

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
J. Zimmerman, MLIS

Sexuality in Cinema

Mädchen in Uniform (1958)

Géza von Radványi (1907-1986)

OVERVIEW

Director Born Géza Grosschmid in Kassa in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Director von Radványi moved into filmmaking after a short career in journalism. He only lived in the city of his birth until he was eighteen. The younger half-brother of Sándor Márai, von Radványi was often overlooked among his contemporaries in Hungary. He would direct films for studios across Europe with the goal of pushing European film to the same heights seen in Hollywood. All told, he would direct twenty-six films before his death in 1986. Von Radványi was frequently sought out as a writer, cinematographer, and producer throughout Europe.

Film A post-war remake of the 1931 film of the same name, *Mädchen in Uniform* seeks the sheen of Hollywood filmmaking and foregoes the free sexual expression of the original. Von Radványi and writer Franz Höllering, having read the critiques of the original film, decided to focus the plot around fascism to avoid the strict censorship that plagued the 1931 film. Unlike many similar films of the time, *Mädchen in Uniform* avoids the “tut-tutting” moralism of many films typical of the mid-century, nor does it dwell on revelation or confrontation, focusing instead on how the community between girls and their caretakers functions to oppose the iron fist of the domineering, Hitler-esque headmistress.



Background 1958's *Mädchen in Uniform* is not the first remake of the 1931 film. Director Alfredo B. Crevenna tackled this story in the context of Mexican Catholicism in 1951's *Muchachas de Uniforme*. As a German film, I wasn't able to find much information about production in English, and there wasn't much available in German either. The single professional contemporary review of the film in English (published in 1961 by The New York Times) doesn't have much to say besides praising the quality of the cinematography and the beauty of the leading ladies. Modern viewers tend to love or hate this movie. Professional reviews are few and far between, but viewer ratings on Rotten Tomatoes rest at 61% approval at the time of writing, and on IMDB, users have an average rating of 7/10.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Manuela von Meinhardis – An orphaned girl abandoned to a militaristic Prussian boarding school

Fräulein Elisabeth von Bernburg – A kindly teacher at the boarding school

Alexandra von Treskow – One of Manuela's classmates who becomes jealous of her

Headmistress – A very old woman with failing health who seeks control of the girls through fear

Fräulein von Racket – The headmistress' sycophantic assistant, a teacher at the boarding school

Yvette – One of the other girls and Manuela's closest friend there

SYNOPSIS

The year is 1910. Manuela von Meinhardis barely has time to mourn her mother's death before her uncaring aunt abandons her at a Potsdam boarding school. The authoritarian headmistress enforces unyielding Prussian discipline, interested not in caring for these girls but in creating obedient gestation vessels for “future German soldiers” as is their “duty.” The only real kindness Manuela finds here comes

from Fräulein von Bernburg, her literature teacher. All of the girls love von Bernburg, who encourages their self-expression and looks after their emotional needs as best as she can.

Weeks pass, and Manuela begins to acclimate and make friends, but she has yet to shake the shyness that is causing her poor marks in class: speaking in front of others seems to terrify her. After seeking sympathy from von Bernburg, the teacher encourages her to remember that she loves her students even if she seems cold. Days later, in preparation for the headmistress' birthday and the annual visit of the princess who funds the school, Manuela is cast as Romeo in a play. Fighting through her shyness with the help of von Bernburg, Manuela channels the forceful Romeo so convincingly that she kisses her teacher. Von Bernburg doesn't scold the girl, but she does pull back. After a rousing performance for the headmistress, the students celebrate. Unbeknownst to them, the cook spikes the girls' punch with rum, leading to Manuela drunkenly proclaiming her love for Fräulein von Bernburg.

The headmistress cracks down hard, telling von Bernburg that she must leave and forbidding anyone to speak with or acknowledge Manuela. Heading back to her bedroom after the headmistress' scolding, Fräulein von Bernburg is surprised to find Manuela waiting in her room. The girl weeps and begs for von Bernburg to stay, but the teacher says the headmistress has changed her mind and that cruelty will "fix" Manuela. Distraught and alone, Manuela climbs the tallest staircase in the school and prepares to jump. Von Bernburg and the students, however, manage to pull her away. In the infirmary, the headmistress shows unprecedented kindness when she holds Manuela's hand as the girl thrashes in her sleep. The old woman begs Fräulein von Bernburg to stay, but the teacher gives an ambiguous answer.

PLOT

Grave – The camera pans across a map of Prussia, a title card overlaid with the year '1910.' Gentle bugle calls play as the camera focuses down on Potsdam, another title card naming the city. The map fades out, and we see an old woman and a young woman riding in a small carriage. The older woman tugs on the reins, and the rhythmic clacking of horse hooves slows to a halt. They stop near a churchyard, and the old woman snaps, "Take the flowers, but don't be long." The church bell rings loudly as the girl finds her way to a specific grave. There is already a mound of flowers there. She stoops to place her bouquet, the church bell still clanging, when the old woman's voice drifts over the graveyard: "Manuela! Manuela!" The girl straightens some of the grave gifts and collects a flower petal before rushing to hop back on the carriage.



March of the schoolgirls – A solemn bugle call plays as the camera jumps between shots of statues of dour-looking men. A bell tower chimes, and a woman's voice can be heard: "Eins, zwei. Eins, zwei. Eins, zwei." Led by a teacher, a group of uninformed girls marches orderly through a gate. She continues her chant, pointing the girls around a left-hand turn. As they walk into the distance, a drum and fife corps begins to play. Marching in perfect unison, the girls pass the carriage Manuela and the old woman rode in on.



Introductions – A clock ticks in an office as the older woman sits at an austere desk, a plain carafe of water and glass in front of her. Manuela looks out the nearby window silently. The old woman sighs impatiently and looks at her pocket watch. A teacher enters, introducing herself as Ms. von Racket. She apologizes that the headmistress is ill. They go through a few more niceties before the old woman addresses Manuela tersely, telling her to turn around so they can "have a look" at her before saying she's overly sensitive and too shy and that her mother spoiled her. "We'll straighten her out," von Racket says with an oddly gleeful grin. She tells someone outside to enter, and a schoolgirl steps inside, giving a quick curtsy after closing the door. Jokingly, von Racket describes the girl as Manuela's "foster mother" before instructing her to say goodbye to her aunt. The old woman snaps at Manuela not to disgrace her father by wasting "this wonderful opportunity." "Yes, Auntie," Manuela mumbles before giving her aunt a cold kiss on the cheek. Ms. von Racket instructs the girls to go get a uniform for Manuela.



