
“Cabaret” and the History of Berlin’s Cabarets

While “Cabaret” relies on the cabaret setting as a narrative force of the film, it is also based in the history surrounding cabaret performances in Berlin. Both in the film and in real life, the cabaret served as a place of degenerate art and political dissent; this status set the cabaret apart from other venues of art and performance in Berlin at the time. The historical and cultural context of cabaret performances in Berlin proves that the cabaret is inherently political and anti-fascist, which proves the political and anti-fascist nature of scenes and performances in the film, namely including “Money” and “Cabaret”.

In Friedrich Hollaender’s essay “Cabaret”, he describes the nature of the cabaret as “dispensing a poison cookie” under the cover of normal evening entertainment, meaning radical ideas are easily spread through performances in the cabaret subconsciously, appearing on the surface as fun entertainment. This can be observed in many elements of the film “Cabaret”, namely in the songs “Money” and “Cabaret”. This effect of subtle yet intense political indoctrination is a key point in understanding the cultural and historical context and importance of “Cabaret” as a whole. “Money” is a performance by Sally Bowles and the Emcee. The song they perform is about the necessity of money in every aspect of life and the adversities surrounding poverty, along with the privileges that come with being rich. While this is a very serious topic and quite relatable to the audience at the time, the nature of the performance itself is quite humorous. Through this juxtaposition, those watching enjoy humorous and pleasant entertainment while subconsciously being “fed” radical ideas about wealth and class structure, therefore fully encompassing the concept of the dispensing of the “poison cookie” (Hollaender 567), so the audience will leave with these new ideas associated with the positive entertainment and performance aspect of the cabaret, whether they are consciously aware of it at the time or not.

In Berlin during the Weimar Republic, at the very surface levels, the cabaret was debated in terms of its cultural utility. For example, many believed war time was too dire to look towards silly entertainment, while the other half of people saw the cabaret as a necessary positive and carefree outlet in times that were far too serious. As we can see in both Hollaender’s essay and the film “Cabaret”, historically, the true nature of the cabaret fell somewhere in between these two ideologies- a source of entertainment that was extremely political at its core while still being pleasant- a necessity against a rising empire of fascism largely defined by aesthetic grandeur without the underlying political meaning. The existence and success of the cabaret was a political act in itself, a pleasant form of entertainment including alcohol, a symbol of prosperity, against the rise of fascism and the tragedies of impending war.

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Cabaret performances criticized every single aspect of German political and social life. The most popular topics were sex and the government and fascism, to the point that after the 1920s two separate words were used to establish the difference in types of cabaret performances- "Cabaret" for songs about lustful activities and "Kabarett" for straightforward political discourse. The cabaret let public discourse thrive, even in an environment threatening censorship. Citizens did not feel guilt while criticizing the state while at the Cabaret, mostly because it was all under the guise of humor. If they were purely listening to political speech, it would feel much more like dissent. This is where Hollaender's "poison cookie" comes into play. The political dissent is so pleasant it does not even feel like political dissent, even when popular topics of critique included Germany's very existence as a republic and the rise and influence of the Nazi party.

Specifically, the song "Money" combines lyrics about wealth and poverty with a humorous performance and choreography to fully encompass Hollaender's concept of the cabaret. In war time, poverty was prevalent, making the issue quite universal in historical context. At the same time, the song has an underlying Marxist theme, which is an act of political dissent in itself as it is being performed during the rise of fascism in Berlin, as it is fundamentally opposed to Marxist ideology. Through the lyrics, the song juxtaposes elements of wealth and poverty, highlighting how wealth makes life easier and being poor makes life harder. For example, the Emcee sings, "If you happen to be rich and you feel like a night's entertainment you can pay for a gay escapade" (Cabaret). This shows the ease and carelessness of the lives of the wealthy, and also provides a sense of irony and self-awareness for the audience because most of the audience of the Kit Kat Club is wealthy, as seen in the film, and looking for entertainment in the same way as what is described in the lyrics- a "night's entertainment".

On the other hand, the song highlights the trials and difficulties of poverty. Sally Bowles later sings "When you haven't any shoes on your feet and your coat's thin as paper and you look thirty pounds underweight..." (Cabaret). While the audience is likely to laugh at these lyrics as they are accompanied with joyful music and humorous choreography exaggerating what it looks like to be cold and hungry, these lyrics describe the very real hardships of people living in poverty. While Sally herself is not exactly poor due to the money of her father, the line about having a "coat thin as paper" directly references the fact that Sally must sell her warm fur coat in order to get an abortion, highlighting the sacrifices one must make when they are poor and do not have another choice. These lyrics are meta-textual as they reference events in the text itself, but also the current historical moment.

