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Cover image from Ernst Lubitsch's *Ich möchte kein Mann sein* (1916).
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WEIMAR FILM AND MODERN JEWISH IDENTITY

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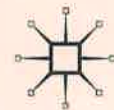


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WEIMAR FILM AND MODERN JEWISH IDENTITY



Ofer Ashkenazi



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PREFACE

The Jew wants to stir up the appearance of life. He becomes an actor, a faker, a liar.

—Robert Weltsch

Henri Trouille was a walking fairytale, displaying the strength and potency of the European middle class in the twentieth century. A front-line officer who fought bravely and was severely wounded in the trenches of World War I, Trouille successfully overcame the trauma of his injury; his arm movements were still somewhat restricted, but he no longer suffered from the frequent anxiety attacks, the paralyzing fear of being suddenly captured and executed by men in uniform or by a frenzied street mob. Upon returning home from the military hospital to Marseilles, he was reunited with his young sweetheart and promptly married her, made peace with his cantankerous mother, and exploited a fortuitous business opportunity. As an associate in an international import-export trading company he was well off, though not extraordinarily rich. He ate in pleasant restaurants, surrounded by his upper middle-class peers; he dressed and behaved in the appropriate manner, and bought a house that befitted his status. Henri Trouille manifested everything that was positive about his class; and he was happy.

Except that he was not Henri Trouille. His name was Alexander Bessel, a German intellectual who had fought against Trouille's regiment and stolen the dead French officer's documents and uniform. Brutally wounded in the trenches, Bessel regained consciousness to find himself abandoned behind the lines on French territory; faking and lying presented his best strategy for survival. His acting, however, went well beyond the front-line infirmary, and became ever more successful and convincing as he integrated into the urban middle class of French civil society. It was within this milieu that he managed his responsibilities at work, conducted a passionate relationship with Trouille's appealing fiancé, and was healed of his arm injury. Finally, even Trouille's mother, who discovered the truth about

Bessel, declared that he was the son she believed to have been lost in the trenches.

This incredible fable outlines the narrative of *The Transformation of Dr. Bessel* (*Dr. Bessels Verwandlung*) made by the Jewish filmmaker Richard Oswald in 1927. Oswald's Bessel is, in Robert Weltsch's words, "an actor, a faker, a liar."¹ Yet (just as in Weltsch's assertion) these qualities are portrayed in a way that elicits the audience's empathy, rather than its resentment. Moreover, Bessel's talent for deception somewhat paradoxically enables him to find his "genuine" identity, which he gradually comes to associate with the educated European bourgeoisie. Indeed, the more successful he becomes in adapting to the aspirations and to the *habitus* of the urban middle class, the less interested he is in the gory conflict between the nations. In his masquerade he finds a new authenticity, a new home. His newly discovered self-perception does not lead him to renounce his national origins—symbolically, he longs to reunite with his biological German mother at the end of the war—but deems them secondary to the values and vocations of a culture that transcends national borders and disregards ethnic differences. He seeks to integrate into the society of bourgeois urbanites, based on the ideals of rational criticism, progress, individual freedom, and social justice. Such a progressive multicultural society perhaps never existed in interwar Europe; but, as Oswald's film shows, it was imaginable, and indeed imagined, on the German screens of the pre-Nazi era.

This book suggests a twofold argument. First, that Richard Oswald's neglected film exhibits three prominent tropes of Weimar cinema: the intricacies between identity and performance (and the tensions between these concepts and "authenticity"); the metaphorical visualization of multilayered identity through the duality of private and public urban spheres; and the essential (yet concealable) difference between the protagonist and his social environment, which renders him an integral member of this society who simultaneously represents "otherness" and contradictions. Like in *The Transformation of Dr. Bessel*, German films of the 1920s have frequently linked the tensions of identity and performance to the post-World War I constitution of the urban middle class and the integration of "outsiders" within it. In addition, Weimar filmmakers often employed a similar spatial encoding of identity formation, emphasizing the disparity between the expressions of individuality in public and in private. Moreover, numerous films that addressed these tensions appeared to follow Oswald's view on the discovery of authenticity—that is, of the "true self, [...] not as [one] presents it to others but as it 'really is'"²—through acting and faking. Oswald's film underscores the power of role-play and emulation (of

middle-class practices) in order to undermine the notion of the intrinsic, irrevocable identity (German nationality in this case). It concludes with the recognition that while the latter cannot be effaced, the former—the performative aspect of personal identity—is more crucial to the individual's experience of authenticity. In Oswald's view, this aspect likewise plays a positive role in the formation of the modern community: a transnational merchant, "the stranger" functions here as a mediator between different communities across national borders. The chapters in this book indicate that this conclusion was prevalent within Weimar cinema.

