

Queen Mary Film Studies and Cinema Memory and the Digital Archive present
London Cinemagoers and “Films From Many Nations”

Queen Mary University of London, 26 May 2022

Cinema Memory and the Digital Archive: 1930s Britain and Beyond (CMDA) is a three-year (2019-2022) AHRC-funded research project whose aim is to enhance the historical study of cinemagoing and cinema memory by organising, digitising, and indexing materials gathered during the 1990s for the ESRC-funded **Cinema Culture in 1930s Britain (CCINTB)** project, making them newly available in a freely accessible online archive.

Visit the website and digital archive: www.lancs.ac.uk/CMDA

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Mädchen in Uniform/Girls in Uniform (Germany, 1931)

Director:	Leontine Sagan
Production company:	Deutsche Film-Gemeinschaft
Producer:	Frank Wysbar
Script:	Christa Winsloe and E.D. Andam
Camera:	Reimar Kuntze, Fritz Weihmayr

Based on the play ‘Gestern und Heute’ (Yesterday and Today) by Christa Winsloe, *Mädchen in Uniform* is the only well-known pre-1960s German film directed by a woman. With an exclusively female cast, it is about a boarding school pupil and her love for her teacher. However, its sexual politics went unremarked by contemporary critics, who focussed on its formally innovative qualities and interpreted it as a critique of the authoritarian Prussian educational ideal. Soon after the film’s release, Leontine Sagan emigrated to England where she made *Men of Tomorrow* (1933) for Alexander Korda, featuring Robert Donat—who was to become a great favourite with British cinemagoers—in his first film role. Decades on, *Mädchen in Uniform* has been revived by historians of women’s cinema,¹ reassessed by queer and feminist critics,² and widely screened to enthusiastic new audiences.

Although some half a dozen CCINTB participants make brief reference to non-Anglophone (“foreign”) films, few such films are referred to by title. Of these latter, the most frequently mentioned is the Marlene Dietrich vehicle *The Blue Angel* (Der blaue Engel, 1930), though it is not clear whether these references are actually memories of the 1930s or have more to do with its star’s subsequent Hollywood fame. So it is rather unusual to find that *Mädchen in Uniform* is mentioned by two CCINTB participants, and clearly as a ‘cinema memory’.

Of all the CCINTB interviewees, Beatrice Cooper of Harrow offers the most extensive memories of seeing “foreign” films in the 1930s, and *Mädchen in Uniform* is among several that she names. (This informant, incidentally, also offers fascinating comments on emigré filmmakers like Berthold Viertel, who worked in British film studios in the 1930s.)

“I remember my sister took me to see *Mädchen in Uniform*. That was in London. This must’ve been 1920, 1930 maybe. And eh, I remember that in Oxford Street there was this cinema. That showed foreign films [referring to Academy Cinema]. And *Mädchen in Uniform*, oh! I was so impressed. I’ve seen it since. And it’s a classic. It’s a wonderful, wonderful film.”³

And from one of the people who wrote to CCINTB with their cinemagoing memories, we have this intriguing comment:

"My Grandmother only went to a cinema once in her life. There was a bit of persuasion needed to get her to see what films were like. In the end the only one she ever went to was 'Mädchen in Uniform', & it seems she found it so upsetting she never went again."⁴

Speakers

Gil Toffell is Academic Research Manager at Learning on Screen (BUFVC) and an archival and oral historian interested in scenes of diasporic media exhibition. He was previously Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in Film Studies at Queen Mary. His book *Jews, Cinema and Public Life in Interwar Britain* (2018) is published by Palgrave MacMillan.

Annette Kuhn FBA joined Queen Mary in 2006 and is currently Professor and Research Fellow in Film Studies. She was Director of CCINTB and is Co-Investigator of CMDA. Publications include *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*; *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory*, *Little Madnesses: Winnicott, Transitional Phenomena and Cultural Experience*; and, with Guy Westwell, *Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies*.

¹Nancy Scholar, 'Mädchen in Uniform', *Women and Film*, vol.2, no.7, 1975.

²Hertha Thiele, Heide Schlüpmann and Karola Gramann, 'Momente erotischer Utopie: ästhetisierte Verdrängung zu "Mädchen in Uniform" und "Anna und Elisabeth"', *Frauen und Film*, no. 28, 1981: 28-47; B. Ruby Rich, 'From repressive tolerance to erotic liberation: Mädchen in Uniform', *Jump Cut*, no. 24/25, 1981; Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film*. London: Routledge, 1990: 27-43; Corey Creekmur and Alexander Doty (eds), *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*. London: Cassell, 1995: 137-166.

³BC-95-208AT001, Beatrice Cooper, Harrow, interviewed 20 July 1995.

⁴DR-95-117PL001, Mrs D Ramsay, Gloucester, letter to Annette Kuhn, 22 February 1995.

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