

## Deconstructive Analysis of Sally Bowles as an American: Fake Femme Fatale in *Cabaret*

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### Introduction

The film *Cabaret* (1972), is based on Christopher Isherwood's novel *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939), Jon van Druten's play *I Am a Camera* (1951) and its film version (1955), and the Broadway musical *Cabaret* (1966), directed by Harold Prince. After the film was released, there have been many Broadway revivals of the musical, and the next *Cabaret* revival opened on Broadway in March 2014. However, I will focus on the film version of *Cabaret*, since this version is probably the most famous one among the many versions of *Cabaret* that remains in people's hearts for many years, not only because of the media's availability to mass audiences in movie theaters, on television, video, and DVD, but also because of significant changes that the film director Bob Fosse made. By eliminating all the songs performed outside the cabaret, Fosse succeeded in making the film realistic; thus it became acceptable for those who are not used to characters who suddenly start singing without a specific reason. The change also made the contrast between inside and outside the cabaret clearer, so the role of the cabaret became distinct. Film techniques such as close-ups and cross-cuts made it possible to show slight facial expressions of the

characters and also details of the costumes.

When the film was released in 1972, the decadence of Berlin and the rise of the Nazis reminded audiences of America during the Vietnam War. However, audiences in recent years do not think of a particular war, but they seem to focus on unique characters depicted in a lively manner and the stories among them rather than understand the film as a concept musical that depicted German society in decay. When people see the film, they might be attracted by the androgynous Emcee, the sleazy, smoky atmosphere of the Kit Kat Klub, or the cheap yet satirical and catchy performances onstage. However, what stays in their minds probably is the unique charm of the main character Sally Bowles as performed by Liza Minnelli.

In *Goodbye to Berlin*, Sally Bowles is merely one of many characters that Isherwood met in Berlin. However, when John van Druten adapted it into the play *I Am a Camera*, he built a story around Sally. In the theater version of *Cabaret*, Harold Prince did not put the primary focus on Sally Bowles, as he tried to depict decadent Berlin through the eyes of Clifford Bradshaw, an Americanized version of the Englishman Christopher Isherwood, rather than highlight Sally's romance. However, in the film version of *Cabaret*, the focus was again shifted to the romance between Sally Bowles and Brian Roberts, an Englishman based on Isherwood and played by the English actor Michael York.

Although Sally acts like an independent, free woman in the film, her independence seems to be limited. Despite her efforts to act as a femme fatale, Sally is a character who faces ruin. I would like to discuss what she represents through focusing on the visual aspects of the film. To consider this theme, I will divide the essay into two parts: Sally onstage and Sally offstage. Inside the cabaret, Sally's relationship with the Emcee is mainly depicted while her relationship with Brian is centralized outside the club.

## **1. Sally on Stage: Sally as the Object of the Male Gaze**

Sally Bowles, a young American woman who sings on the stage of the Kit Kat Klub in Berlin and dreams of becoming an actress someday, is the female protagonist of the film *Cabaret*. Onstage, Sally creates a persona as a femme fatale, seducing the audience members in the club and in the movie theater. However,

at the same time, Sally is forced to play the role that the audience members want her to play. Although she seductively invites the audience members to come to the cabaret, she is fascinated and seduced by the decadence of Berlin embodied by the Emcee.

As a performer on the stage of the Kit Kat Klub, Sally wears the mask of a femme fatale in order to seduce the audience, a role that she inherited from Marlene Dietrich. When Bob Fosse and his team made the film, their image of German cabaret in the 1930s came from the German film *The Blue Angel*, starring Marlene Dietrich as Lola-Lola, a popular local cabaret singer (Tropiano, 727). Actually, *The Blue Angel* and *Cabaret* have a number of common points. For instance, both films are about a cabaret in Germany, and there is a cabaret singer who seduces an intellectual from the middle class: a professor of a local college in *The Blue Angel*, and a student from Cambridge University in *Cabaret*. In *The Blue Angel*, the professor's devotion to Lola-Lola leads to his downfall—he has to quit his job because of his marriage to the cabaret singer, and he becomes a member of the show. He is forced to perform as a clown in front of his former colleagues and students, and he consequently kills himself in disgrace. Therefore, Lola-Lola is considered to be a femme fatale, who is mysterious and seductive, and whose allure ruins men.



Fig. 1 *The Blue Angel* (1930).



Fig. 2 *Cabaret* (1972).