Unfamiliar halls – Outside the office, a grandfather clock ticks and chimes the hour. Manuela wanders around, trying to take in her surroundings: spartan as they are, they are also strangely spacious and royal. She starts to go up some nearby stairs, but the student warns her away, saying they're only for the headmistress and her guests' use. They make their way to the laundry together, passing a choir room. Inside, some schoolgirls sing a patriotic song loudly. "They're already singing!" Manuela exclaims to her guide, who hurries her up another staircase. Back in the room where the girls sing, the camera finds a bespectacled girl who sings sound-alike lyrics to the patriotic song, complaining about her empty stomach: "Everyone can sing as loud as they can, then you'll get a bite to eat."



Hand-me-down uniform – In the laundry room a seamstress is hard at work mending uniform clothes. She passes some shirts to a student assisting her. Manuela and her guide enter, the guide making introductions. They seem excited to have a new friend. The students all leave together, leaving just Manuela with the seamstress who urges her to undress and get into the uniform quickly so she can join the other girls. The seamstress gathers the parts of the uniform for her while gossiping about the other girls' pasts. Manuela is a bit distraught to hear her clothes will be taken away and returned upon her leaving the school and even more so when she realizes her uniform is a hand-me-down. The seamstress chortles as she sits down at her machine to mend a blouse, saying, "Where's your sense of economy?"



School bell – In the courtyard of the school a girl rings a bell, and the halls fill with uniformed schoolgirls, chatting quickly as they dart from classroom to classroom. Manuela meanders downstairs after noting the height of the spiraling staircase. A teacher marches up the stairs toward her. "So you're Meinhardis," she says before inspecting Manuela. She tells her her braid isn't tight enough before introducing herself: Ms. von Bernburg, the teacher all the girls love. "I expect all commandments and convent rules to be observed," she says sternly. Manuela responds politely, and Ms. von Bernburg instructs her to join the others. In a room with a long table and lockers, the schoolgirls listen to a record on a Victrola while they play board games, sew, or read. Nearby, the "foster mother" student helps Manuela unpack. First she takes the girl's money, saying it's not allowed. She then finds a small bar of chocolate, saying sweets are to be confiscated. The girls at the table bristle at this, saying she should let Manuela keep her chocolate. The next thing out of the suitcase is Manuela's diary, and the "foster mother" says all books are to be confiscated. Manuela refuses to let go, and the older girl storms off to find a teacher.



Secret stash – When the teacher is gone, a blonde girl approaches Manuela to offer her help and friendship. Another girl motions for Manuela to come look at her locker. There are some pictures of actresses and family, but hidden underneath are some pictures of stage actors and weightlifters. A girl across the room says she prefers the actresses to the girl's selection of men, and the girl with the pictures teases that the other girl is simply "underdeveloped." The two start a wrestling match with each other over this, but it comes to an abrupt halt when a girl rushes in, saying a teacher is coming. Ms. von Racket enters and examines Manuela's things. The girl is able to keep her diary hidden and keep it private. When the teacher leaves, she stashes it in her locker under some underclothes. The blonde girl helps her finish unpacking. "I had no idea it would be this awful," laments Manuela. "You get used to it," the blonde girl consoles her. They both bond over their mothers being gentle with them, and Manuela reveals that her mother just died. The other girl sympathizes, but their conversation is interrupted by the school bell.



First lesson – "Un, deux, trois," a teacher says as she moves through the motions of a royal curtsy. "Smile. Get it?" The schoolgirls form a box around her, all eyes on the teacher. The teacher rises and speaks about the etiquette of the curtsy, jumping between French and German. After a little instruction, she asks the girls to copy her, and they do in unison, all but Manuela. The teacher sees she's the new student and



asks another girl to instruct her after realizing that Manuela doesn't speak much French. After the one-on-one lesson, the teacher instructs the girls to curtsy again. They obey, a few whispering to each other that they're starving. In the kitchen, we see a young cook arguing with an old cook: the elder scrapes butter from the bread to save money while the younger slathers it on, wanting to feed the children well.

The headmistress speaks – Back in the hall, the headmistress enters to observe the girls. They stand silently at attention like soldiers as she thumps her cane with every other step. She then climbs up onto a small stage, the girls marching into a new formation to listen to a speech. Loudly, the headmistress commands the girls to sing the first verse of "My hands are your instrument." They obey. A teacher on the stage serves as a conductor. From the crowd of singing girls, Manuela stares at Ms. von Bernburg, who sings along. After they've finished singing, the clock tower bells begin to chime, and the headmistress speaks loudly and authoritatively over it, chiding the girls for breaking too many regulations. "I hear that letters have been dispatched," she accuses, "without prior vetting. They complained of unjustifiable complaints about the school." The headmistress concludes by promising the harshest punishment for girls attempting to get letters past her censorship.



Bathtime – Late that night, Manuela and her new friend continue bonding over their similar upbringings and love for their mothers. Manuela speaks of her mother's final moments, and her friend says she'll never be able to see her mother in France again: "Now I have to be a German girl. I wasn't even allowed to keep my own name! I was baptized Yvette." Manuela promises to call her Yvette in secret. Across the room, more of the girls help each other undress for bath time, undoing the other's dress buttons. Ms. von Bernburg enters and tells the girls to go get in the shower. She pulls Manuela aside, asking after her diary. "That's nobody's business," Manuela snaps, but she quickly softens. "Nobody ever read it at home." Being surprisingly reasonable compared to the other teachers here, Ms. von Bernburg drops the issues, telling Manuela to go take her shower. One of the girls in the bathroom parades around making the other girls laugh with her impression of the headmistress. Ms. von Bernburg interrupts her and rushes the girls, reminding them lights out is in ten minutes. "She was so sweet again today," a blonde girl gushes when the teacher leaves.



