Screen Cultures: German Film and the Visual

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Continuity and Crisis in German Cinema, 1928–1936

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Introduction

Barbara Hales, Mihaela Petrescu, and Valerie Weinstein

The following collection of essays investigates the continuities and discontinuities in German cinema before and after 1933, namely, during the transitional period of 1928 to 1936. Much of the scholarship on German cinema approaches the subject by assuming discrete historical periods defined by political regimes. Weimar and Third Reich film are thus often examined apart from one another, in spite of the continuities in both style and substance found in films made before and after 1933. Not only does this standard approach impede investigation of significant continuities, but it also obscures longer discursive genealogies and their social, political, and cinematic significance. The current volume serves as a corrective to this tendency by foregrounding comparisons of German cinematic works across the Weimar and Nazi periods.

Several scholars have challenged using the ascendancy of the National Socialists to power in 1933 as the basis for periodization of German cinema. Focusing on genre cinema, Klaus Kreimeier argues that the continuities and discontinuities in German film and film genres before and after 1933 pose serious problems for discrete periodization. For example, genre cinema does not exhibit a clear stylistic break between the Weimar and Nazi regimes, but rather more subtle differences. Focusing on modernist films, Thomas Elsaesser similarly challenges the 1933 break between Weimar and Nazi cinema, alternatively conceptualizing the period from 1930 to 1936 as a single filmic epoch in Germany, unified by the introduction of sound as well as common economic, technological, and geopolitical concerns. Building on Elsaesser’s approach to the scholarship, the editors of this volume propose an earlier date of 1928, a year in which these various changes began to manifest.

Although differences in institutional circumstances before and after 1933 are obvious, the relationships among films made between 1928 and 1936 are complex and manifold. Within such rich complexity, we find particularly meaningful linkages in cinema’s relationships to the political, economic, and social crises of these years. Although the construct of “crisis” posits a decisive break, as elaborated in the discussion that follows, such fantasies of rupture, disruption, and renewal persist throughout the period in question, accompanying and sometimes masking an array of stylistic, ideological, and institutional associations. To address
the complexities of this transitional era in German cinema, this volume traces how film reflects aspects of continuity and crisis in different, frequently overlapping realms: politics, the economy, discourses of race and ethnicity, genre cinema, the making of cinema stars, film technologies, particularly the coming of sound, and German-international film relationships. Treating the years 1928 to 1936 as a transitional period in German cinema, the essays in this volume offer new interpretations of some of the period’s best-known films as well as some lesser-known works.

Treating Weimar and Nazi Germany in isolation from each other and, by extension, Weimar and Nazi cinema, perpetuates misconceptions of Nazism as representing a complete rupture in European values. A more productive and subtle approach recognizes that no historical epoch arises sui generis and that there are always important continuities with previous time periods. This volume constitutes an intervention in German film historiography by questioning views that focus on Nazi cinema as a complete rupture with the past through a detailed analysis of film as an instantiation of culture, bridging the Weimar and early Nazi periods 1928 to 1936 with a careful eye to note cultural rifts that appear as well as continuities across the time period.

**Crisis, Continuity, and Transition in German Culture, 1928–1936**

Germany experienced dramatic cultural changes between 1928 and 1936 brought on by a series of actual and perceived “crises” in all spheres of life. Reinhart Koselleck and Michaela Richter have examined the changing meaning of the concept of “crisis” both diachronically and synchronically in a transnational setting, though their investigation does not consider these changes in the context of the First and Second World Wars. Their detailed examination illuminates the term’s etymology in classical Greek, which includes the meaning of making a “decision” in the sense of “reaching a verdict or judgment, what today is meant by criticism.”

According to Koselleck and Richter, in Germany, “crisis” (in German *Krise*) started out as a medical term in the sixteenth century (362), and its political usage preceded its extension into economic language around 1850 (366). With Friedrich Schiller, the term “crisis” became a historical idea (371), whereas Johann Gottfried Herder used it in the philosophy of history (377), and Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels employed it primarily as an economic concept (393). By 1845, “crisis” had entered the quotidian jargon, as attested by its inclusion that year in the prominent German-language encyclopedia Brockhaus (366).

According to Koselleck and Richter, today, crisis has become a “central catchword,” so much so that “in our century, there is virtually no area of life that has not been examined and interpreted through this
concept with its inherent demand for decisions and choices” (358). On the one hand, this is due to the concept’s “metaphorical flexibility” and its “multi-layered and ambiguous” meanings (358). On the other hand, this elusiveness is also caused by the media’s undifferentiated use of the term: “‘Crisis’ is often used interchangeably with ‘unrest,’ ‘conflict,’ ‘revolution,’ and to describe vaguely disturbing moods and situations” (399). As Koselleck and Richter point out, a crucial challenge for today’s scholars derives from the fact that, over time, the meaning of the term has changed: “The concept of crisis, which once had the power to pose unavoidable, harsh and non-negotiable alternatives, has been transformed to fit the uncertainties of whatever might be favored at a given moment” (399). They suggest that this pervasive ambiguity may be a “symptom of a historical crisis that cannot as yet be fully gauged” (399). Renate Bebermeyer underscores this vagueness as something “often welcome, since it makes it possible to keep open what it [crisis] may mean in the future.”

Keeping in mind the various uses of the term “crisis”—or in Koselleck and Richter’s words, its “metaphorical flexibility”—the concept of “crisis” was employed in a variety of ways during the time span under consideration. The term’s ambivalence in its modern form could call forth the notion of “hopelessness,” but also one of dramatic change for the better. In his assessment of suicide in Weimar Germany, for instance, Moritz Föllmer points out that during that period crisis expressed the need for radical change: “Right-wing authors emphasized the need for decision in an existential, all-or-nothing situation; Communists predicted the imminent downfall of capitalism as the prerequisite for a proletarian revolution; Social Democrats and liberals used the notion of crisis to opt for reform in a spirit of democratic humanism.” In Föllmer’s examples, the present conditions demanded radical change in which a better future would follow. In this transitional state, there was hope that the body politic could adopt meaningful change resulting in the restoration of civic order or a metaphorical state of health. It was this fight for health—or what the various actors saw as health—that would define crisis in late Weimar and early Nazi Germany.

Several notable factors are responsible for Weimar’s unstable political environment: significant casualties suffered in the First World War, the restrictive Versailles treaty, the inflation of 1923, and the unemployment of the Great Depression starting in 1929. The general instability of the Weimar Republic created an environment in which every political issue was perceived as a crisis. The political and economic crises found in Weimar are also bound up with several cultural crises. The beginning phase of the Republic, the years 1918 to 1924, was marked by revolution, inflation, and, in the arts, by experimentation with Expressionism. In an intermediary period from 1924 to 1929, the Republic experienced both political stability and economic prosperity, which resonated in the artistic realm as a “matter-of-fact” style known as Neue Sachlichkeit (New
Objectivity). The final phase of the Weimar Republic was again fraught with economic and political turmoil, with the avant-garde mirroring the doom and gloom of an alienated public. In 1931, the painter George Grosz noted that Weimar was in a crisis period in which all ideas had become volatile and liberalism was on the decline, and where many left-wing artists were isolated amidst the imminent threat of dictatorship. Conservative, conventional, and reactionary voices all demonized Weimar’s avant-garde artists as well as other groups, such as gays, lesbians, and “New Women,” that were challenging traditional boundaries of sexuality and gender behavior. Writing in a 1931 article, the conservative cultural critic Arnolt Bronnen decried the crisis in theater, whose overly liberal tendencies he deemed antinational. Conservative critics went so far as to call for theater to be outlawed on account of its subversive potential. In his seminal work *From Caligari to Hitler*, written in exile and published in 1947, the cultural analyst Siegfried Kracauer noted the national desire for authoritarian control, stemming from a petite bourgeoisie that could not accept political, economic, and social change.

The various instabilities within Weimar set the stage for the Nazis’ rise to power. Political struggles between the Communists and National Socialists raged as more than thirty political parties vied for power. National Socialists hoped to solidify their gains by addressing the anticapitalist sentiments unleashed by the Great Depression, known in German as the *Weltwirtschaftskrise* (world economic crisis). While on the one hand the National Socialists deployed anticapitalist rhetoric, on the other hand Hitler forged relationships with industrialists, allying with Alfred Hugenberg’s German National People’s Party and assuring economic elites that he was holding back the Communists. Building on this appeal to both the masses and industry, the Nazis promised to replace the “Jewish” capitalism associated with the Weimar Republic with a “utopian state” based on democratic individualism and a unified *Volk* (people).

The Nazi attempt to engineer a *Volksgemeinschaft* (racial-national community) by flattening out the perception of class and forming new alliances was key to a functioning dictatorship. Central to the creation of this *Volksgemeinschaft* was the exclusion of those construed as threatening the racial health of the German people and as belonging to other races: the disabled, the mentally ill, and Jews, and also other groups, including but not limited to the Sinti and Roma, and the Slavs.

A major part of the National Socialists’ program involved unifying the German *Volk* and improving the health of the *Volkkörper* (racial-national body) through a variety of means, including eugenic medical practices. In the 1920s, “racial hygiene” or eugenics was “far more heterogeneous in its politics and ideology than is generally assumed.” In Nazi Germany, it turned decisively toward “negative eugenics”—namely, toward the sterilization and elimination of racially “undesirable” elements. Yet the
Weimar Republic is where Nazi eugenics had its origin. According to Paul Weindling, “Virtually every aspect of eugenic thought and practice—from ‘euthanasia’ of the unfit and compulsory sterilization to positive welfare—was developed during the turmoil of the crucial years between 1918 and 1924,” and it was during the development of the welfare state in the Weimar Republic that “eugenics changed from being the creed of an introverted nationalist grouping to becoming an integral part of social medicine and welfare.”

Anti-Semitism in Germany intensified during the political and economic crises of the late 1920s and early 1930s, and the regime transition in 1933 gave it catastrophic institutional power. In order to create the pure Aryan nation envisioned by Hitler and the Nazis, Jews were designated as germ carriers who were lethal to the health of the Aryan people. Jews were considered dark agents of capitalism, Bolshevist agitators, and impure parasites on the German body politic. Their presence was treated, correspondingly, as a “crisis” in the medical and political sense: decisive action was needed to restore the Volk body to health. Although this was not an entirely new phenomenon—anti-Semitism had been a common phenomenon in Weimar Germany—the early period of the Third Reich saw a flurry of anti-Jewish legislation, including the Gesetz zum Schutze des deutschen Blutes und der deutschen Ehre (Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor, September 15, 1935), which prohibited marriage between Jews and Germans. The Gesetz zum Schutze der Erbgesundheit des deutschen Volkes (Law for the Protection of the Hereditary Health of the German Volk, October 18, 1935) mandated the prohibition of marriage between Jews and non-Jews on hereditary grounds and was linked to the previous edict in its close temporal and conceptual proximity. Such laws insinuated that Jewishness as “race” was a hereditary disease that needed to be eradicated. The Nazis also persecuted the Sinti and Roma. In 1927, so-called German gypsies were required to be fingerprinted, a fact that marked them as threatening other. Furthermore, they were subjected, among other horrors, to sterilization, medical experimentation, and deportation and murder in concentration and death camps.

Adolf Hitler’s rise to power and the victory of the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (National Socialist German Workers Party) in 1933 raised new crises as propaganda called for a “revaluation of all German values.” Nazi Germany was dominated by a cult mentality “complete with xenophobic myth and paranoid messiah.” Hitler emphasized “subjective self, feeling, [and] experience,” privileging the spiritual over the objective world. In a 1934 speech entitled “The Oath to Adolf Hitler,” Rudolf Hess, Stellvertreter des Führers (Deputy of the Führer) between 1933 and 1941, poignantly articulated Nazi views about Hitler as “above the influence of earthly powers” and sent to the
world by “higher powers.” The historian Ian Kershaw notes the discontinuity exhibited by Hitler’s form of leadership, which was evident in the replacement of a “legal-rational [government] by a charismatic form.” The Third Reich was bereft of a central governmental structure and was left with individual departments that attempted to carry out legislation according to Hitler’s intentions. Hitler attempted to redefine Germany’s victim status that followed from its defeat in the First World War through his political doctrines. According to Hitler, Germans in 1933 were no longer a people of infamy and disgrace, but a people of strength and tenacity. He thus came to represent a new identity for Germany’s political power, one of social unity and stability. Of course, this supposed unification of the German people came at the cost of mass genocide and entrance into a world war that would ultimately lead to the dissolution of the Reich in 1945 with Germany’s defeat.

Although Kershaw describes Germany under Hitler’s rule as a country in crisis, he also observes continuity under the Third Reich. Hitler’s seizure of power in 1933 promised elements of change, but also elements of sameness, as is evident in Hitler’s tribute to Reich President Hindenburg. In portraying the early Third Reich as both radically different and, at the same time, very traditional, Kershaw points to a conception of continuity as a means of preserving identity: “Continuity’ is, in fact, the historian’s abbreviation for the persistence, survival, or retention of the dominant strains and features of a social and political system. Clearly, this allows for the existence of differing continuities, and also for the possibility of ‘discontinuities.’” With respect to continuity and the Third Reich’s embrace of the past, Kershaw cites a Nazi predilection for the mobilization of the lower middle classes, which was also pronounced in the Wilhelmine era, as well as the support for German expansion abroad and the antidemocratic neoconservative movements found in both Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany. Additionally, the elite leaders in the army, industry, civil service, and the landed gentry, significant in helping the Nazis consolidate and “seize” power, were also influential in hindering Weimar Germany from becoming a true liberal democratic society.

The continuities and crises present in the years from 1928 to 1936 in Germany are intricately and complexly interconnected with the notion of “transition.” A similar conceptualization is articulated by Koselleck and Richter, who—although only in side notes—describe the relationship between crisis and transition as a mutually constitutive one, and remark that since the late eighteenth century the term “crisis” has been used increasingly to define, evoke, and indicate a historically immanent transitional phase. Yet the radical breaks suggested by the rhetoric of crisis should not necessarily structure the study of transitions. Bhupinder Brar cautions against the simplifications that come with a focus on “‘ages,’ ‘eras’ and ‘epochs,’” even as they provide a useful framework of “‘ideal
types’” that help frame knowledge and understanding. 35 Despite the allure of such tidy scholarly approaches, “transitions, on the other hand, are messy by their very nature. Long shadows of the past and the future criss-cross them, but they have no fixed substance, shape or contours of their own.” 36 As a consequence, Brar advocates an alternative approach to transitional periods in which scholars seek complexity and richness and “devise categories which are tentative, flexible and open-ended, offering clues rather than conclusions.” 37 Thus in this volume we treat the 1928 to 1936 period as a transitional one, a complex weave of interconnected ideas, events, and potentials. We present an array of essays that showcase the crises, contradictions, complexities, continuities, and breaks in German film in transition. Although we find the years 1928 to 1936 to be the most compelling boundaries for our current study, we nevertheless acknowledge the chronological boundaries of the intensive transition in German film history explored in this volume to be “tentative, flexible and open-ended,” insofar as connections and continuities can always be found with that which came before and after.

Crisis, Continuity, and Transition in the German Film Industry 1928–1936

As the essays in this volume explore in depth, the years 1928 to 1936 constituted a transitional period for German film marked by both crisis and continuity. On the one hand, Germany’s concurrent economic, political, and cultural crises, which culminated in Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, intertwined with real challenges to and perceptions of crisis within the film industry. On the other hand, in terms of both structure and output, the German film industry was marked by continuity or “a high degree of identity with what went before.” 38

In terms of crisis, 1928 was a pivotal year, as Weimar Germany’s principal film company, the Universum Film AG (Ufa), was on the verge of bankruptcy: between 1925 and 1927, poor financial and marketing strategies, among them the astronomic production costs of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), substantially weakened the studio. 39 In addition, the Paraufemt contract that Ufa had signed in 1925 with the American companies Paramount Pictures and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in hopes of reenergizing itself did not have the expected positive effects. 40 Both the business and creative side of filmmaking in Germany underwent dramatic changes that concentrated more power in the hands of studios and producers, making Ufa more akin to the Hollywood studios with which it hoped to compete. Moreover, unbeknownst to and unintended by anyone at the time, the concentration of power that occurred as Ufa emulated the US studio system also anticipated the industry’s further consolidation and
its top-down power structure under the Third Reich. The nationalistic media proprietor Alfred Hugenberg took over Ufa in March 1927, saving the studio from bankruptcy.41 The director general Ludwig Klitzsch and Ernst Hugo Correll, who became Ufa’s new head of production in 1928, introduced several significant modifications. Some changes had an impact at the production level, since Klitzsch secured a relaxation of the aforementioned Parufamet contract42 and introduced “shooting scripts, fixed production plans and strict budgets.”43 Furthermore, Klitzsch’s reforms had ripple effects on the creative freedom of Ufa’s directors, since—similar to Hollywood—they now had to answer to producers. This measure curtailed the artistic freedom film directors had enjoyed prior to the takeover, which resulted in a more standardized style of Ufa’s films.44 In light of the studio’s new market orientation, changes were also introduced in its star system because, as Joseph Garncarz has shown, the private lives of actors and actresses were no longer off limits for the press as they had been before 1927, a fact that brought Weimar’s star system closer to that of Hollywood.45

The changing organization and culture of the German film industry brought on by Hugenberg’s takeover left Ufa ill prepared for the coming of synchronized sound. Even though the sound-on-film system had been developed in Germany in the early 1920s as the Tri-Ergon system,46 the unsuccessful first public screening of it in Berlin in 1922 caused Ufa to sell Tri-Ergon’s patent to Switzerland.47 One of the first changes undertaken by Ufa’s new leadership in 1927 was “the shelving of all ‘talking film’ experiments, which the company had pursued for several years.”48 Ufa was thus taken off guard by the cinematic revolution initiated by Warner Brothers’ The Jazz Singer (USA 1927)—the world’s first feature-length film with synchronized singing and speech sequences. In 1928, Warner Brothers produced several other highly profitable sound films, leading other Hollywood studios to follow its model. The European premiere of the sound version of The Jazz Singer in London in 1928 constituted “a turning point” for both British and continental European film industries.49 In Germany, the reverberations resulted in an important merger that created Tobis (Tonbild-Syndikat AG) on August 30, 1928, the first major German film studio devoted to the production of sound film. Tobis both aspired to bring together European forces, technologies, and stakeholders to compete with Hollywood sound film and marketed its sound-film system to other European studios such as Ufa.50 In October 1928, Klangfilm arose to compete with Tobis, a competition resolved by a merger in March 1929 to form Tobis-Klangfilm, which became the dominant sound-film system in Germany.51 In late 1928, the first German feature film using Tobis synchronized sound technology went into production, Ich küsse Ihre Hand, Madame (I Kiss Your Hand, Madame), a silent film with one sound scene, which premiered in January 1929. In
March 1929, the documentary *Melodie der Welt* (Melody of the World) followed, which made extensive use of sound. In December 1929, Ufa released its first sound feature film, *Melodie des Herzens* (Melody of the Heart). As Anton Kaes notes, although it was initially slow in adopting sound technology, after 1930 Ufa moved quickly to use it in its productions: whereas Germany produced 175 silent films and 8 talkies in 1929, in 1930 there were 101 sound films to 45 silent movies, only 2 silent films in 1931, and none in the following year. Ultimately, as Todd Herzog argues, films of the early 1930s such as Fritz Lang’s *M* (1931) embraced the coming of sound technologically, thematically, and aesthetically, and stipulated the prevalence of aural elements over visual details.

Although eventually sound came to be accepted as a modus operandi in the late Weimar years, the coming of sound initially was perceived as a crisis not only for commercial films but also for avant-garde cinema. Traditionally, scholarship has viewed the abrupt end of the latter at the end of the 1920s as caused by the arrival of sound and the rise of fascism. However, as Malte Hagener argues, the period 1928 to 1932 should be understood less as the breaking point or the demise of the European cinematic avant-garde and more as a time of its reorientation, marked by numerous international cooperations and intense efforts to maximize viewers’ exposure to avant-garde films.

During the Great Depression, the cost of new sound technology and the loss of banks as revenue sources for film companies, coupled with a declining audience, left the German film industry in disarray. Between 1928 and 1932, film production in Germany dropped precipitously, reflecting a “structural crisis” that decimated the smaller studios. The numerous collapses, mergers, and bank takeovers of film companies throughout the late 1920s meant that by 1929, only three major German studios were intact: Ufa, Tobis, and Terra. The Great Depression, deflation, the poverty of their target audiences, and the significant expense involved in converting to sound film left even these larger studios on unsure footing.

The economic and financial challenges were obvious problems that preoccupied industry leaders, but contemporaries also talked about German film as experiencing other types of crisis. Rudolf Arnheim saw the primary crisis of German film as an aesthetic one. As articulated in his essay “Beitrag zur Krise der Montage” (Contribution Regarding the Crisis of Editing, 1930) the introduction of sound film challenged both conceptual montage and viewers’ spatial perception. Arnheim wondered about the status of the sound film: Would it be equivalent to a theater piece that has been photographed, was it a mere jewel-like addition to silent film, or could sound film represent a new art form with its own artistic merits? According to him, the path sound film must take would include the asynchronous montage effect where sound was organically
bound to the image without shackling the two realms in strict synchronicity. Arnheim concluded that by not forcing sound to dictate camera work and by not yoking sound to “reality,” the sound film could create its own rules of art particular to the modern age.

With the Nazi takeover of the film industry, a metaphysical crisis joined the aesthetic crisis described by Arnheim. In his speech at the Kaiserhof hotel in Berlin on March 28, 1933, explaining the National Socialist agenda for the film industry, Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels insisted that the industry was not facing a material crisis, but rather “a spiritual crisis.” He linked this spiritual crisis to what he construed as the artistic failings of late Weimar films and their low-life themes and distance from the social reality of the audience. The crisis Goebbels defined was caused, he claimed, by Jewish directors, commercialism, and “intellectual liberalism,” and furthermore was “also a personal [crisis],” insofar as members of the film industry ignored the broader “crisis in Germany.”

By shifting the rhetoric and perception of crisis, Goebbels thus construed Nazis as fighting for German film’s artistic, moral, and racial health, a position we see elaborated in other National Socialist texts.

Such Nazi understandings of filmmaking, of its aesthetic and spiritual crisis, and of the medium’s power, show continuities with Weimar thought. During the late Weimar years, there were certainly differences between the approaches to film held by the time’s most prominent film critics: Arnheim, Siegfried Kracauer, and Béla Balázs. However, as scholars have argued, Arnheim’s formalism, Kracauer’s realism, and Balázs’s understanding of cinema as a new folk art entailed important commonalities, namely, that they shared a belief in the power of cultural critique and viewed film as a form of art. This understanding of film persisted into the Third Reich, though it was increasingly infused with racist, anti-Semitic, and nationalistic concepts that turned cinema into a propaganda tool. An example that illustrates the strong connection between nationalistic writings on film before and after 1933 is the work of Oskar Kalbus, who transitioned seamlessly between the two periods on account of his conviction about the propagandistic use of film, an idea that he developed further during the Third Reich.

In 1933, the Nazis began a process of *Gleichschaltung* (coordination with the Nazi regime), which sought to purge Jews from the film industry, align filmmaking ideologically, and stabilize the industry financially. Nazi-era regulations and restructuring, purportedly to heal a film industry in critical condition, generated more crises: Jewish actors, directors, technicians, and other film personnel had to flee the country or were banned from working; numerous production companies—once the strength of Weimar cinema—went bankrupt; and German film exports dropped dramatically. However, these crises also harbored opportunities for some, since a new set of film professionals emerged during the Nazi years, many
climbing up from the lower rungs of the film industry ladder in order to fill the gaps caused by the departure of Jewish employees active in the film industry. The Nazis reduced licensing fees, cut star salaries, and reduced ticket prices, reorganizing the financing, production, and distribution of German films. Under the auspices of the Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda (The Reich Ministry for Enlightenment and Propaganda, henceforth RMVP), the film industry was directly beholden to the government’s agenda, unlike in Weimar Germany. In order to work, film personnel needed to belong to the Reichsfilmkammer (Reich Film Chamber), a state-controlled professional organization to which membership could be denied arbitrarily, usually on political, ideological, or racial grounds.

In addition to the racial and ideological purge of the film industry and the rise of new talent to fill the gaps left behind, both incentives and penalties were used to encourage ideological and aesthetic conformity. The structures and methods employed by the RMVP were built largely on continuities with Weimar, such as the cinema censorship law of the 1920s and the Spio-Plan. In the late 1920s to early 1930s, Ufa developed the so-called Spio-Plan, the Spitzenorganisation der deutschen Filmwirtschaft (Main Organization of the German Film Industry), a program that centralized the German film industry and pushed for economic reforms through state control, favored the replacement of internal democracy with a strong leadership, and suggested the formation of a film ministry. Formed in May 1933, the state-run loan agency Filmkreditbank (Film Credit Bank) was the first undertaking of the RMVP to reform the German cinema industry, and it embraced many of the principles upheld by the Spio-Plan. According to Jana Bruns, “the new institution’s primary purpose was . . . to promote good relations between the regime and big business and to align their interests.” The Filmkreditbank’s support for films was deeply political: its advisory board reviewed casts, screenplays, and budget submissions and recommended only productions that matched its views, whereas it rejected projects with politically and “racially” challenging content and casts. Moreover, as Bruns points out, by “favoring big companies over small producers, eliminating uncomfortable political views, and streamlining production, it effectively moved cinema one step closer to a centralized and state-controlled industry.”

