

Photographic Transfer & The Construction of a Nazi Sexuality

Witt Giannini

October 18, 2024

Queer and Trans Histories of the Holocaust

Dr. Zavier Nunn

Public displays — and understandings — of human sexuality underwent a radical transformation in the transition from the Weimar Republic to the Third Reich. Under Nazi control, the images of “deviant” or “abnormal” expressions of sexuality and gender that had flourished in queer newspapers, common pornography, and sexological archives during the Weimar period were immediately confiscated, burned, and censored. In its focused targeting of visual material culture, it is clear that the Nazi regime believed in the functional ability of these types of images that displayed the nude human body to lead the German *Volk* astray. This belief is also reflected in their efforts to concretely replace these perverted images with National-Socialist-ideology-affirming nude images to satisfy this prominent gap in public consumption of visual culture. The Nazi’s repeated efforts to produce and disseminate visual propaganda in the form of nude, sexually provocative photographs reveal a role for sexuality in the larger project of Hitler’s fascist vision of Germany. For the Nazis, controlling images meant controlling the public’s understanding of their own sexualities, carefully crafting a visual rhetoric that articulated how sexual practices could support the National Socialist regime. Closely examining the images the Nazis targeted for destruction in comparison with the counter-images they circulated allows for an understanding of Nazi sexuality as both a public and productive force.

The Nazi’s raid of the Institute of Sexual Science on May 6, 1933, demonstrates the Nazi’s heightened preoccupation with the proliferation of images depicting what they perceived to be sexual aberrations. Their looting and burning targeted Magnus Hirschfeld’s archive of images that attempted to document and nomenclate a wide spectrum of sexual intermediaries (Figure 1), specifically because they believed these images had the power to transmit an understanding of this gender/sexual *deviance* to whoever came in contact with them. In his

examination of the construction/destruction of Hirschfeld's institute, Heike Bauer traces this faith in photographic transfer to Hirschfeld's own utilization — and belief in — these images, writing,

they played an important role in transmitting long and complex written texts to a wider audience by depicting at a glance phenomena that in their written exposition covered hundreds of pages of scientific writing... the photographs offered a visual shorthand to the ideas of sexual intermediaries, providing more instantaneous access to Hirschfeld's ideas.¹

Heike specifically highlights this faith in the photograph's ability to *transmit* and educate its audience from a single *glance, instantaneously*. He even cites Christopher Isherwood's account of seeing these photographs during his stay at the Institut where he felt a transformed understanding (even kinship) with the queer subjects behind Hirschfeld's lens: "an intimate archival encounter: a flash of recognition that makes real for Isherwood the existence of homosexuality, which he now no longer understands in terms of private acts but, for better or worse, as a public display."² By engaging in an *intimate, visual encounter* between his own body and those captured in the frame, Isherwood purports to gain a newfound perspective, tolerance, and empathy for the modes of sexual and gender expression presented by the image archives. It is this belief in the transmissive power of *intimate* contact between the photograph's print materiality and human vision that made Hirschfeld's images a primary target in the Nazi takeover and establishment of a new racial/sexual regime.

The Nazis extrapolated this belief even further, believing this transmission (*contamination*) to occur through a physical touch of the image's print. Bauer's text spotlights an image taken during the Nazi raid of the institute that self-reflexively documents the Nazi's own embodied *distance* from the images and ideas whose destruction they are cataloging (Figure 2). The image is deliberately composed to totally obscure and erase these "dangerous" images so as

¹ Heike Bauer, "From Fragile Solidarities to Burnt Sexual Subjects: At the Institute of Sexual Science," essay, in *The Hirschfeld Archives: Violence, Death, and Modern Queer Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2017), 78–101, 89.

² *Ibid.*, 91.

not to “raise questions about the relationship established in the encounter” between the physical prints and Nazi bodies in their official history: “Nazi hands on naked women manages to maintain the institute’s association with sexual immorality even as these images also ensure that the Nazi men sent to cleanse the institute of its holdings are dissociated from homosexuality.”³ The censored images deemed appropriate for the record of the official archive are thus pornographic nudes of topless, traditionally-femme women to reaffirm the two male Nazi’s heterosexuality in their handling, only alluding to the actual contents of Hirschfeld’s archive in their similar compositional framing of an up-close (and *part*-oriented) lit body against a flat and dark background. Because these printed images were able to impart an understanding — or even *encouragement* — of the sexual modalities captured by them, reproducing them in the official image archive of the Nazi takeover would prove antithetical to their motivation for destroying such images in the first place.