While at first listen these lyrics might seem simple or humorous, this is all due to the nature of the cabaret as described by Hollaender. The message of the song is actually quite radical, and as stated by Hollaender, "its effect reaches far beyond the harmless evening to make otherwise placid blood boil and inspire a sluggish brain to think" (Hollaender 567). While at the surface

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level the song “Money” simply describes the contrast between the rich and poor, the foundation of the song is based in society’s dependence on money, which is deeply rooted in Marxism. As the song “Money” describes how difficult life is for those without money and income and how all of their struggles are based in their poverty, it outlines Marx’s idea that all of the struggles of humankind are rooted in class dispute between the privileged and the oppressed, or the bourgeoisie and proletariat classes. This is revealed in the most basic way- the song goes between describing the privilege of the wealthy and the oppression of the poor. The repeated title phrase, “Money makes the world go around” (Cabaret), is an inherently Marxist phrase in itself, as it furthers the idea that all of history and conflict is based in class struggle, and by that claim, money, which is directly related to class. This is an extremely radical idea to be expressed through a performance, especially in the cultural context of 1930s Germany as the Nazi party rose to power, as the Nazi party was fundamentally opposed to Marxist ideals. Therefore, the ideas expressed through the song “Money” are entirely worthy of being the fundamental cabaret song that Hollaender describes, matching the exact function of the cabaret in the Weimar republic.

Hollaender also describes the nature of humor used through cabaret performances to “dispense the poison cookie” or subconsciously spread inherently radical ideas to the audience. Hollaender says that humor in a cabaret performance specifically, as opposed to other types of comedic performances, is about more than just a cheap joke, but “the regal joke, which, in affectionate derision of all-too-human frailties, returns the listener to a consciousness of his strength” (Hollaender 567). While the surface level humor of the cabaret relies on cheap humor through choreography, like the fact that Sally Bowles and the Emcee are dropping coins into their clothes and making loud noises, the lyrics themselves reveal a much more radical type of humor. Even the cheap physical humor has a deeper meaning- they are literally dropping money into their clothes, performing images of wealth in perhaps a sexual nature, proving fundamental human dependency on money. This can be seen in multiple aspects of “Money”. The first and most obvious example is the fact that many of the audience members of the Kit Kat Club are wealthy themselves, such as Max, a frequent audience member for much of the film who buys things for Sally and Brian. This song gives these wealthy audience members a reminder of their own power in wealth through lyrics that outline their privileges, such as “Though you moan and you groan quite a lot, you can take it on the chin and begin” (Cabaret), which is actually a quite grounding method of reminding the wealthy class of their privilege and the fact that their problems are not as monumental as they may seem. This is especially effective in its contrast to the adversities of the poor, which also ties into Hollaender’s idea of the “regal joke”, working both to give power to the rich by nature of self-awareness of their own privilege and also giving power to the rich by making them aware of the class structure that inherently binds them, then giving them the power to resist.

The performance “Cabaret” near the end of the film serves entirely the same purpose, showing

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the same fundamental qualities of a cabaret performance in Germany's Weimar republic, though this performance relies much less on the comedic aspect and more on the performative aspect. In this case, the message lies entirely in the lyrics. Sally sings, "Life is a cabaret" (Cabaret). Since the cabaret space in historical Berlin has been established as inherently and fundamentally political and anti-fascist, Sally's lyrics prove her dedication to political dissent. Through choosing to live her life as it is a cabaret, she is choosing to engage in active political critique of the state, specifically the rise of fascism. Some critiques of Sally state that she is willfully blind and ignorant to the plight of her country and her peers, but "Cabaret" proves this is entirely untrue. By performing at the Kit Kat Club and her specific lifestyle choices reflecting the cabaret itself, Sally Bowles and the performance of "Cabaret" represents the active fight against fascist politics rising in Berlin.

Both "Money" and "Cabaret" from the film "Cabaret" are therefore the perfect example of a cabaret performance that subconsciously empowers its audience through giving them a sense of self-awareness in regards to radical Marxist ideals. It dispenses, through the words of Hollaender, the "poison cookie" to its audience that they are eager to consume because of the pleasant, flashy aspects of the performance, and encompassing Hollaender's "Cabaret" essay as a whole. It perfectly captures the historical moment and political and cultural significance of the cabaret in Berlin under the Weimar republic, and uses this context to further its message.

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