Second, while there is nothing explicitly Jewish about Alexander Bessel, I argue that Oswald's symptomatic discussion of identity and performance should be read as a candid commentary on Jewish aspirations, fears, and self-perception in modern Germany. In its characterization of identity formation, its emphasis on the desire to blend into educated middle-class society, and its marginalization of inborn national identity, Oswald's film encapsulates and discusses the main features of German Jewish modernization and the ways in which it was perceived in the 1920s. As the following chapters indicate, the principles that guide the narrative and visual imagery in *The Transformation of Dr. Bessel* played also prominent roles in the liberal Jewish identity discourse in pre-Nazi Germany. The infiltration of Jews into the educated middle class had been associated by both contemporaneous critics and current scholars with an effort to imitate the appearances and practices of that class. As the discussion in this book shows, while anti-Semitic commentators characterized this endeavor as a deceitful attempt to conceal the authentic Jewish essence (or lack of essence), liberal Jewish intellectuals maintained that—similar to the case of Dr. Bessel—authenticity can be discovered, and expressed, through emulation. The film also echoes the famous assimilatory imperative, "be a man in the street and a Jew at home,"³ which advocates the notion of hybrid identity through the maintenance of separate-yet-related realms of modernity. Finally, as the elaborated discussion in chapter five suggests, Bessel's experiences in wartime France reiterate the trope of "the stranger" as defined by Georg Simmel and associated with "the Jew" in the modern world: an integrated person whose presence nevertheless articulates "externality and opposition."⁴ Such encoding of Jewish experience within the context of the formation and transformation of the urban middle class is evident in various genres of Weimar cinema; indeed, it is one of the most prevailing, yet neglected, phenomena in the German film of the pre-Nazi era.

The chapters in this book suggest that Weimar "genre film"⁵ was, to a large extent, a major symbolic site at which the intricacies of early twentieth-century German Jewish identity were condensed and exhibited.

It was a site that displayed the tensions and hopes that accompanied Jewish integration into the urban middle class at a vital historical moment, when the liberal cohort in Germany had undergone a series of crises that threatened to undermine its fundamental values and beliefs.⁶ This reading will not only underscore new facets in Weimar film, it will also reveal a tremendous effort on the part of German Jewish artists and intellectuals to utilize modern visual culture in order “to define both themselves and the community to which they belong.”⁷

CHAPTER ONE

WEIMAR FILM AND JEWISH ACCULTURATION

Jewry fulfills its contemporary assignment to reestablish the provisional [by being] the best critic, the funniest satirist, the most radical Communist, the most competent journalist, the most hilarious literary improviser, glossator, Frondeur, a master of Aperçu.

—Willy Haas, “Juden in der Deutschen Literatur”

Jewish modernization in Germany, and its influence on both German and Jewish thought, politics, and culture, has fascinated generations of scholars.¹ In depicting the nature of Jewish integration in modern Germany, scholars have traditionally oscillated between portrayals of “symbiotic” and “submissive” relationships, differing primarily in their answer to the question whether Jews contributed *qua Jews* to the German public discourse, or rather relinquished their particularities in the process of assimilation.² Current studies have pointed out, however, that both of these paradigms presuppose a “wrong and ahistorical” notion of authentic and recognizably different Jewish and German cultural identities.³ Recent scholarship on Jewish experience in modern Germany has therefore advocated a shift of emphasis from its national and religious tensions to its social practices. Consequently, these studies accentuate the roles of non-national—or transnational—contexts in shaping the modern German Jewish experience. Rather than searching for the influences of the autochthonous Jewish culture and the transformation it underwent as a result of Jewish assimilation in *Germany*, scholars have shifted their focus to the process of Jewish integration within the educated middle class in the German cities.⁴ Underscoring its bourgeois context, many scholars have come to regard the absorption of bourgeois values and norms as a key component of the modern Jewish experience. As Simone Lässig has indicated, to be considered part of the urban bourgeoisie principally meant emulating its *Habitus*—that is, the appearances, gestures, language, values, and cultural preferences of this social group—in the public sphere.⁵ This process often

included the zealous adoption of the ethos of *Bildung* (personal cultivation and education) as well as an Enlightenment-based liberal morality.⁶

In his portrayal of the incorporation of Jews into the urban bourgeoisie in early twentieth-century Breslau, Till van Rahden suggested that this process could have taken place only within a society that accepted the fundamentals of liberal ethics, was prepared to endorse multiculturalism, and accepted flexible definitions of ethnicity.⁷ This dependency of the Jewish middle class on the liberal sentiments of the society as a whole appears to have led many Jewish intellectuals and artists to engage in an effort to promote the formation of a multicultural, middle-class society and to reflect on its ability to accept them as equals despite their inherent difference.⁸ As David Sorkin noted, the steadfast embracement and articulation of liberal ideals was thus intended to render urban bourgeois Jews “invisible,” that is, indistinct as a group within the public sphere.⁹ Ironically, the intensive endeavor to become indistinguishable (in the context of the urban bourgeoisie) is one of the cultural phenomena that distinguish Jewish thinkers and artists in the realm of German culture.¹⁰