There was also cohesion between the censorship practices of the Third Reich and those of the Weimar Republic, a cohesion that was tied up in the partly similar, partly different ways film as a medium was understood during the two regimes. Nazi views about the necessity of stopping film’s “dangerous influence” on audiences as well as of bringing about a “regeneration of public taste and gradually improve it”—cornerstone statements of the first speech Goebbels delivered at the Kaiserhof—are an extension of early Weimar perspectives on the role of film and the
need to control its negative impact on the public.\textsuperscript{69} In this context, it is important to remember that the Reichsfilmgesetz (Reich Cinema Law) of 1934 was, as scholars have noted, an updated version of Weimar’s 1920 cinema censorship law.\textsuperscript{70} Promulgated on May 12, 1920, and effective on June 16 of that year, Weimar’s cinema censorship law stipulated that “all films had to be submitted prior to release to a national board, which could censor them for damaging public order or security, offending religious sensibilities, demeaning the German image or generally being coarse and demoralizing.”\textsuperscript{71} However, compared with Weimar’s censorship, the Reichsfilmgesetz interfered in more pervasive ways in the production of films. It asked that film companies “seek approval for every step of production, from manuscript to editing.”\textsuperscript{72} It created the position of Reichsfilm Dramaturg (Reich Film Dramaturge), promoting one individual who could revise or discard screenplays, ask that changes be done throughout the film’s production, and whose approval was necessary in order to secure financing from the Filmkreditbank.\textsuperscript{73} Upon its completion a film had to be submitted to the Filmprüfstelle (Film Censorship Board), which could ban any production that worked against Nazi ideology. In addition to the censorship work of the Reichsfilm Dramaturg, Filmkreditbank, and Filmprüfstelle, the Reichsfilmgesetz introduced a ratings system that lauded both “artistic and political excellence,” and whereby financial incentives accrued to the producers that made and to the cinemas that screened highly rated films.\textsuperscript{74} The film press and film criticism were brought further and further under the RMVP’s umbrella, until Goebbels abolished film criticism entirely and replaced it with descriptive, politically motivated film reporting in November 1936.\textsuperscript{75} RMVP directives thereby superseded individual or local preference in motivating movie theaters’ offerings.\textsuperscript{76}

The year 1936 marks the end of the transitional period in German film and 1937 the beginning of “the nationalized film industry.”\textsuperscript{77} The most dramatic aspects of \textit{Gleichschaltung} were complete. As per the Reichsfilmgesetz and other legislation and restructuring, Jews and political dissenters had been forced out, and film production, exhibition, censorship, criticism, and financing all fell under direct or indirect RMVP control. In 1936, the Filmkreditbank financed “over 73 percent of all German feature films,” reinforcing ideological compliance in concert with the Reichsfilmkammer and the Reichsfilm Dramaturg.\textsuperscript{78} The final steps in the nationalization of the German film industry took place between December 1936 and early 1938.\textsuperscript{79} Kautio Treuhand GmbH, a trustee of the RMVP and the Finance Ministry, became a majority shareholder in Tobis at the end of 1936. In 1937 it took over Tobis, Ufa, and Terra completely, thus making them officially “\textit{staatsmittelbar} (indirectly state controlled).”\textsuperscript{80} The remaining smaller film studios Bavaria Filmkunst, Wien Film, and Prag Film became \textit{staatsmittelbar} in 1938.\textsuperscript{81}
As the transition to a nationalized film industry neared completion, the industry achieved a new, if problematic, stability. The crisis in personnel caused by the political takeover had reached resolution: “By January of 1936, much of the cream of the pre-Nazi film industry had gone into exile, including many non-Jewish members of the community.” Those who remained behind rose to fill the ranks, and “by 1936 the film colony of the Third Reich was virtually formed, a stock company which was to continue almost unchanged until 1945.” The slump in film attendance between 1928 and 1936 had also ended and film spectatorship numbers recovered. With 362 million spectators in 1936, German movie theaters finally exceeded the attendance of 353 million reached in 1928. As a large, bold footer in Lichtbildbühne, one of the major film trade papers, proclaimed: “Vor 1933 Krise in allen Filmberufsgruppen! 1936: stabile Verhältnisse, gesunde Wirtschaft, künstlerische Leistungen im ganzen deutschen Film! (Before 1933, Crisis in all Groups of Film Professionals! 1936: Stable Circumstances, Healthy Economy, Artistic Accomplishments in All of German Film!).” As public rhetoric would have it, the years of crisis were over and transition to a new era in German film was complete.

Despite ongoing perceptions and the rhetoric of crisis, the transitional period and its productions can be characterized not only by the above-mentioned continuities in institutions, financing practices, and views about censorship, but also by cohesions in terms of film genres and themes, casting strategies, personnel, and with regard to the German film industry’s complex relationship to Hollywood. In terms of film genre, it is important to recall that comedy dominated the cinematic market in the early 1930s. As Ulrich von Thüna points out, comedies formed 40 percent of the overall production of German films in 1930, increasing to 63 percent in 1931 and more than 64 percent in 1932. This preference for comedy endured into the Third Reich, when 48 percent of the films shown between 1933 and 1945 can be categorized in this genre. Similar to the Weimar years, melodramas were also in high demand, and according to Laura Heins, reached 30 percent of production during the Nazi years. Overall, the themes and genres that had dominated Weimar films, such as love stories, comedies, and crime thrillers, persisted into the Nazi period. The continuance of these predilections for specific film genres suggests that the Nazi takeover did not result in a radical and sudden transformation of the German film industry, but rather in a long period of transition, an aspect underscored by Karsten Witte. Consequently, although cinema attendance grew fourfold between 1933 and 1942, from 250 million to 1 billion viewers, with 1,100 films produced between 1933 and 1945, only one-fifth of the film output had clear political and propagandistic content.

Not only did people like to see the same kinds of films before and after 1933, they also continued to admire some of the same actors. As indicated
in the June 1933 article “Eine neue interessante Umfrage. Das Publikum
liebt nach wie vor die Stars . . .” (A New Interesting Survey, the Public
Still Loves the Stars), Weimar stars such as Hans Albers and Brigitte Helm
continued to rank high in popularity polls. In fact, several prominent and
lesser-known Weimar actors continued their careers after 1933 in films sup-
porting Nazi ideology. Some examples include the post-1933 films of Bri-
gitte Helm, Lilian Harvey, Käthe von Nagy, Hans Albers, Emil Jannings,
Gustav Fröhlich, and Heinrich George, among many others. Ufa’s star-
making strategies continued to be just as problematic in the Nazi period as
they had been during the Weimar years, as discussed in this volume through
an analysis of the career of Brigitte Helm.

Personnel whose careers spanned both Weimar and Nazi Germany
were responsible for some of cinema’s thematic and stylistic continuities
across the transitional period. For example, Carl Froelich, who began his
career in filmmaking at the beginning of the twentieth century as a cam-
eraman working with Oscar Messter, eventually became one of the Third
Reich’s most decorated directors and president of the Reichsfilmkammer
from 1939 to 1945. Froelich’s Ich für Dich—Du für Mich (I For You, You
For Me, 1934) reprises Mädchen in Uniform (Girls in Uniform, 1931), a
film made under his artistic supervision, adapting character, narrative, and
stylistic features to support the Frauenarbeitsdienst (women’s labor ser-
vice). Furthermore, his Traumulus (1935) was paradigmatic of a Nazi
aesthetic ideal that Erica Carter calls the völkisch sublime, an aesthetic that
rejected Weimar modernism and drew on pictorial traditions established
in Wilhelmine cinema. At the same time, however, Traumulus built on the
Weimar past. “Recognizable as a remake” of Der blaue Engel (1930),
Traumulus, like the well-known earlier film, centered on the seduction
and fall of a strict schoolmaster played by Emil Jannings, another artist-
ic force whose career spanned the transitional period and beyond. In
Traumulus, Hilde Weissner replaced the absent Marlene Dietrich, and
Froelich lit and shot her Hollywood style “as markers of her otherness
and irredeemable difference.” Yet, as Katie Trumpener notes, “the cin-
ema of the Third Reich inherited its entire domestic audience from the
Weimar Republic” and transitional films “remind[ed] audiences of their
own viewing histories and habits” even as they adjusted to new aesthet-
ics and ideals. Thus, even as Nazi cinema condemned femmes fatales,
continuities in audience preferences and narrative traditions required a
glamorous ersatz for Dietrich, a role eventually filled by Zarah Lean-
der. Heinz Rühmann’s many Third Reich comedies likewise built on his
Weimar successes, turning his “little man” persona into the essential
German comedian. According to Stephen Lowry, Rühmann’s “role
as a German ‘everyman’ led him to be seen explicitly as an icon of the
national self-image,” whom he reads as a figure of “continuity,” “confor-
mity,” and “integration” throughout the German twentieth century.
was not only prominent actors and directors but also behind-the-scenes production personnel who perpetuated and modified German film traditions across political eras. Witte highlights the example of the cameraman Friedl Behn-Grund, who made dozens of significant films, both apolitical and political, in the Weimar Republic, the Third Reich, the German Democratic Republic, and the Federal Republic of Germany. Film artists and technicians who began their careers in Weimar, or earlier, and who stayed in Nazi Germany, brought their experience, training, and preferences with them and used them to satisfy both audience tastes and political imperatives.

The tension between spectators’ preferences and the regime’s was compounded by German cinema’s contentious relationship with Hollywood throughout the 1928 to 1936 period. As Markus Spieker and Thomas Saunders have shown, from the early 1920s onward, Ufa looked up to Hollywood for its technical brilliance, while simultaneously it also condemned its superficiality and low artistic ambitions. This dualistic view of Hollywood on Ufa’s part also characterized the early years of the Third Reich. Thus in his Kaiserkof speech Goebbels revealed his admiration for international films such as the American portrayal of Anna Karenina in Love (1927) and for the Soviet production Battleship Potemkin (1925). To his mind these films were both entertaining and artful, and Nazi cinema ought to heed their aesthetic values. As Carter indicates, Goebbels’s speech also implies that a film’s artistic value depends on the stars that play in it and on the quality of their performance, something Goebbels implied was missing from Germany at that time, since he used Garbo as his model of stardom. Carter also points out that throughout the 1930s “Hollywood remained . . . not only Germany’s chief rival on the domestic market, but also the most coherent example of a cinema whose success Germany wished to duplicate.” In this sense, it is important to recall that in 1933 Hollywood films represented more than two-thirds of Germany’s foreign film imports, and that even in 1936 the number persisted at around 50 percent, despite the fact that restrictions had by then reduced total imports to approximately seventy films of the two hundred productions needed on an annual basis in order to fill cinema programs.

Third Reich films had both to compete with Hollywood productions, as did Weimar cinema, and also conform to RMVP dictates. Witte describes the stylistic effects of this tension on film comedy:

Geboten war 1936 Eindeutschung. Gefragt blieb der Amerikanismus. Die camouflierte Form, die dem Sinnzwang (Gesetze, Zensur) entsprach, ohne das Bedürfnis (die Anklänge an das andere, schnellere Leben: die Bewegung im physischen Sinn) zu verdrängen, waren jene Produkte der Filmindustrie, die für “eingedeutschten
Amerikanismus” einstehen, das heißt die Ambivalenzen des Originals mitübersetzten.\textsuperscript{109}

In 1936 Germanization was imperative. Americanism was still in demand. The camouflaged form that corresponded to the drive for meaning (laws, censorship) without repressing cravings (the appeals to the other, quicker life; movement in a physical sense), were the products of the film industry that represent “Germanized Americanism,” that is, those that also translated the ambivalences of the originals.

The best known example of the “Germanized Americanism” discussed by Witte is \textit{Glückskinder} (Lucky Kids, 1936), inspired by Frank Capra’s \textit{It Happened One Night} (1934). \textit{Glückskinder}’s American setting, tempo, snappy banter, innuendo, and humorous tension between the protagonists all echo the Hollywood screwball comedy.\textsuperscript{110} At the same time, Witte argues, \textit{Glückskinder} is marked by a sexual repression and dissolution of the individual more characteristic of Third Reich film.\textsuperscript{111} Thus the film competed with its Hollywood rival, sustained an illusion of American-style freedom and consumption, and nevertheless was in synch with RMVP ideals. As Eric Rentschler shows, \textit{Glückskinder} was a copy that “nonetheless passed for a German original, a cutout with its own shape. It relied on foreign patterns of recognition yet still proudly bore the appellation ‘made in Germany.’”\textsuperscript{112}

The “Americanism” that needed to be “Germanized” in the Third Reich developed in German film well before the transitional period. Anton Kaes describes Americanism in Weimar Germany as consisting of two distinct but related components: “scientific management of labor and industrial mass production (known as Taylorism and Fordism, respectively) on the one hand, and commercial mass culture on the other.”\textsuperscript{113} Many Weimar films both sought to compete with Hollywood and reflected “American” mass production and mass culture aesthetically. Two well-known examples are Ernst Lubitsch’s \textit{Die Austernprinzessin} (The Oyster Princess, 1919) and Fritz Lang’s \textit{Metropolis} (1927). A comedy and a dystopian science fiction film, respectively, both these films treat the blurring of identities and the mechanization of bodies. They visualize Americanism through glamour and excess, mass ornaments, and modernist montage. The structural, thematic, and stylistic influence of these films reverberated in the transitional period in films like \textit{April! April!} (April Fools!, 1935) and \textit{Gold} (1934), both discussed at length in this volume.

The Essays
The essays in this volume investigate how a range of films reveals both continuities and ruptures in German culture, politics, and the economy
during the transitional period from 1928 to 1936. The various essays explore shifting conceptions of racial and ethnic identity, as well as the production side of the film industry, through an investigation of the star system, genre study, the relation of Germany to international film, and through various filmmaking technologies, most notably the introduction of sound. It is evident that the film industry could at the same time draw on the political rhetoric of crisis to express various disjunctures in German culture, as well as fall back on more traditional notions drawn from a previous era.

The first section of the volume consists of essays that focus on cinematic representations of Germany's political crisis. Christian Rogowski demonstrates how Werner Hochbaum's film *Razzia in St. Pauli* (Police Raid in St. Pauli, 1932) represents the conflicted political allegiances of its director as well as the social instability of the period. Rogowski argues that Hochbaum's film conveys a politically ambivalent message that fails to expose the real causes of mass unemployment; the film evinces a sense of somber resignation in the face of the sociopolitical crisis of the late Weimar years, a sense enhanced by the film's ambivalent end and its contrastive use of visual and aural elements. Bastian Heinsohn's essay emphasizes that political films of the early 1930s that were influenced by Communist and Nazi ideology conveyed an optimistic outlook in which collective action could result in a better future. Heinsohn asserts that emblematic films such as *M* (1931), *Kuhle Wampe oder Wem gehört die Welt?* (1932, released in English as *Kuhle Wampe or Who Owns the World?*), and *Hitlerjunge Quex* (Hitler Youth Quex, 1933), all adopt a similar approach to crisis by employing the same formulaic structure: initially all three films focus on a fractured society that is subsequently unified. Heinsohn contends that this structural trajectory allowed for a smooth transition from late Weimar to Nazi cinema, despite the Nazis' claim of having made a complete break from Weimar's culture and art.

The second section of the volume is dedicated to essays focusing on economic crisis. Paul Flaig argues that *Die Koffer des Herrn O.F.* (The Trunks of Mr. O.F., 1931) should be understood as linking the specific investments of late Weimar cinema to the way the economic crisis and the crisis of cinema were understood both in their origins and in their potential solutions. Flaig contends that the film's mixture of fairy-tale elements and satire mocks German economic fears and hopes for economic recovery. Owen Lyons's essay analyzing *Gold* (1934) and *Der Kaiser von Kalifornien* (The Emperor of California, 1936) explores the thematic and cultural interrelationships between these early Nazi-era works and several films of the Weimar Republic including *Die Austernprinzessin*, *Dr. Mabuse der Spieler* (Dr. Mabuse the Gambler, 1922), and *Frau im Mond* (Woman in the Moon, 1929), which present similar views regarding the economic role and the aesthetic value that gold played during
the 1920s and 1930s. Lyons considers the anxieties surrounding gold as both the source as well as the answer to the economic crisis. In addition to reflecting pressing economic concerns, Lyons asserts that these films also establish cultural associations that indicate how the concept of gold as a foundation of monetary value was closely connected to the crisis of authenticity that marked the Weimar Republic, which several Third Reich films sought to resolve.

The third section of the volume focuses on the crises and continuities in conceptions of race and ethnicity as manifest in films from the transitional period. Barbara Hales demonstrates in her essay about racial hygiene films from the late Weimar and the early Nazi period, including Feind im Blut (Enemy in the Blood, 1931) and Opfer der Vergangenheit (Victim of the Past, 1936–37), how these works were used as propaganda to indoctrinate physicians and the general public about the inferiority of those deemed mentally ill and carrying “incurable” diseases, and to portray methods for maintaining Germany’s racial purity. Hales investigates the role of heredity and racial health in the transitional era and shows how these films established the authority of the figure of the physician as a genetics doctor and a “hereditary policeman” responsible for controlling reproductive transgression and thus promoting the health of the Volkskörper. Valerie Weinstein analyzes the implicit anti-Semitic subtext in Detlef Sierck’s Depression-era comedy of mistaken identity April! April! (April Fools!, 1935), an anti-Semitism that, as she reveals, is strongly connected to Nazi anticapitalistic views. Weinstein shows that Sierck’s film mocks, contains, and disciplines the figure of the “white Jew”—a nineteenth-century anti-Semitic coinage, current in Weimar and Nazi Germany, that refers to non-Jews corrupted by purportedly “Jewish” attributes such as greed, social climbing, and extravagance. Complicating and layering its racial and economic implications, April! April! not only responds to the crisis of capitalism by ridiculing avaricious entrepreneurs coded as “Jew- ish,” but also rekindles Germany’s colonial aspirations in Africa as part of a new imperial future that brings together colonialism, modernity, old- stock nobility, and the Volk.

The fourth section of the volume focuses on comparison of various genres during the transitional period. Anjeana Hans investigates in her essay the Zigeunerdrama, a popular genre from the 1910s and 1920s that culminated in Leni Riefenstahl’s Tiefland (Lowlands, 1940–44/1954). Produced primarily during the Third Reich, though not completed and released until 1954, Riefenstahl’s film is relevant for the period under discussion owing to the conceptual continuities of the “gypsy” in both Weimar and Nazi cinema. Hans’s analysis of Tiefland’s cinematic roots reveals its origins both in the fantasies of desire and exclusion that the Zigeunerdrama staged earlier in the century and in the nationalist and racist constructions that were at the heart of Nazi ideology and of the Porrajmos
I NTRODUCTION

Wilkfried Wilms examines how, in response to the crisis of military immobility generated by the Versailles Treaty, a crisis perceived with particular acuteness in German aviation, Arnold Fanck’s mountain films *Die Weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü* (*The White Hell of Piz Palü*, codirected with G. W. Pabst, 1929), *Stürme über dem Mont Blanc* (in English as *Avalanche*, 1930), and *S.O.S. Eisberg* (*S.O.S. Iceberg*, 1933) were used to promote aviation and German militarization. Wilms also shows that the aviator portrayed by the real-life pilot Ernst Udet in Fanck’s 1929–33 films redefined the notion of masculinity rooted in self-reliance, steely nerves, and disregard for danger that were represented by the figures of the climber and the explorer in Fanck’s earlier mountain films.

The fifth section of the volume focuses on Ufa’s star-making system. Mihaela Petrescu shows in her analysis of Weimar’s famed actress Brigitte Helm that early Nazi strategies of constructing and advertising star images were not always cohesive. Contrary to the current scholarly opinion that considers Helm incompatible with Nazi views about femininity, Petrescu argues that Ufa’s thematic reshaping of Helm’s roles from 1933 until 1935—in the films *Die schönen Tage in Aranjuez* (*The Beautiful Days in Aranjuez*, 1933), *Inge und die Millionen* (*Inge and the Millions*, 1934), *Gold* (1934), *Die Insel* (*The Island*, 1934), and *Ein idealer Gatte* (*An Ideal Husband*, 1935)—into a figure that protects the community and her male partners foreshadows the chic and self-sacrificial persona created for Zarah Leander. Simultaneously, Petrescu points out that Ufa did not reinvent Helm’s star image but in fact continued the same perplexing and idiosyncratic casting and advertising strategies it had employed for the star during her Weimar career. As Petrescu suggests, this led to a continuously tense relationship between the actress and the studio that resulted in her retirement in 1935. Kevin Johnson’s essay examines the challenges of German identity through the careers of two female stars of non-German origin, the Czechs Anny Ondra and Lída Baarová. Johnson asserts that Ondra, especially in *Die Kaviarprinzessin* (*The Caviar Princess*, 1930), *Baby* (1932), *Die vertauschte Braut* (*The Switched Bride*, 1934), *Der junge Graf* (*The Young Count*, 1935), and *Großreinemachen* (*The Big Cleanup*, 1935), passed as German owing to her comic performances, her impeccable language skills, and her universal performability, that is, the ability to adopt other national identities convincingly. In contrast, Baarová’s Slavic physical appearance and accented German in *Barcarole* (1934), *Einer zuviel an Bord* (*One Too Many on Board*, 1935), *Ein Teufelskerl* (a.k.a. *Leutnant Bobby, der Teufelskerl*, *A Devil of a Fellow*, 1935), and *Verräter* (*Traitors*, 1936) led to her typecasting as exotic and “other,” or as a German figure perpetually tinged by foreignness, a typecasting that exposes strains and contradictions in the Third Reich’s cinematic portrayal of racial otherness.
The sixth section of the volume focuses on the introduction of sound technology in film. In contrast to traditional scholarship that connects the end of the European avant-garde to the coming of sound and the rise of fascism, Brook Henkel points to key continuities regarding the personnel, aesthetics, and organizational activities of the avant-garde as they manifested themselves in Hans Richter’s theoretical writings and his film *Vormittagsspuk* (released in English as *Ghosts before Breakfast*, 1928), a work often considered exemplary yet also marginalized in histories and analysis of avant-garde film. Henkel highlights Richter’s efforts to popularize and promote experimental film in the late 1920s while he was also shedding light on the innovative techniques of past international avant-garde films and integrating their formal accomplishments as part of the multifold cinematic possibilities he was purposefully illustrating in *Vormittagsspuk*. Kalani Michell’s contribution on Harry Piel’s *Ein Unsichtbarer geht durch die Stadt* (An Invisible Man Goes through the City, 1933) argues that the film offers possible resolutions to the filmic crisis of seeing presented by sound, and which is illustrated in the spectacular chase of an invisible character. Michell proposes that resolution comes in the form of aural cues as well as new viewing practices such as a broadened vision that relies on patiently scanning space from afar instead of zooming in on a specific setting and paying attention to visual discrepancies such as objects moving on their own.

The seventh section focuses on analyses of crucial developments in Germany’s international film relations. The two essays in this section investigate Ufa’s transnational connections via the examples of German French cooperations and the famed German-Jewish émigré Ernst Lubitsch’s only serious Hollywood antiwar film, which also thematized the rise of anti-Semitism in Germany during the political and economic crises of the early 1930s. While the coming of sound threw Germany’s major film studios into a crisis, as Margrit Frölich points out in her contribution, it also translated into some profitable business opportunities. Using Marcel L’Herbier’s film *L’Argent* (Money, 1928) as a case study, Frölich explains the importance of international collaborations for Ufa’s business strategies in the late 1920s. She reminds us that thanks to its state-of-the-art Tonkreuz studio in Babelsberg, Ufa started to produce multiple-language versions of its films for the French and British markets, and also made its sound studios available for some foreign coproductions such as L’Herbier’s *La femme d’une nuit* (Woman for One Night, 1930). As Frölich asserts, the strategies employed by Ufa prepared the studio for the impact of the upcoming economic crisis and the shock of the introduction of synchronized sound. She also shows how *L’Argent* unveiled problems with 1920s capitalism, problems that would lead to the Wall Street crash and the Great Depression, in an uncannily prescient way. Richard W. McCormick’s essay reminds readers that German film
émigrés to Hollywood maintained tight bonds to both Germany and America even before the wave of exiles that left Nazi Germany relocated to California. McCormick focuses on Ernst Lubitsch’s work as a specific instance of such transnational connections. He shows how Lubitsch’s 1932 antiwar film *The Man I Killed*, though produced in the United States, reflected Germany’s cultural, political, and economic crises and, in particular, how it addressed the problems of nationalism, militarism, and resurgent anti-Semitism. As McCormick argues, this multivalent orientation toward Germany and its many crises may have contributed to the film’s lackluster US reception. Viewing Lubitsch’s film through the prism of Ofer Ashkenazi’s concept of “double encoding,” McCormick argues that *The Man I Killed* is marked by a sense of crisis and danger for Jews in Germany, a sense that stems from the film’s intriguing ending, which critiques the assimilationist view that one should be “a man in the street and a Jew at home.”

This volume proposes a thorough reevaluation of German cinema in the transitional years between 1928 and 1936, and thereby hopes to refocus current scholarly views about late Weimar and early Nazi film history. As the essays here indicate, the cinematic relationship between the two periods is much more fluid than previously acknowledged; it contains significant threads of continuity that include, for example, the conceptualization of film censorship, the role of the producer, a complex relationship of economic admiration for and aesthetic distanciation from Hollywood as well as specific film genres. It also includes pivotal moments of crisis, particularly linked to the ever-increasing control of the Nazi regime over the film industry and its employees, its film policies and financial practices. Approaching the years 1928 to 1936 as a transitional period affords new insights into the complex matrix of continuities and crises that operated in German cinema during that time, highlighting complexities that so far have escaped the scholarly radar.