Headmistress's office – The headmistress feeds her gigantic goldfish a meager pinch of food as she addresses Ms. von Racket, saying her health is better before asking after a report on the girls. Von Racket answers vaguely about the "spoiled" condition of the modern generation before the headmistress seems to suffer a medical episode. Ms. von Racket helps her into a seat, where the old woman speaks of her heart and Manuela like a disobedient horse, saying she only has to "rein it in." Ms. von Racket agrees and suggests it's a bad choice to put her in Ms. von Bernburg's class. "Why?" the headmistress asks. "Just a feeling," Ms. von Racket says. "One shouldn't allow feelings to dictate their actions!" shouts the headmistress. They move to the budget, and the headmistress complains, "The household gobbles up the budget!" Ms. von Racket says it's hard to cut costs before mentioning the girls are already complaining of hunger. "What do they know of hunger?" the headmistress asks. "We Germans are accustomed to hunger! These girls will one day be the mothers of soldiers. What we need, my dear Racket, is discipline, order, and hardening, not a life of luxury and sentimentality."



Bedtime – The girls all stand by their bedsides, awaiting the return of Ms. von Bernburg. She enters, asking, "Finished?" The girls respond in unison that they are. After turning out the lights, Ms. von Bernburg says good night to each girl one by one, kissing them on the forehead. They all respond with excitement, some more than others, like the girl who whispers excitedly to Manuela. For Manuela, however, Ms. von Bernburg has special advice, telling her to learn to enjoy it here. The teacher makes her way back around the room, and Manuela fights to keep a goofy grin from rising across her face.



Recess – The next day, someone rings a bell, and the girls run across the grounds for recess. Some sit near the school with books or sewing while others explore the gardens or look at the nearby pond. On a bench, two girls sit gossiping about a note one of them was passed, and Ms. von Bernburg appears, telling her to hand over the note. After a moment, she rips it up and tells the girl to burn it, sparing her the embarrassment of reading it. Manuela and her friends oversee this. “That was decent of her,” says Manuela. The other girls agree, one saying she wants to be just like Ms. von Bernburg one day. The other scoffs at this, saying she’ll marry so she doesn’t have to be a teacher. “Why do you think Ms. von Bernburg never married?” Manuela asks. “Who knows...” the other answers. The other girl points to a nearby pavilion with boarded-up windows. They look through a crack to see a copy of the birth of Venus. The bell rings, and the girls rush back toward the school to continue their classes.



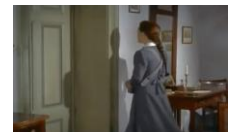
Literature lesson – Ms. von Bernburg enters a classroom. The girls stand obediently and quietly at their desks as she takes her seat and quietly invites them to sit. As a review of their recent lectures on the playwright and poet Schiller, Ms. von Bernburg begins calling names and asking the students questions. This is how they get their marks for the class. One by one, the girls stand and answer their questions. Manuela is called repeatedly. She cannot answer, and others are called to answer in her stead. They all respond clearly and confidently, but Manuela can’t make herself speak. When Ms. von Bernburg asks the whole class a question, every hand raises but Manuela’s. The teacher calls on her. Again, she can’t answer. “One more question before I’m forced to give a bad mark,” she warns before asking another question. All the girls whisper the answer, but still, Manuela cannot speak. Ms. von Bernburg makes a dramatic slash in her grade book.



Staff meeting – The teachers gather in a small meeting hall with the headmistress. One of the older teachers talks at length about the role of girls, specifically that they are to become women and make men happy. “Discipline is key,” the headmistress interrupts loudly. “Obedient women make good wives. Another teacher who was born and raised in England says this runs counter to her own upbringing, but the headmistress insists that things must be different in Germany. She then turns her attention to Ms. von Bernburg, saying she brings in far too few reprimands. The teacher simply responds that the girls are obedient and well-behaved. “Even Meinhardis?” another teacher asks. “No,” says von Bernburg, “but that will change. She’s very new and still suffering from the death of her mother.” The headmistress scolds her for making exceptions. Ms. von Bernburg responds that all children that age need support. “Future mothers of soldiers have to endure tragic blows,” says the headmistress forcefully. “Each to her own fate. There is no need for such fuss.” She concludes her tirade telling the teachers to be more authoritative, calling the idea of children’s individuality a “newfangled theory.”



Performance anxiety – Manuela enters Ms. von Bernburg’s office. The teacher is surprised to see her and asks her to speak her mind. Manuela spins around, facing the wall, and loudly answers each question Ms. von Bernburg had asked her in class. “I learned everything,” Manuela says, “but in class, when you give me those cold looks, I forget it.” Ms. von Bernburg instructs her to sit by the desk, and Manuela slumps over, crying. “You’re a peculiar child,” says Ms. von Bernburg. Manuela says she doesn’t know why she’s crying before handing over her diary. “Mutual trust is a fine thing,” Ms. von Bernburg says before asking Manuela to explain why she’s so emotional. The girl says she stares after Ms. von Bernburg every night after lights out, wishing she could go to her as she had her mother. “You know that I can’t make any exceptions...” Ms. von Bernburg begins. “You’re all my children. I don’t belong to you, but to everyone... You must understand: I like you all! Think of that next time you can’t answer. But that will never happen again.” She pulls out her grade book and shows Manuela all her bad marks. “Things will change,” Manuela promises. Ms. von Bernburg promises Manuela can join the drama club if she does better. They’re interrupted by Ms. von Racket, who enters to speak with Ms. von Bernburg about the headmistress’ birthday party. Authoritatively, Ms. von Bernburg dismisses Manuela. Alone, the teachers brainstorm what play to throw, eventually landing on Romeo and Juliette.



Shakespeare – Manuela stands at the front of a hall reading Romeo’s lines from a copy of the play. The drama addresses her in French, saying she has to “declaim” properly. The teacher then recites the same lines with a deeper voice and a vibrato. Manuela tries to copy her, but the teacher reacts harshly. Her confidence shattered, Manuela’s delivery falters. Again, the drama teacher scolds her, telling her to blow a kiss into the air before saying she’ll have to pick a new Romeo if Manuela can’t improve. Ms. von Bernburg has been watching. A concerned look crosses her face as the school bell rings. Manuela complains about the teacher holding her back to a friend until she comes face-to-face with Ms. von Bernburg, who instructs her to follow. In an empty classroom, Ms. von Bernburg gives Manuela tips on how to perfect her Romeo. Caught up in the passion of the play and her own blossoming sexuality, Manuela pulls Ms. von Bernburg into a passionate kiss. The teacher is shocked silent for a few moments until Manuela begins to cry. “Is that how Romeo should be?” Ms. von Bernburg asks. The class bell rings and girls flock into the classroom. Ms. von Bernburg takes the chance to distance herself from Manuela and move to the head of the class. Later, Manuela and Yvette practice lines during recess, receiving a compliment from Ms. von Bernburg. Another student, Alexandra, glares at Manuela jealously.