Jews’ efforts to emulate the appearance and gestures of the *Bildungsbürgertum* (the educated German middle class¹¹) had played a key role in the pre-1933 German Jewish identity discourse. As the discussion in the following chapter indicates, commentators in modern Germany often linked the experience of Jewish embourgeoisement to the “Jewish” extraordinary mastery of appearance. The frequent association of acting and mimicry with modern Jewish identity thus turned the tensions between metamorphoses and sustainability of identity, and the problematic duality of authenticity and role playing—the foundations of the performing arts—into fundamentally (German-) Jewish themes.¹² A number of recent studies have therefore suggested that during the nineteenth century the German theater had become a principal sphere for the exhibition and negotiation of modern Jewish self-perceptions.¹³ One of the cultural cornerstones of the *Bildungsbürgertum*, theater enabled Jewish directors, dramatists, and, in particular, actors to reflect upon their social integration using artistic conventions that informed the self-perception of the bourgeoisie.¹⁴ Indeed, the theater stage, the place where identities were constituted through acting and simulation, had been gradually perceived in Germany (at least since the 1890s) as a “Jewish” sphere.¹⁵ Jewish performance was particularly noticeable in avant-garde theater and cabaret shows.¹⁶ According to Peter Jelavich, these stages embedded “the mentality that best allowed Germany’s Jews to take a place in the cultural landscape, whose traditional institutions resisted full integration of Jews.”¹⁷

I will argue that, notwithstanding the importance of theater, it was actually cinema that was the major site for the contemplation and

exhibition of Jewish experience in Germany during the Weimar years. By the early 1920s cinema had become a major venue for Jewish artists and entrepreneurs.¹⁸ As demonstrated in the following chapters, film did not only provide a unique sphere in which Jewish “outsiders” could influence the shaping of mainstream bourgeois culture, but it also provided a vocabulary that enabled the integration of their particular experiences, hopes, and fears into the cultural discourse of the bourgeoisie. Observing the collapse of the traditional social and political institutions and the plethora of novel experiences during the Great War and its aftermath, these men and women played a crucial part in the attempt to reconsider the values, desires, and anxieties of the urban middle class. At the same time, they were preoccupied with the challenge of assimilation, its limits, and consequences. This book suggests that, through the works of several Jewish filmmakers, the combination of these two interests—in a liberal urban bourgeoisie and in integration of the “biological” other—had become an integral part of German mainstream culture in the years that preceded the ascent of Nazism.¹⁹

On March 13, 1920, reactionary militia troops led by Wolfgang Kapp marched on Berlin in a violent attempt to overthrow the recently elected German democratic regime. A few days before this attempted coup the journal *Film-Kurier* had called its readers’ attention to the fateful historical crossroad they were facing, at which two competing approaches were struggling over the national hegemony. The popular journal, however, was not referring to the conflict between democracy and monarchy. As Kapp’s militia was preparing for its march on the republic’s capital, the *Film-Kurier* focused on a completely different critical issue: the future of the national film culture. It was a decisive moment of choice for the German film, the journal argued, between the development of an extraordinary art cinema—stylistically experimental, with novel narrative structures and conspicuously “German” themes—on the one hand, and the visual sensations and excitement of exotic adventure films on the other. In other words, as the title of the front-page article read: would the future German film resemble Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, 1920) or Joe May’s *Mistress of the World* (*Die Herrin der Welt*, 1919/1920)?²⁰

To a large extent, this debate on the future of German visual culture was an internal Jewish affair: both Wiene and May were of Jewish ancestry, like many of their actors, their scriptwriters, producers, and other key participants in their productions; furthermore, the magazine *Film-Kurier* itself employed several Jewish critics and was edited by Jews throughout the 1920s. Equally noteworthy, however, is the fact that the Jewish aspect of these films received no mention in this discussion on their essential

role in German culture. It appears as if the Jewishness of the filmmakers had, indeed, become *invisible* to this circle of mostly Jewish critics. To a large extent, this 1920 article is representative of Weimar film culture. The essential role of ethnically Jewish artists, producers, and critics in the two films it discusses and the ways it reviews them as expressions of German national traits were anything but extraordinary during the Weimar years.

Cinema was one of the realms in which the participation of Jews in German culture of the 1920s was most evident.²¹ Intriguingly, the history of Jewish filmmaking in Germany was often intertwined with the development of styles that were identified as distinctively “German” and which, even today, mark the outlines of German “national” cinema.²² It is hard to think of German expressionist film, for instance, without considering the contribution of the scriptwriter Carl Mayer (most notably due to his work on *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*) and the set designer and director Paul Leni (whose *Waxworks*, *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett*, 1923, is an expressionist tour de force). Similarly, many distinguished Weimar horror films, such as the famous *Nosferatu* (Friedrich W. Murnau, 1922), are indebted to ethnically Jewish writers such as Henrik Galeen (born Heinrich Wiesenberg). Jewish filmmakers such as Richard Oswald (born Ornstein) and Leontine Sagan (born Schlesinger) often tested the boundaries of the political agency of film through discussion of social and sexual taboos in a way that became synonymous with Weimar cinema (for both its admirers and its critics).²³