Sally seduces the audiences, yet she becomes an object of the male gaze on the stage at the same time. According to Latham, the primary value of a woman performing on the stage is her physical allure. She says, "When she ceased to appeal to her audience as an object of sexual pleasure, she usually ceased to have a career" (103). Therefore, Sally seduces the audience because that is what performers on the stage should do, while Lola-Lola seduces the audience genuinely. There is a framework of the female as an object onstage, though it may not be that simple to see the stage as a binary opposition of female and male, considering the ambiguity of gender and sexuality on the stage of the Kit Kat Klub. Even the Emcee exposes his bare chest and limbs only when he is in drag in the musical number "Tiller Girls," and other male performers also disguise themselves as females in order to perform on the stage. On the contrary, when they dress as males to perform a folk dance, they do not expose their limbs, and their dance suggests violence rather than sex, as the scene of the club's manager being beaten up by Nazis is cross-cut with their performance.

Sally onstage tends to be reduced to her body or its parts in order to sell herself to the audiences. In her first song "Mein Herr," the homage number to Dietrich in *The Blue Angel*, Sally cross-dresses in a black hat and black attire, and dances with a chair as a prop, as in the famous scene of Lola-Lola singing in the cabaret. The choreography highlights her legs, which is a pastiche of Dietrich, who was known for her beautiful legs. And her legs are fetishized, as her body seems to be cut into pieces when she sits on the chair backwards. Although Sally is a leading singer in the number, other dancers are also sitting and lying on the chairs backwards to show off their legs, so that the mostly male audiences can pick the dancer they like.

Sally shows what the audiences want her to show, and she performs the role that the audiences want her to play. Although she performs as a femme fatale, the gaze of the audiences and their existence are fatal to *her*, because they make her an object of consumption. Sally, as a performer, is controlled and limited by men. Even though there are mostly women performing onstage, the Kit Kat Klub is a male-centered world, as in the case of Takarazuka. In Takarazuka, there is form of misogyny among women in that they consider the male roles as superior and the female roles as inferior, and those who play male roles are higher in the hierarchy.

The Kit Kat Klub stage frames Sally Bowles as an object of the male gaze, yet Sally feels that she can be free on the stage, not hampered by morality, and also she can be independent from social suppression and express herself at the same time, though her freedom is limited. In the 1920s, nudity was only allowed for women entertainers in the theater. Dudden notes, “theater may enable women to rehearse the most radical projects of self-creation or may reduce them to bodies and present them as objects. Theatre may do either of these, or both, or neither” (2). In the title song “Cabaret,” Sally proudly declares, “Life is a cabaret.” For Sally, the phrase means that the Kit Kat Klub is a place where she can escape from harsh reality, and it is also the only place where she can truly live as she is.

Sally’s independence onstage is suggested by her androgyny. Both Sally and the Emcee are depicted as androgynous characters, as they always wear black clothes that look formal, and both have short black hair, red lips, and powdered white faces. We can see the relationship between independence and androgyny in the case of Sylvia von Harden. Sylvia is the woman painted in *Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden* by Otto Dix, recreated in the Kit Kat Klub in the song “Willkommen,” soon after the Emcee greets us, and the camera zooms out. Fosse took the film’s visual image from German expressionist paintings, and this painting is one of them. She is depicted as androgynous, holding a cigarette in her big, manly hand. She wears a red check dress on her flat body, which has no feminine curves. Her face is so pale that the red color of her lipstick is strongly emphasized, and this contrast makes her face seem grotesque. In Germany in the 1920s, it was rare for women to go to a café and sit alone, so Sylvia was called a “new woman,” that is, a woman who is socially independent. Like Sylvia, Sally’s androgyny is symbolized by her social independence. She is free from social demands that she be feminine and modest.

However, Sally’s independence is limited only to the stage of the Kit Kat Klub. “Willkommen,” the first musical number in the film shows Sally’s lack of talent and her desperate future as an actress. Although Sally wants to become a film actress, her lack of talent prevents her, so she is bound to the stage of the Kit Kat Klub. Sally Bowles was originally created as an untalented character, and Isherwood described her performance in this way: “She sang badly, without any expression, her hands hanging down at her sides—yet her performance was, in its own way,

effective because of her startling appearance and her air of not caring a curse what people thought of her" (38). However, when they started casting for the film, Liza Minnelli was the first person to be auditioned, though Minnelli was a very talented performer. However, Minnelli tried hard to suggest Sally's lack of talent in the film.

