

Representation of Dangerous Sexuality in Interwar Non-Fiction Sex Hygiene Films: A Franco-German Comparison*

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Summary

In the interwar period VD prevention films accompanied the introduction of new “permanent” treatments for syphilis. While they still warned the audience about the dangers of infection, these films were primarily designed to inform about these new methods for curing syphilis. These methods could only be effective if the infected patient immediately consulted a certified doctor (as opposed to a charlatan) upon experiencing the first symptoms.

The objectives of the commissioners of health education films tended to go beyond simply conveying a propaganda message. They adhere to and act on the educational potential that the film medium offers to an adult audience. In addressing subjects like sexual health, the films speak to the intimate lives of the audience members, faced with characters whose sexual behaviour is meant to echo their own or that of their friends and relatives. In order to properly raise awareness, the film must escort them, help them overcome their disarray, and persuade them that they are morally able to adopt the necessary measures to avoid contagion.

This paper consists in an in-depth comparative study of three anti-venereal films produced and shown between 1928 and 1931, a short but pivotal

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period in the development of continental European syphilis prevention films. The three films illustrate two forms of screenplay action. In the French films, the patient is identified with a tragic hero and the medical institution embodied by a providential man. Contrary to these French films, the German film tends to display a more matter-of-fact-approach, which is not meant to downplay the risks but rather to clearly identify and address the community exposed to danger and to present how the infection is taken care of once it is diagnosed. Here I consider these films together to show how different ways of conveying the same medical discourse were adopted to adjust to national cinematographic environments.

Keywords: syphilis, drama, information, city, German(y), France

Introduction

In 1941, the well-known author Stefan Zweig reflected in his autobiography on how youth in early twentieth century Europe had been haunted by the peril of venereal disease:

[...] for it must not be forgotten that forty years ago sexual diseases were spread a hundred times more than they are today, and that they were a hundred times more dangerous and horrible in effect, because medicine did not yet know how to approach them clinically. Science could not yet cure them quickly and completely as it does today, so that now they are no more than episodes. Whereas today, thanks to Paul Ehrlich's therapy, in the clinics of the small and medium-sized universities weeks often pass by in which the professor is unable to show his students a freshly infected case of syphilis, the statistics of those days show that in the army and in the big cities at least one or two out of every ten young men had fallen victim to infection.¹

In Europe and the US in the 1920s, the response to this threat included investment in massive communication campaigns against major scourges like tuberculosis, syphilis, alcoholism, cancer and VD, as traditional public hygiene was transformed into a twentieth century understanding of public health. This is true especially of venereal disease health education campaigns, for which private and public stakeholders used print media, conferences and theatrical and visual arts. As a "modern" communication technology, film played a significant part in this development.²

This paper consists in an in-depth comparative study of three anti-venereal films produced and shown between 1928 and 1931, a short but pivotal period in the development of continental European syphilis prevention films: *Le baiser qui tue* (*A kiss that kills*) is a 69-minute French black and white

1 Zweig 1943, 88.

2 See for example: Eberwein 1999; Pernick 1999; Parascandola 2007.