The destruction of Hirschfeld’s transformative/transferable images, however, was not enough to regulate the sexual practices of a racially unified *Volk*. To dutifully counteract the perceived “perversion” of these images, the Nazis focused efforts on publishing and circulating their own images of nudity and exhibitionism to impart an official state-sponsored sexuality upon its viewers. Dagmar Herzog’s examination of sexuality and nudity within Nazi fascist propaganda points to newspapers and journals as one medium utilized in the mass dissemination of images that alleged to promote “transcendental, quasi-spiritual” ideals of human sexuality.⁴ Images of naked (racially *approved*) women basking in the sun in fields or on the seashore filled the pages of *Das Schwarze Korps*, the official SS Journal, emphasizing the Nazi’s desire to

³ Ibid., 94-95.

⁴ Dagmar Herzog, “Hubris and Hypocrisy, Incitement and Disavowal: Sexuality and German Fascism,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11, no. 1 (2002): 3–21, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sex.2002.0007>, 10.

mass-circulate these images to a wide audience.⁵ Capitalizing upon the bodily contact required of newspaper as a medium (seeing/holding/buying/turning each page), Nazi propagandists hoped to physically impart an understanding of this regime-approved mode of sexuality on anyone who came in contact with the journal. Hans Surén's *Der Mensch und die Sonne* compiled and combined the types of images found in various issues of *Das Schwarze Korps* into one romanticized volume, becoming a bestseller (and a regime-approved reprint with added propaganda) for its body-cult images that perfectly aligned with National Socialist ideology.⁶

The images that fill the pages of Surén's treatise on bodily *fitness* immediately contrast the medical, indexical, and diagnostic visual tone of Hirschfeld's portraits. If Hirschfeld's images, as Bauer argues, have the capacity to “[turn] humans into objects... employ[ing] the visual language of medicine and criminology to turn people into case studies by training the lens on certain parts of their bodies,” then Surén's have the exact opposite effect, focusing on fully-realized bodies in community, engaged in active social relations.⁷ Images of naked (racially and sexually approved) women in pairs and groups are placed in natural landscapes of fields (Figure 3) and ponds (Figure 5), completely removing the clinical flat background of Hirschfeld's images and common pornography. If Hirschfeld's images denaturalize, crop, and isolate aberrations in their presentation of detached body parts, Surén's images seek to highlight physiognomical conformity, visually contextualized within a social/natural/national landscape. Examining the pictorial innovations and visual contrasts made in these regime-approved images of nudity allows for a distinct articulation of the nuances (and *purpose*) of the vision of National Socialist sexuality hoping to be transmitted by these images in their mass dissemination.

⁵ Ibid., 12.

⁶ “Hans Surén, Excerpts from Man and the Sun (1925),” Deutsche Geschichte in Dokumenten und Bildern.

⁷ Bauer, “From Fragile Solidarities to Burnt Sexual Subjects: At the Institute of Sexual Science,” 89.

Images like Figure 3 articulate a space for sexuality within the National Socialist regime while clearly reflecting the exact government-approved applications of this sexuality. Figure 3 foregrounds a group of five Aryan women holding hands in a circle while they are partially submerged in water in front of a reeded marsh. Their pose, recalling the form of Henri Matisse's *La Danse* (1910) (Figure 4) helps to cast these nude images as works of fine art (even as *masterpieces* in the Western canon), ideologically justifying them as distant from the "money-making, perverted" form of pornography. Nudity and sexual gazing are naturalized as a *public* occurrence fostered through group participation, mirroring the opportunities for sexual contact provided by Nazi groups and organizations. While Strength through Joy offered a possibility of "sexual adventure" through travel, the Hitler Youth and the German Labor Front (RA) gave young adults unsupervised interactions with the opposite sex.⁸ Nazi organizations stimulated — and even encouraged — opportunities for heterosexual, racially-approved sexual contact. Figure 3 is intended to reaffirm this connection with each physical/visual contact it makes in its mass circulation, linking group participation with a possibility for voyeuristic glimpses.

Figure 5 then begins to answer *why* exactly this type of sexual opportunity was deliberately fostered through these groups in their conflation of sexuality and labor. The image depicts two young women carrying bundles of wheat — and exposing their nude forms by process — in a brightly lit field. The image of these two bodies enacting a *harvest* immediately connotes a reproductive fertilization encouraged by the state. This visual collapse of sexuality and labor recalls the idea of *purposeful sexuality* raised by Annette Timm in her analysis of Nazi-approved sexual activity:

⁸ Elizabeth D Heineman. "Sexuality and Nazism: The Doubly Unspeakable?" *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11, no. 1 (2002): 22–66. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sex.2002.0006>, 29-30.