Jewish engagement with German film was not restricted to the artistic avant-garde; it was also evident in the most prominent blockbusters. Fritz Lang, who flirted with expressionist-styled psychological grimness in films such as *Destiny* (*Der müde Tod*, 1921), directed some of the most popular films of the era, such as *Die Nibelungen* (1924) and *Metropolis* (1926).²⁴ Much like Lang’s epic visualization of imagined past and future, Ernst Lubitsch’s historical dramas (such as *Madame Dubarry*, 1919) were embedded in, and extended, German popular historical imagination.²⁵ Similarly extravagant were the immensely popular adventure films of Joe May (born Julius Otto Mandl) dating back to the early Weimar years.²⁶ With the advent of German sound film in 1929 many Jewish filmmakers were involved in the production of some pioneering blockbusters, which playfully explored the new cinematic horizons of sound recording. Thus, for instance, Hanns Schwarz made musicals and backstage-melodramas such as *Darling of the Gods* (*Liebling der Götter*, 1930); and Wilhelm Thiele (born Isersohn) made the extremely popular musical *The Three from the Gas Station* (*Die Drei von der Tankstelle*, 1930). The latter also demonstrates a prevalent tendency to incorporate into film other aspects

of popular culture with a conspicuous Jewish presence, such as pop music and revue-shows. Some Jewish filmmakers of the Weimar sound film era succeeded in emulating *Caligari*’s phenomenal success in both gaining critical acclamation and attracting a wide audience, such as Josef von Sternberg with *The Blue Angel* (*Der blaue Engel*, 1930), and Fritz Lang with *M* (1931).

Depicted often as the most symptomatic films of Weimar’s final years, *The Blue Angel* and *M* are probably the most widely known demonstrations of the influence of ethnically Jewish men and women on the “distinctiveness” of German cinematic imagery. This influence, however, went beyond the circles of directors, scriptwriters, and set designers. The unique visual perception of the Jewish cinematographer Karl Freund, for instance, made an extraordinary contribution to Fritz Lang’s renowned *Metropolis* and Murnau’s *The Last Laugh* (*Der letzte Mann*, 1924).²⁷ Helmar Lerski, the cinematographer who produced the remarkable visual illusions in *Metropolis* also constructed some of the most innovative images in Weimar film [such as in Leni’s *Waxworks* and the recently rediscovered Robert Reinert’s *Nerves* (*Nerven*, 1919)].²⁸ An indirect influence on “classical” Weimar film can be traced also to the prominent roles occupied by Jews in other cultural realms. The innovative director Max Reinhardt’s (born Goldman) guidance in the theater was of undeniable significance in the artistic development of Murnau, Lubitsch, and numerous others who shifted their interest from theater to film during the 1910s. The transition from stage to screen characterized many prominent Jewish actors in Weimar film. Some, like Peter Lorre, gained fame for their ability to convey the inner world of tormented souls with a few visible expressions; others, like Siegfried Arno, and Kurt Gerron, successfully imported the body language of urban cabaret shows to various film productions.

Alongside their role as artists, German Jews likewise made an impact on the local cinema as policymakers and critics. Like many of the most popular films of the era, *Metropolis* and *Caligari* were made under the auspices of the Jewish producer Erich Pommer. Prior to 1933 Pommer was arguably the most influential man in the German film industry; as head producer of Ufa (Universum Film AG)—a conglomerate of production companies that dominated the German market—he also exerted a crucial influence on the cooperation with American and European studios, which dramatically changed German cinema in the latter half of the 1920s.²⁹ Several production and distribution companies, such as Nero Film and Stern-Film, had Jewish owners.³⁰ Jews likewise held leading positions as reviewers and theoreticians of film and its political impact. Critics such as Willy Haas, Béla Balázs, and Siegfried Kracauer combined popular

reviews with analytical observations that depicted film as a social agent and a mode of reflection on social reality, and pointed to its artistic potential.³¹ Many Jews, such as Karl Wolffsohn, Hans Feld, and Hans Wollenberg, promoted this kind of discourse as editors and publishers of popular film magazines and anthologies.³² Recounting only a fraction of the aforementioned Jewish participation in Weimar filmmaking, Abraham Myerson and Isaac Goldberg stated in 1933 that "before the recent confiscation of the industry by the Nazis, [cinema] was in effect a Jewish domination."³³ But a lot more than "a Jewish domination," cinema was a site where Jewish cultural endeavor integrated into the mainstream German culture in a way that emphasized cooperation (and downplayed differences) between Jews and non-Jews.

The remarkable presence of Jews in Berlin's film industry was far from coincidental. The German discourse about film, its social function and political impact, seems to have made it especially attractive to young educated Jews who sought to be incorporated into, and to influence the worldviews of, the urban middle class. A trivial reason for the appeal of film among these Jewish artists was its immense popularity and its unparalleled role in modern urban culture. It was "love at first sight," the critic Urban Gad reminisced in 1921; the German public's affair with films was "patient, merciful and forgiving, as is any great love."³⁴ Indeed, by the mid-1920s between one and two million Germans were visiting cinema theaters every night.³⁵ Between the years 1918 and 1933 the number of cinema theaters in Germany doubled, reaching more than 5000.³⁶ Most of the filmgoers, however, were city dwellers (in Berlin alone more than forty million tickets were sold each year in the mid-1920s).³⁷ Already before World War I, and much more in its aftermath, film had become an essential element of German urban culture. The marketing strategies that had begun to evolve before 1914—including, for instance, the use of "film stars," genre films, and targeted advertising—grew more sophisticated and insistent in the early 1920s; together with abundant film magazines, reviews of films in the general press, and the conspicuous decoration of urban cinema theaters, they ensured an almost ubiquitous presence of film in the urban public sphere.³⁸