Sunday – The bespectacled girl sets the scene as she takes the screen, saying, “Children, there’s nothing better than a cozy Sunday.” The camera pans around the room, showing us girls sewing, reading, singing, and drawing. The girl drawing gives her work to a friend seated on the same bed, and the other girl hugs and kisses her with excitement. “Lying in bed all day is forbidden,” shouts the ‘foster mother’ elder student as she enters the dorm. Crossing to the two girls on the bed, she cruelly snatches and rips up their drawing. One girl snatches it back, and the other tries to hold the ‘foster mother’ back as they go running around the room, causing a scene. Manuela stands at the top of the high staircase. One of her friends says it would take a human only 9.81 seconds to hit the bottom if they jumped. Another girl drops something, striking an older student who shouts up at them. In the laundry room, one girl reads a letter she intends to have smuggled out to her parents as others giggle and darn socks. Ms. von Racket enters to examine the girls’ work and nearly discovers the scandalous letter, but she’s distracted when the bespectacled girl enters singing a saucy cabaret tune. When the girl says her military officer father taught her the song and the girls giggle, Ms. von Racket takes out her anger on Manuela, saying she must repair her threadbare blouse by Monday morning or earn a reprimand.



New blouse – The sky darkens as Manuela tries in vain to repair her old blouse. She sits alone in the laundry room sewing and reciting lines from Romeo and Juliette. Ms. von Bernburg climbs up the nearby stairs, stopping for a moment when she hears a voice: it’s supposed to be lights out. “Meinhardt?” she says, stepping into the laundry room. “Still awake?” Manuela explains she must repair her blouse or face punishment from von Racket. In the nearby dorm, Alexandra stirs, sneaking over to the door to spy. Visibly frustrated with von Racket’s demands, Ms. von Bernburg takes Manuela to her quarters. Alexandra follows stealthily, watching another girl convince a maid to sneak out a letter for her. In her quarters, Ms. von Bernburg gives Manuela a new silk blouse to replace her tattered one. Manuela is oddly elated. Before she leaves, she comments on how pretty Ms. von Bernburg looks in her Sunday dresses, saying she’s afraid her favorite teacher will leave them. Ms. von Bernburg crosses the room and assures her she’s staying because she cares for all the girls, offering her hand to shake. Manuela grasps and kisses it before rushing to her dorm. Back on her bed, Manuela lays the blouse across her pillow to sleep on. Alexandra glares across the room at her. Before the scene fades out, the camera glances up at the placard on the wall: “We are not put on this earth to be happy, but to do our duty.”



Letter intercepted – The headmistress marches across her office shouting at Ms. von Racket about her lack of attentiveness. In her hand she holds the letter the girl had tried to sneak out, shouting, “This letter was sent back due to an incomplete address.” She identifies the girl who wrote it and thrusts it toward von Racket for her to read herself. She does and immediately dives into her typical brown-nosing, but the headmistress refuses to hear it, commanding her to punish the girl. “And no further commotion!” the headmistress quips while lifting a glass of water to her lips. “Or I won’t live to see my birthday.”



Headmistress' birthday – The girls are hard at work doing a dress rehearsal and preparing the set decorations for the play. The drama teacher listens from the first row of seats, seemingly barely holding back frustrated tears as she shouts yet again that the girl's 'declamation' is all wrong. Ms. von Racket enters and hastily storms to the front of the room. She says that one of the girls must be punished by the headmistress' orders for writing a letter filled with lies before stepping onto the stage and stripping the costume off the girl playing the priest. The girl's tearful begging fades into the joyfully toned but emotionally empty cry, "For she's a jolly good fellow, hip hip, hurrah!" Smiling pridefully, the headmistress enters the hall with her elderly friends in tow. Schoolgirls stand silently at their seats like soldiers. The old women chat with her as they take their seats at the front near the stage: "I treat my daughter like my mother treated me: first the convent, then marriage. Nothing in between." "Just like our principles:" the headmistress says proudly, "children, church, kitchen." She repeats the phrase comically for an even older friend who uses a horn to listen. Backstage, the girls scramble to put the final touches on costumes or memorize their lines. One poor girl frets that she's been given no time to prepare as she tries to put on the priest costume.



Performance – A piano plays a simple waltz as the girls dance on stage. From the crowd, Ms. von Bernburg smiles happily as Manuela skillfully performs her part as Romeo. The audience claps as Romeo and Juliette kiss. In the kitchen, several women work hard to prepare the party food for both the headmistress' guests and the children. There is some argument about who should get what, as it's clear the headmistress thinks the girls having a celebratory treat is spoiling them, but the women in the kitchen have other plans. With the help of another student, the stand-in for the priest is able to deliver her lines. Back in the kitchen, one of the women puts some special final touches on the punch. The girls file out of the auditorium with their chairs, and the girls backstage celebrate putting on such a good show.



Afterparty – The same chairs used as seating in the auditorium are put in place in a dining hall where the girls all clamor and shout praise for the performers. One of the girls starts playing a jaunty waltz on a nearby piano, and the girls begin to waltz around the room together. Everyone wants to dance with Romeo. Ms. von Bernburg enters from the rear door, and a schoolgirl stands to announce her, but the teacher stops her, beaming joyfully at the celebrating students. Manuela catches sight of her and stops dancing, smiling goofily up toward her. Ms. von Bernburg is happy to tell the girls the headmistress and her guests all loved the performance. A girl asks von Bernburg what she thought of the play, and, jokingly, she says that the girl who said the priest's final line was the star of the show, causing the girls to giggle. "I enjoyed you all!" says Ms. von Bernburg happily as she approaches Manuela. "And bravo to our Romeo." As she turns to leave, Ms. von Bernburg sees the sour look on Alexandra's face and tells her not to be a spoilsport. The blonde girl stares jealously at young Romeo celebrating with the other girls.