When the film begins, and the club's Master of Ceremonies, referred to as Emcee in the musical and in the film, introduces each performer to the guests in the club, Sally hardly stands out, because they are standing near the far edge of the stage, and there is a dancer in front of them. Though she is wearing a long, red dress with short black hair, which is quite different from the other dancers, who have blonde hair and are wearing short pants to show their legs, her red dress blends into the red curtain of the stage, and she hardly stands out. Later in the film, Sally says that she likes Lye De Putti, who performed on the stage in Berlin and later went to Hollywood, only to fail and die young. Sally, who comes to Berlin from America, has a similar experience to that of Putti. So Putti's failure as an actress in America seems to foreshadow Sally's future as an actress. Sally says that she can be better than Putti, which can be taken as an unconscious protest against her future. When Sally sings solo numbers on the stage, there are only a few people in the audience and little applause compared to the numbers by the Emcee. In "Maybe this Time," when she sings "Everybody loves a winner, so nobody love me," Sally sings about herself as a loser.

Sally is controlled by the Emcee, since he seems to be the only character that knows everything happening in the film as well as on the cabaret stage. In "Tiller Girls," the Emcee enters wearing a dancer's costume and a blonde wig. Although the dance number is cheerful, scenes of Nazi boys sneaking into Natalia's home yard are cross-cut with them. As a drum roll begins and Nazi boys shout to make Natalia find her dead dog, the music turns into a march. Then suddenly, the hats of the dancers turn into Nazi helmets, and their canes turn into guns. All of the dancers except for the Emcee have no expression, but the Emcee grins ominously. He seems to know what is happening outside the cabaret, and his performance reveals the audiences' subconscious sadomasochism that supports violence. The omniscient Emcee also reveals the subconscious desire of Sally to be destroyed, and thus he leads her to her downfall.

Sally seduces the audience to "come to the cabaret," yet at the same time, Sally

is also seduced and captured by the decadence embodied by the Emcee. There have been a number of ways to interpret the Emcee. Harold Prince says that the Emcee represents the Depression, while Roger Copeland sees him as a marionette of the German expressionists, as the ventriloquist manipulating a puppet in the opening act suggests. On the other hand, in an interview in the DVD "Broadway's Lost Treasures," the actor Joel Grey describes the Emcee as a bad guy who wears a Hitler mask. What is common to these interpretations is that the Emcee is depicted as someone who seems to transcend human nature. In that sense, he is like a clown or a marionette that can only live on the stage of the Kit Kat Klub. Sally and the Emcee never have a conversation. It may be because their relationship is professional as performers, but it is more likely because the Emcee is not human. To me, the Emcee seems to be an incarnation of decadence as Prince says, and also someone who represents the city of Berlin: a city that attracts homosexuals, camp culture, vagabonds, and Jews.

Sally is attracted and captured by the Emcee: decadence. Mizejewski argues that in the performance of "Money," their intimate way of dancing suggests that Sally and the Emcee are much more closely matched than Sally and Brian (210). Since they wear similar attire that imitates those of the bourgeois, and their height is almost the same, the Emcee looks like Sally's counterpart. Usually, the Emcee and Sally keep a distance, as they never have a private conversation except for while they are performing. He does not look like a human, as he does not show his emotions, and he seems to be omniscient. Although Sally and the Emcee do not have any conversation, the Emcee always keeps his eyes on Sally. For instance, when Sally performs the number "Maybe this time" on the stage, the Emcee gazes at her from the wings. Yet the film audience can see only his profile, but it is impossible to read his expression, so it disquiets us. And also when Sally tells Brian that Max is a baron, Sally notices the Emcee's gaze and then sticks out her tongue at him. However, when Sally is irresolute as to whether to have an abortion or not after the picnic scene with Brian, the distance between the Emcee and Sally is finally closed. The Emcee creeps up on Sally waiting her turn in the wings, and he holds her from behind as if the dark side of Berlin decadence captured her. Then she decides to have an abortion, which makes her part from Brian and consequently leads to her downfall.

In the musical number "Cabaret," Sally's pale body stands out in the darkness, but the shadows on her face and body make her seem to melt into complete darkness. When a person basks in light on the stage, the light blinds her, so that she cannot see the audience. Sally in the spotlight suggests that she is blind to the economic depression and seduced by divinely decadent Berlin, which gives her an instant refuge, but gradually leads her to collapse. Foster Hirsch explains the irony of the song: "Far from being intended as a celebration of good times, 'Cabaret' is the ironic theme song of a social and political dimwit, a no-talent loser, who blindly capitulates to Nazi darkness."