**Notes**


3 Elsaesser, “Moderne und Modernisierung,” 23.


9 Gay, Weimar Culture, 120.


12 Arnolt Bronnen, “German Nationalism, German Theater,” in Kaes, Jay, and Dimendberg, Weimar Republic Sourcebook, 346.


24 Eksteins, “Rites of Spring,” 311.


29 Eksteins, “Rites of Spring,” 324.


32 Kershaw, “1933,” 15.


37 Brar, “Theorizing Transitions,” 324.


40 On the Parufamet contract and how it failed to help Ufa, see Anton Kaes, “Film der Weimarer Republik: Motor der Moderne,” in Jacobsen, Kaes, and
41 Attempting to play Hitler for his own goals of attaining power, Hugenberg part willingly, part unwittingly, helped him come to power and served as Minister of Economy in the Third Reich’s first cabinet.


47 Kaes, “Film in der Weimarer Republik,” 84.


50 Klaus Kreimeier, Die UFA-Story: Geschichte eines Filmkonzerns (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2002), 212.

51 Kreimeier, Die UFA-Story, 212.

52 Kaes, “Film in der Weimarer Republik,” 84.

53 Todd Herzog, Crime Stories: Criminalistic Fantasy and the Culture of Crisis in Weimar Germany (New York: Berghahn, 2009).

54 Malte Hagener, Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-Garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919–1939 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007).


58 Arnheim, “Beitrag zur Krise der Montage,” 76.


60 Arnheim, “Beitrag zur Krise der Montage,” 76, 80.


See, for example, Carl Neumann, Curt Belling, and Hans-Walther Betz, *Film “Kunst,” Film Kohn, Film Korruption* (Berlin: Verlag Hermann Scherping, 1937).


Petro, “From Lukács to Kracauer and Beyond,” 61.


Kleinhans, *Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Kino*, 40.


Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema*, 331. See also Tegel, *Nazis and the Cinema*, 46–47.

Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema*, 332.

Hull, *Film in the Third Reich*, 89.

Hull, *Film in the Third Reich*, 92.
85 *Lichtbildbühne*, Berlin, 29, no. 73, March 26, 1936, 1.
88 Witte, “Film im Nationalsozialismus,” 159.
89 Heins, *Nazi Film Melodrama*, 15.
94 See Mihaela Petrescu, “Brigitte Helm and Germany’s Star System in the 1920s and 1930s,” in chapter 9 of this volume.


103 Witte, *Lachende Erben*, 146.


107 Carter, “Marlene Dietrich,” 188.

108 Carter, “Marlene Dietrich,” 188.


Part I. Politics
1: “Timid Heresies”: Werner Hochbaum’s 
*Razzia in St. Pauli* (1932)

Christian Rogowski

A small-time crook, “Matrosen-Karl,” spontaneously decides to steal a piece of jewelry from an upscale shop in Hamburg by smashing the display window and running off with the loot. He manages to shake off the policemen pursuing him by taking refuge in the narrow lanes of the densely populated slum-like Gängeviertel neighborhood near the harbor. Climbing through an open window, he ends up in the room of “Ballhaus Else,” a prostitute who is home, sick in bed. Unhappy in a stale relationship with “Musiker-Leo,” an anemic, penniless musician, she hides the stranger in her bed when the police search her room. The two start an affair and indulge in dreams of escaping their dreary lives by running away together. That same night, the police investigation closes in on Karl in the shabby tavern where they celebrate their upcoming departure. Karl attacks the chief police detective and is arrested. Her hopes of an escape dashed, Else returns to her musician friend in quiet resignation.

Such is the plot of *Razzia in St. Pauli* (Police Raid in St. Pauli), the first full-length sound feature film by Werner Hochbaum (1899–1946), which premiered at Berlin’s U. T. am Kurfürstendamm theater on May 20, 1932, to generally respectful, sometimes even enthusiastic reviews, especially regarding the excellent cinematography of A. O. Weitzenberg. On the face of it, the plot is unremarkable, in line with countless genre films produced during the Weimar period. Yet what may look like a run-of-the-mill blend of social melodrama and crime thriller is informed by an aesthetic sensibility and a social engagement that betray artistic and political ambitions distinctly at odds with commercial Weimar genre cinema. Hochbaum’s visually brilliant film is rife with puzzling contradictions and ambiguities that are attributable to many factors: these include the tensions between silent film traditions and the intrinsic logic of the new medium of sound, the clash between documentary aspirations and concessions to genre conventions, the filmmaker’s own conflicted political-aesthetic program within a political Left split by ideological divisions, and perhaps a general sense of lack of orientation prevailing in the last years of the Weimar Republic. As I hope to show, *Razzia in St. Pauli* occupies
a paradoxical position at multiple interstices of German film history—the film is at once unique (as a politically inflected work of art of the time) and highly typical (as a genre film produced in Germany in response to the crisis brought about by the Great Depression).

In early 1930, the director Werner Hochbaum placed the blame for the crisis in the German film industry on sound film itself. Yet instead of spreading a sense of alarm, as the title of his essay “S.O.S. Die Filmsituation in diesem Augenblick” (S.O.S. The Situation of Film Right Now) would suggest, Hochbaum highlights the unique opportunities he sees emerging from a changed situation: after the profit-oriented model of producing vacuous entertainment for commercial gain has led to the near collapse of the German film industry, Hochbaum argues, film is ready to reassume its societal responsibility as a true *Volkskunst*. Soviet cinema, as well as some efforts spearheaded by the labor movements in Britain and Germany, he feels, signal a reorientation of film as an art form responsive to the needs of the majority of the population and the issues that concern them by taking a dedicated political stance: “Als Kunstform muß auch der Film Stellung nehmen zu den Problemen der Zeit” (As a form of art, film, too, has to take a stance vis-à-vis the problems of the age).3 A few weeks later, in another essay, “Der Arbeiter vor dem Film: Kritisch sehen lernen!” (The Worker vis-à-vis Film: Learning to View Critically!), Hochbaum more narrowly defines what he sees as the primary responsibility of filmmakers: by way of what he calls a “dialectical montage” of images, films need to facilitate political learning processes, training their proletarian mass audiences “als Sozialist kritisch sehen zu lernen” (in critical socialist viewing practices).4 Viewers are thus rendered immune to the manipulative practices of mainstream film that lull them into naively accepting a “desired worldview” (“den naiven Zuschauer für ein gewolltes Weltbild einzunehmen”). Though cast as politically progressive, Hochbaum’s program is oddly nostalgic, aimed at reclaiming or reviving a lost critical potential of images that supposedly has been eroded by the advent of sound.5

The idealistic approach outlined in the 1930 essays, I venture, is characterized by many contradictions and tensions, not the least of which is Hochbaum’s odd silence about the possible critical potential of sound itself. The optimistic note concerning the pedagogic potential of a socially committed mode of filmmaking belies the considerable difficulties Hochbaum himself faced in his efforts to create films that were artistically viable, that spoke to the intended audience’s interests and concerns, and that could find success at the box office. As a result, manifold economic, practical, and political difficulties—complex, contradictory, and diverse—inscribed themselves in the form of aesthetic and ideological incongruities in *Razzia in St. Pauli*. To trace these incongruities, I will first sketch Hochbaum’s personal background and his approach to filmmaking in
order to shed light on the film’s peculiar production history. I will then place his 1932 film in the context of politically engaged leftist films of the period, films that sought directly to depict and address the economic and social consequences of the Great Depression in late Weimar Germany, aiming for broad audience appeal by drawing on familiar genre conventions. I will also discuss a number of key aspects of the movie itself that make this little-known film a kind of test case for the possibilities and limitations of politically committed filmmaking in the late Weimar Republic.

Hochbaum’s career in film was short, essentially lasting only about ten years (1929–39), during which he managed to direct a total of fourteen feature-length films. Long forgotten after the Second World War, he was rediscovered internationally as a major director when a retrospective of his work, including *Razzia in St. Pauli*, was held in Vienna in 1976 and subsequently traveled to various countries. The German film historian Ulrich Kurowski hailed Hochbaum as one of the “top five” German filmmakers, alongside the acknowledged masters F. W. Murnau, Fritz Lang, Ernst Lubitsch, and Max Ophüls. Much of the enthusiasm was predicated on the sense that a politically engaged major artist had been rediscovered who had been a tragic victim of National Socialism. Hochbaum’s leftist credentials seemed altogether impeccable: in the late 1920s, with the backing of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), he had started out with films focusing on the plight of the working class in the Great Depression. After 1933, he worked in Austria for a while. Upon his return to Germany, a successful career in highly acclaimed genre film was cut short in 1939 by his expulsion from the Reichsfilmkammer (Reich Film Chamber), which effectively banned him from the profession. He had to “volunteer” for military service but was discharged on account of a severe lung ailment in 1943. Subsequently, he made a precarious living by writing film scripts that were submitted under the name of the woman he was then living with. In 1945, Hochbaum was a member of the small group of filmmakers that assembled in Berlin’s Hotel Adlon to launch a new, democratic film culture (later to become DEFA, Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft). After his sudden death from tuberculosis, his widow Grete Hochbaum appealed to the East German authorities for restitution on behalf of Hochbaum as a victim of fascism by claiming that he had been part of a secret network of anti-Nazi resisters.

The “Hochbaum case,” it turns out, is more complicated, as his biography contains many unresolved questions: born in 1899 in Kiel, a midsized port city on the Baltic coast in northern Germany, Hochbaum volunteered in August 1914, at age fifteen, to serve in the German Army. Toward the end of the war, having gone missing under unexplained circumstances while on leave in Belgium, he was charged with desertion but was able to extricate himself from capital punishment. After the war, he struggled in various endeavors, as an actor, a dancer, and an entrepreneur.
An unsteady life of extended periods of unemployment and homelessness alternated with remorseful returns to his father’s advertising business. In 1923, at the height of hyperinflation, a draft of a letter was found that suggested that Hochbaum was offering his services as an informant to the French Army in the occupied Rhineland, and he was charged with high treason. The case was eventually dismissed—Hochbaum had never mailed the letter and claimed it was written to ward off a creditor by pretending that he would be receiving a major sum of money soon. At the end of the 1920s, Hochbaum settled in Hamburg and eked out a meager living by writing occasional articles and reviews for the SPD daily, *Hamburger Echo*, where he was mentored by Heinrich Braune, the head of the paper’s arts pages. Hochbaum entered filmmaking with several propaganda shorts backed by the SPD, including *Vorwärts* (Forward, 1928), *Wille und Werk* (Will and Work, 1929), and *Zwei Welten* (Two Worlds, 1930), the latter two scripted by Braune. With the support of the SPD and local trade unions, Hochbaum was also able to produce and direct a full-length silent feature commemorating the Hamburg dock laborers’ strike of 1896, *Brüder* (Brothers, 1929), to his own script. In 1928, inspired by the innovative documentary style of Walter Ruttmann, Hochbaum devised a plan to create a Hamburg equivalent of Ruttmann’s famous city film, *Berlin—Die Sinfonie einer Großstadt* (Berlin—Symphony of a Big City, 1927), entitled *Hamburg, das Erlebnis einer Weltstadt* (Hamburg, the Experience of a World City). Due to lack of funding, the plan came to naught, as did a number of other projects Hochbaum contemplated after the advent of sound when he relocated to Berlin.10 It took Hochbaum over two years to launch his first sound feature, *Razzia in St. Pauli*, when he managed in 1931 to secure the financial backing of a small production company, Orbis-Film GmbH, based in Berlin. The company, started by Justin Rosenfeld in 1928, specialized in creating German versions of foreign-language films, and *Razzia* was its first venture into producing a full-length feature.11

Extensive archival research conducted by the German film historian Ulrich Döge has recently produced evidence that necessitates a critical reassessment of the image of Hochbaum as a committed leftist trapped in adverse circumstances, since Hochbaum’s conduct in the Third Reich was fraught with ethically unsavory ambivalences. Unlike many filmmakers who left Nazi Germany for racial or political reasons, after 1933 Hochbaum was simply called to direct films in Austria on regular assignments. During his time there, Hochbaum, for reasons that are not altogether clear, secretly supported members of the then-illegal Austrian Nazi Party and SS with considerable sums of money. The 1939 dismissal from the German Reichsfilmkammer, it turns out, was not on account of any supposed political opposition to the Nazi state, but happened because Reich minister Joseph Goebbels found out about the 1923 high treason charge.
During his military service in the Wehrmacht, from 1940 to 1943, Hochbaum frantically tried to rehabilitate himself politically and professionally. In this sense, in 1940, he wrote a lengthy exculpatory letter to explain to the Nazi authorities the murky parts of his biography: Hochbaum sought to ingratiate himself by denouncing the evil influence of the “verjudete Filmindustrie” (Jewified film industry) of the Weimar Republic and even claimed to have been cheated out of his rightful earnings for Razzia in St. Pauli by a “small, obscure Jewish company”—a jab at Rosenfeld’s Orbis-Film, which had given him a lucky break by making his first sound film feature possible. Throughout his life, Hochbaum repeatedly found himself on the wrong side of the law—respectively, the wrong side of power—and he was clearly prepared to bend the truth to extricate himself out of tricky situations, thus inadvertently undermining his claim that he was always a staunch, if sometimes clandestine, antifascist. Little surprise then that in January 1946, the “Screening Report” of the American Secret Service labeled him “an opportunist of the worst sort who is willing to do or say anything for material advantages,” adding the suspicion that Hochbaum still was “an avowed believer in nazism and racial and militaristic creeds.”

This is not to say that the interest in the socially disadvantaged that Hochbaum exhibits in Razzia in St. Pauli or his left-leaning political sympathies of the time were not genuine. On the contrary, it can be argued that the film’s peculiar form and look are due to the fact that to Hochbaum the struggle for economic survival in times of extreme hardship was not a mere sociological “problem” that could be observed from a distance, from an abstract and ideologically or philosophically well-defined vantage point. Hochbaum’s silent feature film debut, Brüder, had been a critical success and well received in Hamburg and elsewhere in northern Germany, yet failed to gain larger distribution let alone bring in money. As a result, Hochbaum was essentially jobless and without a source of income for about two years when the Great Depression hit Germany. In 1931, his father died, leaving him a small inheritance, which Hochbaum invested into the making of Razzia in St. Pauli. When he embarked on the film as scriptwriter and director, then, Hochbaum had himself experienced poverty, destitution, hunger, homelessness, and the ambivalent allure of skirting the law to make ends meet.

The advertising campaign surrounding the film emphasized the fact that it had been made in Hamburg’s famed red-light district and that it featured the participation of actual police forces and, as the advertising materials put it, “echte Ganoven und Mädchen aus St. Pauli” (genuine crooks and girls of St. Pauli). In itself, the use of lay actors in fiction film was nothing new. Hochbaum had done the same in his own Brüder in 1929. Interestingly enough, Hochbaum here already blurred fact and fiction in more ways than one: footage that in the fiction film stands for...
Fig. 1.1. Promotional material for *Razzia in St. Pauli* (1932), Zurich, Switzerland, Summer 1932. Image reproduced by permission from Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek–Museum für Film und Fernsehen, Schriftgutarchiv, N38083 HPr 01.
the plight of dockworkers that led to the 1896 strike—shots of an emaciated young woman sick in bed with a lung ailment, a brooding laborer sitting next to her on a couch in the cramped space, and an old woman scraping together a meager meal with a herring—is recycled in the SPD election documentary short, *Zwei Welten*, as documentary evidence of the current (i.e., late 1920s) misery of the urban proletariat. What is new about *Razzia in St. Pauli* is that it employs lay people from an underworld generally associated with the wrong side of the law, something that some critics found to be in poor taste, running the risk of glorifying criminals and prostitutes. In advertising brochures that accompanied screenings of *Razzia in St. Pauli*, Hochbaum described the “gentleman’s agreement” he had arranged between the Hamburg police forces and the organized crime ring officially functioning as a boxing club to treat his studio as a kind of extraterritorial zone. The criminals not only brought their “Mädchenanhang” (girl entourage) along to the filming, Hochbaum notes with appreciation, but they also devised a disciplinary system that held everyone accountable to strict rules of punctuality and cooperative conduct.16

Other promotional materials issued with the release of the film strike a tone somewhat at odds with Hochbaum’s professed interest in sociopolitical commentary. Thus the *Illustrierter Film-Kurier* brochure prominently features the full lyrics of a Hamburg folk song that is of only minor importance in the film—parts of it appear in a brief sing-along by a merrily swaying crowd in the dingy tavern: “Was nützet dem Kaiser die Krone / Was nützet dem Seemann sein Geld / Denn es kann ja nichts Schöneres geben / Als in Hamburg ein Mädchen für Geld” (What good is a crown to an emperor, what good is money to a sailor, for there can’t be anything more lovely than a girl that’s for sale in Hamburg). The brochure thus clearly plays into the fake romanticism of St. Pauli’s shady underworld. Likewise, other advertising materials strike a somewhat bombastic note that sharply contrasts with the understated tone of the film itself: “Groß wie eine Symphonie! . . . Ein filmisches Meisterwerk!” (Grand like a symphony! A filmic masterpiece!), a leaflet declares, before comparing Hochbaum’s visual art with that of masters like Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and René Clair, emphasizing that the film is not to be compared to “films of the traditional ilk.” Hype ostensibly aimed at cinephiles does not prevent the authors of the leaflet from appealing to the more prurient and sentimental interests of less sophisticated audiences: “inmitten dem aufwühlenden Leben Gestrandeter, im dunkeln Viertel der Verbrecher, Ganoven und Dirnen, der gewohnheitsmäßigen Kaschemmenbesucher—erleben zwei Menschen die Sehnsucht einer glücklichen und großen Liebe” (in the midst of the turbulent lives of outcasts, in the dark neighborhood of criminals, crooks, and prostitutes, regular clients of questionable dives, two humans experience the longing for a happy and great love).17 Covering
all bases, such text promises art as well as sex and crime, romance and adventure, in an exotic milieu.

Even with its claims to authenticity, *Razzia* draws on a range of general generic conventions that started well before the Weimar era: innumerable early silent films bank on the ambivalent allure of entertainment, crime, prostitution, and show business, a trend that culminated in the Weimar period with the “street film” subgenre—with films such as Karl Grune’s *Die Straße* (The Street, 1923), G. W. Pabst’s *Die freundlose Gasse* (The Joyless Street, 1925), and Joe May’s *Asphalt* (1929). The notorious underworld of St. Pauli as a setting was a particularly attractive trope. Notable examples of this tradition include E. A. Dupont’s *Varieté* (1925), Rolf Randolf’s *Das Geheimnis von St. Pauli* (The Secret of St. Pauli, 1926), and Erich Waschneck’s *Die Carmen von St. Pauli* (Carmen of St. Pauli, 1928)—a film that features the actor Wolfgang Zilzer, who was to appear as the musician Leo in *Razzia in St. Pauli*. In a nod to musical films of the period, we have sequences set in nightclubs and a handful of musical numbers, including a cameo by a well-known Hamburg singer, Charly Wittong, presenting two songs. In some ways, then, Hochbaum’s film invites genre-related misapprehensions: what plot there is is indeed set in the world of crime and prostitution, and we have a robbery, a police chase of sorts, an amorous liaison, a brawl in a tavern, and an attempt at escape. Yet the “realism” of the film, with its slow pacing and the understated, bland delivery of the dialogs, very much contradicts sensationalist advertising. There is a general lack of suspense even with the appearance of a shady character, whom Else and Karl suspect of being a police informer but who turns out to be a fellow member of a crime racket, turning the whole incident into a red herring. The film seems to try and deliver on the promise of adventure and excitement while at the same time implicitly disavowing that promise by showing how dreary the characters’ lives “really” are. Every now and then, the contradiction is addressed in the film itself. Early on, Else complains that her life as a prostitute is boring and unglamorous—“Es ist genauso, als ob du in der Fabrik deine Zeit abarbeitest” (It’s just like biding your time working in a factory)—especially when compared to what is normally shown on the silver screen: “Wenn ich so die Frauen im Kintopp seh—was die alles erleben! Ich möchte auch mal was erleben” (When I see women in the movies—the exciting stuff they experience! I’d like to experience something exciting, too, for once). To a certain extent the film acknowledges that its realist, sociopolitical dimension is at odds with the concessions it makes to commercial genre cinema, but it pays lip service to these conventions all the same.

*Razzia in St. Pauli* is clearly indebted to an earlier politically engaged film: Leo Mittler and Albrecht Viktor Blum’s *Jenseits der Straße* (On the Other Side of the Street, 1929) focuses on people in the same Hamburg neighborhood struggling for survival, by any means possible, at a time of
mass unemployment. The silent crime drama features a basic plot constellation nearly identical to that of Razzia: a prostitute is eager to escape her dreary life and teams up with an unemployed young man who steals a necklace as a hoped-for means of escape. This attempt fails, leaving the prostitute in quiet resignation: “Wir kommen aus dem Dreck doch nie heraus!” (We’ll never get out of this rut!) Jenseits features the actor Friedrich Gnaß—who would play “Matrosen-Karl” in Razzia—as a sailor. Produced by the Prometheus-Film company under the auspices of the Communist media impresario Willi Münzenberg, the film seeks to alert its viewers to the necessity of revolutionary change, all the while camouflaging its political message under the guise of a thrilling crime drama.

Mittler and Blum employ visual strategies similar to Hochbaum’s, such as documentary footage of the Hamburg harbor and St. Pauli streets, occasional “Soviet style” rapid editing, and the use of recurring visual motifs. Most prominently, both films zero in on feet and legs as motifs indicating the connection between work, mobility, and identity. In Jenseits, close-up shots of a woman’s legs in high-heeled shoes and silk stockings, strutting back and forth on a sidewalk, introduce us to the main character as quite literally a streetwalker. Her profession is highlighted when a pair of male legs, in polished shoes and neatly ironed pants, approaches, suggesting a brief negotiation of terms. Similarly, Hochbaum’s film repeatedly highlights legs in symbolic ways: the dancing male legs in black tuxedo pants at the opening; the tired shuffle of an elderly woman as she heads toward a church; the legs of Karl running from the police, itself represented by two pairs of legs; the legs of the dancing showgirls in the nightclub sequence; Else’s legs as she puts on her stockings; and finally, the marching legs of laborers on their way to work that accompany the final song.

Whereas Jenseits exhibits a subtly presented but palpably communist perspective that associates petty crime with the economic crisis, the political “message” of Razzia is anything but clear. To be sure, there are references to economic hardship, such as when the prostitutes in the empty tavern complain that high unemployment has made their “business” dry up too. And much of the film may indeed be read as an indictment that mass unemployment forces women into prostitution and men into petty crime in order to survive. Yet we never actually see such necessity on screen: the prostitutes calmly accept their lot, keeping themselves busy with needlework and crocheting while chatting about their dreams of a better life—a house in the country with a little garden. The men in the tavern quietly pass the time playing cards. Unemployment is metonymically represented visually by repeated close-ups of hands, idle or occupied with unproductive activities such as handicrafts, sorting cigarettes, or playing cards. Such images are contrasted with close-ups of Leo’s hands as they glide over the piano keyboard, showing him engaged in his employment.
Unlike Hochbaum’s previous film, *Brüder*, with its focus on proletarians driven to strike on account of their intolerable living and working conditions, *Razzia* refrains from showing the causes of suffering among the poor, or even their struggle for survival. Here, the unemployed remain almost altogether invisible, the one exception being the brief appearance of a suicidal man. All others that appear in the film—the dock workers, the waiters in the street café, the taxi driver, the man fixing a sign at the facade of a nightclub, the policemen, the crooks, and the prostitutes and their clients—may not have glamorous, respectable, or even legal jobs, but they all seem to get by. The Kongo Bar tavern eventually does fill up, and none of the clients seem to have any problems paying for their beer and their schnapps. People seem to be perfectly content with the simple pleasures the tavern affords, hitting the dance floor for a brief shimmy, or merrily singing along to the songs played on the accordion. Else and Leo live in a modest room in the *Gängeviertel* and may be bothered by neighbors practicing the trumpet, but they do have a roof over their head and a landlady who tolerates not only their cohabitation but also Else’s brief fling with Karl. Leo may be a wimp, but he is also the only one who has a legitimate job, as a pianist, and he and Else seem to get by—they may complain about the dreariness of their lives, but both have a more or less secure source of income. Else’s malaise is not motivated by socioeconomic factors, but by psychological ones: it is Leo’s listlessness and lack of drive that translate into Else’s sexual and emotional frustration about being stuck with an unresponsive partner. Most important, perhaps, what motivates Karl’s decision to rob the jeweler’s store in broad daylight and in full view of numerous bystanders remains altogether unexplained; without any background information, the robbery appears as an entirely unmotivated, impulsive action by someone the viewer may well assume to be a callous, habitual criminal.

*Razzia in St. Pauli* is thus a far cry from other politically engaged leftist films of the period, such as Phil Jutzi’s proletarian fiction film about the consequences of mass unemployment, *Mutter Krausens Fahrt ins Glück* (Mother Krause’s Trip to Happiness, 1929), or even more so, Jutzi’s semidocumentary *Hunger in Waldenburg* (1929), with its drastic scenes of hardship filmed in the slums of a Silesian industrial town. It could even be argued that *Razzia’s* many shots of privileged people carousing in nightclubs, dancing and drinking champagne while lower-class people are shown enjoying themselves in the more modest tavern, may actually backfire, with the visual pleasure provided by these sequences potentially contradicting the film’s intended emphasis on economic hardship. In real life, many of the around six million unemployed and their families experienced hunger and evictions from their homes once their benefits were reduced or cut altogether. None of the characters in *Razzia* are faced with such catastrophic disruptions; their malaise remains diffuse and appears as largely psychological.
The ostensible focus on psychology serves two important functions: on the one hand, it promises to provide potential points of audience identification for a wide range of viewers; on the other, it is a form of anticipatory self-censorship aimed at avoiding the charge of political tendentiousness. For instance, critical analysis of contemporary socioeconomic issues as symptoms of the workings of monopoly capitalism in crisis could be dismissed by segments of the audiences, and by official censorship, as *Tendenz*—unacceptable party-political agitation. One potential avenue to take was that of melodrama, as in Marie Harder’s sound film *Lohnbuchhalter Kremke* (Payroll Clerk Kremke, 1930), produced in the orbit of the SPD. The film highlights the plight of an elderly, lower-middle-class office employee who loses his job: politically conservative and loyal to his employers, he becomes a concrete victim of abstract “modernization”—downsizing, mechanization, and rationalization—when a new machine is brought in that can do his job more efficiently. The focus here is on the personal tragedy experienced by Kremke through his loss of status, his sense of loyalty betrayed, and his advanced age that makes it difficult for him to find new employment. Films that sought to be more outspoken, such as Slatan Dudow and Bertolt Brecht’s *Kuhle Wampe oder Wem gehört die Welt?* (Kuhle Wampe or Who Owns the World?, English release, 1932), resorted to clever techniques of displacement: at the end of the film, the economic crisis in Germany is invoked obliquely in a dispute on a suburban train that centers on coffee-growing practices in Brazil, which serves as an implicit critique of predatory practices of contemporary capitalism.