The punch – In the kitchen, one of the cooks dances and sings as she liberally applies rum to the previously dissatisfying punch. The other two cooks stop their waltzing as one sees this: "Johanna! Have you lost your mind?" "It has to be like that," the libatious cook says. "If the headmistress finds out," the other cook begins to scold. "Couldn't care less," says the first cook as she carries the punch toward the dining room. "The girls have to live too." In the dining hall, the cook shouts that the punch is ready and begins ladling out cupfuls for the excited girls. Manuela drinks deeply from her mug and quickly becomes tipsy. She offers a drink to Alexandra, who sits away from the other girls. "I saw you," Alexandra says coldly. "Who?" Manuela asks. "What did you see?" "You and Ms. von Bernburg, when she took you in her room," says Alexandra plainly. Manuela says that was supposed to be a secret since Ms. von Bernburg helped her dodge Ms. von Racket's punishment. Alexandra teases that she could tell, but all it takes is a couple questions from Manuela to get her to admit she's jealous of the attention the newcomer is getting from her favorite teacher.



Public admission – Manuela, growing more drunk and less interested in Alexandra's vague threats, giggles and rejoins the other girls. Not long after, Alexandra goes to Ms. von Racket, telling her that Manuela is drunk. Back in the dining hall, Manuela downs another cup of punch, shouting, "This is the greatest day of my life!" Jokingly, a girl



across the room challenges her to an acting competition, and the girls help the staggering Manuela to the highest point in the room. She passionately dives into the “what light through yonder window breaks” monologue from the play, stumbling only for a moment when she whispers, “My goddess! My love! Ms. von Bernburg...” It takes a moment for her to realize what she’s said, but she doubles down when she sees her peer’s shocked expressions, reiterating again and again that she loves Ms. von Bernburg and von Bernburg loves her back. The headmistress, followed by Ms. von Racket, storms in to confront Manuela about her drunkenness, and the girl doubles down again. “I’m not scared,” she says, “of anybody! Cheers, Ms. von Bernburg!” She stops to take another deep gulp from a mug of punch. “I love her. I love her!” The headmistress shouts back, “This is a scandal!” Manuela drops her mug and collapses to the ground.

“Most depraved girl” – The girls gather outside the door to the infirmary. Ms. von Racket exits, slamming the door behind her, and the girls ask about Manuela’s condition. Ms. von Racket snaps that no one is to see Manuela but the cook with her meals before ordering them to return to class. Dutifully the girls file out, except Yvette, who asks Ms. von Racket, “How’s she really doing?” “She got what she deserves!” snaps von Racket. In Ms. von Bernburg’s office, another teacher warns her about Ms. von Racket’s political positioning. “I have a clear conscience,” snaps Ms. von Bernburg. “But that doesn’t always suffice,” the other teacher says before leaving. In the infirmary, the cook gives Manuela water and listens to her troubles. “Alexandra is jealous,” Manuela says hoarsely, “and Racket hates Bernburg. I’m scared! I said too much! I must go to her and explain everything!” As she sits up to take action, the headmistress strides in, a deep frown furrowing her face. After kicking out the cook, she scolds Manuela, saying, “Since this school was established, there has never been such a scandal! You’re the most depraved girl to have ever attended this school! I’d give you a fine beating if you weren’t too big for it!” “What have I done, then?” Manuela asks tearfully. “You behaved dreadfully on my birthday,” the headmistress begins. “You’ll get your punishment.”



The princess – Ms. von Racket barges into the infirmary with urgent news for the headmistress: “Her Royal Highness is coming this afternoon.” Barking orders as she leaves the room, she says everyone, including Manuela, is to attend the arrival of the princess, reiterating no other girls will speak to Manuela. The girls line up for a pre-visit inspection, the ‘foster mother’ student barking orders at them like the headmistress, telling them when to curtsy and reminding them not to speak to Manuela. In her office, the headmistress curtsies deeply, practicing before checking her watch. The cook is ordered to fetch Manuela, and some of the gathered girls whisper that they’re going to say something to the princess about the headmistress. Manuela enters and finds her place. When the princess arrives, the headmistress and teachers rush to greet her, speaking of how much they appreciate her patronage and how well taught the girls have become. None of the girls speaks to the princess as planned. After a word of sympathy for Manuela having lost her mother, the princess leaves as quickly as she came. The girls are ordered to wait until Manuela has left before moving or speaking. Yvette walks after her, trying to console Manuela, but Ms. von Racket stops her and tells her to stay away from Manuela for reasons she “can’t explain.”



Surprise visitor – In the kitchen, the cooks gossip about Ms. von Bernburg getting called into the headmistress’ office. Meanwhile, Ms. von Bernburg stoically suffers through the headmistress’ angry diatribe upstairs. Calmly, von Bernburg defends her actions, but Ms. von Racket is there too, cross-examining. While they go back and forth for a bit, the headmistress has already made up her mind: seeing as Manuela has “developed an unhealthy fascination” with Ms. von Bernburg, von Bernburg will have to isolate herself from the girl. Ms. von Bernburg is obviously unhappy with this, storming off back to her quarters. She paces behind her desk for a moment before turning up the oil lamp burning on her desk. The light reveals Manuela standing nearby in the dark. Slowly, she shuffles toward her beloved teacher and collapses on the floor, crying at Ms. von Bernburg’s feet. Von Bernburg helps her into a seat before quickly trying to explain that this is her fault and Manuela needs to stay away from her and face her punishment. “I’ll never see you again?” Manuela asks. “Then life’s not worth living.” Ms. von Bernburg begins to sensitively urge Manuela to live for herself before snapping back into the authoritarian methods the headmistress expects from her. “Your



love for me is wrong," she says resolutely. "I am your teacher, nothing more. Now go." "Farewell, dear Ms. von Bernburg," Manuela says tearfully on her way out.

Fear and obedience – Walking back toward the infirmary, Manuela comes face to face with the headmistress. Realizing where she came from, the headmistress bursts into Ms. von Bernburg's office to shout at her again: "You spoke with Meinhardis! Despite my ban!" Ms. von Bernburg tries to explain that Manuela had been hiding in her chambers, but the headmistress refuses to listen, simply calling her back to her office. There, she tells Ms. von Bernburg that she must either quit or be fired. She wonders why von Bernburg even stayed since she never fit in. Ms. von Bernburg tells the story of the girls she met on her first day who were scared out of their wits, and it was for them she stayed and tried to be sensitive. "I had hoped to persuade you," she finishes. "Persuade me?" the headmistress growls. "Who do you think you are?" She goes on a tirade about how hardness is simply discipline and order, and that is what they are there to beat into the girls if necessary. "The children shouldn't have to pay for what happened to us," von Bernburg quips. "Your 'authority' is based on fear, and the children hate you for it." "But they obey!" the headmistress hisses.