In the number "Cabaret," Sally recommends that people forget about harsh reality and live only for the pleasure of the moment, as she does herself. However, when the song comes to the lines, "But when I saw her laid out like a Queen/ She was the happiest corpse, I'd ever seen," Elsie's corpse suggests an ominous future: the collapse of the Weimar Republic and of Sally herself. Elsie's corpse is a *memento mori* (Rodger). When Sally sings about Elsie, all the lights except for the spotlight on Sally are switched off, and the film audiences can see nothing but Sally wearing a purple dress on the stage. The song "Cabaret" seems to refer to Liza Minnelli's mother, Judy Garland. Sally sings about her female friend Elsie, who is based on Garland, who lived her whole life in the show business world, married five times, and died of an overdose of sleeping pills. Sally's life outside the cabaret is as utterly confused as that of Judy Garland. Sally cannot have a stable relationship with a particular person, and she is always drinking and smoking cigarettes. Show business seems to ruin performers because of its nature of making them an object of consumption.

In the film, Sally Bowles is free from social oppression and can express herself on the stage of the Kit Kat Klub as she sings "Life is a cabaret," yet she becomes the object of the male gaze at the same time, so she has to wear a mask of a *femme fatale* to seduce the audiences onstage, and she plays the role that men want her to play. And also she is confined in the frame the Emcee constructs on the stage, and she is captured by the Emcee. In this sense, there is a contradiction inside Sally on the stage. However, the contradiction also makes it possible for her to feel free onstage.



## **2. Sally Offstage: Sally as an American Woman who is Accorded Limited Freedom and Independence**

Sally also tries to be a free, independent woman and to act like a femme fatale offstage. She invites Brian to live in her flat, and their friendship begins. Inside the club, the relationship between Sally and the Emcee is mainly depicted, yet when Sally goes out of the club, the focus shifts to the relationship between Sally Bowles and Brian Roberts, the male protagonist of the film, and their heterosexual romance is central to the plot of the film. Sally's relationship with Brian shows her side as an American woman who represents the free woman of the 1920s and the 1960s, though here too she cannot be completely independent.

Since Sally is turned from the original English woman into an American woman in this American film, the focus is also shifted from the character representing Isherwood to Sally. Fast-talking, independent, morally free, bohemian Sally shows characteristics of free women in America. She is an American woman who lives in the 1920s and the early 1930s and ignores the Victorian concept of morality that still existed. For instance, she is promiscuous, having sexual relationships with men who promise to give her a role in a film or to introduce her to someone in the film industry, and she often spreads the story around. This lack of restraint was frequently seen among the young American women in the 1920s. Like Clara Bow, whom Sally imitates by her posture on a canoe when she visits Max's villa, Sally Bowles can be considered a flapper: young women in the 1920s who had short, bobbed hair and wore short skirts. In the 1920s, fashion for women was quite a controversial issue, especially in terms of morality. According to Angela J. Latham, people in the fashion industry suggested that fashion was more important than a woman's body, so women should make their body fit popular fashions instead of choosing a fashion that fit their body (30). Women also found fashion important and spent large amounts of money on clothes, but it was not because they cared for appearance rather than inner beauty, but because clothes were an expression of their identity.

Thus, if Sally can be considered a flapper, her costume is very important as well as her demeanor to show her identity. Apart from bobbed hair and short skirts, Latham says that the chemise had a significant development in the 1920s (38).

Until then, a chemise was chaste and simple, and it was not referred to out loud among women. Yet, in this decade, a chemise became silk, colorful, with fancy trimmings such as flowers or butterflies on it. Although quite a few people thought it was morally wrong, companies and advertisers started to sell them widely. When Sally tries to seduce Brian in his room, she wears a pink chemise made of silk. She chooses what to wear in front of a mirror before she goes to Brian's room, and she decides that the chemise is the best one to seduce him. Here, a chemise is depicted as a symbol of seduction.

Another costume that caused controversy and suggests that Sally Bowles is a flapper is the bathing suit. Sally wears a black, one-piece bathing suit with white frills when she canoes with Brian and Max around Max's villa. Her limbs are exposed in the suit. In the 1920s, many people, especially in the older generation, thought that women should wear bathing suits that hide their limbs, while many young girls protested not only because it is unfashionable, but also because it is not practical for swimming. The regulations for bathing suits were different from state to state, yet state officials, especially along the coast, were divided between the concerns that women should be modest and that they should come in large numbers to the beach by loosening up the regulations. This conflict between morality and capitalism occurred in many places; yet, officials eventually gave up on modesty, and capitalism won here as well as in the case of the chemise. Therefore, Sally wearing a chemise and a bathing suit embodies women's freedom in face of old-fashioned morality.