*Razzia in St. Pauli* was produced in a climate subject to severe constraints regarding what could be articulated on screen in political terms. Such self-censorship was compounded by economic considerations prompted by the general crisis: small companies, like Orbis-Film, producing perhaps one or two feature films a year, were forced to play it safe, since failure at the box office could not be offset by the success of other films. As a result, Siegfried Kracauer famously argued, politically engaged filmmakers in the final years of the Weimar Republic offered little more than “timid heresies”—cautious and indecisive deviations from politically ineffectual commercial film. Moreover, leftist filmmakers were forced to take sides in the conflict between the Social Democrats, who advocated reforming the Weimar Republic, and the Communists, who sought to dismantle the capitalist democratic system altogether. In film, Helmut Korte has argued, this implied a choice between “appellative Elendsschilderung,” depicting socioeconomic misery to appeal for reform, and a “solidarischer Kampf,” calling for radical collective political action. Considering Hochbaum’s earlier work on behalf of Hamburg’s SPD, one would expect him to align his film with that party’s moderate, reformist agenda. Yet *Razzia in St. Pauli* does not offer much analysis as to the roots and causes of the current malaise,
nor does it offer a sense that there may be a way out. Instead, some con-
temporary critics felt, Hochbaum had, perhaps inadvertently, squandered
the film’s critical potential by making too many concessions to conven-
tional genre films. His former mentor, Heinrich Braune, for example, in his
review for the Social Democratic Hamburger Echo, caustically dismissed the
film as “das Produkt eines zu allem bereiten Opportunismus. . . . Dieser
Opportunismus vernichtet . . . tatsächlich die Ansätze eigener Gestaltung”
(the product of an opportunism that is prepared to do anything. . . . This
opportunism destroys . . . any viable content or perspective), a state-
ment that oddly foreshadows the 1946 assessment of Hochbaum by the
American Secret Service.

In a sense, Razzia in St. Pauli has multiple beginnings as well as mul-
tiple endings, vacillating between divergent registers. On the one hand,
there is a documentary approach clearly inspired by the so-called Russen-
filme, that is to say, montage-based films that emerged out of the Soviet
Republic in the 1920s by filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga
Vertov, and Vsevolod Pudovkin. On the other hand, the film follows
genre-film conventions derived from heterogeneous silent and sound-
film-era sources including domestic drama, romance, crime thriller, and
social “problem film.” Before the narrative proper begins, the film seems
to operate primarily on an observational logic, merely recording reality
and then recombing the recorded images in visually striking “dialectical
montages”—the juxtapositions of images intended to help viewers draw
their own conclusions as Hochbaum had advocated in his 1930 essay.
Such montages, to be sure, are not innocuous, in that they manipulate
the kinds of conclusions the viewers are expected to draw, so as to reach
an understanding of socioeconomic issues that corresponds with the film-
maker’s vantage point. Yet this vantage point, while clear enough on the
microlevel (concerning individual segments of the film), is less than clear
for the film as a whole.

The film’s initial commitment to observational realism is evident in
the manner in which Hamburg is introduced as the setting. The opening
sequences studiously avoid standard establishing shots of familiar Ham-
burg landmarks that also grace innumerable souvenir postcards, such as
the Michel steeple of the baroque St. Michaelis Church, the Landungs-
brücken dock with its ocean liners, or the Binnenalster lake in the city
center surrounded by park-like esplanades. Instead, we get images of
the lesser-known Nikolai Church near a canal, dockworkers crossing the
Baumwall bridge that links downtown Hamburg with the harbor district,
and the crooked, dingy lanes of the Gängeviertel. The Hamburg we see
here is not that of the transient tourist visitor but of the working-class
resident, living and working in a diverse city characterized by the proxim-
ity of commerce, transportation, daytime work, nighttime entertainment,
and quiet residential life along the harbor and its adjacent neighborhoods.
Yet even the first images subtly undermine a strict sense of mere observation of a particular milieu: the close-ups shots of dancing male legs, in black tuxedo pants and polished shoes that appear superimposed over the water to an increasingly frantic, syncopated brassy music track, are clearly not something a camera could simply have recorded in a fly-on-the-wall manner. The segment gets ever more stylized as the legs turn into their shadows dancing, while the water has turned into an abstract pattern of streaks of reflected light. At another point, as the camera tilts down from a crucifix in front of a church, it reveals a man, unsteady on his feet and obviously inebriated, standing in front of a wrought-iron gate. He swivels around and staggers in the direction of the camera, coming so close as to blur the focus. As he is about to hit the lens, there is a quick cut to a view from the other side of the gate, now showing the man in a brief altercation with two women on the sidewalk before he staggers across the street, away from the women and the camera. The incident is at least partly staged, since the camera could not have been on two sides of the gate at the same time to observe this everyday incident. Slippages such as these suggest that Hochbaum’s alternative, “critical” filmmaking practices do not necessarily differ that greatly from those of mainstream film that he denounced as deceptive and manipulative in his 1930 essays.

Razzia in St. Pauli was shot with silent film cameras, as sound cameras were prohibitively expensive at the time and difficult to move to the desired locations. The Vera Film studios in Hamburg, where some of the interior sequences were shot, were at the time not equipped for sound, necessitating the subsequent dubbing of voices, music, and other sounds during postproduction in Berlin. Such constraints negatively impact the film’s claim to veracity, severely undermining the sense of authenticity to which the film aspires: for instance, the lip-synching of the professional and lay actors is often less than perfect, creating a jarring disconnect. Most notably, the voices of the real Hamburg “girls of St. Pauli” are clearly provided by professional actresses employing strangely generic Berlin lower-class accents, creating an odd contrast between the people shown on screen and those heard on the soundtrack. The Communist Hamburger Volks-Zeitung was particularly alienated by these fake voices, complaining that the absence of locally correct accents completely undermined the film’s political credibility by showing “ein St. Pauli, wie es sich der kleine Moritz vorstellt. Nichts als verwegene Zuhälter und Verbrechergestalten, die einen Dialekt sprechen, wie er in einem Bouillonkeller an der Spree, aber nicht in einer Köminsel an der Elbe zu Hause ist” (a St. Pauli just as little Moritz imagines it. Nothing but audacious pimps and criminal figures who speak a dialect that is at home in a basement soup kitchen on the river Spree but not in a corner pub on the Elbe).24

In more than one sense, then, Razzia in St. Pauli is still primarily a silent film, with dialog, music, and other sounds relegated to a secondary
function: Hochbaum tells his story primarily through images, in a straightforward, somewhat conventional linear plot, interspersed with a “dialectical montage” of images that provide a kind of visual commentary. Sound is sometimes effectively enlisted to heighten the impact of a given scene. Yet frequently, in the more extended scenes of the main storyline, the effort to maintain a “realistic” mode of speaking keeps the verbal dialog flat and monotonous, and the acting styles of the various players create some dissonances: Gina Falckenberg as Else and Wolfgang Zilzer as Leo generally underplay their respective parts, whereas Gnaß as Karl the crook sometimes resorts to exaggerated speech patterns, facial expressions, and gestures, an outdated mode of acting associated with silent film—“um Nuancen zuviel Spiel” (a tad too much acting), as the reviewer writing for Film-Kritik noted.25

In the shorter, more abstract segments, words are often redundant, driving home a point already made by the collage of images alone. The most obvious example is the sequence surrounding a man’s suicide. We see an extended parade of superimposed images of carousing in a nightclub, all of which comes to an abrupt halt when a young woman pokes a lit cigarette into a balloon that bursts loudly. The bang acts as a bracket to the ensuing image of a young man slowly collapsing onto a bench, letting a pistol drop from his hand. The point is clear: we are given to understand that while the privileged few are frivolously enjoying themselves, others despair and are driven to suicide. The man remains anonymous and stands in for the misery of innumerable others, his death is treated with callous efficiency by the police answering the telephone, “Selbstmord?—Arbeitslos . . . Schön, wir kommen” (Suicide?—Unemployed . . . Right, we’re on our way), and juxtaposed with the continued decadent merrymaking at the nightclub, where a corpulent man declares in self-righteous indignation: “Also, . . . daß die Leute immer gleich die Flinte ins Korn schmeißen! Was soll denn unsereins bei der heutigen Banklage sagen?” (Well, . . . what’s up with these people throwing in the towel straightaway! What are the likes of us to say, what with the state the banks are in these days?)

Hochbaum had used similar techniques of “dialectical montage” in his SPD short films that present jarring contrasts of poverty and affluence, misery and callous luxury—as a case in point, Zwei Welten is predicated precisely on such harsh, condemnatory oppositions. In Razzia, however, the added verbal commentary in its exaggerated polemic is sometimes at odds with the visuals. The nightclub sequence continues with an extended display of female eroticism that is equally problematic: the legs of the chorus girls are displaced by a close-up of the lower part of a single woman’s dancing body, repeatedly lifting and twirling her skirts in can-can style to reveal her dark, gartered stockings. Moments like these are narratively unmotivated, and the film here indulges in visual pleasure by appealing
to the audience’s erotic desires at the expense of social commentary and dramaturgical economy. The close-up of the woman’s hopping legs act as a visual bracket as they dissolve into those of Else in her room hopping on one foot to get into her stockings and fix her garters.

The overall tone of Razzia in St. Pauli is one of somber resignation. Yet perhaps the most puzzling feature of the film is the song that ends it and that strikes, at best, a profoundly ambivalent note. It is sung by Ernst Busch, the noted left-wing actor famous for his appearance as the male lead in Kuhle Wampe. Though a German production, Kuhle Wampe was first shown—after many problems with the German censors—in Moscow on May 14, 1932, only to be released in Germany ten days after Hochbaum’s film, on May 30. Like Hochbaum, Busch was born in Kiel, and his participation in Hochbaum’s film might be due to their personal friendship dating back to the early days when they both started out in theater there. Alongside Gnaß, the “Matrosen-Karl” of Razzia, Busch had been a member of Erwin Piscator’s left-wing ensemble at Berlin’s Theater am Nollendorfplatz. In Razzia, Busch’s voice suddenly appears from off screen in the final sequence that comes after the end of the narrative proper, with a somewhat abrupt transition: after Else has been frustrated in her attempts to rekindle in Leo a sense of passion and goes to bed alone, Busch’s voice proclaims, “So leben die einen. Die andern aber. . .” (This is how some people live. The others, however, . . .). The music with a jagged march-like rhythm—that we heard early on in the film when we saw the documentary footage of dock workers arriving on shore on their way to work—now accompanies a rapid montage of the images of the legs of legions of dock workers marching, combined with superimposed shots of the rotating pistons of industrial machinery. The final song in Kuhle Wampe, “Vorwärts, und nicht vergessen!” (Forward, and Don’t Forget!), appeals to a notion of communist solidarity as the source of collective power, ending on a note of optimism: radical social change is possible, the song suggests, if the politically aware people “denen sie [die Welt] nicht gefällt” (who don’t like the world as it is) get together and act jointly. Kuhle Wampe thus glosses over the rifts between the tightly organized Communists with their antirepublican stance dictated by Moscow and the decentralized, pluralistic Social Democrats who advocated seeking to improve the existing system; the film brackets questions of what exactly joint political action might look like by shifting to an allegorical register in depicting the youthful dynamism of a communist sports festival.

Kurt Lavaal composed the final song for Razzia that, with its march-like, syncopated rhythm and angular harmonies, shares many similarities with Hanns Eisler’s famous compositions for Kuhle Wampe. However, Lavaal’s forceful, strident music contrasts sharply with the pessimistic content of the song lyrics penned by Carl Behr and Hedy Knorr about “das große graue Arbeitsheer” (the big gray army of workers) marching
into the city in the morning, delivered by Busch in his characteristically crisp, apodictic style. If the music may connote a certain optimism, the visuals, focusing on monotonous mechanical repetition, together with the increasingly somber lyrics, strike an oddly morbid note: “Morgens in der großen Stadt / wo Staub statt Tau vom Himmel fällt / beginnt der Tanz, der Räder- und Maschinentanz. / Alle tanzen mit, Schritt um Schritt / denn es trägt den Tod in sich, wer müde wird.” (In the morning in the big city, where dust falls from the sky instead of dew, the dance begins, the dance of wheels and machines. Everyone dances along, step by step. For he who grows tired carries death within himself.) The music and the rotating pistons slow down as the voice ceases to sing, only to accelerate again into a frantic crescendo, with accelerating shots of the hastily spinning machine wheels, before the word “Ende” appears on a dark screen, leaving all questions unresolved: there is no promise of a bright future achieved by collective action. In his contribution to this volume, Bastian Heinsohn shows how politically interventionist films made in the early 1930s, advocating Communist or Nazi solutions to the crisis, seek to convey to their viewers a sense of the possibility of resolution and renewed societal wholeness. By way of contrast, the final song’s lyrics in Hochbaum’s film seem to jettison faith in the power of solidarity, ending on a sense of collective drudgery—“Wir marschieren von der Not zum Tod” (We are marching from misery to death).

The song elicited a wide range of divergent responses. Surprisingly, it was a conservative critic, Fritz Olimsky, who maintained that “der endlos zerdehnte Schluß (den man unbedingt noch kürzen sollte), wird schließlich wider Erwarten noch gerettet durch einen Song auf die Arbeit” (the interminably drawn-out ending, which one absolutely should still cut short, is salvaged unexpectedly by a song about labor). Others praised Lavaal’s music, refraining from engaging with the lyrics at all, merely noting that the film culminated in a “charaktervolles Song Ende” (song ending full of character). Some contemporary reviewers voiced their objections to this extradiegetic finale that defied genre conventions instead of bringing adequate closure to the narrative. Thus Siegfried Kracauer, writing for the left-liberal Frankfurter Zeitung, acknowledged Hochbaum’s artistic sensibility and commitment to social justice, but complained, “die Szene ist gut gemeint, erzielt jedoch ihres Nachklap- pens und verschiedener Unstimmigkeiten wegen nicht den gewünschten Effekt” (the scene is well-intentioned, but on account of being tacked on and with its various inconsistencies, it fails to achieve the desired effect). Despite Busch’s stirring delivery, the final song fared little better with critics on the extreme left of the political spectrum, who bemoaned that the film failed to take a clear agitatory political stance. The Communist Hamburger Volks-Zeitung polemically complained, “Offenbar ist dem Macher des Films, als alles fertig war, auch aufgefallen, daß noch
etwas fehlt, deshalb hat er zum Schluß ein Bild von Hafenarbeitern, die über die Baumwallbrücke strömen, angehängt, und sich dazu einen ‘Song von der Arbeit’ komponieren lassen” (Apparently, once everything was done, it occurred to the maker of the film, too, that something was missing, and so he tacked on a scene at the end with dock workers streaming across Baumwall bridge, and had a “Song of Labor” composed for himself).29 Interestingly, the review does not mention Busch’s name in its critique. Neither does Die rote Fahne, the official nationwide newspaper of the German Communist Party (KPD), based in Berlin. That paper, too, dismissed the ending for its lack of an ideologically correct perspective: “The feeble effort to contrast these romantically sentimentalized, ‘humanized’ Lumpenproletariat figures with the actual proletariat in the short final scene is absolutely insufficient, leaving behind a disconcerting impression.”30 Despite his good intentions, the KPD critic felt, Hochbaum had failed but could improve things by siding more clearly with the “kämpfende Proletariat.”

It may be precisely this lack of a clear political perspective that constitutes the film’s greatest claim to “realism” and artistic honesty: the overall disorientation conveyed by Razzia in St. Pauli evinces a sense that, given the enormity of the socioeconomic crisis, no party-political program offered any viable solutions. What to many across the political spectrum during the Weimar Republic was not politically clear enough, to the Nazi censors was all too obvious. By late 1933, within one and a half years after its release, the “timid heresies” offered by Razzia in St. Pauli had become unacceptable to a totalitarian regime. On December 7, 1933, the Upper Chamber of the Reich Censorship Board banned the film as “not compatible with today’s notion of morality and decency.” Although the censors conceded that the film did not deliberately aim at glorifying prostitution and petty crime, they opined that the depiction of sexual and criminal misconduct as seemingly natural consequences of unemployment, together with the portrayal of a largely incompetent police force, bestowed on the film its “entsittlichende Wirkung” (demoralizing effect). Although the film company was prepared to cut the final song, the fact that the film consisted almost entirely of “Bett- und Kneipenszenen” (bedroom and tavern scenes) made it unsalvageable in the eyes of the Nazi censors.31 The film’s creator, Werner Hochbaum, however, managed to continue working with considerable success under the changed circumstances, until he too fell foul with the Nazis in 1939. But that, as we have seen, is a different story.

Notes

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2 It is difficult to judge the overall aesthetic quality of the film, especially in terms of rhythm and pacing, because the versions that have survived are incomplete. When Razzia in St. Pauli was submitted to the censors in Berlin on April 11, 1932, it was 2,016 meters long, that is, approximately 74 minutes. The longest surviving version, now held at the Deutsche Kinemathek Berlin, measures 1,705 meters (63 minutes), about 11 minutes shorter than the original. The version at the Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv Berlin is about 57 minutes long, that is, here a further 6 minutes are missing, mainly in two spots: at the very beginning, after the opening credits, there is a brief bit of accordion music that, in the Kinemathek version, accompanies a camera pan across the harbor to reveal a man sitting beside the harbor playing the instrument; in the Bundesarchiv version the segment cuts off after a few seconds, before the man comes into view, resulting in a jarring gesture that makes no sense musically or visually, perhaps due to a damaged print that was badly spliced together. The second, longer cut appears to have been made deliberately for dramaturgical reasons: the Bundesarchiv version features only one song presented in the tavern by the local entertainer Charly Wittong, “In unserer Heimatstadt, da gibt’s ein Wiederseh’n” (In our hometown, that’s where we’ll meet again), sung in standard German. In the Kinemathek version, a second song follows, “Fohr mi mol röver” (Take me across the water), sung in the broad Hamburg dialect known as Platt that is largely incomprehensible to any viewers outside of northern Germany and thus potentially redundant. Unfortunately, the film’s initial censorship record (B.31364), which usually features a step-by-step description of the plot and visual sequence of a given film, has not survived, so we have no means of assessing what exactly the remaining 11 missing minutes may have contained.


4 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.


Werner Holba, “Nr. 3424: Der Fall Hochbaum,” in Dokumentationszentrum ACTION, Werner Hochbaum.


Hochbaum’s association with Orbis-Film also included a short sound film centered on the popular comedian Szöke Szakall, Besserer Herr gesucht zwecks . . . ( Wanted: Well-Situated Gentleman for . . ., 1932), directed jointly by Werner Hochbaum and Carl Behr, which often was shown in conjunction with Razzia in a single program. When Hochbaum was called in as codirector to complete Heinrich George’s directorial debut, Schleppzug M17 (Train of Barges M17, 1933), Orbis-Film helped salvage the floundering project. After the Nazi takeover of power, Rosenfeld, of Jewish descent, was able to work for a while with a special permit but had to relinquish control of the company. Forced out of his livelihood, Rosenfeld settled in the United States in 1938. See Christian Rogowski, “Justin Rosenfeld—ein deutscher Lebensweg,” in Büttner and Schätz, Werner Hochbaum, 33.


Döge, “Die ewigen Masken,” 49.

“Razzia in St. Pauli,” Illustrierter Film-Kurier, 1774, 1932.


Bruce Murray, Film and the German Left in the Weimar Republic: From Caligari to Kuhle Wampe (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 67.

Helmut Korte, Der Spielfilm und das Ende der Weimarer Republik (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1998), 248.


Korte, Der Spielfilm, 232.


Bock, “Ein Hamburg-Film,” 309.


28 Siegfried Kracauer, “Film-Notizen: Auf der Reeperbahn,” *Frankfurter Zeitung*, June 2, 1932, in *Kleine Schriften zum Film* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), 64.


2: Film as Pedagogy in Late Weimar and Early Nazi Cinema: The Role of the Street in Mobilizing the Spectator

Bastian Heinsohn

As early as 1915, Hugo Münsterberg recognized the potential of moving images as educational tools for the masses, stating that “Millionen haben in den dunklen Häusern ihre Geographie, Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft gelernt” (millions have learned in the dark houses their geography and history and natural science).¹ Yet, as Münsterberg acknowledges, “this power of the moving pictures to supplement the schoolroom and the newspaper and the library, is, after all, much less important than its chief task—to bring entertainment, and enjoyment and happiness to the masses.”² When German cinema reached maturity during the 1920s, movie stars began to play a significant psychological role for spectators, providing them opportunities to identify with role models and their attitudes and actions.³ This psychological aspect is crucial, as it emphasizes film’s function as an educational tool that showed audiences ways out of their miserable situations in the aftermath of the 1929 stock market crash. Not only did popular cinema and big-budget films entertain the masses in a time of political and social instability, but a number of German productions also offered guidance, stimulated sentiments, and ultimately generated politicized views among spectators.

This essay argues that key films in the transitional era at the end of the 1920s and in the early 1930s adhered to a formulaic pattern depicting a fragmented society at the outset, then proposing what filmmakers considered a righteous trajectory, or what I would call “the right path,” signaling a future marked by unity and wholeness.⁴ This pattern is present in Fritz Lang’s serial-killer thriller M (1931), Slatan Dudow’s proletarian drama Kuhle Wampe oder Wem gehört die Welt? (Kuhle Wampe or Who Owns the World?, English release, 1932), and Hans Steinhoff’s Hitlerjunge Quex (Hitler Youth Quex, 1933), one of the earliest state-sponsored feature films in the Third Reich.⁵ The shared trajectory from fragmentation to a new whole allowed for a surprisingly smooth transition from late Weimar to Nazi cinema, despite the alleged complete break
between Weimar-era German culture and art propagated by the Nazis. I argue that the cinematic street, a dominant motif of Weimar cinema, assumed a key role in promoting the ideologies that were presented on screen: namely, it functioned as a crucial bridge between fragmentation at the outset of the film and a new whole at the end. In this context, fragmentation refers not only to the polarized and disunited society at the time of political tensions, but also to the modern sociocultural trajectory, which saw forms of fragmentation permeating work processes and domestic life. The street becomes a learning space for both the characters in the film and the audience in front of the screen. Encouraging spectators to take the supposedly “right path,” the narratives resolve in depictions of wholeness, which in these three examples clearly refer to the idea of a nation as a whole. The three films in this analysis are exemplary of how cinema in the transitional era has the power to educate viewers by presenting actions on cinematic streets as a model for moviegoers to take action. Ironically, as Todd Herzog argues, Weimar Germany experienced a “crisis of faith in visual evidence” caused by unstable and broken-down visual boundaries.6 The street is the key location for what Herzog describes as the emergence of a “new institution”: a community that unites in order to overcome its previous state as an “illogical mass.”7

Film critics, both past and present, have written extensively about the relationship between film and pedagogy.8 The strong potential of visual images to affect spectators by addressing them on a psychological level suggests why film soon became the prime pedagogical tool among the various forms of artistic expression and the new means of mass communication. “The spirit of film” (der Geist des Films), argued Béla Balázs in 1930, “is, like the spirit of language, an object of ‘national psychology’” (ist wie der Geist der Sprache Gegenstand der “Völkerpsychologie”).9 Balázs developed the concept of cinema as psychological experience by examining what he calls “optical language,” which sets itself apart from all previous forms of artistic expression by eliminating the spectator’s position of fixed distance.10 Balázs argued that “the camera has my eyes and identifies them with the eyes of figures within the action” and concluded that through cinema’s power fully to immerse the spectator in the realm of the images and actions on the screen, “a radical new ideology makes its appearance for the first time.”11 Film stars soon assumed a key role in the formation of convictions and attitudes because they served as “political and psychological models who demonstrate some quality that we collectively admire.”12 Film must be considered a pedagogical tool, as it makes a “deliberate attempt to produce knowledge, forms of ethical address, and social identities.”13 The Lehrstücktheorie of Bertolt Brecht, the coauthor of the script for Kuhle Wampe, turned the theater stage into a place of learning for the actors and the audience alike. Brecht ascribed the new medium the same “social duties” as other forms of art, in that it follows “from the transformation of art into a pedagogical discipline.”14
After the Nazis came to power in 1933, the propaganda ministry supported the star system because, as Mary O’Brien states, “[it] recognized the economic, psychological, and ideological value in the audience’s propensity to identify with celebrities.”15 In his 1942 essay “The Formative Power of Film,” the director and newly appointed Reichsfilmintendant (supervisor of film for the Third Reich) Fritz Hippler summarizes the power of the medium, which was recognized and exploited from the production of *Hitlerjunge Quex* onward. Hippler argued that film “ist und bleibt nun einmal die intensivst wirkende und weiterhin auch die für größte Massen geschaffene Kunst. Sein Beispiel und seine Wirkung werden nur allzu leicht innerer Besitz von Millionen” (is and remains the art that has the most intense effect and that is made for the broadest masses. Its example and its impact all too easily become the inner property of millions).16

In the early 1930s, not only did German film studios supply the masses with visual pleasures and mass entertainment, but powerful media conglomerates on the left and right also tried to exert influence on public opinion by mobilizing support and encouraging participation through these means of communication.17 At this particular time, the cinematic street assumed a new role as a bridge between the depiction of an undesirable status quo and a preferred new social order. The fragmentation and radicalization of German political parties and of large parts of German society played out on the urban streets. Violent encounters of political opponents, parades, and chaos turned the streets into stages for public manifestations of power.18 By the end of the Weimar era, the street had already become a prominent setting of contemporary sociopolitical trajectories in all forms of the arts. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s portrayals of pedestrians in his *Berlin Streets* paintings and Friedrich Seidenstücker’s atmospheric photographs of daily life in Berlin emphasize the urban street’s function of reflecting the current state of Germany.19 Whereas some of the most memorable scenes from the early phase of Weimar cinema took place in the street, such as in Karl Grune’s *Die Straße* (The Street, 1923), and G. W. Pabst’s *Die freudlose Gasse* (Joyless Street, 1925), the filmic street in late Weimar cinema assumed a new role. Although it continued to mirror the political tensions and upheavals, the bourgeoisie in crisis, and the gender issues already portrayed in early Weimar cinema, the filmic street of the early 1930s increasingly focused on offering ways to solve tensions, as exemplified in *Kuhle Wampe*, *M*, and *Hitlerjunge Quex*.

