New German Critique* 24-25 (1981-2), p. 252 and Antje Ascheid, *Hitler's Heroines* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), p. 37.

⁴¹ As quoted in Ascheid, "Nazi Stardom and the 'Modern Girl,'" *New German Critique* 74 (1998), p. 58-59.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 32.

actresses and a feminine lifestyle (fashion, makeup, hairstyles) that played a greater role in the star system. A star cult in a sense celebrated career women, a phenomenon at odds with National Socialist's ideal womanhood.⁴³

Despite all these factors against a star cult in Nazi Germany, one did continue to strive and even grow. Female actors were at the forefront of the Nazi-era star cult; they were generally paid more than male actors (Zarah Leander was by far the highest paid actor of the period) and their appeal far outweighed their male counterparts who, as many historians have pointed out, generally lacked youth and sex appeal.⁴⁴ These actresses far more often denoted an international rather than a national style; many were foreigners and their personas were often modeled on American actresses. Also, many of these actresses displayed a lifestyle of luxury and overindulgence that rivaled their American counterparts; "If fashion and make-up were considered outmoded signifiers of 'empty' modernity, Ufa actresses for the most part looked just as artificial as Hollywood divas and never outgrew the stamp of Weimar stardom."⁴⁵ As a study of the Lilian Harvey and Marika Röck will suggest, the star was another component of Nazi-era film culture that existed neither in conformity nor defiance, but rather was an arena of controversy essential to this culture.

Lilian Harvey, in many ways, embodied the contradictions of the Nazi-era star cult. Her star power is evident in the advertising for *Capriccio*; her name is in bold letters on all the posters and ads, along with repeated promise of seeing her wear pants. In the *Vorstandprotokolle*, *Capriccio* is constantly referred to as the "Harvey-Film" and

⁴³ Ibid, p. 39.

⁴⁴ Information on Leander in Jo Fox, *Filming Women in the Third Reich* (New York: Berg, 2000), p. 102.

⁴⁵ Antje Ascheid, *Hitler Heroines* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), p. 39.

in discussions of salary we see that Harvey is earning the “high amount” of 138, 750 RM whereas the director, Karl Ritter, earns 100, 000 RM.⁴⁶

To a large degree, Harvey seemed to stand outside the bounds of Nazi culture. Her persona was linked strongly to the Weimar regime and to Hollywood. Her first film in Germany was in 1925 and by the late 1930s her career was starting to dwindle, as she was getting too old to play her typecast role of “*die süsseste Mädel der Welt*.”⁴⁷ Therefore, she was already a well-established star in Weimar before she made Nazi-era films. Also, her androgynous body was more in line with a Weimar style than the curvaceous body type one sees more frequently in Nazi-era actresses. Harvey also went to Hollywood to try to break into the American market. During her visit from 1933 to 1935, she made four films, but none of them were very successful. Although the regime frowned upon this type of expatriation, when she returned to Germany she was welcomed home as a star reborn (for example, an ad for *Capriccio* announces “A newly discovered Lilian Harvey”). Her lifestyle rivaled the Hollywood diva in wealth and luxury. Although at the beginning of her career her persona reflected her roles as an innocent girl, this persona gradually transformed into one of “fur-clad power player,” who drove a Mercedes, draped herself in diamond jewelry and hobnobbed with both Ufa and Hollywood elite.⁴⁸ Also, in both her onscreen character and personal life she projected a self-confident assertiveness that seemed more in line with a Hollywood than Nazi-era actress.

⁴⁶ Harvey’s salary is listed in the 21.12.1937 entry and Ritter’s in the 7.12.1937 entry.

⁴⁷ In *Leibeswalzer* (1930), Willy Fritsch’s character serenades her with the song “*Du bist die süsette Mädel der Welt*,” a nickname that stuck with Harvey thereafter.

⁴⁸ Antje Ascheid, “Nazi Stardom and the ‘Modern Girl,’” p. 74 and 78-79.

Historians debate whether Harvey's star image corresponds at all to Nazi culture. In general, most historians see her as a glaring exception to the times; for example, Kremeier states, her "films showed that the 'American' star cult, which continued in some form in Ufa under National Socialism, was difficult to shape into an instrument of the regime, the two had nothing in common."⁴⁹ However, Witte disagrees; he sees a mechanical artificialness to Harvey that makes her inherent to Nazism:

The Ufa direction did not want her to be a vamp or a lady; what they had in mind was 'the sweetest girl in the world.' They allowed this face to assume only one expression: mechanical good cheer. Harvey sought to glide over the floor like a fairy, but the pitter patter of her gait had more in common with a wind-up doll...Lilian Harvey, the eternal blond dream and lucky kid, was the perfect synthetic, whose human features mimicked the mechanical ones of cartoons.⁵⁰

For Witte then, Harvey had everything in common with a regime that promoted a mechanized militaristic aesthetics in both their political and artistic spectacles. Ascheid disagrees with Witte that these characteristics automatically link Harvey with Nazism, rather she believes that her "artificiality and antirealism seemed to sidestep politics – functioning neither as an affirmation nor a condemnation – simply existing alongside it."⁵¹ She argues that Harvey's assertiveness along with her association with conspicuous consumption puts her more in line with a female modernity opposed by the National Socialists. At the same time, Harvey's persona seems to coincide with Nazi principles; her eternal childishness that alternates both between a "boyish masculinity" and a "girlish femininity" makes her perpetually dependent on men and erases any sexual threat she may pose to men.⁵² However, her role in *Capriccio* seems to challenge the latter

⁴⁹ Klaus Kremeier, *The Ufa Story* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), p.291.