"Forgive us our sins" – Manuela sits on the tower staircase as the bell chimes the hour. With tears in her eyes, she stands, slowly ascending the steps. Stressful music begins to overtake the chiming bells, and we hear Manuela murmur the Lord's Prayer: "Our father, who art..." Her steps come more quickly now as she rounds another landing and sets up a new flight. "Don't punish her!" she murmurs. "Forgive! Forgive! Forgive us our sins..." The music has reached the top of a crescendo as she takes to the final landing, looking down at the ground far below. Ms. von Racket enters the infirmary and is shocked to find it empty. She goes running into the dorm, asking the girls if they're hiding Manuela. They follow her when she runs out to search more of the school. "Manuela! Manuela!" they shout as they rush through the school. Someone spots her at the top of the stairs, now on the other side of the railing. Hearing the noise, Ms. von Bernburg comes to investigate. Slowly, she's able to distract Manuela long enough for some students to grab her and pull her back to safety. Manuela then passes out from the exertion and emotional shock, and several girls along with Ms. von Bernburg carry her back to the infirmary.



Infirmary – Manuela tosses and turns in her sleep, her hand reaching out to grasp something. Showing tenderness for the first time, the headmistress reaches out to hold the girl's hand, and she calms. Ms. von Bernburg can't hide a look of shock that crosses over her face. The headmistress turns to face her, begging her to stay. "Manuela will find her own way in life," Ms. von Bernburg replies cryptically. The headmistress leaves, and Ms. von Bernburg turns to follow her, turning out the light as she goes. The girl turns over in her sleep as the shadow of Ms. von Bernburg disappears behind the closed door. Once again the bells in the tower ring as the headmistress makes her way down the long hall.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Manuela von Meinhardis

An orphaned girl abandoned by her scornful aunt to a militaristic Prussian boarding school

Sensitive Manuela is described by many, including her aunt and some of the teachers, as overly sensitive. While in the modern perspective, a child having trouble coping with the very recent death of their mother is expected and accepted, in the early 1900s, such children were thought to simply be acting out for no reason. Manuela has trouble adjusting to life at the boarding school, but Ms. von Bernburg sees what she's going through and tries to sympathize while helping her to succeed in her classes. Seeing this sensitivity as something more than just a teacher helping a student, Manuela soon falls for Ms. von Bernburg. When she is rejected toward the end of the film, the sensitive girl's first thought is suicide.

Love While somewhat under-explored verbally and textually, Manuela's adoration of Ms. von Bernburg is obvious. She shows her love for her recently departed mother clearly at the beginning of the film in the

way she gingerly straightens the grave goods and collects a single petal for herself even as her aunt shouts angrily for her to come back to the carriage. This death drives how Manuela interacts with others throughout the film, and in some ways, she begins to see Ms. von Bernburg as a surrogate mother. While her love first has this innocent tinge, she soon moves into something different as her love for Ms. von Bernburg and her budding sexuality intermingle, leading her to passionately kiss her teacher when they're practicing Romeo and Juliette in private. This comes to a head toward the end of the film when, after being rejected after a very public drunken admission, Manuela decides life isn't worth living if she can't be with Ms. von Bernburg, and she attempts to throw herself to her death from the high tower staircase.

Fräulein Elisabeth von Bernburg

A kindly teacher at the boarding school

Sensitive Unlike most of the other staff at the boarding school, Ms. von Bernburg is very sensitive to the girls' feelings and needs. This makes her incredibly popular with the schoolgirls, who face rejection or outright antagonism from other teachers. The reason she even stayed in the position was because she knew most of the girls simply needed a bit of understanding to be good students, refusing to bow to the authoritarian beliefs of the headmistress.

Confident Ms. von Bernburg oozes confidence. From the way she speaks to the way she moves, she is like a marble statue in stature. It's no wonder all the girls are so taken with her and want to be just like her. Her confidence extends even to trying to show the headmistress the error of her ways as we see at the end of the film. When asked why she stays even when she disagrees with the way the girls are treated and her role in that, she says she stayed first for the girls' sake but also in an attempt to get the headmistress to change her mind about her authoritarian means of education.

Headmistress

We learn very little about the headmistress and her past throughout the film. We don't even learn her name. We do learn, however, that she is incredibly cruel to her wards, denying them simple self-determination or expression and even filling meals.

Authoritarian All the actions and every word the headmistress takes and speaks in this film show us her authoritarian attitudes. She is almost a caricature of Adolf Hitler in the way she speaks and holds herself. If the girls have any needs or desires that aren't being met, she simply says they're acting like brats and cuts their rations and free time further. She, however, wants for nothing, and much of the school's activities revolve around making her happy and making her look good to her elderly friends or the princess. It's only at the very end of the film that we get even a glimpse of tenderness from the headmistress.

Fräulein von Racket

We don't learn a lot about von Racket. She is a yes man for the headmistress, frequently trying to ingratiate herself with the authoritarian old woman. Ms. von Racket also takes out her anger on the girls frequently, taking what little they have for the most minor of offenses.

Cruel Cruelty is von Racket's major trait. Unlike many of the other teachers, she is happy to be cruel to the students. She seems to take some sick satisfaction in making the girls cry and act out, using such behavior as an excuse to enact further cruelty. While the other teachers try to get the headmistress to soften her treatment of the girls, von Racket seems to lead the headmistress in the direction of further starving the girls and robbing them of any joy, suggesting that the girls complain of certain things in meetings with the headmistress.

Alexandra von Treskow

Alexandra is an older blonde girl. She is often given more responsibilities by the teachers. It's Manuela's closeness with Ms. von Bernburg that makes her turn nasty toward the end of the film.