Sexuality, in other words, was viewed as a means to an end. It was to be deployed within racially "desirable" families to produce future soldiers for the war machine and by individual men to strengthen their productive capacities and their fighting spirit... not [just] sex for the sake of individual pleasure.⁹

The image affirms sexual reproduction as a patriotic act akin to farming (*sewing/reaping*) and feeding the nation. But the embodied *weight* of physical labor captured in the postures of the girls in the photograph also connotes the darker elaborations of sexuality employed in service of the Nazi's national and militaristic project as mentioned by Timm. She writes that prostitution was accepted under Himmler's influence only as a "necessary" means of "satisfying male sexual drives, which if left unsatisfied, would lead men into homosexuality, dampen their fighting spirit, or diminish their labor productivity."¹⁰ Sexuality was thus understood as something to be utilized; voluntarily, in supplying future generations of racially-approved citizens and soldiers, or involuntarily, in service of discouraging male homosexuality within the Nazi ranks and increasing both economic and militaristic capital. Surén's photograph helps articulate this National Socialist view of sexuality and productive labor as one singular, fluid motion, artistically valorizing its two subjects as they both put their bodies to (re)productive use.

Throughout the Nazi regime's rise to power, German fascist thought found visual articulation through the medium of images, emphasized as a powerful tool for influencing society and shaping self-perceptions of sexual identity. Their destruction and burning of Magnus Hirschfeld's image archive demonstrate Nazi attunement to the understanding of these images as capable of proving deviation, changing perception, and imparting meaning through visual contact as purported by Christopher Isherwood and Hirschfeld himself. The Nazis even went further to suggest physical contact with these prints might alter — or contaminate — one's own

⁹ Annette F. Timm, "Sex with a Purpose: Prostitution, Venereal Disease, and Militarized Masculinity in the Third Reich," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11, no. 1 (2002): 223–55, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sex.2002.0014>, 225.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 224.

“normal” body, carefully censoring and posing official visual documentation of their raid of the Institute of Sexual Science to affirm their heterosexual conformity. Through their destruction, the Nazis created an absence in the proliferation of images of nude representations that they could fill (and *replace*) with their own carefully crafted, state-approved images of voyeuristic sexuality. Nude images of women in groups amongst natural landscapes filled the pages of *Der Mensch und die Sonne* and *Das Schwarze Korps*, hoping to radically alter ethnically-approved German approaches to sexuality through visual and physical contact with these mass-circulated images. These images hoped to articulate German sexuality under the Nazi state as a form of productive labor, both *replenishing* in providing future generations of soldiers and citizens and *quota-fulfilling* in providing a (hetero)sexual outlet to frustrated troops to increase fighting spirit. As these images formally and compositionally embody the ideologies of sexuality in support of the fascist National Socialist state, they forged a new definition of image as *instruction*.



Figure 1. "Hirschfeld's archive." Bauer, Heike. "From Fragile Solidarities to Burnt Sexual Subjects: At the Institute of Sexual Science."



Figure 2. "Members of the Hitler Youth select material for the book burning, 1933." Bauer, Heike. "From Fragile Solidarities to Burnt Sexual Subjects: At the Institute of Sexual Science."



Figure 3. Surén, Hans. *Der Mensch und die Sonne*. SPIEGEL.
<https://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/naked-nazis-book-reveals-extent-of-third-reich-body-worship-a-768641.html>.