⁵⁰ "Too Beautiful to Be True: Lilian Harvey," *New German Critique* 74 (1998), p. 37.

⁵¹ "Nazi Stardom and the 'Modern Girl,'" p. 61.

⁵² Ibid.

argument. Harvey's alternating sexuality, feminine, masculine and asexual, (wonderfully illustrated by three stills depicting her in her disguise as Casanova, in her real clothes as Madelone and in her convent uniform as seen in Figs. 5, 6, and 7) may also be interpreted as sexually threatening in that it allows her to cross boundaries, dapping in all kinds of sexuality: heterosexual, homosexual and lesbian. Ascheid's main argument that Lilian Harvey was both a contradiction and an affirmation of Nazi culture still pertains; she is an excellent example of how conflicting ideas could be embodied in one person, who was able to achieve celebrity status in a totalitarian regime.

Marika Rökk, although she was certainly one of the top actresses of the period, never achieved quite the same status or the wages as Lilian Harvey. Her career started considerably later than Harvey's; at the time of *Gasparone*'s release she was still a relatively new actress. Rökk's star image seemed to coincide more closely to Nazi ideals than Harvey's. For instance, one of Rökk's main draws was her athleticism, particularly her ability to perform very difficult and complex dance moves. Posters for *Gasparone* certainly broadcasted this point, featuring Rökk in the midst of high leaps (see Figs. 8 and 9). In contrast to Harvey's lithe, androgynous figure, Rökk's was curvaceous and feminine, but still very strong and sturdy – a body perfect for fulfilling the Nazi ideal of motherhood. She was also portrayed as being very hardworking. For example, a photo on the cover of the *Programm von Heute* shows her diligently at work, memorizing the script. Nazi rhetoric liked to emphasize the hard work and years of struggle necessary to becoming an actress in order to counterbalance the frivolity and overindulgence associated with the lifestyle.⁵³

⁵³ Ascheid points out that Nazi rhetoric frequently emphasized years of struggle necessary to becoming an actress in *Hitler's Heroines*, p. 53. Also, one can see this rhetoric in a *Film-Kurier* article on *Capriccio*,

However, there were also components of her image that contradicted Nazi ideal. For instance, she had a reputation for having a fiery temper and being very ambitious. Romani states that her nickname was *Kollegenfresser* – partner eater – because she was quite willing to use and then dispose of partners, both on screen and off, in order to further her career. One can see her real life personalities reflected in her fictional character of Ita, who is certainly a woman who gets what she wants by any means. Advertisements for *Gasparone* even describe Ita as “ill-tempered” or “the most temperamental little person that ever stood on the stage of a revue.”⁵⁴ Therefore, she shared with Harvey a willfulness that puts her more on par with modern femininity than Nazi ideals of traditional womanhood.

Conclusion

The advertisements for *Capriccio* and *Gasparone* suggest that even within the relatively harmless genre of the musical comedy, there are conflicting cultural tendencies. Messages are never straightforward, rather they point to an inherent instability in cultural discourse. The advertisers made a very conscious effort to separate the imaginary realm of the films from the real world by associating the genre and plot with operatic and theatrical traditions and emphasizing the experience of the senses over the experience of the intellect. Defining the film realm as illusory – far removed from their contemporary Germany and arenas of rational thought – allowed them to portray behavior that

which interviews the actresses that play the convent pupils; it reads “Now to show that even this first opportunity [that is their role in *Capriccio*] demanded a hard struggle, we will now report some details from the lives and the work of the young *Capriccio* monastic pupils.” It then goes on to describe their modest beginning and the intensive training that went into getting their first role (“*Filmstart junger Sangerinnen in Capriccio*,” 21 February 1938, Nr. 43, p.5).

⁵⁴ “*Gasparome*,” *Film-Kurier*, 22 December 1937, Nr. 297, p. 2 and *Presseheft* (Berlin: Franke and Co, 1938).

transgressed the strict limits of Nazi society. The advertisements for *Capriccio* and *Gasparone* enticed the viewer with images of exotic locals where thieves and nightclub dancers rule, cross dressers whose actions play on heterosexual and homosexual tensions, and aggressive women who physically and mentally dominate their male counterparts. Some historians argue that these images safely dished out in the medium of film offered a catharsis for disruptive thoughts and behavior so that Germans, purged of them, could return to the regulated conformity of Nazi society. However, the presentation of these images was not so clear-cut. Firstly, these images were made to appear extremely attractive, with the full force of beautiful actors, big budgets and talented directors behind them. Secondly, any counterbalancing images that were meant to suggest a redeeming order, such the image of the Aryan male characters or the image of marriage at the end of the films, paled in comparison to the sexy, controversial images. Thirdly, the controversial images did not just exist within the filmic realm, they also existed in reality with the star cults surrounding the two main characters of *Capriccio* and *Gasparone*. Lilian Harvey and Marika Röck, like the films in which they starred, stood neither in conformity nor in defiance to Nazi ideals, rather their existence suggests that disparate cultural forms still continued to thrive in the Nazi regime.

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