Jealous Alexandra's jealousy grows and becomes more apparent as the film unfolds. We're first introduced to her as a helpful older girl who seems sympathetic to Manuela's situation. However, as Manuela's relationship with Ms. von Bernburg deepens, Alexandra becomes openly spiteful. This is minor at first: glaring and pursed lips shot at Manuela from afar. On the night of the play, however, it reaches a head. Having seen Manuela enter Ms. von Bernburg's quarters late at night, Alexandra tries to blackmail her drunken rival. Manuela is too drunk to understand what's going on and simply brushes off the comment, but Alexandra fetches Ms. von Racket, who appears to confront Manuela and overhears the girl's confession of love for her teacher. It's clear that Manuela didn't really want to hurt Manuela, but her desire to be as close with Ms. von Bernburg as she is pushes her to act rashly.

THEMES

Society

Politics: *Fascism* *Mädchen in Uniform* is, first and foremost, an examination of fascism in microcosm. From the first to the last scene, the specter of fascism haunts the story. Manuela's aunt is overly strict, not even giving the girl a decent amount of time to tend to her mother's grave or say goodbye before throwing her into an especially strict boarding school. There she describes Manuela as spoiled before abandoning her. Being dressed for class and having her belongings unpacked, Manuela is forced to give up anything that might bring her some comfort or joy. This treatment continues as Manuela is brought into the fold and taught to march and be silent like the others. The headmistress is shown to be the reason this fascistic teaching strategy is employed. Having been brought up in a time of war, she thinks kids have it too easy these days and wants them to suffer because of it. She is shown to be ingratiating herself with powerful people and skimming a tidy profit off the top of the school fees, helping her profit margin stay high by starving the girls. This type of authoritarianism only seeks to improve the life of the leader and their immediate subordinates while causing stress and suffering among everyone else.

Illustrative moment There are many moments of fascism throughout the film, but one of the clearest comes early. Soon after joining her classmates, Manuela is treated to a speech by the headmistress. During this time, the headmistress chastizes the girls for not obeying the overly strict rules well enough, orating like Hitler or Mussolini.



Gender Female gender expression, specifically that of the turn of the 19th century, is on full display in *Mädchen in Uniform*. We learn very quickly that 1910 Prussia was a deeply misogynistic culture with state-supported institutions like this boarding school intent on penalizing young women for having any personality or desires outside of marriage and child-rearing. The role of women and girls is spelled out for us at several points, and each time it's said that women exist to serve the man they marry and to raise his children no matter the cost. Manuela and others bristle against this, seeking out their own moments of self-expression and pushing against the demands of the likes of the headmistress and Ms. von Racket. Most of the girls conform completely to the feminine ideals foisted upon them, but we see Manuela reveling in her role as Romeo, happily playing the "man" at the post-play dance and waltzing with all the other girls.

Illustrative moment The clearest moment of how gender is examined in this film comes in the first half of the film. The teachers gather with the headmistress to discuss how they should teach the latest class of girls. At the beginning of this meeting, we hear Ms. von Racket telling the group, "Girls are put on Earth to become women who make men happy." This old-fashioned and, frankly, regressive view of women and their role in society is part of the fascist ideals the headmistress wishes to instill in the girls living at the boarding school. To have any desires or interest outside of pleasing a husband or raising children is seen as an affront to the teachings at the school.



Education Education is an ever-present theme in the film even if it is just on the surface. While Ms. von Bernburg and the other teachers seem to want to focus on education, the headmistress insists they focus first on her cruel version of discipline. The only reason the headmistress seems to focus at all on education is that the girls' performance is tied to continued funding from the princess. The idea of education all but falls away in the second half of the film, the plot overtaken by Manuela's crush on von Bernburg and the performance of Romeo and Juliette.

Illustrative moment The clearest moment of education and how it was performed in the 1910s comes fairly early in the film when Manuela has her first literature lesson with Ms. von Bernburg. The teacher addresses the class, calling names with the girls standing as they're called. Each answers a question and gets a good mark in the teacher's book. Manuela struggles with speaking in front of the class and receives a bad mark because of it. This moment gives us a very clear example of how education and grading worked before standardized curriculum and testing.



Justice

Punishment The punishment we see is mostly cruelty enacted on the girls for simply being teenage girls. In this way, it's unusually unjust. The headmistress takes extra steps to punish girls who attempt to tell their families about what is happening in the boarding school, thinking their desire to have filling meals and real free time is just them being spoiled brats. When girls are found breaking rules, they're not allowed to take part in extracurricular activities like music or the play, and sometimes punishment is meted out simply for being unlucky enough to be around the headmistress or Ms. von Racket when they're in a bad mood. In this film, punishment is used as a tool to instill obedience through fear.

Illustrative moment One of the more obvious and impactful moments of punishment in the film happens around the halfway point. The girl with glasses enters the room singing a dirty cabaret song about soldiers, and Ms. von Racket is there to hear her. The teacher reacts with shock and disgust, telling the girl she'll be punished and demanding to know who taught her the song. The girl responds it was her father, a high-ranking military officer. Ms. von Racket realizes she can't punish a girl for doing something she thinks is patriotic, leading some of the girls to giggle softly as the cruel teacher visibly squirms with embarrassment. Von Racket whirls around and starts chastizing Manuela for the state of her hand-me-down blouse, telling her to mend it by tomorrow morning or face worse punishment, leading the girl to stay up late trying unsuccessfully to mend the threadbare blouse.



Life stages

Old age A small but nonetheless important theme, we see old age mostly through the headmistress. She is quite elderly. She walks with a cane, cannot stand for long, and is frequently seen taking medicine with the aid of water. She seems jealous of the young girls for their youth, and this may be part of what drives her cruelty. Because she is old, she has experienced much suffering, and because of this, she thinks she must toughen up the girls through punishment and cruelty to prepare them for what may make them suffer in the future.



Illustrative moment The clearest moment of old age comes at the beginning of the film. After initially hearing that the headmistress is indisposed, we are introduced to her when Ms. von Racket visits her in her office later that day. There, the headmistress seems to have a small medical episode before complaining about her old age. She claims in this moment she simply wills her heart to continue beating.

Coming of age Much of the film relies on this theme to have an impact. If Manuela were much younger or any older, her blossoming sexuality and the treatment of the teachers would mean less. While most girls have their mother to help them through this time, Manuela has just lost hers, and it hobbles her. Because she has no one to look up to—her aunt simply abandoning her to the boarding school instead of trying to fill the role of surrogate mother—Manuela is desperate to find someone to fill the role her mother

left behind. She latches onto Ms. von Bernburg, going from simple admiration and childish attachment to full-blown romantic obsession. Losing this first love gives Manuela such a shock that she's driven to attempt suicide, thinking nothing in her life will ever matter unless she can be with her dear Ms. von Bernburg.