Similarly, Sally represents women in the 1920s, but she also reflects the film audience in the 1970s. According to Copeland, the most important purpose of *Cabaret* is to reflect the contemporary society both in the stage and the film versions. When the film starts with the Emcee's evil smile, we immediately find a huge mirror behind him that shows a distorted figure of himself and the diegetic audiences in the Kit Kat Klub; thus the film audiences can see that one function of the Kit Kat Klub stage is to reflect German society. In the stage version of *Cabaret*, the mirror on the stage also reflected the actual audience watching the musical. The mirror cannot reflect film audiences in the film version, yet it is clear that the mirror works in the same way as the stage version: to suggest a reflection of the audiences watching the film—that is, the audience in the early 1970s America. In

the film, the Emcee seems to criticize Americans and their attitude towards the Vietnam War as well as the attitude of the Germans toward the rise of the Nazis. Harold Prince, who thought of using the mirror when he directed the theater version of *Cabaret*, says, “human nature doesn’t change; what happened in Berlin at the time of *Cabaret* can happen here, and that’s why the mirror is our metaphor” (Foster 40).

Wolf argues that Sally Bowles in the theater is considered to be the “Single Girl,” which was a staple of popular culture in the 1960s. According to Lehman, the Single Girl is a woman generally in her twenties or thirties, unmarried, heterosexual, and without children (3). The image of the Single Girl is a utopian fantasy of a woman free from the social and sexual constraints that limited her mother. She is depicted as a character that denies the American female identity in the 1950s. According to Stacy Wolf, women in the 1950s had a narrow choice for their lives. During the war, women had to do the jobs which men used to do, but soon after the men came back, women were chased from the labor market, and especially women in the middle class were expected to stay home and become wives and mothers. Especially on television and in films of the era, most female characters were wives and mothers in a nuclear family, and if not, then the woman might be a pinup girl like Marilyn Monroe, or a young teenager. (*Changed for Good* 27-28).

Thus in the film, Sally is depicted as a woman in the 1920s, and also in the 1960s and early 1970s, who denies the value systems of her mother’s era. Although scenes with her mother, which exist in other versions, are eliminated in the film, the character Natalia Landauer represents the value system of a former era as a modest woman instead of Sally’s mother. Sally and Natalia’s opposition is clear from their first meeting. For instance, when Natalia declines a cake, Sally takes it instead. Sally seems to be intentionally opposed to Natalia, talking openly about sex and offering Natalia some gin, as if she were a bad child who does things that she is told not to in order to attract the attention of the adults. In this scene and the following biking scene, Sally and Natalia wear similar clothes. In the English lesson scene, Sally wears a black dress, a black hat with a yellow rose, and a yellow scarf, while Natalia wears a dark green dress with a white hat and a white scarf. In the biking scene, they wear a similar bandanna. Although their clothes look similar in both scenes, Sally’s dress in the English lesson scene is décolletage, and

she wears a sleeveless sweater in the biking scene, while Natalia hardly shows her skin, so the similarities of clothes only emphasize their differences. The opposition between the two women represents that of a value system in America: modesty and self-representation.

Also, Natalia is contrasted to Sally in terms of economic dependency on her parents and her marriage with Fritz. Natalia chooses to live a conservative life as a wife and mother, while Sally chooses not to. Natalia consults Sally when she has a sexual encounter with Fritz, but she cannot accept it as love, since he might be a fortune hunter, and he seems to be a Christian, while she is Jewish. She says that the biggest problem is that her father will never forgive her if she marries Fritz. Natalia is depicted as a woman living under the patronage of her father. She is a member of the bourgeoisie who is raised to be a good wife and mother, while Sally is a person who challenges patriarchy, as she does not marry, has an abortion, and does not depend on her father.

However, although Sally is depicted as an independent American woman who opposes the former generation, it is also true that she is influenced or even controlled by the men around her, especially by her father, Maximilian, and Brian. These three males limit her life offstage. There seems to be an opposition between male and female as onstage. The male is traditionally considered as independent, and female as dependent. Sally challenges this traditional value system by having promiscuous relationships, earning her own living by working at the club, and refusing to be a wife and mother. However, Sally's sexual ambiguity, shown through her androgyny offstage, collapses this binary opposition itself.

In her relationship with her father, Sally's mask of a femme fatale is torn away, and her innocence and fragility are revealed when Sally's father stands her up. Then the fact that she usually suppresses her true self behind a mask is also revealed. In this scene, she wears a black suit with a white bow tie and with her bangs side-parted, so she looks like a tomboy. Wolf says that the "tomboy fits into the narrative of adolescence" and that her story is "marked by anxiety about not fitting in, feeling of confusion, and a sense of dislocation" (*Problem Like Maria* 50). Sally's tomboy fashion shows her sense of dislocation in the society and also shows that she cannot wear the mask that she created offstage. Sally, who seems

to be independent, is merely wearing a mask.