Correlating with political upheavals and social transformations during the early 1930s, German cultural production, ranging from the visual to the performing arts, lost its neutrality because, as Alan Steinweis writes, the collapse of political liberalism in the late Weimar years “was reflected in the demise of the notion that art could exist neutrally in a sphere
separate from ideology and politics." The urban street represented the ideal cinematic means to showcase the political battlefield of the time and constituted a crucial link between what Siegfried Kracauer labeled the Weimar “street film” and early Nazi cinema, as exemplified in *Hitlerjunge Quex*. With regard to cinema, the omnipresent *Gleichschaltung*, or bringing into line, in Germany after 1933 was a relatively gradual process that allowed for striking similarities between film production before and after the Nazis came to power. The major studios during these periods were in fact “dream factories, not propaganda machines.”

In order to secure the success of cinema after 1933, the film industry provided audiences with numerous films made by established directors and starring well-known actors, a fact that resulted in significant continuities between Weimar and Nazi cinema. The Nazis also tended to use identifiable characters to allow viewers to relate to their role models on the screen. In a speech at the inauguration of the Reichskulturkammer (Reich Chamber of Culture) in November 1933 in Berlin, the German Reich’s Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, addressed the role of the artist in the Third Reich. Goebbels, who was in charge of almost all aspects of media and artistic production during the Third Reich, underlines that the regime’s main goal was to reunite, control, and mobilize the German *Volk* in order to become a *Volksgemeinschaft* (racial community). Goebbels assigned the artist a key role as mediator and educator in this endeavor by declaring an end to any form of individualism and liberalism in the arts. Instead, the “new” artist was expected to make use of his medium in order to “translate” the nation’s trajectory and therefore to speak in the name of the people and the nation. Goebbels left no doubt about the Nazis’ approach to the arts, claiming that “Kultur ist höchster Ausdruck der schöpferischen Kräfte eines Volkes, der Künstler ihr begnadeter Sinngeber” (the higher expression of the creative power of a nation and the artist is the gifted person who gives it a meaning). As Minister for *Volksaufklärung* (public enlightenment), Goebbels installed Nazi ideology as a means of guidance and control in the arts. It was the film medium that soon assumed a key role in Nazi culture as it reached a wide audience and grew steadily in popularity until the late war years.

In his speech at the Berlin hotel Kaiserhof less than two months after the *Machtergreifung* (seizure of power), Goebbels, a self-proclaimed “leidenschaftlicher Liebhaber der filmischen Kunst” (passionate lover of cinematic art) announced the film’s future trajectory. The use of the term “Zukunftsaufgaben” (future tasks) in the speech alludes to the idea that film was foremost a pedagogical tool in addressing the German *Volk*. The speech’s strong emphasis on the “new”—Goebbels used the word “new” seventeen times in this short speech—may indicate the intention for a radical turning away from late Weimar cinema. However, Goebbels
also praised the legacy of earlier German cinema and explicitly mentioned two productions that made an impression on him: Fritz Lang’s *Die Nibelungen* (The Nibelungs, 1924) and Luis Trenker’s *Der Rebell* (The Rebel, 1932). Moreover, he spoke of a reform of the medium and not about a complete reinvention. He thus proposed a process that indicates change and continuity at the same time, for example, with regard to popular genres and the use of famous actors. Goebbels reminded the audience, among them the leading personnel of the German film industry, that cinema in the “new age” should build on the success of popular cinema during the Weimar years. As he pointed out, “Das Schaffen des kleinsten Amusements, des Tagesbedarfs für die Langeweile und der Trübsal zu produzieren, wollen wir ebenfalls nicht unterdrücken” (Nor do we wish to suppress the making of the tiniest amusement, of the daily requirement against boredom and tribulation).

The Kaiserhof speech already hints at the Propaganda Ministry’s twofold approach to utilizing the powers of cinema. Sabine Hake describes this as a strategy to “depoliticize popular cinema while at the same time politicizing certain forms of moviegoing.” The speech is an early indicator that the year 1933 marked the beginning of a gradual transformation of the medium instead of a clear-cut break from previous film production in Germany. When Goebbels speaks of “our time” and a “new age,” the parallels to late Weimar cinema’s street scenes become obvious: “Whoever understands our time knows which dramas are at film’s disposal. Every night on the streets outside.” Ironically, Nazi cinema soon would turn largely away from the city streets because they were visible reminders of a Weimar Berlin linked to decadence and an excessive nightlife.

The proletarian classic *Kuhle Wampe* and the thriller *M* are among the several late Weimar films that display anti- or protofascist traits, respectively. *Kuhle Wampe* displays procommunist demonstrations in the streets and an agitprop theater group calling for a revolution. The street becomes the place for the working class and the political left to unite and rise up against the political status quo and against unfair conditions for the poor. On the one hand, the street is a place of strength and community, depicting mobilized workers marching together and singing songs of solidarity. On the other hand, the street makes visible the misery of the workers’ situation and ties it to the capitalist economy and society. It is in the street where the unemployed desperately attempt to find work or even a place to live after being evicted from their homes. At the other end of the political spectrum, *M* examines “the nexus between total mobilization, surveillance and social control” on the verge of calling for a protofascist and militarized society in order to exterminate a common enemy. Lang captured German society at a time when serial killings and the widely publicized frantic hunts for the murderers caused significant nervousness and angst. In order to counter fears of further destabilization (be it of
an economic, political, or criminal nature) and to propose solutions, a significant part of German film production in the early 1930s turned considerably more didactic.

Slatan Dudow cowrote *Kuhle Wampe’s* script with Brecht, who had developed a strong fascination with cinema in the late 1920s despite his initial doubts about it being a serious art form. Brecht was interested in questioning the possibilities and limits of a medium that he regarded as a thoroughly capitalist industry. By the early 1930s, Brecht recognized the political potential of film. In Brecht’s account of the lawsuit over Georg Wilhelm Pabst’s film adaptation of his play *Die Dreigroschenoper* (The Threepenny Opera, 1931), he explicitly addresses the didactic nature of the medium and its power to politicize and mobilize viewers: “What film really demands is external action and not introspective psychology.” *Kuhle Wampe* is considered a Brecht film as much as a Dudow film because of the former’s significant role in the production process: Brecht worked on the script, directed a pivotal scene, and helped to finance the project. The idea of a collaborative film was, as Marc Silberman states, a “self-conscious attempt to counteract the hierarchical studio arrangements in the commercial industry.” The collective, among them the writers Ernst Ottwalt and Helene Weigel, the composer Hanns Eisler, the actors Ernst Busch and Hertha Thiele, and members of leftist theater groups, attempted to realize a worker-oriented film in times when leftist views were increasingly fought and suppressed. The political left also faced problems from within. As Bruce Murray points out, there was little consensus among the Left in the final years of the Weimar Republic when political views diverged sharply and the economy struggled after the 1929 worldwide economic downturn. The Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands KPD (Communist Party of Germany) and the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany) failed to establish an alternative to the National Socialist German Workers Party (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, NSDAP) because neither party “was willing to make the compromises necessary to unite in what might have been a successful coalition against National Socialism.”

*Kuhle Wampe* condemns the counterproductive disunity among leftist groups and workers in dealing with the devastating effect of the worldwide economic crisis on the German working class. The struggling Bönice family, hit hard by unemployment and unable to pay the rent, is driven out of its Berlin apartment and forced to relocate to the tent colony “Kuhle Wampe” near lake Müggel on the outskirts of Berlin. The son, Franz, had committed suicide out of despair before they left for the tent camp, and the daughter, Annie (Hertha Thiele), takes action to change the situation for her family and for the working class. She helps prepare a cultural festival with sporting events, theatrical performances, singing, marches, and political discussions. The film’s
concluding sequence aims to unite the splintered leftist groups and ultimately to change the status quo.

*Kuhle Wampe* relies heavily on the power of street images and scenes of mass enthusiasm that the Nazi regime would soon exploit aesthetically in support of fascist politics. Through the film, however, the street setting undergoes various shifts in its function as a depiction of the “right path” toward a better future. In the early sequences, the street is a site of despair, disorder, and futile attempts to change the unfair conditions of the unemployed and homeless. The cyclists and their monotonous pedaling in the film’s opening sequence illustrate the severe situation for job-seeking workers in the catastrophic aftermath of the world market crash. The bicycle becomes a symbol of the accelerated pace that permeated all areas of work and life in modern times. It expresses a mobility in the streets that is required because the economic situation demands a constant and fierce race for jobs.

The sequence after the urban street scenes described above portrays the tent camp “Kuhle Wampe” as a place of freedom that provides the evicted Bönickes moments of respite from the hardships and the ruthlessness of life in the city. However, in the logic of this activist film, the Bönickes’ situation and the poor conditions for the fragmented working class will not change while remaining in the colony since it is too far away from the city and its streets. Consequently, Annie returns to the city and soon we see her marching in the streets with fellow activists. The *Sporttreffen* (sport meet) that takes place on a meadow presumably outside the city center is the culmination of all the mobilization efforts in the urban streets. *Kuhle Wampe* emphasizes the politicization of the street and its function as a path toward active participation, especially in the montage sequence just prior to the event with the mass arrival of participants on motorbikes, bicycles, and on foot. Ernst Busch’s *Sportslied* (song about sport) accompanies the following montage of racing motorbikes and rowing athletes, and the song’s lyrics stress the function of the street as a site to gather, to learn (reminiscent of Brecht’s *Lehrstücktheorie*), and to take action: “Kommend von den vollen Hinterhäusern / Finstern Straßen der umkämpften Städte. / Findet ihr euch zusammen. / Um gemeinsam zu kämpfen. / Und lernt zu siegen. / Und lernt zu siegen.” (Coming from the crowded tenements / in the dark streets of the embattled cities / you gather together / to fight together / and learn to win / and learn to win.)

The 13-minute segment depicting the preparations for the event codes public space as a realm of active participation, solidarity, community, and mobilization among the working class. Strongly influenced by Soviet filmmaking at the time, *Kuhle Wampe* adapts the montage style introduced and popularized by directors such as Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Dziga Vertov in the mid-1920s. The sequence begins...
with a montage of images featuring the traditional realm of the working class with heavy machines, cranes, and smoking chimneys accompanied by the melody of the *Solidaritätslied* (Song of Solidarity, written by Brecht with music composed by Hanns Eisler). The images in this montage, though unrelated to the plot in *Kuhle Wampe*, evoke the impression that the spaces of the working class are no longer associated with misery and despair but instead with productivity and action. The lyrics to Eisler’s song emphasize the function of the street as politicized space, and the song is only performed when activists are seen marching along paths and streets. The song’s second stanza, performed at the *Sporttreffen*, states: “Vorwärts und nicht vergessen/ Unsere Straße und unser Feld/ Vorwärts und nicht vergessen/ Wessen Straße ist die Straße/ Wessen Welt ist die Welt/ (Forward!/ and don’t forget our street and our field/ Forward!/ and don’t forget whose street is the street/ whose world is the world).”

The montage of marching workers, motorcyclists, bicyclists, swimmers, rowers, and flags and placards proclaiming solidarity depicts, as Nora Alter asserts, a “mobilized collectivity.” The ceremony ends abruptly when a theater group called Red Megaphone enters the scene and acts out a forced eviction, thus reproducing artistically the Bönickes’ dire circumstances. The *Sporttreffen* responds to, restages, and in a Brechtian way playfully defamiliarizes the working-class conditions depicted in the first part of *Kuhle Wampe*. The film’s job-hunting scene with images of racing bicycles in the streets is restaged as a playful element of an event that, despite its competitive nature, eventually stresses collectivity. Consequently, the *Sporttreffen* ends with a communal awards ceremony celebrating multiple participants who enter the stage together to great applause. This scene is the culmination of the film’s ideology by showing how the working class needs to react to its situation: to speak in one voice and to mobilize and function as a unit. Consequently and despite the scene’s strong procommunist message, it is at the same time, as Silberman argues, protofascist because it anticipates later Nazi aesthetics of mobilized masses, parades, and enthusiastic athletes in competition.

Although the interpretative political lens differs, the role of the street is thematically the same: to galvanize people and to form a community.

Owing to complications before and after theatrical release on May 30, 1932, the success of *Kuhle Wampe* as a pedagogical tool (to teach viewers how to take the class struggle to the streets and mobilize) was limited. As Silberman notes, although today *Kuhle Wampe* is considered the pinnacle of proletarian and revolutionary cinema of the Weimar Republic, its impact as a role model for politicized filmmaking and as an alternative to conventional studio productions was “negligible.” In addition, leftist films struggled in the wake of the introduction of sound, an invention that ignited a new competition for commercial success between national and international producers, distributors, and theater owners.
Roughly a year prior to *Kuhle Wampe*’s release, Lang’s *M* premiered on May 11, 1931. *M* similarly presents the pattern of the pedagogical approach, depicting society and space as deeply “illogical,” to use Herzog’s term to describe the political, economic, and social conditions of early Weimar Germany, before the film utilizes the street setting as the “right path” that leads both the protagonists and the viewer to a new wholeness. In *Kuhle Wampe*, mobilization in the streets functions to change the social-class status quo, whereas *M* takes the opposite approach. Mobilization is linked to militarization in the streets and both take place in order to reestablish the status quo. Although *M* has been noted as a film that is ambivalent toward the death penalty and blurs binaries such as good/bad, victim/perpetrator, and guilt/innocence, it is nonetheless a straightforward guide to coming to terms with modern urban life in times of turmoil and uncertainties. At the time, Berlin was, as Kaes puts it, “no longer governed by rule of law, but swayed by the pressure of the mobilized masses.” The film’s secondary title, *A City Searches for a Murderer*, indicates that the key element is neither the child murderer Hans Beckert (Peter Lorre) nor the gruesome killings. Instead, *M* is a cinematic portrayal of citizens who take to the streets mobilized by a common goal. “Never is the city more unified,” states Edward Dimendberg in his analysis of spaces of modernity, “than when threatened by a criminal transgressor.” The story of the search for the murderer falls into three distinct sections. The first section introduces Beckert and his victim Elsie Beckmann. The second part focuses on the police investigations, headed by Inspector Lohmann, and on the criminal underworld’s reactions to the child killings. Both police and criminals provide meticulous instructions on how to control the streets. Here again, the street becomes a place of learning for everyone involved in the search for Beckert. The criminals control and patrol the streets by integrating the beggars and homeless people into an elaborate system of street surveillance. The third and final segment centers on Beckert’s capture by the criminals, his transfer from a warehouse to a criminals’ court (“kangaroo court”) with the crime boss Schränker as head prosecutor, and the eventual arrival of the police.

By means of “audience control,” particularly achieved through lighting and sound techniques, Lang makes the viewer an accomplice in the search for the child murder Beckert in the dimly lit labyrinth of streets. The flashlight that leads to Beckert’s arrest recalls its historical function when such devices were “instruments of discipline” in public spaces of confrontation and disorder. Point-of-view shots and the emphasis on (limited) vision and sound in the final moments of the hunt for Beckert turn the viewer into an active participant in disciplining and mobilizing the street. *M* shows how to unite and mobilize in a city that, according to Steven Jacobs, resembles a “collection of fragments.” Berlin in *M* is not a coherent urban space; especially in the early sequences, it is a fragmented labyrinth of dimly
lit streets that do not provide any sense of spatial coherence. Rigid surveillance techniques eventually attempt to capture a totality of the city space and instill order. In his analysis of M in the context of serial-killer cases, Herzog links the development of a united community to a “crisis of seeing” at the time and to the futility of tracking the murderer through visual evidence.\textsuperscript{58} He argues that traditional methods focused on visual traces and clues proved unsuccessful.\textsuperscript{59} Hence, the community has to be “on the lookout,” which shifts the emphasis toward a system of surveillance in order to track down the murderer.\textsuperscript{60} The cinematic street is at the heart of the mass formation process and vividly reflects the state of alarm and tension. The street sounds correlate with the overall \textit{Stimmung} (mood) of the film with agitated shouting of “Extraausgabe” (extra newspaper edition), car honks, bells, rings, sirens, whistles, and voices from an agitated mob that, taken together, emphasize the general state of heightened alertness in the city.

The increased use of extreme high-angle shots of streets in the second half of M provides a sense of the urban space as a whole and actively engages the viewer in the search for the hiding suspect. Hence, as educational tool, the film powerfully includes the viewer in the search.\textsuperscript{61}

The process of mobilization transforms the fragmentation of urban space and society into a new whole.\textsuperscript{62} By means of popular actors, M promotes attitudes and belief systems that leave no doubt about the need fully to engage in the manhunt in order to locate and eradicate what Schränker terms “die Bestie” (the beast).\textsuperscript{63} Schränker and police officer Lohmann serve as key role models who take measures to teach the masses and the police force in the film, as well as the viewer. As Inspector Lohmann’s “doppelgänger in the underworld,” Schränker imitates the strategies used by the police force (or possibly vice versa).\textsuperscript{64} The mobilization of the street is a process in which, as Kaes puts it, “every resource is activated; differences in class and social status become irrelevant.”\textsuperscript{65} The street becomes a highly democratic space eradicating distinctions between the people inhabiting it who are now united in a common purpose. Yet, as democratic urban space, the street in M also allows the perpetrator Beckert to escape responsibility for his actions (the elusive Beckert is eventually caught inside a building) and to hide his face in the anonymity of the urban masses. In this regard, M establishes an intriguing contrast in its depiction of the street as democratic space in comparison to \textit{Kuhle Wampe} and \textit{Hitlerjunge Quex}, because these films require the protagonists to “show their faces” in order to participate and engage effectively with their respective political movements.

The trajectory from fragmentation to unity played out on the urban streets is key in \textit{Hitlerjunge Quex}, the film adaptation of Karl Aloys Schenzinger’s 1932 book \textit{Der Hitlerjunge Quex}, which portrays the murder of Hitler Youth Herbert Norkus by Communist groups in the Moabit neighborhood of Berlin in January of the same year.\textsuperscript{66} The Nazi Party
turned Norkus’s death into a myth of a reawakened German youth that was popularized further by its representation in literature and film. In the novel and in the film, Norkus is named Heini Völker. Both texts function as a bridge between Weimar and Nazi cinema, since the economic misery of the late Weimar years serves as a necessary historical backdrop for the story of a young martyr. The novel’s attempt to indoctrinate young Germans is straightforward and the book became a considerable success; 190,000 copies were sold within two years after its publication. Steinhoff’s adaption likewise addresses young Germans from the first sequence onward: the first shot in Hitlerjunge Quex, a close-up of an apple, is followed by a two-shot of boys looking at the fruit outside a street shop in despair because they do not have the money to buy it. One of the boys tries to steal the apple and is caught right away. Passersby debate how to deal with the young thief; attitudes range from anger to compassion for the boy given the harsh times. The passersby then turn into an unruly mob as Heinrich George’s character, Heini Völker’s father, who happens to have witnessed the theft, subsequently tries to calm down the crowd. Impressively in stature and depicted as a strict and overbearing father figure, George’s character is nevertheless portrayed in this early scene as utterly helpless as soon as the chaos on the street gets out of hand. George himself functions as a reminder of a fragmented Germany on the brink of an unavoidable collapse. The opening sequence with Father Völker in between rival groups and the chaos that ensues in the street is reminiscent of the state of alarm in the streets in Lang’s M. We hear a whistle sound that is immediately followed by somebody shouting “Polizei!” (Police!). Policemen on horses, shot from a low angle to insinuate that a strong police force is needed in this transitional period, immediately enter the scene and reinstall order in the streets. This sequence in Hitlerjunge Quex underlines the sociopolitical tensions of the late Weimar years through the depiction of a fragmented society aggravated by arguing groups, chaos, and disorderly behavior in the streets. Aesthetically, the fragmentation in this early sequence is enforced through fast cuts and rapid changes of camera position. Fragmentation also affects young Heini (Jürgen Ohlsen), who is at first torn between his communist household with his authoritative father, the repeated calls by a family friend to join the Red Front Youth group, and the Hitler Youth.

Several fairground scenes throughout the film replace the role of the street as public space and function as a place of learning for Heini. Scenes at a shooting gallery represent the increasingly violent political struggles in the urban streets at the time. At the carnival, Heini finds out more about the Red Front Youth, as well as the Hitler Youth who gather nearby. As a street stand-in, the fairground is also the location of the climactic scene where Communist Party members close in on Heini and kill him with a knife after hunting him down in the urban streets.
An earlier scene in *Hitlerjunge Quex* is also key to understanding the film’s pronounced emphasis on the importance of making the right decision. Heini’s mother (played by George’s wife, Berta Drews), distraught over the situation of rising political tensions and deep economic depression, attempts to kill him and herself by turning on the gas in the kitchen. She is killed, but Heini survives and wakes up in a hospital bed. During a stroll outside the hospital, Heini is placed on a park bench between his father to the left and a Hitler Youth officer to the right. The officer asks, “Wo gehört der Junge heute hin?” (Where does the boy belong today?) The question recalls *Kuhle Wampe*’s subtitle *Wem gehört die Welt?* (To Whom Does the World Belong?) as well as Eisler’s *Solidaritätslied* (Song of Solidarity) that reoccurs in *Kuhle Wampe* with the lines “Wessen Straße ist die Straße? Wessen Welt ist die Welt?” (Whose street is the street? Whose world is the world?) The Nazi Youth organization appeals to Heini and facilitates his decision to join them because it displays an alternate world marked by order, discipline, motivation, and cleanliness, and that contrasts with the chaos and disorder in the beginning of the film. He feels he belongs to the new world, no longer a fragmented society but a nation that is signified by unity, equality (as conveyed in their uniforms), and wholeness. Heini gains immortality as he lives on through the glorification of his death as sacrifice for the fatherland.70

Steinhoff’s *Hitlerjunge Quex* duplicates the strategy of many films in the transitional era of using relatable and charismatic characters to achieve maximum effect on the audience. As one of the first major productions initiated and overseen by the Propaganda Ministry, it employs a teenage boy to stress the importance of the young generation mobilizing and taking the struggle to the streets for the future of the *Vaterland* (fatherland). As Hippler states in regard to the formative power of cinema, it must establish a “Verbindung des Zuschauers zum Hauptdarsteller während des Filmablaufs” (a personal connection of the viewer to the main actor during the course of the film) and “das Bestreben, diesen gleich zu sein” (the attempt to be equal to him).71 Fifteen-year-old Jürgen Ohlsen, who plays Heini Völker, represents the generation that went to the trenches when the war broke out. At the time of shooting, Ohlsen was more or less the same age as Herbert Norkus when he died, allowing the targeted audience, the future generation of German soldiers, to relate to the character on screen. When Heini is seen and heard humming the Hitler Youth’s marching song “ Unsere Fahne flattert uns voran” (Our Flag Flutters before Us), the deliberate repetition of text and melody serve to teach viewers the song and leave them with a catchy tune long after the end of the screening. In addition to the marching song, the film relies on the powerful imagery of a youth group that has taken the “the right path,” ideologically and physically, toward a supposedly unified community and a strong nation.
In times of embattled streets, strong political polarization, and increasing mobilization, the adaptation of Schenzinger’s book must be seen as the next step in the transitional era between Weimar and Nazi cinema. As a state-sponsored production, *Hitlerjunge Quex* (for which Schenzinger also cowrote the script together with Bobby E. Lüthge) appropriated the pedagogical aspects of earlier films and reapplied them according to Nazi ideology. For Rentschler, the film represents “a cinema of clear lines and straightforward answers, a medium charged with a mission: it aims to show the way.”72 Aesthetically, *Hitlerjunge Quex* is by no means typical for commercial Nazi cinema, which eventually turned away from urban streets shot on location in favor of studio sets for large-scale entertainment productions such as musicals, costume films, melodramas, period pieces, and biopics. As an educational tool geared toward the younger generation, *Hitlerjunge Quex* remained important and was widely seen during the Third Reich, shown regularly in schools and universities, in the Hitler Youth Film Hour, and at special NSDAP film exhibitions.73

German cinema in the early 1930s reflected the tensions in the streets of a destabilized nation and the radicalization and polarization of political parties and societies. Moreover, as the Weimar Republic collapsed, film turned into an educational tool to educate viewers about the “right path” and demanded that people take a stand. The result of this educational push brought on a newfound sense of wholeness, unity, and strength. The activist film *Kuhle Wampe* addresses the working class and encourages viewers to mobilize and fight for their cause in the streets. In *M*, criminals, street beggars, and police gather there to eradicate evil and to save the entire community from harm. *Hitlerjunge Quex* targets the young generation and soon-to-be soldiers in order to bring them in line with Nazi ideology. All three films follow a pattern typical of cinema as educational tool during the early 1930s as they portray a trajectory from fragmentation to a new whole by means of forming masses and mobilizing them in the streets.