Illustrative moment Many coming-of-age moments include taking part in an adult action like having sex or drinking alcohol. One of the clearer moments of this theme in the film deals with the latter. After the play, one of the cooks decides to spike the girl's punch to improve its flavor. This allows Manuela to get extremely drunk. It's clear it's her first time drinking: she is very quickly stumbling drunk, but she keeps on going, trying to prove herself as a woman and a tough one at that. It's her drunkenness that leads to her admitting her love for Ms. von Bernburg to everyone.



Sexuality

Discipline While not explicitly sexual in every context seen in the film, we do see a sort of dominant and submissive relationship form between the schoolgirls and the school staff. The girls are expected to give in to all demands and act less like people and more like objects in front of staff. The headmistress explicitly states at several points this is all in service to teaching them to mindlessly serve their husbands in the near future, that the girl's only purpose in life is to produce and care for "future German soldiers." Punishment is a key aspect of discipline at the boarding school: in fact, it's just about the only aspect of discipline we see, giving the headmistress' orders and demands a somewhat sadistic undertone.

Illustrative moment One of the first moments of explicit discipline and how it's used in the film happens early on, just after Manuela has been given her uniform dress. She enters a room where a teacher instructs the students on the proper form for a royal curtsy. This type of etiquette is at the center of these girls' education and serves to show them how to act for their future husbands. While much of the discipline we see is completely non-sexual, it is given a sexual tinge by the fact that the end goal of every act by the teachers is instilling complete obedience for a future sexual partner into these girls.



Domination/Submission At the boarding school, the girls are expected to be completely submissive to the orders and demands of the teachers. We frequently see teachers barking orders at the children who face punishment if they so much as hesitate. As the relationship between Manuela and Ms. von Bernburg becomes more complex, it takes on the trappings of a dominant/submissive relationship, Ms. von Bernburg leaning on discipline to try and help her student succeed in the system the headmistress has constructed. In this, we see Manuela give up her autonomy in many ways, including handing over her diary to Ms. von Bernburg when she refused to give it up to anyone else before. In this theme we also see the battle between the headmistress and Ms. von Bernburg. Ms. von Bernburg seeks to submit to the headmistress' demand for discipline as an attempt to change her mind about its cruel necessity. The headmistress, however, refuses to relent until the very end of the film, but she realizes sometimes a gentle hand is needed after Manuela attempts to throw herself from the tower staircase.

Admiration This is a core theme in this film. All of the girls admire Ms. von Bernburg for her grace and fairness. Their obvious admiration takes the form of friendly gossip about their favorite teacher, trying to do their best in class for her, and waiting excitedly for a goodnight kiss from her each night. Manuela begins to admire Ms. von Bernburg quickly. We see an admiration develop between Yvette and Manuela, especially after they begin working on Romeo and Juliette together. Some of the teachers admire Ms. von Bernburg for the same reasons as the girls. Ms. von Racket's admiration for the headmistress reaches sycophantic levels.

Attraction The idea of attraction is a bit loose in *Mädchen in Uniform*. We see it in the way the girls make friends. Yvette and Manuela kick it off quickly because they simply like how the other looks. At one point, we see two girls cuddling with each other, one drawing a portrait for the other one. She gifts this to the girl who kisses her in thanks. Manuela's romantic attraction to Ms. von Bernburg comes on quickly and only escalates. At first, we see admiration, a desire to emulate von Bernburg's kindness and poise. But when

she instructs Manuela on how to properly play Romeo, something shifts, and Manuela takes a chance, kissing her teacher. Soon after this, it becomes clear that Alexandra has some level of attraction to Ms. von Bernburg and that she views Manuela as a rival. It's this rivalry that leads her to tell Ms. von Racket about Manuela's drunken behavior.

Love While it's a frequent theme in the film, we don't really explore it deeply. The girls and teachers don't share their insight on the feeling. It haunts the narrative like a ghost, Manuela's dead mother frequently coming up wordlessly. In her mind, she has lost her love. Her aunt is uncaring; the headmistress and many of the teachers are cruel. Manuela is lacking a caring womanly influence in her life. Because of that, she latches onto Ms. von Bernburg for her kind attitude. At first, we see this as a young girl yearning for a surrogate mother, but as the film continues, the girl's budding sexuality begins to complicate the relationship. By the time Manuela kisses Ms. von Bernburg, she's already fallen for her teacher. Ms. von Bernburg makes it clear that she doesn't return these feelings by pushing the girl away, but still Manuela's love grows. She drunkenly admits her love when drunk, and Ms. von Bernburg sets a firm boundary, saying, "I am your teacher, nothing more." Manuela reacts harshly to this and is driven to attempt suicide by her broken heart.

Lesbianism Most of the apparently lesbian moments in the film are incidental side effects of the all-female cast and setting. One may argue that some of the moments of the girls showing each other affection fall into this description, but without a bit more information or repetition, they don't say much. What we do see is a strange rivalry between Alexandra and Manuela, both of whom want to be Ms. von Bernburg's main focus. Manuela openly expresses a romantic love for her teacher, but Alexandra's lesbian tendencies show through her possessiveness and jealousy. All the girls love Ms. von Bernburg, but Alexandra is the only one who tries to hurt Manuela for her advances on the teacher.

Illustrative moment Many would think the admission of love is the most illustrative moment, but there is a purer, more tender moment early in the film that highlights this theme very clearly. When rehearsing the part of Romeo with Ms. von Bernburg, Manuela takes a chance to kiss her, and for a moment, Ms. von Bernburg lets it happen. She pushes the girl away quickly, however, shocked in silence. Instead of making a scene, Ms. von Bernburg simply begins preparing for class.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How are fascist control mechanisms examined by this film?
2. Would you describe the lesbianism on display in *Mädchen in Uniform* as overt or covert? Explain.
3. Would you call the 1958 version of *Mädchen in Uniform* an improvement or a worsening of the 1931 version? Why?
4. Examine the ideas of loss of control, rebellion, and obedience in this film. Are these ideas touching on sexual themes, political ideas, or a combination of both?