Sally's gender seems to turn from female to male, especially a young, innocent boy, in her relationship with her father. When her father breaks their promise, Sally is hurt deeply because she feels that her father does not love her, and she declares to Brian that she will become a great actress to show her father what she can do. Sally's desire to be noticed by her father and to exceed him seems to be more like a feeling that a son harbors for his father rather than that of a daughter. Sally is like a poor child who tries so hard to attract the attention of her great father, because she loves and admires him. In this scene, we can see her innocence and fragility behind the mask of a bad girl. She wears clear nail polish instead of her usual emerald green one, and she refers to her hands as a "positively a nun's hands." Then she hides her hands, putting on white gloves. She hides not only her hands but also her innocence and fragility with the gloves. However, that innocence is not that of a girl, but of a boy. Considering René Girard's idea of mimetic desire, Sally's desire for money and fame seems to be borrowed from her father, who possesses both of them. Thus, the relationship between Sally and her father seems to be that between members of the same sex.

In the relationship with Max, Sally is depicted as a fake femme fatale, since she fails to seduce him. Moreover, she is seduced and used by him because of her bad habit of chasing after money. Sally first meets Max at a laundry. Max enters the shop to hand Sally a piece of laundry that he she has dropped on the road, and when Sally tries to speak to the shop assistant in her poor German, he offers to interpret for her. Sally sees that Max is rich, and she takes him to the Kit Kat Klub. As usual, she tries to seduce Max. Soon they start to go out, sometimes by themselves, but mostly together with Brian. They spend most of their time together, eating, driving, and chatting. While associating with Max, Sally's childish fascination with wealth is revealed. For example, when they attend a lunch party at Max's villa, Sally says that the food here is always good to other guests, even though it is her first time to visit the villa. She also asks a person sitting next to her if they met at a film festival last year to impress him that she is involved in the film industry, even though it is obvious that she has never attended any such film festival.

Sally whispers "Money" at the backstage of the club, as if she were fascinated by the scent of money, and she decides to seduce Max in order to get financial sup-

port from him and to use his connections, assuming that he must know someone in the film industry. However, Sally finds out that she is paid by the hour by Max like a prostitute, as the connection between money and sex is suggested in the musical number "Money" performed by Sally and the Emcee. The number satirizes the bourgeois, capitalist system that "makes the world go around." Although she satirizes capitalism and money supremacists in the number, Sally also considers money as supreme. They sing that they will give up love for money, even though the pastor told them to love. That suggests that Max (money) will take precedence over Brian (love) for Sally, as Brian says, in "exchange for a little infidelity." In their dance, Sally drops gold coins inside her dress, and the Emcee drops coins inside his pants. When they repeat "Money Money Money," they approach each other with their eyes wide open, and the music gets louder and louder. When it comes to the climax, their faces get so close that they almost kiss. They narrow their eyes and murmur "Money, money, money" in ecstasy. Here, they seem to be thinking about sex, saying "Money." Sally and Brian both get money from Max, and both have sex with him. As Sally and the Emcee sing, "And you feel like a / Night's entertainment, / You can pay for a Gay escapade," associating with Sally and Brian is just a form of entertainment for Max that he pays for.

Sally believes that she has succeeded in seducing Max, but actually, it is Max who has seduced Sally and Brian by showing off his wealth, extensive knowledge, and experiences. At one point, he even proposes to take them to Africa. Although Sally's femme fatale mask seems to work on the stage, it does not work in the life outside the cabaret, and it is torn away by Brian at the end of this triangular relationship. Brian, who becomes angry with Sally, who says that she is handling Max well, so that she may be able to marry him and become rich, understands that Sally is just pretending to be bad. They find out that they have both slept with Max and that it is Max who was manipulating them. Max leaves some money and a short letter, and suddenly leaves Berlin.

Thus, it becomes clear that Sally is not a femme fatale, but someone who pretends to be one. It is also shown by her heavy makeup. Usually, performers wear heavy makeup onstage, but even outside the club Sally always wears green eye shadow and fake eye lashes, even after she takes a shower. The makeup shows that she is wearing the mask of a femme fatale outside the Kit Kat Klub as well,

as Brian accuses her of “using men and gold-digging, and behaving like some sort of ludicrous little under-aged femme fatale” (101). It seems that she is trying to be a different person in order to hide her true self. Sally wears the mask of a femme fatale, and tries to be a mysterious and dangerous woman. However, the gap between her mask and her true self seems to destroy her as it killed famous film stars, such as Marilyn Monroe and Judy Garland. Their masks were fatal to them as well, especially when the image of the mask is far from their true selves