Notes


2 Münsterberg, “Why We Go to the Movies,” 11.


4 My use of the phrase “the right path” needs to be read in the historical context of the late Weimar Republic when it was considered right on both sides of the
political spectrum to unite in order to build up national strength. I use the phrase here to emphasize its link to the physical “path,” namely, the streets. Thus the phrase represents what the filmmakers want the audience to do ideologically and physically, namely, to move forward and to enforce and strengthen national unity. Early Nazi film continued to appropriate this concept in accordance with Nazi ideology.


6 Todd Herzog, Crime Stories: Criminalistic Fantasy and the Culture of Crisis in Weimar Germany (New York: Berghahn, 2009), 115.

7 Herzog, Crime Stories, 128.


11 Balázs, Early Film Theory, 99.


17 See Peukert, Weimar Republic, 172.


19 Wolfgang Brückle, Ulrich Domröse, and Florian Ebner, Friedrich Seidenstücker: Von Nilpferden und anderen Menschen. Of Hippos and Other Humans (Berlin:


23 Weimar film stars such as Hans Albers, Heinz Rühmann, Lilian Harvey, and Brigitte Helm remained widely popular actors after 1933, and some directors commonly associated with Nazi films today such as Luis Trenker and Hans Steinhoff began their careers during the Weimar years. For more on Helm’s career before and after 1933, see Mihaela Petrescu’s essay in this volume.


27 Heiber, *Goebbels Reden*, 134. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.


29 In fact, Goebbels downplays the role of ideology, which is highly deceptive in retrospect as it almost certainly was at the time: “Man soll nicht von früh bis spät in Gesinnung machen. Wir empfinden dafür zu leicht, zu künstlerisch. Die Kunst ist frei und die Kunst soll frei bleiben, allerdings muß sie sich an bestimmte Normen gewöhnen.” (One should not think about political ideology from morning till night. We ourselves have sensitivities too light, too artistic for this. Art is free and art should remain free, yet it must accustom itself to certain norms.) See Albrecht, *Film im 3. Reich*, 30.


34 The German expression “auf der Straße leben” (to live on the street) is commonly used to express the state of being homeless. “Auf der Straße sitzen” (to sit on the street) is generally used to express the aftermath of an eviction.

36 The trial of the serial killer Peter Kürten in Düsseldorf coincided with the theatrical release of *M* in May 1931. Although Lang always denied a direct link between a specific murder case and the script, he must have been aware of the profound anxieties caused by Kürten, aka the “vampire of Düsseldorf.” The terror spread through newspapers, magazines, and the pulp fiction genre exploited the sensational aspect of such cases. See Kaes, *M*, 26–38. Thea von Harbou wrote the script for *M* at a time when Kürten’s predations caused a widespread fear of sexual crimes on urban streets between 1929 and 1930. See Kaes, *M*, 30.


38 Silberman, *Brecht on Film and Radio*, xi.

39 Willet, *Brecht on Theatre*, 50.

40 Silberman, *Brecht on Film and Radio*, xii.

41 See Bruce Murray, *Film and the German Left in the Weimar Republic—From Caligari to Kuhle Wampe* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 147. The outcome of the November elections in 1932 illustrates the split between the leftist parties (SPD 21 percent, KPD 17 percent) that contributed to the success of the NSDAP (33.1 percent). See Helmut Korte, Reinhold Happel, and Margot Michaelis, *Film und Realität in der Weimarer Republik* (Munich: Hanser, 1978), 84.

42 Murray, *Film and the German Left*, 147.


44 A brief montage sequence after Franz’s suicide with images of a watch, pedaling cyclists, and Franz’s bike strongly suggests that the accelerated pace of life and the unsuccessful race for employment is to blame for Franz’s death.

45 Most of Germany’s left-wing films at the time were produced, financed, and distributed by Prometheus-Film Corporation. Founded in 1926, Prometheus specialized in producing proletarian fiction films while also promoting politicized Soviet productions such as Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) to a German audience. It soon became the main distribution outlet for Soviet film abroad. Soviet directors’ use of cinema as a political medium had an encouraging effect on Prometheus’s German filmmakers.


48 The revolutionary message in the final version is somewhat watered down owing to the Filmprüfstelle’s bans on earlier versions before the eventual release at the Berliner Atrium Theater. The film had only a short run in theaters and was banned by the Nazis in 1933. For more details on the bans of earlier versions of
Kuhle Wampe and the ban with the Nazis’ rise to power, see Korte, Happel, and Michaelis, *Film und Realität in der Weimarer Republik*, 180–84.


50 See Murray, *Film and the German Left*, 143. In a comment from January 1932, shortly after Prometheus’s collapse, Brecht expressed his disappointment that anticapitalist views and communist filmmaking were no longer a successful tool and worthy counterpart to mainstream cinema with its increasingly strong right-wing tendencies: “A Communist film no longer has commercial value because Communism is no longer a threat for the bourgeois public. It no longer arouses interest. It would be different for a National-Socialist film.” See Silberman, *Brecht on Film and Radio*, 203.


52 See Kaes, *M*, 44.


55 Kaes, *M*, 44.


57 Jacobs, “Panoptic Paranoia,” 382.

58 See Herzog, *Crime Stories*, 115ff. Several serial killers and their widely publicized murder cases unsettled Weimar German society, such as Carl Großmann (arrested in 1921) and Fritz Haarmann (arrested in 1924) and Peter Kürten (arrested in 1930). Police forces were incapable of tracking down the murderers in a timely fashion, which only intensified the state of alarm among the population.


61 Beckert’s capture, however, is not the result of sight—which is a truly unreliable sensory faculty in *M*. The film emphasizes the importance of sound over visual clues and has a blind man in the street hear and remember Beckert’s whistle, which eventually leads to his arrest. An exemplary sequence stressing the unreliability of sight in *M* is a comical scene in which two men argue over whether the suspect wore a red or green hat.

62 See Hsi-Huey Liang, *The Berlin Police Force in the Weimar Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970). As Liang shows, the militarization of Berlin streets encompassed various levels of society from police forces to regular citizens. Semilegal or illegal police-like units of armed citizens joined the strong presence of police forces in Weimar Berlin’s streets. These so-called Bürgerwehren (militia)
performed security tasks in Berlin independent of the official police authorities beginning in the early 1920s. The 1930s then saw a rise of militarized, semilegal military groups from the radical political left and right because the National Socialists mobilized small underground armies before 1933 and reactionary groups additionally infiltrated the Berlin police force.

When *M* was released in theaters, the actors Gustaf Gründgens (Schränker) and Otto Wernicke (Inspector Lohmann) were already acclaimed celebrity actors and widely known from the stage and the big screen. Gründgens’s prior role was as Robespierre in Hans Behrendt’s *Danton* (released just four months before *M* in January 1931), a rabble-rouser character similar to Schränker in the form of a radical leftist socialist during the French Revolution. Gründgens was often typecast in roles in which his persona exercises power over others; he specialized, for example, in charismatic villains and “shady fraudsters.” See Hans-Michael Bock and Tim Bergfelder, *The Concise Cinegraph: An Encyclopedia of German Cinema* (New York: Berghahn, 2009), 174. Otto Wernicke’s memorable performance as the authoritative yet fatherly Inspector Lohmann led to a reprisal of the role in *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* (Lang, *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, 1933). Interestingly, both actors continued their acting careers after 1933 and remained influential stars during the Third Reich, thus adding to the many continuities between Weimar and Nazi cinema.

Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 164. The merging of the police and the crime world in their endeavor to find Beckert is best illustrated in the famous montage sequence that blurs the spatial boundaries between the criminals and the police by visually merging both groups in their mobilization efforts.

Kaes, *M*, 44.

Karl Aloys Schenzinger, *Der Hitlerjunge Quex* (Berlin: Zeitgeschichte Verlag, 1932).


Heini’s last name Völker is an obvious reference to Volk, the German people in Nazi ideology, emphasizing his role in representing the future of the Volk and the nation. Devoted and agile Heini is nicknamed “Quex” (quicksilver) because he carries out all commands with alacrity. See Rentschler, *Ministry*, 56.

Heinrich George (1893–1946) had openly sympathized with the communists before the Nazis came to power. The Nazis relied on his star power and allowed him to continue his acting career. George subsequently collaborated with the Nazis and starred in several Nazi propaganda films such as Veit Harlan’s *Das unsterbliche Herz* (1939), *Jud Süß* (1940), and *Kolberg* (1945). He became the actor whom Sabine Hake cites as the “most closely tied to fascist fantasies of the autocratic and the populist leader.” See Sabine Hake, “Political Affects: Antifascism and the Second World War in Frank Beyer and Konrad Wolf,” in *Screening War: Perspectives on German Suffering*, ed. Paul Cooke and Marc Silberman (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2010), 115.

The glorification of death and the heroic sacrifice for a higher good, here the future of the German nation, is, according to Susan Sontag, one of the trademarks
of fascist aesthetics. See Susan Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,” New York Review of Books, February 6, 1975. Films such as Wunschkonzert (Request Concert, 1940) employ the trope of male death as sacrifice for the fatherland as well.

72 Rentschler, Ministry, 53.
73 See Hake, Popular Cinema, 71.
Part II. The Economy

Paul Flaig

Introduction


—Kaspar Hauser [Kurt Tucholsky], “Kurzer Abriß der Nationalökonomie,” 1931

[Money is neither a means of payment nor a means of exchange; neither is it a fiction, but above all it is not money. With money one can buy goods because it is money and it is money because one can buy goods with it. But in the meantime this theory has been dropped. It’s unknown where money comes from. It is just there or rather not there, mostly not there.]

Released in December 1931, *Die Koffer des Herrn O.F.* (The Trunks of Mr. O.F.) premiered at the Mozartsaal in Berlin to great interest within both film press and industry. Considering those involved in its production, this is not surprising. The film’s script was co-written by the noted leftist playwright and filmmaker Léo Lania. Its songs featured lyrics by Erich Kästner and music by the increasingly prominent composer Karol Rathaus. The cast included the veteran Alfred Abel as well as rising stars Peter Lorre and Hedy Kiesler, soon to be known in Hollywood as Hedy Lamarr. It was, however, the film’s director and co-writer, Alexis Granowsky, who provoked the majority of interest. Granowsky had come to Berlin from the Soviet Union, where he had had great success with his Jewish Academic Theatre of Moscow, working first for Max Reinhardt before turning to film for *Das Lied vom Leben* (The Song...
of Life, 1931), a sensational combination of montage technique, buoyant musical sequences portraying the rich and poor, and a frank realism that would provoke censorship. In his review of Koffer, Fritz Olimsky would praise the director especially: “Alexis Granowsky greift aus der Problemwelt unserer Zeit das zurzeit allbewegende Thema ‘Weltkrise’ heraus und behandelt es in einer wunderlich persönlichen Art” (Alexis Granowsky takes from our contemporary world of problems the recent, ever-present theme of “world crisis” and treats it in a wonderfully personal manner).3

As Olimsky’s intimates, Die Koffer des Herrn O.F. is concerned with the most timely of situations—the “world crisis” brought on by global economic depression as well as the more local crisis facing German cinema: the moribund, largely impersonal state of the German film industry and its preferred genres.4 Olimsky is responding to the film’s own take on this double crisis, which offers satirical rejoinder to causes and potential solutions for both the German economy and German film industry, a satire in the form of an exaggerated, improbable fairy tale of miraculous recovery.

The film’s central premise suggests this mixture of satire and fantasy: a rural village, Ostend, mysteriously receives thirteen suitcases stamped with the initials “O.F.” Interpreting the suitcases as a harbinger for the arrival of a wealthy investor, the town spruces up and then, tricked by Lorre’s newspaper editor, transforms into a metropolis, believing “O.F.” to stand for a billionaire named Oskar Flott. Ostend quickly becomes Europe’s sole haven from economic crisis: cosmopolitan women are imported for cabarets, a film company is founded, producing insipid yet successful operettas, and an international conference is held to discover how the booming city escaped the global economic depression. Having begun by calling itself “a fairy-tale for grown-ups,” the film ends by showing Ostend’s prominent place on a map of desiccated Europe before admitting that the film is only a “Spiel” (play or game), a spinning globe detonating in its final shot.

Perhaps taking this statement literally, Siegfried Kracauer would differ from Olimsky and other adulatory critics, stating, “In höheren Sphären glaubt sich der neue Granowsky-Film . . . zu bewegen. Tatsächlich ist er höherer Nonsens” (The new Granowsky film . . . believes itself to be moving in more elevated spheres. In point of fact it is elevated nonsense).5 Kracauer precedes his dismissal with an appraisal of German cinema at the height of the depression, as the “Zerstreuungskultur” (culture of distraction) associated with “die Jazzmusik, die Girlrevue, das High-life in den Hotelhalle” (jazz music, the girl revue, and the high life in hotel halls) has given way to more serious attempts by filmmakers to reckon with the realities of political and economic crisis.6 Kracauer dismisses Koffer for its naïve theatricalism, preferring the other German films released at the end of 1931, from comic adaptations of Kästner’s Emil und die Detektive.
A F AIRY TALE FOR GROWN-UPS” 75

(Emil and the Detectives) and Carl Zuckmayer’s Der Hauptmann von Köpenick (The Captain of Köpenick) to dramas like Mädchen in Uniform (Girls in Uniform) and Niemandsland (No Man’s Land). This accusation of theatricalism seems to very much apply to Koffer: based on a play by Hans Hömberg, the film’s conceit appears to be heavily inspired by Nikolai Gogol’s Inspector General. Revisiting this period in From Caligari to Hitler, Kracauer returns to all the films mentioned in his earlier article but for Die Koffer des Herrn O.F., so nonsensical and superficial it does not even merit inclusion in a chapter entitled “Timid Heresies,” which analyzes the retroactively toothless “antiauthoritarian” films of the Republic’s final years.

Scholars have likewise ignored Die Koffer des Herrn O.F., a fact surprising given not merely the extraordinary array of persons involved in its production, but also its rare, almost singular status as a satire of German economic anxieties and hopes made at the height of Germany’s financial crisis and only thirteen months prior to Hitler’s election. In this essay, I argue that Die Koffer des Herrn O.F. should not be dismissed as aesthetically or politically trite precisely because it offered, through its farcical exaggeration and excessive superficiality, a subtle but potent critique of the dominant economic and cinematic responses to the crisis in the final years of the Republic. Because the financial crisis was provoked, in part, by perception and spectacle, by a lack of confidence responsible for deficiencies in investment and production, so are the fairy-tale elements of Koffer the ideal means for exposing this lack as both unreal and distracting from the problem at hand. If the film feels slight, this is entirely fitting for a satire of how realities both economic and cinematic are very much the stuff of fantasy and thus of farce. Its central premise of the thirteen trunks functions as a financial MacGuffin, motivating the film’s optimistic movement in line with Ostend’s expansion while suggesting such resolution of crisis is no different from that crisis’s perpetuation. By focusing on a nonsensical yet sensational “culture of distraction”—revelling in the very girls, jazz, and hotels Kracauer isolated—Die Koffer des Herrn O.F. links the surfaces of that culture and its commodities to the hysterical faith in recovery by means largely the same as those that produced economic depression in the first place: confidence tricks, the fabrication and manipulation of events and accidents, and perceptions that produce rather than simply observe reality. The “fairy tale” of a crisis escaped grows up into a satirical realization that faith in such escape is the very cause of crisis itself.

If “genuine fairy tales,” as Kracauer wrote in “The Mass Ornament,” are “not stories about miracles but rather announcements of the miraculous advent of justice,” Koffer presents an excessively ingenuous fairy-tale world full of miracles and thus wholly devoid of justice. It does so not to add to the distraction, but rather to show, through its very commitment to a miraculous yet manipulated rescue by the nonexistent O.F., how and
why such distraction perpetuates itself to the point of catastrophe. Rather than challenging Germany’s dreams of recovery with documentary evidence of mounting catastrophe, Granowsky and his collaborators exaggerate the childish desire motivating these dreams to the point of their explosion. This wake-up call is revealed not only by the film’s concluding image of a detonating globe, but also by that image’s censorship in the film’s truncated rerelease during the Third Reich, an ideological maneuver to preserve financial and filmic fantasies that will be the concluding focus of this essay.

**Financial Crisis and Fairy-Tale Countercrisis**

Was war das für eine komische Kugel, ob sie sich nun drehte oder nicht! Er mußte an eine Zeichnung von Daumier denken, die ‘Der Fortschritt’ hieß. Daumier hatte auf dem Blatt Schnecken dargestellt, die hintereinander herkrochen, das war das Tempo der menschlichen Entwicklung. Aber die Schnecken krochen im Kreise!

—Erich Kästner, *Fabian* (1931)

[What a strange globe, whether it turned or not. [Fabian] couldn’t help thinking of a drawing by Daumier, called “Progress.” Daumier had drawn snails crawling after each other, which was the pace of human development. But the snails were crawling in a circle!]

*Die Koffer des Herrn O.F.* begins with a setting of the scene that is comical and jazzy, Ernst Busch, the film’s musical narrator and a well-known performer for the German Left, singing *Die Kleine Ansprache* (The Little Speech) to an insistent rhythm composed by Rathaus. Busch sings Kästner’s lyrics over *Koffer*’s opening images: a series of spinning planets against a black background are first shown before moving to a closer look at a glittering earth and its continents. This tour ends with Europe, which does not glitter, but is simply a blank field, its name reversing in color from black to white as a new background appears: a cannon, paired with a bugle call. From this brief evocation of Europe’s recent war-torn past, Busch, like the barker he played earlier that year in G. W. Pabst’s *The Threepenny Opera* (cowritten by Lania), brings the viewer up to date, describing the continent and its various metropolises as “modern.” The film’s setting finally appears, a tiny spot on the map, the name “Ostend” appearing to clue the spectator in, who is instigated throughout the song to pay attention to what is being shown and sung. *Die kleine Ansprache* moves quickly to its final stanza, the globe spinning faster and faster, before a tiny village appears: “Die Welt wird ausverkauft. / Es wird
geräumt. / Ostend merkt nichts davon. / Es schläft und träumt” (The world has been sold out. / It’s been cleared out. / Ostend doesn’t notice that. / It sleeps and dreams).12

This opening number establishes the timeliness of the film, with its appeal to the modern and to a crisis afflicting this modernity, at levels planetary, continental, and urban. The comic scale of an entire planet, itself nothing more than a model, is a fitting stand-in for a world that has been “sold out” and introduces the film’s dream-like atmosphere and fantastic recovery. This sequence also introduces one of the abiding visual motifs of Die Koffer des Herrn O.F.: the circle. The spinning globe implies a center around which all things turn as well as more marginal spots away from the action, both center and margin themselves circular dots with their own orbital systems. The spinning globe also suggests a movement that is recurrent, an insistent activity that brings one back to the starting point in a motion as frenetic as it is repetitive. Images of circles as well as circulatory movements will punctuate crucial moments in Koffer, suggesting the proximity in both text and concept between “Krise” (crisis) und “Kreis” (circle). A catastrophic event will recur if its solution means more of the same, if countercrisis is only a turn away from more crisis. Indeed, how to read words and distinguish letters is not only referenced by Busch at the film’s beginning, but also will eventually explain the film’s conceit, those mysterious letters “O.F.”

We find a more measly circle in the film’s introduction to Ostend: a diminunizing, overhead shot of a town square, a fountain at its center with a constable pacing, in a loop, in time to Rathaus’s earlier theme, slowed to a sleepy tempo. We then see a town motto: “Besser zwei Schritte zurück als einen Schritt vorwärts” [Better two steps back than one step forward]. The film does not linger on the lethargic rhythms of this town, clearly constructed in a film studio, introducing as quickly as it can a few cliché images of provincial life: children and piglets running around the fountain, a horse and buggy as both public transportation and fire engine, lazy men playing skat, and a bored barber with few customers. All this is immediately interrupted with the arrival of the eponymous trunks, thirteen suitcases carted to Ostend’s hotel, drawing the attention of the entire town, a new center around which its residents will soon orbit.

The questions of “Wer ist O.F.?” (Who is O.F.?) and “Was will O.F.?” (What does O.F. want?) quickly provoke a wave of refurbishment of its hotel, tailor, and barbershop. This is nothing compared to what happens once the film’s central instigators are introduced: Ostend’s nameless mayor, played by Abel, its newspaper editor, Stix, played by Lorre, and an ambitious builder, Stark, played by Harald Paulsen, who, in the film’s flimsy attempt at romantic subplot, has eyes for the mayor’s daughter, played by Kiesler. Stix and Stark conspire a way of exploiting the trunks

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12 The text references a particular line from the film, which is repeated here in a different language to highlight the theme of crisis and its dream-like resolution.
for their benefit as well as for Ostend. After the owner of the suitcases fails to arrive, Stix implies that he knows O.F., encouraging his auditors’ imagination by drawing the initials with his fingers in the air and stating, “O.F. ist Oskar Flott, ein Milliardär. Jawohl. Ich kenne ihn.” (O.F. is Oskar Flott, a billionaire. Yes, that’s right. I know him.”)

Lorre’s performance as Stix recalls a range of manipulators and cynics performed or created by those involved in Koffer’s production: Lorre’s performance as Galy Gay—who arbitrarily transforms from humble fish packer to bloodthirsty soldier—in a 1931 production of Brecht’s Mann ist Mann (Man Is Man), a group of fact-inventing journalists in Kästner’s 1931 novel Fabian, or the farcical manipulation of oil economies in Lania’s precrisis play of 1928, Konjunktur (Boom). Following the plot of that play, a financial boom here depends less on reality and more on manipulation, as the arrival of the thirteen trunks becomes the means by which the German economy is made worthy of confidence. His co-conspirator, Stark, plays along during an informal town meeting, suggesting that Ostend needs jazz music and a cabaret, Stix affirming, “Jawohl es braucht ein Kabarett. Herr Flott liebt Zerstreung nach dem Essen” (That’s right, it needs a cabaret. Mr. Flott loves distraction after a meal). The conceit of Die Koffer des Herrn O.F. is that belief in economic growth is enough to make that growth real, capital generating not out of its investment or material basis, but rather out of the expectation of its arrival.

Much of the film’s initial comedy comes at the expense of Ostend’s provincialism. Viola Volant (played by the cabaret chanteuse Margo Lion), the leader of a pack of chic women, is introduced to Ostend by a welcoming party of befuddled men, quickly dismissing Stix’s claims of Ostend’s “große Zukunft” (great future). The first of many ironic cuts, Granowsky moves from Volant’s dismissal to the image of a city plan for a new Ostend and to Stark’s proclamation, “Hier liegt die Zukunft von Ostend” (Here lies the future of Ostend). This overhead shot above the expanding circle of Ostend both recalls the film’s opening contrast of metropolitan dots on the globe with the sleepy town square and echoes a previous sequence at an entertainment office, its director looking for Ostend on a wall map as he tries to determine why this nonexistent place is ordering women and musicians. The film moves immediately to a Soviet-style montage of construction, as men dig foundations, concrete is poured, and various signs mark future urban landmarks, including film and dance palaces. The complicity between economic growth and distraction grows to a ludicrous degree as Granowsky merges images of production, transportation, and commerce with the comedy of thousands of dresses, hats, and stockings ordered for Ostend’s women along with perfume and makeup.

Amid all this activity, Oskar Flott remains absent, threatening to pull the carpet from under the circular yet perpetual motion of credit,
production, and consumption provoked by the promise of his investment. Since Flott does not exist, Stix stages his arrival, announcing his visit and producing the expected mass of people, waiting outside a now “grand” hotel. The silhouette of a man appears on the balcony, doffing a top hat to the cheering crowds and singing children, but this distant, silent savior immediately disappears, claimed, by the hotelier, to be under the weather. Confronted by the elusive Flott, the town patriarchs ask what they can do now to encourage more growth. Stark has the answer: “Kaufen und bauen! Bauen und kaufen!” (Buy and build! Build and buy!) The scene that follows shifts to the realm of high finance. As Ernst Busch sings the Hausse-Song (Boom-Song), a stock market swarms with people as men seek to buy stocks or deposit their money, only to learn that everything has been bought and that the banks are so flush with cash they cannot take any more. Images of skyscrapers and apartment blocks appear, the village’s future as metropolis finally a reality.

