Jewry fulfills its contemporary assignment to reestablish the provisional [by being] the best critic, the funniest satirist, the most radical Communist, the most competent journalist, the most hilarious literary improviser, glossator, Frondeur, a master of Aperçu.

—Willy Haas, “Juden in der Deutschen Literatur”

Jewish modernization in Germany, and its influence on both German and Jewish thought, politics, and culture, has fascinated generations of scholars.¹ In depicting the nature of Jewish integration in modern Germany, scholars have traditionally oscillated between portrayals of “symbiotic” and “submissive” relationships, differing primarily in their answer to the question whether Jews contributed qua Jews to the German public discourse, or rather relinquished their particularities in the process of assimilation.² Current studies have pointed out, however, that both of these paradigms presuppose a “wrong and ahistorical” notion of authentic and recognizably different Jewish and German cultural identities.³ Recent scholarship on Jewish experience in modern Germany has therefore advocated a shift of emphasis from its national and religious tensions to its social practices. Consequently, these studies accentuate the roles of non-national—or transnational—contexts in shaping the modern German Jewish experience. Rather than searching for the influences of the autochthonous Jewish culture and the transformation it underwent as a result of Jewish assimilation in Germany, scholars have shifted their focus to the process of Jewish integration within the educated middle class in the German cities.⁴ Underscoring its bourgeois context, many scholars have come to regard the absorption of bourgeois values and norms as a key component of the modern Jewish experience. As Simone Lässig has indicated, to be considered part of the urban bourgeoisie principally meant emulating its Habitus—that is, the appearances, gestures, language, values, and cultural preferences of this social group—in the public sphere.⁵ This process often
included the zealous adoption of the ethos of Bildung (personal cultivation and education) as well as an Enlightenment-based liberal morality.6

In his portrayal of the incorporation of Jews into the urban bourgeoisie in early twentieth-century Breslau, Till van Rahden suggested that this process could have taken place only within a society that accepted the fundamentals of liberal ethics, was prepared to endorse multiculturalism, and accepted flexible definitions of ethnicity.7 This dependency of the Jewish middle class on the liberal sentiments of the society as a whole appears to have led many Jewish intellectuals and artists to engage in an effort to promote the formation of a multicultural, middle-class society and to reflect on its ability to accept them as equals despite their inherent difference.8 As David Sorkin noted, the steadfast embracement and articulation of liberal ideals was thus intended to render urban bourgeois Jews “invisible,” that is, indistinct as a group within the public sphere.9 Ironically, the intensive endeavor to become indistinguishable (in the context of the urban bourgeoisie) is one of the cultural phenomena that distinguish Jewish thinkers and artists in the realm of German culture.10

Jews’ efforts to emulate the appearance and gestures of the Bildungsbürgertum (the educated German middle class11) had played a key role in the pre-1933 German Jewish identity discourse. As the discussion in the following chapter indicates, commentators in modern Germany often linked the experience of Jewish embourgeoisement to the “Jewish” extraordinary mastery of appearance. The frequent association of acting and mimicry with modern Jewish identity thus turned the tensions between metamorphoses and sustainability of identity, and the problematic duality of authenticity and role playing—the foundations of the performing arts—into fundamentally (German-) Jewish themes.12 A number of recent studies have therefore suggested that during the nineteenth century the German theater had become a principal sphere for the exhibition and negotiation of modern Jewish self-perceptions.13 One of the cultural cornerstones of the Bildungsbürgertum, theater enabled Jewish directors, dramatists, and, in particular, actors to reflect upon their social integration using artistic conventions that informed the self-perception of the bourgeoisie.14 Indeed, the theater stage, the place where identities were constituted through acting and simulation, had been gradually perceived in Germany (at least since the 1890s) as a “Jewish” sphere.15 Jewish performance was particularly noticeable in avant-garde theater and cabaret shows.16 According to Peter Jelavich, these stages embedded “the mentality that best allowed Germany’s Jews to take a place in the cultural landscape, whose traditional institutions resisted full integration of Jews.”17

I will argue that, notwithstanding the importance of theater, it was actually cinema that was the major site for the contemplation and