In attempting to satisfy the thirst for visual entertainment, German film studios produced several hundred films each year during the 1920s.³⁹ The soaring need for skilled workers and artists in this industry enabled the participation of many educated young Jews in various aspects of filmmaking. The novelty and popularity of film often associated it with lowbrow entertainment. This identification appears to have contributed further to the involvement of Jews in it: as in other arenas of the emerging urban culture, such as the circus or the cabaret, newcomers and "outsiders" suffered

little institutionalized discrimination (or unofficial prejudices) in comparison with the "legitimate" theater or other traditional arts.⁴⁰ As Sabine Hake noted, in the early twentieth century, when numerous young Jewish artists initiated their love affair with filmmaking, cinema was particularly attractive to "all those whose lives have been deeply affected by the process of modernization."⁴¹ These artists, most of them immigrants, children of immigrants, or second generation to Jewish emancipation, undoubtedly belonged to this group, and their films habitually portrayed and sought to affect this social milieu.

As it emerged to be the most popular form of urban entertainment, film was considered by many commentators as the medium that symbolizes and intensifies the potentials and perils of urban modernization (indeed, in a way similar to the presence of the "the Jew" in the city⁴²). German critics often pointed to the disturbing match between spectators' experience in the cinema and the "essence" of experience within the modern city (or, in Walter Benjamin's famous words, the contemporary, namely, urban, "shape of existence").⁴³ Exploiting the latest technological innovations film provided a myriad of visual sensations that displayed and supported the emerging mass consumption culture.⁴⁴ Naturally, this new culture reflected the waning of various social and cultural traditions, a process with which film was promptly associated.⁴⁵ Moreover, film provided modern urbanites with an unparalleled type of reflexive images. It enabled them to see themselves, figuratively speaking, from a different angle: the use of various viewpoints, camera movements, and montage editing granted urban spectators a perspective from which they could reflect on their daily experience, its meanings, and its boundaries. Put simply, for young Jewish artists in the early 1900s Germany film was an accessible medium, which enabled them to engage in a discourse that examined and characterized the social milieu they belonged to, or sought to be a part of.

Film, moreover, was not merely a most popular urban entertainment, or the "theater of the little man," as some critics asserted.⁴⁶ Many critics of the Weimar era strived to portray film as an art form that adapted the cultural heritage of *Bildung* to the reality of World War I and its aftermath, and to the modern visual media.⁴⁷ Much of the discourse about film addressed the question whether film could develop artistic qualities that matched the traditional, admired arts. Weimar filmmakers frequently endeavored to attain legitimacy through filming adaptations of classic texts (e.g., *Faust*, *Hamlet*, *Crime and Punishment*, etc.) or by claiming to have based their narratives on a literary or "legitimate" artistic source.⁴⁸ In their writing on film, both filmmakers and critics often compared it to poetry and literature. Previous experience in more reputable arts, such as theater, painting, and literature, enabled many filmmakers to underscore film's relations

with established art forms, and oftentimes to conclude that film was the ultimate art of modernity: a place in which poetry and technology merged into a sequence of visual images that expressed the novelty of contemporary experience.⁴⁹ These efforts to legitimate film have contributed to its perception as heir and potential contributor to the arts that have traditionally constituted bourgeois culture in Germany.⁵⁰ For young Jews of the educated middle class, therefore, film also provided an accessible path toward participation in the mainstream culture of the *Bildungsbürgertum*.

In addition to the duality of high art and popular entertainment, the post-World War I German film underscored and nurtured the tension between the national and the transnational aspects of cinema. The reading of Weimar cinema has traditionally emphasized its national aspect. Both Weimar contemporaries and later scholars often portrayed German film's imagery as being associated with the particularities of German history and cultural traditions. While many later studies have sought to unveil the destructive aspects of German nationalism in the nation's pre-1933 cinema, Weimar commentators frequently emphasized the constructive role played by film in the enhancement of national qualities. Several post-World War I commentators observed that film could contribute to the endeavor of nation-building, since they could manifest, teach, and develop the immanent qualities of German national culture.⁵¹ The conservative critic Oskar Kalbus went so far as to maintain that, in taking on a role similar to that of the German universities after the defeat in the Napoleonic Wars, post-World War I films could replace "what has been lost in the material world" with the "spirit" of the nation.⁵² Yet the national mission of cinema was underscored not only by Weimar conservatives and nationalists. Erich Pommer, the Jewish producer who detested nationalist chauvinism, advocated the use of film as guardian and educating agent of German culture, as he extolled its unique qualities vis-à-vis the American version of modernity.⁵³