Responding to this economic growth, the film’s farce also expands, departing from the mockery of provincial Ostenders to mocking those previously at the center of power. Granowsky shifts from Ostend to an ongoing conference on the economy that will move to the former small town to discover how it has escaped crisis. The circular logic of the film’s opening, along with the circularity of Ostend’s own boom, is acknowledged once more with the mayor’s welcoming speech to the conference. Speaking through the circular frame of a microphone, the mayor gives a speech appropriately circular in logic: “Was wäre die Wirtschaft ohne Krise? Was wäre die Krise ohne Konferenz?” (What would the economy be without crisis? What would the crisis be without a conference?) Echoing the lie foundational to Ostend’s escape from crisis, Abel proclaims the town’s motto, “immer jahrhundertelang: Immer vorwärts—keinen Schritt rückwärts!” (for centuries long: always forward, no step backward!), while we see, in contrast to his radio audience, the actual motto. A booming economy and its crisis are not to be opposed, but are complicit, just as the conference, as much a precondition for the crisis, seems only to prolong it. The impotence of the conference is confirmed in what follows, as the perpetual “Tagesordnung” (order of the day), “the world crisis,” is discussed around a vast roundtable with the same phrases, ceremony, and increasingly old participants repeated as their meeting goes on for years. As the film’s various couples align—Stix and Viola Volant, Stark and the mayor’s daughter, and the mayor and a hypercompetent secretary—we briefly return to the conference for its seventy-eighth meeting until Granowsky cuts from an especially old economist rambling about the crisis to a jazz band performing for dozens of dancing brides and grooms. When the full truth about O.F. is revealed by Stix, the city’s leaders agree to have him disappear, fabricating a fatal car accident. In the film’s finale, which returns to the planetary scale of its opening only to
have that planet explode in a last shot, the trunks are referenced in a song, with Busch imparting to audiences the useless lesson, “Der beste Rat, den man Euch geben: Es Schafft Euch 13 Koffer an!” (The best advice I can give you: get yourself thirteen suitcases)\textsuperscript{15}

There is an unstated moral in this “fairy tale for grown-ups”: no immediate solution to financial turmoil will appear as it did in this film. No miracle will rescue Germany, and the belief in miracles will only distract from actually confronting the crisis at hand. Fairy tales were themselves a privileged genre of the Weimar years, turned to by many of Granowsky, Lania, and Kästner’s liberal or left-leaning peers, whether in the philosophical celebrations of the genre by Kracauer or Benjamin or the communist-tinged tales written or illustrated by Hermynia Zur Mühlen, George Grosz, Béla Balázs, Kurt Schwitters, Joachim Ringelnatz, and many others.\textsuperscript{16} In labeling itself “a fairy tale for grown-ups,” \textit{Die Koffer des Herrn O.F.} distinguishes itself from these other efforts, and this not only because the latter were primarily aimed at children.\textsuperscript{17} Changing the audience also involves changing the period, which shifts from the “Once upon a time . . .” to an explicitly contemporary period of crisis, while simultaneously avoiding the dominant reality of that period: the massive, crippling unemployment that was the crisis’s most visible effect. In turning from the realist impulse of documenting the crisis’s disastrous effects, \textit{Die Koffer des Herrn O.F.} focuses on the fantastical background behind Germany’s economic depression as it was understood in leftist circles of the time. This was the realm of confidence, and indeed only months prior to the film’s production and release Germany would suffer its most devastating blow. Described by the economic historian Harold James as the “credit crisis of 1931,” fleeing investors deflated Germany’s money supply, a “shock that dealt such a fatal blow to hopes of economic recovery in the spring of 1932.”\textsuperscript{18} This “shock” could only be remedied not on the material levels of production, but in the subjective, psychological, and projective sphere of “hope.” The answer to this demand is supplied in \textit{Die Koffer des Herrn O.F.} and suggested by the phrase forming its title, a kind of pithy newspaper headline that the editor Stix introduces in the film and repeats at crucial times as an incantation to ward off doubts about Ostend’s dreamy future. Whereas James suggests that “in the aftermath of the collapse, immediately effective short-term measures looked like chimeras,” Granowsky’s film offers precisely such figments, staging the most ludicrous solution to “collapse” to undermine the very desire behind wishful thinking.\textsuperscript{19} A fairy tale would be the right genre for staging this play of chimera and collapse, but it must be for adults as well since it needs to acknowledge, via the film’s satirical exaggeration of confidence and \textit{Konjunktur}, that it is only that, a fairy tale.

Yet the film’s satire does not stop with fanciful solutions, but rather links the restoration of confidence to the fundamentals of the crisis itself.
The circularity of problem and solution is as clear as the implied complicity between economy, crisis, and conference: if the economy is perceived as weak then perception will translate into reality as investors and depositors flee. If, however, its future is perceived as strong, backed by wealth, then its strength will redouble, which contrasts with withdrawals plaguing the German economy in the six-month period, from July to January, in which *Koffer* was conceived, produced, and released. As in the newspaper office, it is all too tempting to shape this perception through fiction, through a fairy tale whose hero is thirteen suitcases with contents unknown and the owner nothing more than a series of initials to be filled out in dreams and manipulations. The film exposes what the writer B. Traven, discussing the world depression, called “Mass hypnosis. Mass suggestion. The suggestion, the notion: ‘I can lose!’ tears this beautiful economic system, willed by God, blessed by God, protected by God, to shreds.”

*Koffer* reveals this “hypnosis” by shifting its direction, from “I can lose!” to “I can win!,” from crisis to counter-crisis, but by doing so suggests that this progress is no different from regress. On a circular track, a step forward is the same as a step backward.

In combining fairy-tale solutions with farcical exaggeration, *Die Koffer des Herrn O.F.* reflects a larger critique of the time offered up in the Republic’s final years. Writing for the landmark leftist journal *Die Weltbühne*, which had published several essays by Lania and Kästner, Sebastian Franck would claim, in an article titled “Wirtschaft am Tage vor der Diktatur” (The Economy in Days before Dictatorship), that although “die Krise des Unternehmerprofits ist real” (the crisis of employers’ profits is real), there are compelling yet distracting “Oberfläche des Geschehens” (surfaces of the event) that imagine the crisis in terms of “willkürliche, vermeidbare Dummheiten, blinde Zufälle, Pech und Ratlosigkeit” (random, preventable stupidities, blind accidents, misfortune and helplessness). Die Koffer des Herrn O.F. recasts this “surface” as a farce, reversing misfortune into fortune, from the contingent arrival of the trunks to the willful blindness of Ostend’s residents to the stupidity of their modernization into a world city. This “surface” is as nonsensical, Granowsky, Lania, and Kästner imply, as the reverse movement of credit destroying the lives of their audiences. Recalling Traven’s image of capitalism as religion, the film’s mock-heroes take the place of God, not falling prey to the hopes and fears of others, but rather seeing how easy it is to manufacture expectation and confidence. Better in their hands than in those of the clueless, decrepit men seen in recurring conference scenes. Like the film’s obsession with circles, these scenes echo the rash of so-called roundtable conferences that took place throughout Europe in 1931, conferences that traumatically recalled the reparations put in place at Versailles. The film’s timeliness was even understood as a way of clarifying the confusing news coverage promoted by real-life versions of Lorre’s editor, with
the critic Heinrich Braune claiming, “Dieser Film gibt nämlich eine Antwort auf die Frage, die eilige Leser stellen, wenn sie etwas von einer ‘Initialzündung’ zur Neuankurbelung der Wirtschaft hören. Die Koffer des Herrn O.F. sind nämlich der Anlaß einer solchen Initialzündung. . . . An einem phantastischen Beispiel wird hier tatsächlich demonstriert, auf welchen Faktoren so etwas wie ‘Wirtschaftsvertrauen’ beruht.” (This film gives an answer precisely to the question a hurried reader asks when they hear something about an “initial spark” for a new economic stimulus. The trunks of Mr. O.F. are precisely the inducement for this initial spark. . . . This fantastic example actually demonstrates the factors on which something like “confidence in the economy” depends.) Fritz Olimsky would likewise praise the film as “Ein hypermodernes Märchen, in dem wir hier und da unsere Zeit und ihre schon fast in Psychose ausgeartete Geistesverfassung wiedererkennen” (a hypermodern fairy tale, in which we once again recognize here and there our era and its psychotically degenerated state of mind”). The psychotic pace of events in Koffer also found favor with the film critic Felix Henseleit, who argued that the film’s mixture of fairy-tale tone and ironic exaggeration “macht so die Dummheit mancher Dinge deutlich, die wir seit unvordenklichen als gottgegeben ansehen” (makes the stupidity of many things clear, things we unthinkingly regarded as God given).

Given this seductive fabrication of a Flott-given recovery, critics could not separate their view of Koffer’s satire of the complicity between crisis and countercrisis without understanding the film’s own spectacle and suggestion, especially against the backdrop of the German cinema’s generic investments early in the sound era. If the economy was misperceived in terms of a distracting “surface of events,” then this misperception was based on the same principles as the cult of distraction at work in Weimar film culture only “days before dictatorship.”

From Flott to Hitler, Satire to Censorship

*In our present society the old opera cannot be just “wished away.” Its illusions have an important social function. The drug is irreplaceable; it cannot be done without.*

—Bertolt Brecht, “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre” (1930).

Although tourists and residents alike forget Ostend’s fabricated origin story, the film does explain the identity behind the initials, “O.F.” As the final conference sequence unfolds, Granowsky cuts to this long-awaited revelation: a man at a travel agency reads from a document to his secretary, “Das sind endlich die 13 Koffer der Filmschauspielerin Ola Feolden . . .” (Those are finally the thirteen trunks of the film actress Ola Feolden
Feolden was traveling to a town called Ostende and the secretary forgot to include this final “e,” prompting their arrival in Ostend. For this mistake, she is fired. Beyond either the irony of this simple explanation for Ostend’s boom or even the joke of one job lost against the millions manipulated out of the suitcases, the revelation that these latter belonged to a film actress is worth noting. This final irony is all the more fitting since Ostend took its first steps toward becoming a metropolis by importing fashionable women, its initial burst of production not heavy industry, but rather the “distraction” Oskar Flott supposedly loves. That the trunks belonged to an actress, filled no doubt with the same ensembles and makeup kits ordered up for Ostend’s women, implies a connection between the play of subterfuge used to motivate Ostenders, to instill confidence so as to make both fictions real, and the specific role that film may play in offering up distraction as business. Die Koffer des Herrn O.F. is filled with many such cinematic references: dream sequences of the letters “O.F.” projected above a sleeping mayor, mirrors and window displays to demonstrate the newly fashionable surfaces of Ostend’s storefronts, cabaret performances featuring songs about the temptations of “modern culture,” and a film firm bent on ignoring contemporary problems for the sake of superficial comedy.

As I will argue, it is fitting that Ostend’s industrialization is shown primarily through its acquiescence to dance, fashion, and film, its jealous female residents ordering thousands of dresses, hats, and stockings to win back the gazes of their men, who initiated this craze for commodities in the first place. The film posits that spectacle is the real engine for economic health, especially during two crucial scenes that link the desire for distraction to the ability to generate capital. In the first, viewers are introduced to Ostend’s salon, where one of the town’s fashionable imports teaches women what to wear in various social or sexual occasions. With each demonstration, the women of Ostend gracefully move about the salon in appropriate costumes, from androgynous suit and tie, to sleek evening dresses, to sheer nightgowns, these last intimating sexual invitation for Flott. They move not only according to the instructions of the salon’s leader, but also according to the poses of mannequins sprinkled throughout the room. This link between female spectacle, commodification, and fashion, one of the hallmarks of Weimar culture, reaches its climax in a later scene at Ostend’s newly established cabaret. After a performance from a jazz band, a group of identically dressed women take a circular stage, one featuring a sunburst at the center of its floor. Granowsky alternates between proto-Busby Berkeley shots of the dancing troupe from above with close-ups of their dancing legs in isolation or in synchronized movement, recalling the many other popular dancing troupes of the Weimar years analyzed by, among others, Kracauer and Fritz Giese. All this is prelude to the main show: Viola Volant’s
performance of Kästner and Rathaus’s *Cabaret Song*. This title suggests setting as much as topic, a performance that is about distraction as much as it seems only to distract. Violant’s song describes various states of fashionable dress and undress, from skirt to corset, all of which end with the exclamation, “moderne Kultur” (modern culture). As an emblem of that culture, she wears an evening gown streaked in black-and-white stripes that further emphasizes the play of obstruction and revelation, clothing and flesh. The lyrics explain why distraction is the key to winning over Flott or, absent his arrival, expanding Ostend, “modern culture” being a mass suggestive play of distraction (fashion) and desire (for the naked, female body in this case) going back, the song’s lyrics intimate, to the Garden of Eden. In the film’s *Schlussong* (Finale Song), Kästner’s lyrics return to this theme, linking it to the trunks of Mr. O.F., which only hide another series of covers, the costumes of a film actress: “Meine Damen, meine Herr’n! / Das Paradies ist noch sehr fern. / Zwar: man kennt den Garten Eden. / Doch noch keiner war darin. / Wir tagen und reden / Und kommen nicht hin . . .” (Ladies and Gentlemen / Paradise is still quite far. / Sure, we know about the Garden of Eden. / But nobody was ever inside. / We sit and talk / and never get there . . .). 29

We might add to this activity of “tagen und reden” the production and consumption of films, as Kästner’s reference to “paradise” recalls his earlier lyric about “modern culture,” premised on the same logic as the distractions offered up by Ostend’s pleasure industries. There seems to be no difference between those old men sputtering at the conference roundtable and the men surrounding Volant’s circular stage in the cabaret. All believe in paradise to the extent that they imagine it just around the corner, without ever questioning whether this paradise is merely a figment running its seekers in a circle. The cabaret song is a perfect forum for both staging this desire while also questioning it, channeling its distracting energies, like the “psychosis” of Ostend’s “mass hypnosis,” to other ends. In doing so the film recalls the mission of Brecht and Weill in *The Three Penny Opera* and *Mahagonny*. 30 As with the latter, *Koffer* offers a jazz-inflected fable of a consumerist city fabricated out of nothing, based only on the proximity between financial confidence and confidence tricks. And just as *Mahagonny* sought to harness the energies of opera to criticize the culinary nature of operatic culture, so does *Koffer*, compared by several critics to Brecht and Weill’s collaborations, adapt the forms of film operetta against themselves and the distractions this genre wrought on audiences in the desperate years of the early 1930s. 31

This adaptation is most clear in a late scene, one anticipated by Stark’s plan for a film palace for Ostend. Shifting from a wedding celebration for the city’s newly married couples, two men are shown in an office mid-debate, the one beginning “Aber bedenken Sie doch Herr Direktor, Probleme . . .” (But sir, consider problems . . .) before being interrupted: “An
Probleme geht man Pleite. Komödien bringen Dividenden. Warum ist Ostend eine Weltstadt? Weil es sie nicht um Probleme kümmert? Warum sind wir eine Weltfirma? Weil wir Komödie machen!” (With problems one goes bankrupt. Comedies bring dividends. Why is Ostend a world city? Because it cares about problems? Why are we a world firm? Because we make comedies!) Explicitly linking the problems and solutions of the German economy to the financial viability of the German film industry, this brief scene introduces viewers to OTAG (Ostend Tonfilm Aktiengesellschaft [Ostend Sound Film Corporation]), a parodic version of UFA that, like its inspiration, earns its profits by offering a never-ending supply of distracting fantasies. A whole series of OTAG posters are shown, with an accompanying love duet on the soundtrack, each exchange between male and female singer echoing, in an exaggerated, operetta-esque style, the title of each film: *Ich liebe* (I Love), *Du liebst* (You Love), *Er liebt* (He Loves), *Wir lieben* (We love), and *Ihr liebt* (You All Love), all given the same subtitle of “Eine Tonfilm Operette” (a sound film operetta). Every poster, in turn, shows roughly the same couple, in the same pose, with various states of stylish dress, a repetition in recipe brought home in a final shot that shows all the posters en masse, the operetta made according to the readymade patterns of the assembly line. The director introduces another species of musical comedy: a similarly identical series of barracks comedies, from *Kasernenluft* (The Air of the Barracks) to *Kasernenduft* (The Smell of the Barracks). As if these satiric, interfilmic references to the romantic operetta and the military farce were not enough, Granowsky ends the scene with OTAG’s director looking directly at the camera and declaiming, “Ich erkläre Ihnen . . . ein Film mit Sinn interessiert niemand. Ein Film ohne Sinne, das braucht eine Weltstadt” (I will explain it to you . . . a film with meaning interests no one. A meaningless film, that’s what a world city needs). The scene concludes with this final statement, but the conversation continues by cutting to Stix’s office: the editor’s assistant is asking about reporting on the “sensation” of the “world crisis.” Stix’s rebuttal, to report instead on the “sensation” of an explosion of children born to Ostend’s married couples, follows the same principle as OTAG’s theory of film, both showing a mass media savvy about supplying a demand by creating and directing that demand. “Sensation” is made equivalent to the nonsensical absence of “sense,” and whether a headline or a film that lacks “sense” also lacks the problematic meaning of the day: “world crisis.”

By having OTAG’s director speaking simultaneously to the film’s spectators as well as to filmmakers interested in direct depictions of crisis, Granowsky theatricalizes the plight of both artist and audience, the cynicism behind so much of the German film industry’s efforts baldly stated. Like the other epic moments in the film, from Rathaus’s music to Busch’s singing to Lorre’s performance, this brief Verfremdungseffekt is none too
estranging. Its attempt to link the two sides of off-screen space—the industrial and the spectatorial—makes clear why Henseleit praised the film as a “debate piece” balancing between the lightness of the musical and the sting of satire.33 Kracauer’s critique of the film as “Nonsens” and excessively theatrical misses how these elements are turned against themselves, not only speaking as meaningless conventions but also connecting them to what they distract from: the meaning of crisis, paradoxically present in the film through consistent and in this case explicit avoidance. Even those films that dealt with the problems of the present should, in the words of UFA’s production chief E. H. Correll, feature characters “who nationally or in purely human terms strive to achieve a worthy goal. They succeed neither through coincidence nor through deceit.”34 A rebuttal to UFA, Die Koffer des Herrn O.F. emphasizes precisely coincidence, deceit, and a very non-nationalist cosmopolitanism as the motivating factors for both crisis and countercrisis, and its gaggle of bureaucrats hardly suffices as empathetic protagonists on whom audiences might project their fears or desires.

There is another reason behind Granowsky and Lania’s turn to the nonsensical: the threat of censorship. Granowsky’s Das Lied vom Leben had set off a major controversy when it was prohibited from screening because of references to cesarean section, provoking many writers for Die Weltbühne to rally to its cause.35 Lania, who had once claimed, “Das Drama ist uns nur insoweit wichtig, als es dokumentarisch belegbar ist” (Drama is important only insofar as it is documentarily provable), was involved with several worker-themed documentaries, focusing especially on the realities of impoverishment and hunger among urban and rural laborers.36 Several of these films were prohibited from release by German censors, so rather than make another documentary about the expanding German underclass Die Koffer des Herrn O.F. abstains from directly showing the devastating effects of the crisis. Instead it takes place in a studio-shot, fairy-tale universe imported in equal parts from Heimat kitsch as well as the foreign, largely American realm of the cosmopolitan and modern. A synthesis of German anxieties about its native genres in contrast with those offered by foreign film industries, both German Heimat and superficial Amerikanismus come in for lampooning, provincial life being as silly as the jazzy metropolis Ostend becomes.37 Sticking close to the surface of competing styles of sound film, Koffer is able to avoid overt controversy and instead work on the desires at the very heart of late Weimar’s “culture of distraction.” Granowsky, Lania, and Kästner follow the rules of their fictional OTAG director, refusing to reveal problems and instead revel in meaninglessness and sensationalism as the very truths of how Germany’s disastrous state was, in financial and filmic terms, occluded by performances of confidence and optimism.

Although the film was never released in the United States, the New York Times Berlin correspondent, C. Hooper Trask, praised the film’s
style as groundbreaking while missing—in contrast to German critics—its satire, stating, “I hate to be heavy-handed in treating such light fare but, if we took it seriously, its lesson would be pernicious."38 Although Trask never suggests what this “lesson” might be, similar suspicions would crop up a year later, with German censors returning to the film after Hitler’s election, transforming the feature Die Koffer des Herrn O.F. into the short Bauen und Heiraten (Building and Marrying). Little record remains of the film’s rerelease beyond its censor cards, but these give a sense of how and why the newly appointed Filmprüfstelle (Film Board) would defuse Koffer’s satire. The most significant change is the removal of several of Kästner’s songs, which provided ironic commentary on the Ostenders’ dreams and, more important, on the film’s own status as a fairy tale. Removing these songs also required excising Granowsky’s most startling effects, from dream sequences to cabaret performances, where the film’s satire of financial and film fantasies is most to the fore. Although the film’s plot and many of its characters remain, even Stix, played by the Jewish Lorre, Koffer’s most biting scenes were excised, not least the scene featuring OTAG, which deals with the film industry’s own censoring of films that might explore Germany’s political and economic crises. Above all it is the film’s new title that speaks loudest, Bauen und Heiraten giving far more emphasis to the fantasy provoked by the trunks rather than the contingency of their arrival. What happens when a satire of film genres and financial solutions loses its satirical elements? It becomes that which it had satirized, less a mocking imitation and more the embodiment of a fairy tale, not for adults, but for an obedient Volk. Hence its title, which takes literally two scenes late in the film, in which a stately male official stands on pristine, marble steps, couples cascading on both his sides in a choreographed march, first, in marriage, and second, accompanied by nurses carrying babies. Bauen und Heiraten, in its very title, hopes that the film’s ambiguous mix of satire and fairy-tale turnaround will be defused, with only the later dwelled on by its audiences, who are never directly addressed, as in the most Brechtian, epic moments of Koffer.

For the intellectual and artistic left responsible for Die Koffer des Herrn O.F., the financial crisis was always a political crisis.39 In ignoring this link between economic turmoil and political instability—an economy “days before dictatorship”—Koffer got past censors, but also made it, for a critic like Kracauer, the most timid of the “timid heresies” produced in the Republic’s final years. It is O.F. himself who only retrospectively suggests the desperate desire Germans had, according to Granowsky and Lania, for a savior. When Flott is made to appear to the Ostenders, played, we learn at film’s end, by the hotelier’s son, Ostend’s cheering crowds wave their hats and hands up to the silent billionaire, all while a military march plays in the background. These images cannot help but seem to anticipate future psychoses on the part of the German
For its makers, such a savior could only exist in a fairy tale, and indeed Flott is a fictional part, the real O.F., the film actress Feolden, being as unreal and unseen as the nonexistent financier. That this nonsensical plot might be redeployed in earnest by German censors or that a savior could exist for Germany in a manner even more confidence-inducing than Flott gives *Die Koffer des Herrn O.F.* prescient bite—from O.F. to Hitler, to put it in Kracauer’s infamous terms. Although the film admits a certain timidity, the explosion with which it ends, like the cannon with which it begins, gestures to the link between past war, present crisis, and coming catastrophe.

### Notes

1. Kurt Tucholsky, “Kurzer Abriß der Nationalökonomie,” *Die Weltbühne* Jg. 27, nr. 37, September 15, 1931. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.
2. See Anon., *Der Kinematograph*, nr. 280, December 1931.
4. As Felix Henseleit would state in his rave review, “Ein Schritt vom Wege des Ueblichen und Hergebrachten ist dieser Film, ein Film, der zu Debatten anregt, ein einfacher Film, ein Film ohne viel Herz, ohne die alle Romantik, die wir Gestritten noch zuweisen lieben, ohne die Liebe zum Idyll, aber eine märchenhafte Groteske, die Romantik von heute zeigt und zugleich karikiert, eine Auseinandersetzung mit Sinn und Unsinn unseres Lebens, unserer Zeit, und zugleich ein zeitsatirischer, gigantisch aufgepuffter Ulk, dem das Publikum lebhaft applaudierte.” (This film is a step away from the usual and conventional, a film to stimulate debate, a simple film, a film without much heart, without any romanticism—for which those of us from yesterday still assign a love—without love for an idyll, but a fantastical comedy, which shows and simultaneously caricatures the romanticism of today, an argument with the meaning and meaninglessness of our life, our time, and, at the same time, a satire of our times, a gigantically puffed-up joke that the audience animatedly applauded.) See Felix Henseleit, “Die Koffer des Herrn O.F.,” *Reichsfilmblatt*, nr. 49, December 5, 1931.
7. *Die Koffer des Herrn O.F.*’s Gogol-esque conceit seems, in turn, to have influenced a number of German pre- and postwar films, including Douglas Sirk’s *April! April!* (1935), Arthur Rabenalt and Béla Balázs’s *Chemie und Liebe* (1948), Wolfgang Staudte’s *Die Abenteuer von Fridolin B.* (1948), and Robert Stemmler’s *Berliner Ballade* (1948). I thank an anonymous reader for bringing this influence and these films to my attention.
9 When the film has been mentioned, it is largely as a footnote in biographies of its stars or as another early sound comedy to add to the list of military farces, musical comedies, and kitschy burlesques of provincial life made in Germany during the first years of the Depression. See Ruth Barton, *Hedy Lamarr: The Most Beautiful Woman in the World* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2010), 21–25; Stephen Youngkin, *The Lost One: A Life of Peter Lorre* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005), 68; Helmut Korte, *Der Spielfilm und das Ende der Weimarer Republik* (Göttingen: Vandehoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 284 and 351; and Thomas Brandlmeier, “Kaisers Kientopp: Tendenzen der (rechts)deutschen Lachkultur,” *Spaß beiseite, Film ab: Jüdischer Humor und verdrängendes Lachen in der Filmkomödie bis 1945* (Hamburg: Cinegraph, 2006), 70.


12 All of Kästner’s lyrics, along with a comprehensive plot description and many stills, are featured in *Illustrierter Film-Kurier*, nr. 1700, December 1931.


15 These closing words appear to have been changed in a post-premiere edit of the film, Busch instead singing “Märchen hört und sieht man gern, / Dreizehn Koffer wie soeben, / Helfen freilich nur im Traum, / eine Rezept für das Leben, / Das sind sie wohl kaum. . . .” (One likes to hear and watch fairytales / Thirteen trunks like those just now, / certainly help only in a dream, / a recipe for life, / they hardly are). Reference to these edits are made in *Die Lichtbild-Bühne*, nr. 294, December 9, 1931.