Finally, in her relationship with Brian, Sally’s tendency to be influenced or even controlled by men is depicted. For instance, her decision to have an abortion and pursue her dream suggests that she is independent, beyond the old value system and living in the new era. However, it is not only because of her dream that she decides to get an abortion, but also because of Brian. When Brian asks her the reason for her abortion, Sally, pressed for an answer, says that she cannot give up her dream, but she also says that it is for Brian’s sake. It is obvious that the previous picnic scene affects her decision. In the scene, Sally keeps talking about their baby to attract his attention, but Brian gives her only vacant answers. It seems that Brian’s indifference gives Sally the impression that he does not want a baby anymore. Sally’s abortion seems to show her independence, but her infirmity after the abortion shows that she cannot be a strong, independent woman completely. When she has her habitual drink, a “Prairie Oyster,” her green fingernails are shown in close-up. Her nails and bleared green eye shadow show her desperate, tragic figure. Therefore, though Sally seems to represent the independent American woman both in the 1920s and the 1960s, she is also depicted as a woman who is oppressed in the male society.

In her relationship with Brian, Sally plays a traditionally male role that is aggressive. Her behavior such as smoking, drinking, and earning her living by herself are considered as traditionally masculine behavior. Sally’s androgyny offstage seems to suggest homosexuality, while it shows her social independence onstage. According to Mizejewski, Sally’s “decadence” could be read as a code word for gay identity. She writes, “Sally Bowles’ ‘eccentricity’ is coded as gay male rather than heterosexual female eroticism, and the extent to which that eroticism is further displaced as hostility toward motherhood” (86). Sally’s association with homosexuality, however, is not related to lesbians, but to gay men. When Sally tries to

seduce Brian in his room, he refuses her because he has not succeeded in having sex with women, though he has tried three times. Later, however, when Brian comforts Sally after her father did not show up at their appointment, Brian kisses her because her father does not care for her, and they finally have a physical relationship. Mizejewski argues that Sally's father gives Brian an opportunity to "gain his virility" and lets Sally "cure" his failed heterosexuality (202). However, in this scene, Sally seems to be disguised as a boy when she takes off her heavy makeup. It seems that Sally's transformation into a male makes it possible for Brian to sleep with her.

On the contrary, Brian plays a traditionally female role in the triangular relationship with Sally and Maximilian. In this relationship, not only Sally, but also Brian becomes the object of Max's gaze. For instance, when they go out in a canoe, Sally and Brian wear bathing suits, but not Max. "Two Ladies," a musical number performed by the Emcee and two dancers, implies that Brian plays a female role in the triangular relationship with Sally and Max. One of the dancers looks like Sally, with blue eye shadow and fake eyelashes, and the other dancer looks androgynous, which suggests Brian disguised as a female. As the musical number suggests, the relationship among the three is neither a love triangle with two men competing for Sally nor a homosocial "friendship" relationship between Max and Brian, since Brian and Max have sex. As suggested in the number "Two ladies," this is a relationship of two women and one man: Sally and Brian as female, and Max as male.

If it is traditional to see men as possessing money and power and women as weak and inferior, Max seems to be the only male, while Sally and Brian seem to be female. Max purchases an expensive fur coat and hat for Sally, and a gold cigarette case for Brian. At first, Brian refuses to accept the present from him. It seems that he tries to protect his masculinity and dignity. However, when Max invites Sally and Brian to his villa for a lunch party, Brian wears a blue sweater that Max chooses for him, and he finally accepts the gold cigarette case. In this moment, the equal power balance is collapsed, and we can see the new frame of Max as the one to give, who owns power, and Brian as the one to receive, who is submissive. This change in the power balance symbolically turns Brian into a female.

So when Sally and Brian return from Max's villa, it is revealed that Brian, who



has played a female role, slept with Max. Here, Brian's masculinity is easily transformed by the power balance with Max. Therefore, Brian's masculinity largely depends on the environment. Blind with rage at having his subconscious bisexuality revealed and symbolically turned into a female, Brian hits two Nazi men spreading propaganda on the road in order to restore his masculinity, only to be beaten and seriously injured. Being beat up is also considered as a punishment for Brian's "wrong" behavior.

However, though Brian is also attracted to decadent Berlin and his bisexuality or homosexuality (if Sally turns into a male in her relationship with Brian) is revealed during his stay in Berlin, he can escape from Berlin in crisis to a safe world in England. It may be because he proposes to Sally and determines to become father and husband: to be a heterosexual man to fit in the patriarchy. On the other hand, Sally is captured by Berlin and its decadence. Maybe it is because of her indifferent attitude towards society and politics, but also because Sally can be a double threat to the male dominant society as an immoral woman who endangers the former value system and as a homosexual. However, she seems not to notice that she faces collapse, and it makes the ending of the film more tragic, though it looks like a happy ending on the surface, when Sally decides to pursue her dream by returning to the stage.