Weimar film was, however, produced and distributed within a transnational framework. The local film industry's dependency on export during the hyperinflation period, and the desperate struggle against imported US (and, to a lesser extent, Soviet) productions in the late 1920s, prompted transnational collaborations with European, American, and Soviet companies.⁵⁴ These factors also instructed the oscillation of German film between mimicry of Hollywood's successful conventions and the display of unique, "authentic" German images and narratives. On the one hand, German filmmakers sought to imitate the success of Hollywood films in being essentially "transnational" by presenting tropes and "models of identification" that would appeal to a variety of modern audiences, across national borders.⁵⁵ On the other hand, as a marketing strategy (which

proved to be particularly effective in the transnational market of the early 1920s) they frequently endeavored to define and manifest the German national particularities in their films.⁵⁶ As an emblem of the combination of national and transnational identities, and of German and transatlantic urban culture, film appears to have enabled Jewish urbanites to contribute to the German national discourse without conceding the transnational aspects of their identity.

While the tension between the desire to emulate Hollywood's convention and the struggle to find a conspicuous German cinematic imagery reflected marketing concerns, it also underscored a fundamental duality of cinematic representation: the search for authenticity through the display of visual simulation. This duality figured prominently in the relentless discussion of the relations between film and reality in the post-World War I years. Weimar critics and spectators were well aware of the insoluble gap between film and experienced reality. As Franz Liesegang wrote in 1918, no one could be fooled into equating reality with its simulation in film: when we gaze at the screen, "our eye notices [...] that something is not right, that something is different from looking at nature" (another critic commented in 1920 that this disparity explained why most people enjoy being in nature, but suffer when watching nature films).⁵⁷ Reflecting on the connection between film and reality, the *Film-Kurier* reminded its readers that in order to take film seriously as art, one should not think of it as a mere replica of reality.⁵⁸

Yet, while the tension between reality and its appearance on the screen was widely acknowledged, this did not detract from the fascination of filmmakers, reviewers, and spectators with the notion of realist representation. In fact, the notion that film could portray "the truth" was as widely acknowledged as its inability to replicate "the real." Political activists of various convictions sought to use this ability in order to educate the masses. Cinema could suppress revolutionary impulses, promised Oskar Kalbus, for instance, since "the Camera Obscura cannot lie."⁵⁹ The Jewish critic Béla Balázs expressed a similar belief in the political impact of film realism—"displaying the truth is the best weapon in the fight for the truth"—but concluded that it therefore supported the Marxist cause.⁶⁰ Film's capacity for being simultaneously an entertainment, a documentation of reality, and a means for critical reflections on reality prompted Heinrich Zille's 1925 statement that was frequently repeated by Weimar filmmakers and critics, "the way to film is the way towards awareness."⁶¹ The desire to display "the truth" on the screen was often emphasized in advertisements of films, as well as in interviews with filmmakers that accompanied the marketing campaigns; Weimar film critics tended likewise to address this notion of "realism" in their aesthetic evaluation of particular films.⁶²

Rather than emphasizing the 'indexical' quality of film, its ability to document the surface of reality, Weimar filmmakers and reviewers often celebrated the discovery of a *new kind of authenticity* through the mimicry of reality in film. Faking, "making the impression" of the real world, it was often remarked, enabled the film to go beyond experienced reality.⁶³ Thus, for instance, when asked whether he preferred to film "outdoor" scenes in a studio or on location, the Jewish filmmaker Paul Leni explained that the studio would provide a more "authentic" image, because it allowed him to exhibit the *essence* of the filmed reality, rather than its surface.⁶⁴ Indeed, many German critics and filmmakers asserted that film could bridge the modern divide between essence and appearance: film could expose otherwise invisible psychological dispositions; it could reveal the unique "spirit" of an age, its ideological biases, and disregarded mythologies; and it could disclose the power structure that determines social experience.⁶⁵ As one critic wrote in 1927, the careful simulation of visible reality in film enabled it to unveil the invisible essence of reality: "the reality that lies behind the objectivity."⁶⁶ In other words, in emphasizing the convoluted relationships and overlaps between national and transnational identities and between essence and appearance, film embedded the fundamental tensions that both Jews and gentiles often associated with the modern Jewish experience in German cities. As the following chapters demonstrate, this understanding of film appealed to many Jewish filmmakers of the Weimar Republic. As in Oswald's work in *Dr. Bessel*, they often formulated their films in a way that underscored the revealing of authenticity through mimicry and acting, and the emergence of collective identity through the experience of border crossing.

As the aforementioned quotes imply, however, in associating film with the authentic truth Weimar critics also indicated its role in contemporary politics and ideological debates. By the early 1920s, several filmmakers, intellectuals, and politicians had already emphasized film's significant role in the formation of popular worldviews and self-perceptions. The representatives of *The German Association of Film Makers (Vereinigung deutscher Film Fabrikanten)*, for instance, warned the Reichstag members in February 1920 that film would soon replace all traditional sources of information; learning its language and its political effects was an urgent task, they maintained, since film was bound to become a crucial means in the quest for public support.⁶⁷ The almost mystic power to manipulate spectators' views and actions was underscored in numerous film reviews of the period, and fear of this power instructed the ongoing efforts to censor "perilous" films.⁶⁸ The conviction that film could not only lead spectators toward the correct political worldview but was also able to transform "the masses into a public," to provide models for identification, guided

commentators of all political convictions in Weimar, from the radical and conservative right, through the liberal supporters of the republic, to the communists.⁶⁹ Due to this widely held recognition of its (potential) political impact, film was not merely a "Jewish" medium—in the sense that the metaphors, fears, and desires associated with it uncannily corresponded with those associated with "the Jew"—but it also enabled Jews to participate in, and to shape, the ideological discourse in Weimar Germany.

