

**REPORT FOR FIGS-HSS SCHOLARSHIP**

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## The Cross Cultural Transportation of Cabaret: Exploring the connections between Weimar and Malayalam cinemas

As a recipient of the FIGS-HSS scholarship for 2014-15, I got an opportunity to further my academic engagement in Germany. The scholarship provided me with an opportunity to be in Berlin for a period of about six months from February to August 2015. My host University was Freie University, Berlin and I was affiliated with the Department of Theatre and Filmwissenschaft. My supervisor in Germany was Professor Erika Fischer-Lichte, an acclaimed figure in Theatre and Performance Studies in Germany. Even before I reached Berlin I was in e-mail communication with the professor and she advised me to be affiliated with the *Interart* programme, an International Research Training group that was devised to bring in doctoral and post doctoral fellows from diverse disciplines to forge methodological and multidisciplinary approaches to the study of arts, humanities and social sciences. The students and faculty of the *Interart* were amicable and supportive, often intimating me about events and talks and helping me to feel comfortable in a new space where my lack of language fluency in German proved to be a bit of a difficulty. I was even allotted a work station with a computer and this came handy when I had to work on weekends and holidays. Located opposite to the library, the *Interart* office became my second home for the next six months.

My research interests were mostly concentrated on the Weimar cultural life and its varied spaces of entertainment, with a special focus on cabaret. Hinged on a precipice of intense activity, the Weimar era witnessed a massive makeover in the cultural spheres and the overall restructuring of mental landscapes. This was also the time of intense exploration in aesthetic and creative fields as seen in movements such as *Die Neu Sachkeit* (The New Objectivity), the architectural innovations of Bahaus School under Walter Gropius, Brecht's

Epic theatre, Dadaist strands in works of Otto Dix and George Grosz, and photographic studies of Moholy-Nagy. The short lived fame and glory for which the Republic was hailed was soon followed by a fragile political order that sowed the seeds for an ostensibly “decadent” sub-culture to flourish. Perhaps, one of the reasons why this infectious zest for new experiences and sensorium found instant appeal among the masses had to do with the transitory and ephemeral quality it reeked of. Reminiscing his time in Weimar Germany, the German playwright Carl Zuckmeyer writes: “The arts blossomed like a meadow just before being mowed. This explains the tragic yet brilliant charm that is associated with this era, often seen in the images of poets and artists who died prematurely” (November 23, 2012).

Titled “The Cross Cultural Transportation of Cabaret: Exploring the connections between Weimar and Malayalam cinemas,” my project was devised to track the life and career of Anita Berber, the expressionist dancer, poet and actress who emerged as a sensation in the Weimar era through her unique performance style that blurred the thin lines between onstage and offstage. I attempted to place my study within the feminist media tradition by reading Berber’s performances as a rebellion against the constrictive codes of morality that created her as an epitome of the era’s debauchery and excesses. My stint in Germany was used mostly to collect archival materials that were scattered across different archives in Berlin. I also used my time to consult with scholars such as Gertrude Koch who had worked extensively on Weimar Germany and the film culture of the 1920s. But, I soon found other avenues of interest, especially the multiple modes through which Berber’s memory has been encapsulated in the contemporary moment, like for instance in the performance staged by MS Schrittmacher in 2014 titled “ Anita Berber: Retro/Perspective” at Kunsquartier Bethanian where Berber breathed her last and the night club in her name in Gerichstrasse.

The exposure to the multidisciplinary academic environment of Germany has been an eye-opener to me in many ways. Even though I had been to Germany once earlier on a short-

term scholarship, this time I got to know the academic rigor that marked the German academic structure. I attended the talks and seminar in other departments in Freie University and this helped me to connect to students who were working on allied fields like art history and social anthropology. I was invited to participate in the weekly colloquiums hosted by the *Interart* that involved research presentations by senior PhD students on their ongoing research. The opportunity to engage with the research of one's cohort was something that I found quite useful as it also generated questions and clarifications that allowed me to take a fresh look at the material I have in hand.