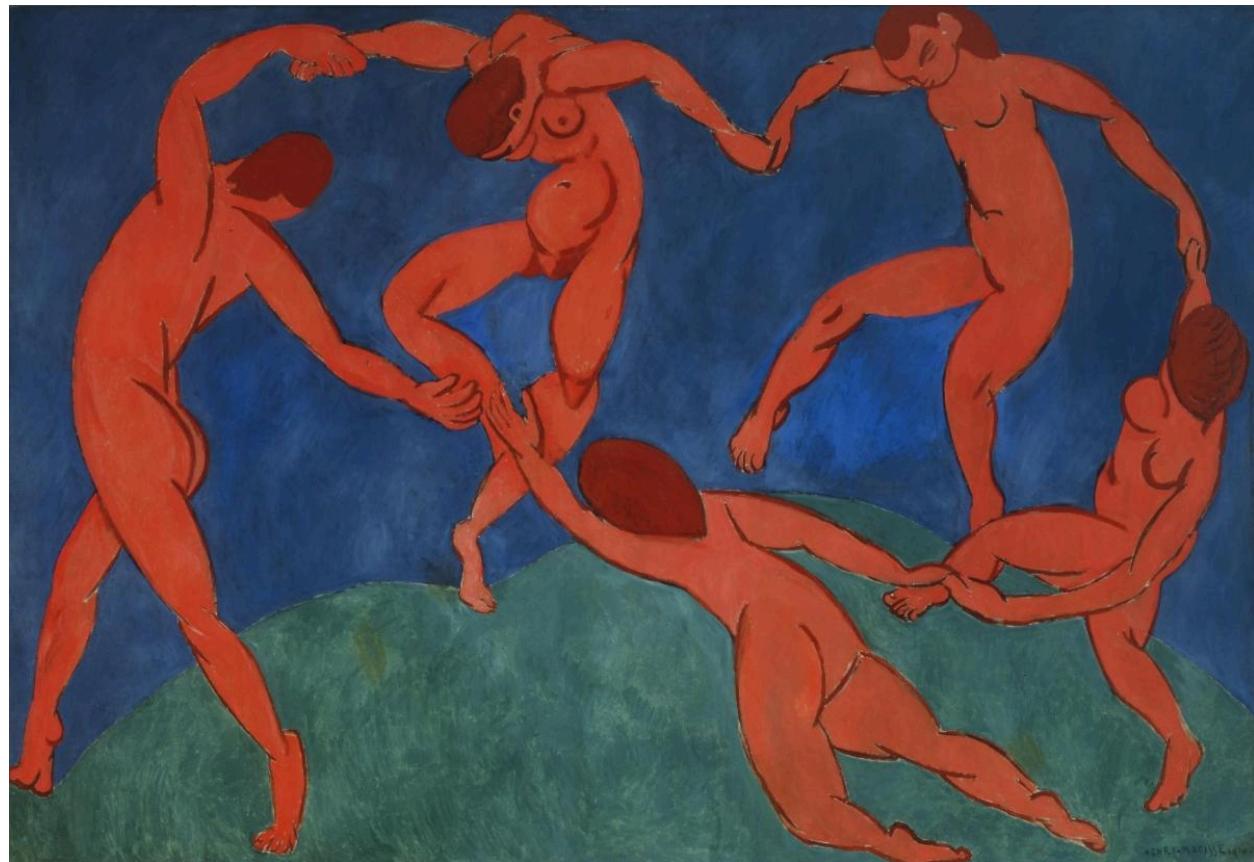


Figure 4. Henri Matisse, *La Danse*, 1910. The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia.

<https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/digital-collection/01.+paintings/28411>.



Figure 5. Surén, Hans. *Der Mensch und die Sonne*. SPIEGEL.
<https://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/naked-nazis-book-reveals-extent-of-third-reich-body-worship-a-768641.html>.

Bibliography

Bauer, Heike. "From Fragile Solidarities to Burnt Sexual Subjects: At the Institute of Sexual Science." Chapter. In *The Hirschfeld Archives: Violence, Death, and Modern Queer Culture*, 78–101. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2017.

"Hans Surén, Excerpts from Man and the Sun (1925)." Deutsche Geschichte in Dokumenten und Bildern, https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=4434.

Heineman, Elizabeth D. "Sexuality and Nazism: The Doubly Unspeakable?" *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11, no. 1 (2002): 22–66. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sex.2002.0006>.

Herzog, Dagmar. "Hubris and Hypocrisy, Incitement and Disavowal: Sexuality and German Fascism." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11, no. 1 (2002): 3–21. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sex.2002.0007>.

Timm, Annette F. "Sex with a Purpose: Prostitution, Venereal Disease, and Militarized Masculinity in the Third Reich." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11, no. 1 (2002): 223–55. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sex.2002.0014>.

Images

Bauer, Heike. "From Fragile Solidarities to Burnt Sexual Subjects: At the Institute of Sexual Science." Essay. In *The Hirschfeld Archives: Violence, Death, and Modern Queer Culture*, 78–101. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2017.

Matisse, Henri. *La Danse*. 1910. *The State Hermitage Museum*. The State Hermitage Museum. <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/digital-collection/01.+paintings/28411>.

Surén, Hans. *Der Mensch und die Sonne*. SPIEGEL. SPIEGEL Gruppe, June 16, 2011.

<https://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/naked-nazis-book-reveals-extent-of-third-reich-body-worship-a-768641.html>.