In German public discourse prior to 1933, film was perceived as a major vehicle for reflection on both the innate tension between performance and authenticity and on the hidden principles that guide—or should be guiding—the constitution of the urban middle class and its worldview, values, desires, and fears. In other words, it constituted an effective tool for the contemplation of Jewish assimilation within the modern urban sphere: the formation of individual identity, and authenticity, through performance and appearance; and the constitution of a multicultural, liberal community that would accept the notion of multilayered identity. Film provided an unparalleled and unprecedented sphere of activity for Jews in modern Germany. It was a medium that facilitated upward social mobility, enabled one to influence the German political imagination, and provided a new vocabulary for reflections on the process of identity formation. A reading of Weimar film as a Jewish endeavor will therefore disclose key features of the German Jewish self-perception, and the manner in which these were negotiated within the German public discourse.⁷⁰

Notably, while Weimar film demonstrates an extraordinary triumph of Jewish acculturation, the golden age of German Jewish filmmaking concurred with an unprecedented growth in anti-Semitic tendencies and a manifest deterioration in the "invisibility" of Jews in the German national discourse. The long years of devastating war, the humiliating defeat, and the political and economic instability during the aftermath stimulated old resentments toward Jews as well as gave birth to new anti-Jewish perceptions.⁷¹ It has been frequently noted that the five hundred thousand Jewish residents in Germany in the early 1920s comprised less than 1 percent of the general population.⁷² Nonetheless, the post-World War I years generated an intimidating wave of accusations that linked the Jews with the catastrophic outcome of the war.⁷³ The mixture of popular militarism and wartime propaganda instigated a widespread allegation that the German army was "stabbed in the back" by spineless left-wingers and disloyal Jews.⁷⁴ Jews were marked as opportunistic war profiteers already at the beginning of the war. Anti-Jewish sentiments had been manifested and kindled further by the "Judenählung," the census of frontline Jewish soldiers (which practically differentiated German Jews from "Germans," underscoring their status as a distinguished category). The unwillingness

to report the results of the census, which, in fact, refuted the accusations, perpetuated the rumors on the unpatriotic Jews of Germany.⁷⁵

The political turmoil of the aftermath and the evidently prominent role of Jews in the leadership of the Marxist revolutionary movements during the early days of the republic inspired another spread of anti-Semitic emotion (which occasionally resorted to violence).⁷⁶ The anti-Jewish violence, and the identification of the Jews with the republic and its shortcomings, reached a climax in 1922 with the assassination of Walther Rathenau, the Jewish foreign minister.⁷⁷ While it did not indicate an inevitable escalation of anti-Semitic powers, the assassination contributed to the growing (out-of-proportion) importance of the "Jewish question" within the German political discourse. The experience of the war, the revolutions, and the amounting anti-Semitism prompted a reconsideration of the German Jewish "question" also within Weimar Jewry; revolutionary and dissimulatory tendencies challenged the ambition to be "invisible" from a Jewish point of view.⁷⁸

Arguably, with the post-World War I immigration from Eastern Europe, Jews were visible in the German cities more than ever before. The Jewish refugees who fled westward to escape violence and poverty during the war and its aftermath were often visibly recognized as foreigners; for both anti-Semites and Jewish nationalists they seemed to challenge the premises of the assimilation enterprise, or to mark its boundaries.⁷⁹ In addition, while strict quota limited Jewish enrollment to many German universities, some popular scientific trends inspired the popularization of new, racist anti-Semitism, which described Jews as "objectively"—and "incurably"—different from the German *Volk*.⁸⁰ Finally, of course, at least since the latter 1920s, the National-Socialist Party efficiently provoked and exploited anti-Jewish emotions in its march to political dominance. Obviously, these developments have not denoted a straight, or predestined, path to the annihilation of German Jewry. But they made the "Jewish question"—the challenge of the assimilation of Jewish identity within modern society in Germany—urgent and unavoidable. German Jewish filmmakers, most of them "cautious liberals" who sought to promote a social reform through "evolution, no revolution," felt this challenge and constantly reacted to it.

The Jewish filmmakers of the Weimar Republic enjoyed the fruits of acculturation in an era when its fundamental assumptions have been put to test. Faced with the increasing threat of being cast as "outsiders," reflections on identity formation, "otherness," and social justice had become an essential component in their films. As the following chapters show, many Jewish filmmakers in pre-1933 Germany (even the ones who claimed to be oblivious to politics) creatively engaged these topics with a sense

of urgency. In their attempts to counter the popularity of illiberal, anti-Semitic tendencies, these filmmakers formulated the protagonists and the imagery that shaped German cinema in the years that preceded the republic's violent demise.