My initial week in Berlin proved to be a relatively difficult one, accentuated by the delay in arrival of my check-in luggage. My work started in full swing only in the last week of February and I did a cursory scan of the archives and libraries that might have material on Berber. By the middle of March, I located many references and books, partially because I followed up on the references in the works of Kate Elswit (2014), Mel Gordon (2006), Karl Toepfer (1997) and Susan Funkenstein (2005). In between, I presented my work in two conferences, the Society of Cinema and Media Studies conference in Montreal and the Media Fields conference in University of California, Santa Barbara in April. Both the conferences geared me into the direction of feminist media, something I was inspired after reading Guiliana Bruno's *Street Walking on a Ruined Map* (1993), a work on the Italian woman filmmaker, Elvira Notari. Like Bruno's study of Notari that is marked more by absences or the significant presence of particular strands of personal details while leaving out others, my study of Berber presented me with similar problems because of the propensity of her biographers to scavenge the minutiae of her personal life to paint her as a cautionary tale for the era's moral excess. Therefore, following Bruno, my attempt was to construct a palimpsest, "a series of "inferential walks" through novels, paintings, photographs and architectural sites" (3). My inferential walks with Anita Berber, then, follow a similar logic of

restoration, whereby I seek to wrench the dancer away from her popular reputation as femme fatale and, restore her as an auteur in her own right

As I progressed with my work, Professor Fischer-Lichte advised me to present my on-going work in the colloquium in May 2015, a privilege I was happy to take up. My paper was titled “Anita Berber, Body as Weapon: Dance, Sexuality and *Nacktkultur* in Weimar Germany,” that explored the imagination of techno-body in the performance of Berber. My paper drew from the discussions on how Berber used eurhythmics, a choreographic aesthetics that conjoined rhythmic gymnastics and bodily expressivity. It was a pleasure to see the audience engaging with my paper with comments and suggestions. In fact, one of the suggestions by Professor Koch during my talk proved to be very productive in identifying a source material that I could not find in my earlier visit to the archives. I also participated in the “art and reproduction” conference organized at the Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz in May. The conference helped me to think through questions on the role of technology, labor and reproduction in the era of digital media. I used the discussions gathered in the conference on how Berber’s memory is mediated posthumously in the cultural forms including accounts of Czech choreographer Joe Jencik’s *Anita Berberova: A Study* (1930), lithographs of Anita Berber by Charlotte Berend-Corinth (1919), Otto Dix’s *Portrait of the Dancer Anita Berber* (1925), Mel Gordon’s full-length study of Berber titled *The Seven Addictions and Five Professions of Anita Berber: Weimar Berlin’s Priestess of Depravity* (2006) and the films that draws on Berber such as *Frida and Anita* (Dir. Liz Rosenfeld, 2010) and *Anita: Tänze des Lasters* (*Anita: Dances of Vice*, Dir. Rosa von Praunheim, 1987).

In the meantime, I visited the Department of Film archives at the *Bundesarchiv*. Even though I found the references of many Berber’s films, I could not access the files for the same as the archive was closed for reassembling the material and was operational only after a year. In her stint with the cinema of the Weimar era, Berber acted in more than twenty-one films. It

is crucial to interrogate how far her entry into films was facilitated by her success as a dancer. This would be vital in resituating Berber in the Weimar entertainment space, as it is often the case that her identity as an actress in Weimar cinema is easily overlooked. Was her identity first and foremost that of a dancer and her entry into cinema nothing short of an accident? Or is it that she considered the avenue of cinema as yet another mode of experimentation, much in tune with her fiddling with the form of abstract dance? These questions become particularly daunting because of the unavailability of most of the films and the remaining accounts marking her trajectory of decline and the tragic flaw as conditioned by her inability to excel in a space that had put extreme pressure on performers. Added to this was my difficulty in meeting Lothar Fischer who had a private collection of material on Anita Berber. I got the information that his material was relocated to the German Dance archive in Cologne rather too late, a few days before my departure. These two places are of utmost importance for my work as it can help me to further my enquiry on Anita Berber's experimentation in the field of *Ausdruckstanz*, the expressionistic dance movement in Germany that included dancers like Mary Wigman, Valeska Gert, among others. I hope that I will be able to continue my research and undertake another research trip to Germany to find my material at *Bundesarchiv* and German Dance archive in Cologne. I thank Federation of Indo-German Societies in India and Hanns Seidel Foundation for providing me with the scholarship and I hope there will be many scholars who will benefit from the programme.