Sally believes that, after all, freedom and independence are allowed to her only on the stage of the Kit Kat Klub, because on the stage, Sally lives inside the frame made by the Emcee, so Sally causes no harm or threat to the society. However, when she steps out of the club, it becomes difficult for her to be independent. She tries to be free from social constraints as a modest woman who only has sex in a monogamous relationship and is expected to become a wife and a mother, but she cannot be free from the influence of men. Moreover, she seems to be punished for her behavior. She is depicted as a desperate, tragic figure. Although she tries to act like a femme fatale, her gold digging to get financial support to be an actress and to connect with someone in the film industry seems to become the purpose itself, that is, an act of self-destruction by having pointless promiscuous relationships with men.

## Conclusion

At the end of the film, Sally decides not to go to England with Brian but to go back onstage. When Sally goes to the station to see Brian off, she waves to Brian while walking away from him, not turning back, as if to cut off her regret for the future with him and the life outside the cabaret. Even though Sally acts cheerful, and people are attracted by her charm, they consequently leave her, and she is alone. Fritz and Natalia are married, Max leaves Berlin after his affair with Brian and Sally, and Brian also leaves Sally after her abortion. The stage of the Kit Kat Klub seems to be the only place where she is needed and where people accept her. The performers on the stage, including the Emcee, and the audiences do not leave her, only if she continues to act as a femme fatale. Knowing that the mask of a femme fatale she put on the stage is fatal to herself as well and that she will not be able to escape from the club and Berlin in decay, she chooses to stay where she can be as she is.

However, Sally's decision to go back onstage can be seen as that of someone who decides to live in a fantasy, not in reality. Because onstage, Sally can become what she wants to become, though it might be merely a reflection of the male desire, and she does not have to face harsh reality. The ending of the film seems to criticize artists who escape from their responsibility to criticize society, and create art only for its own sake. Considering the history of cabaret, it has been a place for artists to criticize the authorities by using satire. However, Sally seems to perform only for her own pleasure. It might also be a criticism toward the musical industry, which used to focus mostly on love stories and human dramas, and only limitedly featured social problems in order to make profits by attracting the audiences who want entertainment to escape from reality, since *Cabaret* is called the first concept musical which tried to depict society in decay rather than merely telling stories.

Sally offstage seems to be stigmatized as an immoral woman. However, her androgyny suggests a gendered double standard in society, and if she were a male, her behavior would be more acceptable. Since gender performances of masculinity and femininity themselves are not stable, as seen in the relationships between Brian and Max, or between Sally and her father, this gendered double standard also cannot be stable. Therefore, when we think of one's femininity or masculinity,

we need to be aware that our judgment might be based on such fragile standards. If the standard changes, what used to be bad can turn into good, and vice versa. For instance, Sally does not change whether she is onstage or offstage, yet since the people around her and her environment change, the meanings of her characteristics and behavior change as well, influenced by the environment. Therefore, gender performance is clearly affected by our social environment rather than reflecting our true selves.

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Deconstructive Analysis of Sally Bowles as an American:  
Fake Femme Fatale in *Cabaret*

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Aya Suzuki

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**Abstract**

Sally Bowles, the female protagonist of the film *Cabaret*, who came to Berlin from America to be an actress, is depicted as a woman who is free from social restrictions. She acts as an independent woman, having promiscuous relationships with men who promise to introduce her to the film industry, and working at a sleazy night club, the Kit Kat Klub. However, her independence seems to be limited both onstage and offstage. I would like to demonstrate how Sally is a fake femme fatale.

In the first chapter, I focus on Sally onstage. She plays the role as of a female entertainer, and seduces the audiences. However, since she is the object of the male gaze, her role as a femme fatale is merely the reflection of the desire of the audiences, and her mask becomes fatal to herself as well because if it makes her an object of consumption. The stage of the Kit Kat Klub is the only place where she can express herself, and the stage gives her the feeling of independence, which is represented by her androgyny, though she lives within a frame made by males.

In the second chapter, I pay attention to Sally offstage. She seems to be indepen-

dent outside the club and free from the male gaze. She embodies the independent American woman: a flapper in the 1920s and the Single Girl in the 1960s, who rebels against the social value system. However, outside the cabaret, she cannot really be independent, since she cannot be free from the influence of the men around her, as seen in her relationships with her father, Maximilian, and Brian. At the same time, she also affects others, so she can be considered as a threat that breaks the invisible social rules. Sally, who becomes a threat to the male dominant society, is depicted as a tragic figure that seems doomed to collapse with decadent Berlin.