This book demonstrates how the popular conventions of Weimar genre film were formulated and exploited by Jewish filmmakers in order to explore the inherent tensions of modern Jewish identity and to react to the current political, social, and ideological challenges faced by the post-World War I German bourgeois Jewry. The often overlooked contemplation of Jewish experience in Weimar film is important also for the equally overlooked ways in which it influenced the visual images, narratives, and styles of the German cinema of the time. Brilliantly canonized in the works of two Jewish émigrés—Siegfried Kracauer (*From Caligari to Hitler*, 1947) and Lotte Eisner (*L'Écran Démoniaque*, 1952)—the traditional reading of Weimar films portrayed them as manifestations of the extraordinary encounter of the "German psyche" with modernity and its crises.⁸¹ These seminal studies suggested a teleological interpretation that linked Weimar film to the (almost inevitable) rise of national socialism. In associating post-World War I films with the peculiarities of German national culture, they emphasized the illiberal qualities manifested in these productions: the embrace of irrational drives, nationalist chauvinism, conservatism, escapism, and anti-Semitism. In highlighting these tendencies, Eisner and Kracauer's accounts have shaped the ways in which generations of scholars have imagined the Weimar Republic through its films.

Recent studies, however, have challenged the capacity of previous analyses to "tell the whole story."⁸² As Thomas Elsaesser has famously argued, the reading of Weimar films as precursors of Nazism is problematic mainly because "the films usually indexed as 'Weimar cinema' [...] refuse to be 'tied down' to a single meaning."⁸³ Current scholars, therefore, tend to underscore the multiple readings embedded in Weimar cinema, pointing to the variety of contexts that lent meaning to these films.⁸⁴ Indeed, the dissociation of films from the historical meta-narrative (i.e., the demise of the Weimar Republic) has enabled scholars to link them with numerous experiences, worldviews, and memories of Weimar contemporaries.⁸⁵ Some scholars have employed this new approach to reveal a variety of additional manifestations of nationalist conservatism, escapism, latent racism, and not-so-latent anti-Semitism; others, however, have noted the longing for a less authoritarian society and have addressed the practice and aesthetics of left-wing filmmaking.⁸⁶

Based on these recent trends in the study of Weimar film, the following shifts the emphasis to the cinematic encoding of Jewish urban experience in the pre-Nazi era. A key element in the argument suggested later is the

particular selection of films examined in this book. Even though German studios produced hundreds of films during the Weimar years, the scholarship on Weimar film frequently focuses on a fairly limited canon of the “most significant, most widely taught, and most widely available films of the period.”⁸⁷ The following discusses films that are part of this canon alongside films that have been hitherto neglected by scholars. In focusing on Weimar popular genres—domestic comedies, melodramas, horror films, adventure and war films—it suggests that analysis of lesser-known films reveals the importance of overlooked ideological tendencies and of deemphasized stylistic trends. Moreover, it provides a new context for the understanding of films included in the familiar canon. As the following chapters show, the contextualization of popular genres such as domestic comedies and adventure films within the framework of the contemporaneous Jewish identity discourse would also enable a new reading of Weimar’s most renowned works, such as *Nosferatu* and *Metropolis*.

The films analyzed in this book share a similar view of the integration of “outsiders” into the European middle class and the need to establish a social order and values that would enable such integration. Thus, the reflections about otherness and integration in these films function as a general framework for the discussion of various liberal causes, for example, unbiased and efficient legal institutions, reform of the education system, and the eradication of mysticism and illiberal radicalism. In the films discussed in the chapters that follow, modern Jewish experience is encoded as the foundation for a critical inquiry into the essence of the post-World War I urban middle class: its values and the threats it faces from forces such as prewar conservatism and nationalism, as well as “American” indifference and mass consumerist escapism.

The following discussion highlights the urban frameworks in which pre-1933 German films were produced and distributed. It was in these modern spheres of post-World War I Germany, simultaneously local and transnational, that the Jewish presence became visible in unprecedented ways. Associated with these spheres of modernity, the symbolic role of “the Jew” reached a notable climax during the crisis-ridden years of the Weimar Republic. This book argues that many of the films that were made in Berlin during the years 1918–1933 in fact contemplated the German Jewish encounter during this ominous period. Thus, the following chapters seek to go beyond merely marking the “presence” of Jews in Weimar cinema and characterizing the formation of “the Jew” on the screen, to argue that film was the main contribution of German Jews to what Steven Aschheim called the “German-Jewish co-constitution” of the progressive bourgeoisie in pre-Nazi Germany: an endeavor that “highlights the search for, and

the founding of, a new sensibility in which older ethnic and religious differences are either peripheral or play no role at all.”⁸⁸ To a large extent, Weimar films demonstrate the efforts—mainly by Jewish filmmakers and through symbolism that invoked a conspicuously Jewish experience—to promote the formation of a liberal, multicultural, transnational bourgeois society, in which “the Jew” could be different, but equal.