

Weimar Uncensored, 1918-1920:

An Online Archive

1. Introduction

This dossier emerged from archival research conducted for a film program at the 2026 Silent Film Festival in Pordenone. The program, which consist of six restored films, was co-curved with Michael Cowan and is titled “Weimar Uncensored: Taboos and Transgressions in German Cinema, 1918-1920.” Our interest was sparked by two events: the first event was the overnight abolishment of state film censorship by the socialist interim government on November 12, 1918, one day after the war ended and three days after the monarchy collapsed. The second event was the reintroduction of censorship on May 18, 1920, which was stricter than before and even included bans on films that had been shown freely before. What happened? Which films were screened during that brief period that led to this reversal? Also, relating to this dossier, what debates and disputes did these films generate?

The archival documents from 1918—1920 assembled here tell the story of how filmmakers, critics, and the government officials reacted to the sudden liberation from state control. They also describe how the commercial exploitation of near-total freedom produced a backlash that led to the reinstatement of censorship. This story is emblematic not only of the Republic’s early struggles with new freedoms, but also of broader arguments about artistic license and its boundaries. It also highlights the role that film plays as a public medium in a democratically free but deeply divided society.

Two caveats: First, the abolition of government censorship was not absolute, because local municipalities and the police could still use Paragraph 184, the obscenity law, to shut down a screening and even confiscate a film. However, this was relatively rare, usually occurring in response to public protests and disturbances at the theater. The other caveat concerns the choice of sources used to construct the story, given the immensely diverse and chaotic media landscape in the years immediately following the war.

Unsurprisingly, the sudden release from four years of harsh censorship by the imperial war ministry created a tsunami of new writings in every form imaginable, including writing

about film. While there were already several established film journals for the general reader, such as *Der Kinematograph* and *Lichtbild-Bühne*, a new film journal, *Der Film-Kurier*, was founded in 1919 to provide *daily* coverage of the burgeoning film industry. Numerous film journals were founded in the same year and often folded after one or two issues. Films were also discussed eagerly in the daily press. Berlin alone, with a population of 4 million (making it the third-largest city in the world in 1920), is estimated to have had over 100 newspapers, a dozen tabloids that appeared in three editions (morning, midday and evening), separate papers for every political party, and special-interest magazines for sexual minorities. An increasing number of these materials are currently being digitized and made available online by large-scale projects such as the Bundesarchiv's [Digitaler Lesesaal](#) and the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin's Zeitschriftenarchiv ([Zefys](#)). The present dossier can only hint at the depth and diversity of the period's archive.

To tell the story of censorship's hidden role in the production and reception of early Weimar film, I will focus on the rise and fall of the *Aufklärungsfilm*, a genre typically associated with the censorless period of the Weimar Republic. The German term is often translated as "enlightenment film" or "sex-education film," but I have decided to leave it untranslated because it retains its triple meaning: the Enlightenment period, sex education, and investigation of something hidden. In most cases, the term connotes more than one meaning in the original language and is, in fact, often used ironically. The German preserves the term's ambiguity.

The *Aufklärungsfilm* originated with Richard Oswald's four-part film series *Es werde Licht* (Let There Be Light), released in March 1917, which was intended to "enlighten" the viewers about the spread of venereal diseases during the war. Presenting medical and moral advice through melodramatic narratives allowed Oswald to address themes that had not previously been seen in film. Literally within two weeks of the end of censorship, Oswald began work on a film about prostitution, depicting young women being forced into sex work by poverty. Shortly thereafter he made *Anders als die Andern*, the first openly positive film about homosexuality. In a sense, both films pleaded for tolerance in the tradition of the Enlightenment, while also educating filmgoers about sexual practices. Oswald made both films in collaboration with Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, founder of the Institute for Sexual Science in 1919. Both films premiered in May 1919 and unleashed a fierce backlash against the genre. As a result, no copy of *Die Prostitution* has survived. Only posters, advertisements, and extensive pro and con writings about it remain to testify to its importance. *Anders als die Andern* is available as a fragment with large parts missing.

Oswald continued to defend his narrow concept of the *Aufklärungsfilm*, but the term became soon associated with the examination of sexual taboos and was rapidly adopted by reviewers for all sexually explicit films. The term also soon overlapped with another German film genre of the time, the *Sittenfilm* (“morality film”), which dealt with social taboos, such as alcoholism, drug addiction, sexual crime, blasphemy, and occultism. In a sense, all these films provide sensationalist, often salacious and scandalous entertainment under the thin guise of *Aufklärung*. It is estimated that more than one hundred of so-called “*Aufklärungsfilme*” were produced in 1919. Almost all of these low-budget movies have disappeared without a trace except for highly suggestive posters, which are presented here in an online exhibition dossier by Michael Cowan.

To demonstrate the force of the moral backlash, the present dossier also includes a section on censorship decisions made at the end of 1920 about films produced and screened during the uncensored period. Most of the films were prohibited from being shown again. The reasons given for banning a film offer insight into the censors' understanding of a film's function in society.

This section is still a work in progress, as is the entire dossier. It will be updated when new materials become available. In other words, this online archive is an open archive that invites participation. Each contribution will add nuance and depth. Please contact us if you would like to add your own archival finds to the Weimar Uncensored archive. All contributors will be acknowledged by name.

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