19 James, *German Slump*, 294.


22 Alternative cinematic displacements of these conferences can be detected in the cross-cutting between criminal and police meetings in Fritz Lang’s *M* and in the Congress of Vienna setting for Erik Charrell’s *Der Kongress Tanzt* (The Congress Dances), both films released the same year as *Koffer* and respectively transforming the trauma of Versailles and the repetition compulsion of present-day conferences into criminal conspiracy and romantic fantasy.


29 See *Illustrierter Film-Kurier*, nr. 1700, December 1931.

30 See Brecht, “Modern Theatre Is the Epic Theatre,” 33–42.

31 Fritz Olimsky praised Rathaus’s music as “dreigroschenopernmäßig wirkungsvoll” (effective in the manner of *Threepenny Opera*) and Kracauer intimated direct influence from Brecht. See Olimsky, “Der Film in December,” *Berliner Börsen-Zeitung*, nr. 568, December 1931, 568. Rathaus’s score would earn extraordinary attention and praise, including an article devoted to its innovative interplay with Granowsky’s images. See Anon., *Der Film*, nr. 49, December 5, 1931. Kästner had praised *The Threepenny Opera*, arguing for a shift from “realism” and “naturalism” toward the parodic, equally inspired by the film musicals of René Clair. See his “Tonfilm und Naturalismus,” September 12, 1930, in Kästner, *Gemischte Gefühle: Literarische Publizistik aus der “Neuen Leipziger Zeitung,” 1923–1933*, Band 1 (Zürich: Atrium Verlag, 1989), 394.
32 Eric Rentschler discusses this scene in “The Situation Is Hopeless but Not Desperate: UFA’s Early Sound-Film Musicals,” in Weimar Cinema, 1919–1933: Daydreams and Nightmares (New York: MOMA, 2010), 47. For other essays on early sound operettas, see the collection Wenn ich sonntags in mein Kino geh’: Ton-Film-Musik, 1919–1933, ed. Rainer Rother and Peter Mänz (Bönen: Kettler, 2008).


34 Quoted by Bruce Murray, Film and the German Left in the Weimar Republic (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 152. See also Klaus Kreimeier, The UFA Story: A History of Germany’s Greatest Film Company, 1918–1945 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 186–202.


36 Quoted in Kästner, Gemischte Gefühle, Band 2, 34. Lania’s film, Hunger in Waldenburg (Hunger in Waldenburg), was censored in 1929. See “Ein neuer Streich des Filmzensors: Das zensierte Elend,” Leipziger Volkszeitung, March 16, 1929, republished in Gertrude Kühn et al., eds., Filme und revolutionäre Arbeitserbewegung in Deutschland, 1918–1932, Band 2 (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1978), 78–79.


39 This point is made most forcefully by Detlev Peukert in Die Weimarer Republik: Krisenjahre der klassischen Moderne (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987), 243.
IN HIS INTELLECTUAL HISTORY of the evolution of the term “crisis,” Rein- 
hart Koselleck claims that it was in the decades between 1840 and 
1860 that the economic use came into its own, as separate from previous 
medical and judicial meanings. In the writings of Marx and Engels, for 
eexample, it was used predominantly in the economic sense after 1844. 
Koselleck points to the role of the crash that followed the gold rush in 
creating the conditions for the first truly global economic crisis after 1856 
that was locatable “everywhere and nowhere” at the same time.1 The 
global economic consequences of the gold find in the Sierra Nevada had 
been massive, spurring growth in shipping, changing migration patterns, 
boosting the buying power of countries whose gold reserves were greatly 
increased, and setting off a wave of worldwide speculation, the intercon- 
nected nature of which had hardly been seen before. In France, the influx 
of capital, that was a result of the gold rush, promoted lending at a low 
interest rate and created the conditions for the invention of the Crédit 
Mobilier, which would change the face of European finance and serve as 
a model for the great German industrial banks.2 In Germany, the gold 
rush contributed to a similar boom in credit institutions and an “orgy of 
bank founding”3 that accompanied the flourishing of Aktiengesellschaften 
(joint stock companies) as well as a rise in financial speculation in the 
middle and upper classes.4 

In addition to the economic effects of the gold rush, the cultural 
impact of the almost ten-year boom, and subsequent crash, reached far 
beyond the borders of the United States and throughout what had only 
recently begun to be understood as an interconnected global financial sys- 
tem.5 The Swiss pioneer John Sutter’s place at the center of the gold fever 
resonated in the German-speaking world and was partially responsible
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for the large proportion of German speakers among the migrants drawn to California. The image of Sutter and the “49ers”—the international influx of prospectors seeking gold who followed him—remained as a symbol of speculation and risk for decades to come. The importance of the gold boom and bust for the concept of “crisis” in its modern form was underlined by the writer Stefan Zweig in 1927, who included the rise and fall of John Sutter, and his founding of modern-day Sacramento, as one of the “decisive points” in his collection of succinct, fiction-infused biographic portraits, *Sternstunden der Menschheit* (Decisive Points in History). The image of striking it rich in a far-off land was a powerful motivator for the speculative spirit of the times, and mid-nineteenth-century German gambling manuals, printed by the thousands and known as the *Deutsche-Kalifornien*, derived their name directly from it.

The discovery of an abundance of gold rippled through the newly forged linkages of the world financial order, causing wide evaluation of the viability of using the precious metal as a basis of monetary value. In the following decades, the history of gold-backed currency intersected with significant crisis points in the history of the German nation itself. The adoption of the gold standard, and the creation of the *Goldmark* (gold mark) in 1873, was virtually coincident with both the founding of a unified Germany as well as the economic decline that followed the *Gründerkrach* (crash of the founders) of the same year. With this change in monetary policy, Germany initiated what would become the international gold standard. Later, Germany’s abandonment of the gold standard on August 4, 1914, and attempts to convince the public that war bonds were “as good as gold,” marked the beginning of the inflationary period that peaked in 1923. As a result, abandonment of the gold standard was conflated historically with defeat and the national trauma that followed. After the adoption of the *Papiermark* (paper mark) in 1914, the *Goldmark* remained only a nostalgic memory of a currency not yet completely adrift on the sea of the modern financial system. The complete collapse of the German currency during the hyperinflation of 1923 pushed arcane and specialized monetary policy into the forefront of political decision making once more. Thus, during the Weimar Republic, questions surrounding the adoption of a gold-backed currency were of vital importance to the immediate experience of the German populace, and, as will be argued here, emerge symptomatically within the cultural productions of the time.

In what follows, the question of what role gold played in the popular imaginary will be addressed through a discussion of key films from the crisis that marked the end of the Weimar Republic and the birth of the fascist state. Examples from before the end of the Republic such as *Dr. Mabuse der Spieler* (Dr. Mabuse the Gambler, 1922) and *Frau im Mond* (Woman in the Moon, 1929), will be discussed, before the focus shifts to
Gold (Gold, 1934) and Der Kaiser von Kalifornien (The Emperor of California, 1936). After the banking collapse and Germany’s abandonment of the gold standard in 1931\(^\text{12}\) during the Weltwirtschaftskrise (Great Depression), anxieties surrounding gold as both the solution to as well as the root of the crisis came once more to the fore. Gold was paradoxically both associated with the instability of money and economic exchange and, at the same time, regarded as exceptional from other commodities in its role as a foundational unit of value. This contradiction is not easily reconcilable in rational terms and instead will be approached from the direction of the significance of gold in the German cultural tradition. I suggest that these anxieties played out, and were symbolically reconciled, in the films under discussion here. These films reflect pressing economic concerns of their time, but also introduce symbolic and cultural associations that go beyond the economic and reveal how the idea of gold as a foundation of monetary value was closely related to the crisis of “authenticity” that marked the Weimar Republic years.

Images of Crisis and Authenticity in the Early Weimar Republic

The Weimar Republic is widely understood as a period of perpetual crisis.\(^\text{13}\) Currency collapse, financial crashes, and the eventual slide into the global depression were reflected in a wide variety of films and texts that are beyond the scope of the present chapter. However, a few of the key tropes that emerged in the hyperinflation years bear mentioning, as they informed the growing popular awareness of financial forces as a pervasive phenomenon and influenced the formation of the popular discourse surrounding the “world economy.” The most relevant of these examples provide a groundwork for further discussion of general anxieties surrounding the problem of falsification and the genuine.

In the early years of the Republic, many such depictions employed the figure of the so-called Raffke or Schieber as a direct embodiment of the effect (or supposed cause) of economic crisis. The term Raffke is no longer in use, however Schieber still carries the negative connotation of double-dealing and foul play. At the time, they were roughly interchangeable terms that broadly described a male nouveau riche type—well dressed, sometimes effeminate in his taste for luxury and lavish clothing, but also occasionally ill-mannered gluttons, waited on by a small army of servants. Fritz Lang described Dr. Mabuse, of Dr. Mabuse der Spieler, as a Raffke, although Mabuse is somewhat atypical of the type in the seriousness of his exploits as well as in the complexities of his character development.\(^\text{14}\) More typical examples of the Schieber or Raffke type have survived in such films as Ernst Lubitsch’s Die Austernprinzessin (The Oyster Princess, 1919), Reinhold
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Schünzel’s *Alles für Geld* (Fortune’s Fool, 1923), and Richard Eichberg’s *Fräulein Raffke* (Miss Raffke, 1923). In addition, reviews and synopses of films now presumed lost indicate that the stereotype was well established in the early 1920s and was something of a comedic staple. Alternatively, the *Schieber* was represented as the cool, obsidian face of capital, as in Heinrich Maria Davringhausen’s painting *Schieber*, of 1920, which depicts a collected, aloof, and powerful figure sitting calmly in a modernist office in a skyscraper. He is flanked by a telephone and holds a pen with a glass of wine in the foreground and a half-finished cigar on the edge of his desk, as if he is both working and indulging at the same time. Yet the page before him and his office itself are empty, and the uneasy geometry of the background, in which precarious voids appear in the floor and ceiling of his lofty perch, suggests the instability of his position.

Fictional portrayals of *Raffke* and *Schieber* personified the power of global finance and were as much a result of popular mistrust of figures associated with speculation and profiteering on the chaos following the First World War as they were a by-product of the popular speculative manias of 1918 and 1922. In this sense they were not only a symptom of the inflation but also took on an explanatory or even aspirational role as individuals who were merely more successful in their speculative ventures than others and who had used the crisis of the postwar years to their advantage. They were both figures of outright disdain, whose negative characteristics were often clearly interchangeable with anti-Semitic depictions of Jewish financiers, and sources of iconoclastic humor. Upwardly mobile beyond the bounds of their class and background, they poked fun at the stuffiness of the establishment, as in the example of *Die Austernprinzessin*. Their popular depiction complicated issues of class and propriety, and they were at times clearly the object of a begrudging admiration for a populace that was caught up in speculative activity as an everyday reality, as theirs was the wealth of the nouveau riche, and its accumulation was often depicted as being a result of their own cunning and street smarts rather than a result of inheritance or familial connection.

In addition to their association with the social effects of the inflation, and the chance reconfiguration of established social order, these figures explicitly tied the problem of loss of value as an economic category with loss of essence in the ontological sense. The term *schieben*, or the nominative *eine Schiebung*—meaning to hustle someone—also referred specifically to the phenomenon, carried out by unscrupulous traders, of substituting one commodity for another, or adulterating and bulking up the quantity of a commodity, such as flour, with the addition of sometimes toxic additives. The concept is illuminated, as well as lampooned, in Wilhelm Dieterle’s film *Durch’s Brandenburger Tor* (Through the Brandenburg Gate, 1929), which is set in 1923. In this film, the selling of black rice as caviar is discussed, and a young street urchin is depicted...
accidentally applying boot polish to a customer’s food instead of mustard. An intertitle draws attention to his slang and dialect when he exclaims, “Oh, pardon, beinah hätt ick mir einer kleinen Schiebung schuldich gemacht!” (Oh sorry! I nearly made a little hustle by accident!) The suspicion surrounding the pedigree of objects, goods, currency, and people is also central to *Dr. Mabuse der Spieler*, the final scene of which takes place in Mabuse’s central currency counterfeiting operation—a transparent allusion to the out-of-control minting of currency at the time. Thus the figure of the Raffke or Schieber was intimately connected to this key problem of the Weimar Republic—a widespread mistrust of the authenticity of both motives and the surface appearance of objects. Depictions of Raffke and Schieber functioned as a simplification of complex socio-political shifts and provided an explanatory mechanism that distilled the postwar economic crisis into one simple figure that remained within the visual vocabulary of Weimar cinema and well into the post-Republic years.

Less well understood is how, in the crisis years at the end of the Republic, these anxieties were displaced onto questions surrounding the “genuine” nature of gold, and further, how this phenomenon correlated with the history of German economic policy.

**Paradise Lost: The Gold Standard as a New Eldorado**

During the hyperinflation, the symbolic nature of money was an unwelcome intrusion into the reality of the average citizen of the Weimar Republic. The transitional Rentenmark, introduced in November 1923, was not in fact backed directly by gold, but rather bonds denominated in US dollars. It was not until the Reichsmark was adopted, in September of 1924, that the gold standard was reintroduced in a limited sense and Germany joined the global flight back to gold-backed currency. Reichsbank President Hjalmar Schacht oversaw this transition and recounted it in his 1927 work *The Stabilization of the Mark*, noting that “the theory of metallic currency is now stronger and not weaker, than ever it was” and that “nothing showed the superiority of gold so much as the war.” Thus gold was of great symbolic importance to the national imaginary, as it bridged the tumultuous period of recent memory, harkening back to what was often treated as a “paradise lost” after 1918.

Beyond the realm of economic argument, the gold standard’s popularity as an idea was (and still is) largely a result of the “elegance of the economic theory associated with it.” This theory has an intuitive appeal since it appeases anxieties surrounding money as an arbitrary system by
appearing to provide foundational value. It should also be noted that gold was not the only substance offered as a potential foundation, and others, such as Karl Helferrich’s rye-backed Roggenmark (rye mark), were proposed. But the ontological connotations were the same—whether with grain or ore, the promise of reification through association with a tangible thing was a powerful antidote to the abstraction of currency.

The influential opinions of Schacht, as well as the debate over currency reform in the global news media of the 1920s, may have influenced Fritz Lang’s space exploration film, *Frau im Mond*, which saw him return to the subject matter of currency, as well as the foundational value on which currency is based. The film was developed and released at the end of the so called period of stabilization of the Republic, after Black Friday at the Berliner Börse (Berlin Stock Exchange) on May 13, 1927, and only a few short weeks before the Wall Street crash that heralded the global depression. In *Frau im Mond*, anxieties surrounding the genuine and authentic return to gold haunt the narrative, now displaced into the paradoxical representation of gold as both a source of value and *Echtheit* (authenticity), as well as a force of destabilization and crisis.

*Frau im Mond* depicts the discovery of a surplus trove of gold in the mountains of the moon and the ends to which people will go to obtain it. The “pioneer” of the moon gold, Professor Manfeldt, is introduced in the film living in abject poverty, the walls of his flophouse papered with worthless inflation-era bills. He is framed as a “dreamer,” in contrast to the cabal of criminals and industrialists who attempt to steal the schematics for his spaceship. His interest in gold is presented to the audience as purely scientific and aesthetic—outside of the economic realm. The film introduces the viewer to key narrative structures concerning gold that appear in all of the texts under discussion here. First, a binary is established between gold’s vulgar economic value and its productive or aesthetic value—an association that recalls Richard Wagner’s notion of the Rheingold and suggests a problematic separation between use and exchange value. Second, this binary separation is aligned with an idea of a true, “genuine” worth versus the “false” use of gold. Third, the discovery of gold is linked to the conquest of space and territory: in this case, the prospectors literally build a “space ship.” As will be shown, these three structures are also found in *Gold* and *Der Kaiser von Kalifornien*. As recurring fictional constructs, they further the process by which, as Linda Schulte-Sasse argues, gold acquires a “social-psychological power, a sublime essence independent of its real presence.”

**Alchemy, Liquidity, and Fidelity in *Gold***

Karl Hartl’s *Gold* is a modern retelling of the alchemical search for chrysopoeia—the transmutation of base metals into gold. In the film, Professor
Achenbach (Friedrich Kayßler) discovers a formula for the creation of gold involving atomic fission. However, the agents of the wealthy English industrialist John Wills (Michael Bohnen) sabotage the experiment, murder Achenbach, and steal his method. Wills hires Achenbach’s protégé, Werner Holk (Hans Albers), who joins him in a subterranean lab off the coast of Scotland, but Holk has plans of his own to avenge the death of his mentor. Holk’s motivations are further complicated by the promise of scientific discovery in Wills’s Faustian offer, which becomes even more seductive when Holk is introduced to the industrialist’s daughter, Florence (Brigitte Helm). Wills’s theft of Achenbach’s discovery is motivated by his own desire to create an economic super-weapon that will allow him to conquer the world market—perhaps a Wagnerian allusion to the ring of the dwarf Alberich. As in *Frau im Mond*, gold’s dual nature is defined by the intentions of its possessor. It is either a sublime substance, of high aesthetic value and evocative of discovery and enlightenment, or grounded and corrupted by its dissipation in exchange and commerce.

Hartl’s film expounds on the dual nature of gold along these lines, but updates the Wagnerian imagery with references to modern technology. Achenbach’s process produces artificial gold through nuclear fission, and when it falls in Wills’s hands, fears of the destructive power of an atomic super-weapon are conflated with economic warfare. In one montage sequence, the mere rumor of production—since no gold created in Wills’s machine is ever circulated—causes panic and headlines warning of “gold inflation,” “stock market panic,” “riots by the unemployed in the South African gold fields,” and eventually “world catastrophe” and “crisis.” Interestingly, *Gold* was not the first German film to employ the notion of an excess of gold as a form of economic super-weapon. This plot device is also found in several lost films from the postwar crisis years of the early Republic. For example, Rudolf del Zopp’s *Das goldene Gift* (The Golden Poison, 1920) depicts a factory owner who imperils global trade with artificially created gold, while in Edmund Heuberger’s *Die Sonne Asiens* (The Asian Sun, 1920), a Chinese engineer attempts to create artificial gold in order to release China from its dependence on the West. Further, in Louis Ralph’s *Die goldene Pest* (The Golden Plague, 1921), an anarchist obtains the formula for the creation of artificial gold in order to flood world markets. In these films, real fear of economic and political collapse finds its articulation in a mimetic surplus surrounding gold’s symbolic role at the heart of capitalism’s “creative destruction.” Marx and Engels’s assertion that capitalism would sow the seeds of its own destruction “like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells,” was based on their observations of the destructive power of the then-novel phenomenon of overproduction. Overproduction of gold in these films threatens the world economic order, but in reality the fractional relationship of
Fig. 4.1. Illustration from the January 1931 edition of UHU magazine that imagines the unintended consequences of unlimited gold production.
money to gold meant that this was as much a problem of perception as anything else. In this sense, the reality of gold as a marker of value is less important than the image of its circulation, as is concisely demonstrated through the symbiotic and contradictory relationship of original and copy in these films, a familiar trope that reanimates some of the tensions and fears surrounding the figure of the Schieber and his destabilization of the binary of appearance versus substance.

While anxieties similar to those from the early Weimar Republic appear in Gold, the film also mobilizes imagery much more specific to its post-Weimar political climate, conflating views of fidelity and economic value with völkisch notions of blood and soil. For example, when Holk is gravely wounded in the destruction of Achenbach’s lab, his fiancée Margit (Lien Dyers) is physically tied to him after her blood is used in a transfusion that saves his life. In this sequence, appearing in hospital garb, Margit becomes the embodiment of Klaus Theweleit’s “white nurse,” just as she later waits for Holk at home. She is a nonthreatening, motherly absence throughout the film, appearing only at its beginning and end. In contrast, Florence is a “figure who defies gender boundaries” and “appears a leftover of Weimar culture” in appearance and demeanor. She is independently mobile—shown driving a car and referring to far-flung travels aboard the luxury yacht Savarona—and is explicitly linked to notions of “liquidity” and “motion” in both the financial and material senses of the terms. In reality the Savarona was a super-yacht of its time that was built in Hamburg in 1931 and belonged to the billionaire granddaughter of the American architect John Augustus Roebling, designer of the Brooklyn Bridge. Its name, according to Film-Kurier, is “an Indian word” for “black swan,” a veiled reference perhaps to statistical theory and the rules of chance that drive the marketplace. As such, it is an additional symbol of chance and flux that is linked to liquidity and high finance. Its presence in several articles in popular magazines at the time also identified it to audiences as a marker of Anglo-American financial influence.

At the end of the film Holk returns to Margit, who is an image of purity, playing the role of the faithful Penelope awaiting his return. The Wagnerian allusion is continued in the final scene in which Holk casts the small nugget of the artificial gold that he had succeeded in creating back into the sea from whence it came. Thus he renounces the economic value of the artificial gold as beneath him and retains his own integrity through his association with genuine scientific discovery, as well as his fidelity in all senses of the term, by rejecting the “false” advances of one of the two golden-haired women and returning to his fiancée. The core of the film’s ideological import is the rejection of the falsity and temptation associated with the disrupting forces of unmoored, liquid, finance capital in favor of a value system linked to the idea of Holk’s Heimat (homeland) and the stability of his heteronormative relationship with Margit.
Against the presumed stability of this coupling, fast women, water, ships tied to speculation and financial ruin, and the brief appearance of an uncanny double—Holk’s old friend Willi Lüders (Ernst Karchow)—drive this point home. Willi serves little purpose in the film, except as a sounding board for Holk to clarify points of the plot, but he is of allegorical significance as both representative of the Weimar years and as the doppelgänger by name of “Wills” himself. Now hiding his old identity, he works as the first mate on the Savarona, adopting the English name “Jenkins” after being financially ruined in 1925. During their brief exchange, Jenkins explains his misfortune to Holk, recounting: “Auf der Kap Martino, es war eine Frau an Bord . . . ich war nicht auf der Brücke als es darauf ankam, und mit einem Schlag alles futsch . . . Stellung, Karriere und anständiger Name” (Off the Kap Martino a woman was on board . . . I was not on the bridge when it mattered, and all was lost with one blow . . . position, career, and good name). This brief story marks Jenkins’s presence as explicitly allegorical of the early crisis years of the Republic, as Cap Martin is a headland that juts out into the Mediterranean directly beside the bay of Monaco and its casinos. Gambling, the female, the potential loss of a ship, as well as his current reliance on foreign capital for his welfare, are all images directly associated with the Weimar Republic.

On Theweleit’s spectrum of feminine types in reactionary literature, Florence is neither the “white” nor the infamous communist “red woman,” but is aligned with the “false” gold of the liberal Republic in the reactionary worldview. In this sense, she fits his critique of the fascist fear that “the state was as clearly dominated by gold as was the black and red of the flag—and the fascists longed for a day when both would return to their former state of sublime ‘harmony’: to whiteness.” In Theweleit’s analysis of fascist iconography: “The ‘Republic’ aimed to resolve social conflicts not by the gun, but through the market—a goal rightly identified by the soldier males as a dangerous source of ‘devaluation.’ Gold represented a demand that they coalesce into the mass into which men are transformed by the market.” In this reading, Florence functions as the return of the repressed golden woman of the Weimar Republic, supported by foreign credit and possessed of a deadly surface sexual appeal—an image aided by the cultural memory of Brigitte Helm as the ersatz metallic Maria in Lang’s Metropolis (1927). The industrialist Wills’s British origin also extends this reading of the film in terms of its nationalist undertones, since London played a dominant role in currency markets and is central to the history of the gold standard. Wills represents the influx of foreign capital that was central to supporting the Republic, and his defeat and rejection by Holk would have played to nationalist sentiment at the time.

Germany’s abandonment of the gold standard in 1931 took place in an environment of uncertainty, renewed fears of economic crisis, and
amidst the series of “emergency decrees” that were a result of attempts to push through economic policy. Reich Chancellor Heinrich Brüning’s decisions on monetary policy attempted to balance a need for the loosening of credit against a political intolerance for any policy of Abwertung (devaluation) of the currency, given the recent memory of the hyperinflation.41 Gold, in its fiscal form, was central to this crisis, but it also resonated on a symbolic level that transcended instrumentalist arguments for or against a gold standard. On this symbolic level, it could be paradoxically both at the root of and the solution to the crisis of monetary value itself. In Hartl’s film, gold’s excessive and destructive properties are pitted against its redemption in the form of the alchemical obsession that reveals its “true value” as a substance to be appreciated by science, or, in aesthetic terms, as “priceless” and having a value beyond the financial realm. The narrative arc of the film thus resolves these tensions, smoothing over the paradoxical duality of gold in the popular imaginary. In what follows, a similar logic will be discussed in relation to how Der Kaiser von Kalifornien brings this matrix of signifiers to bear on questions of authenticity and genuineness.

The Golden Harvest of Der Kaiser von Kalifornien

Luis Trenker’s Der Kaiser von Kalifornien is a loose retelling of the story of Johann August Sutter’s (sometimes spelled “Suter”) colonization of the American River Valley, near what would become Sacramento, California. In this film, the discovery of gold is destructive and corrupting in itself and leads to the abandonment of Sutter’s Mill, which is depicted as an experiment in schaffendes Kapital (productive capital) for the men who had traveled westward in search of a new life. This loaded imagery of an agrarian utopia of “productive” labor draws directly from the ideology of national socialism and will be discussed further. Equally as important, Sutter’s colony is presented as a paradise devoid of the “parasitic” armature of a modern economy—the raffendes Kapital (parasitic capital) of the financial market.42

Trenker borrows several key images from Blaise Cendrars’s novel L’Or: La merveilleuse histoire du general Johann August Suter (Gold: The Marvelous History of General Johann August Suter, originally published in 1925)43 but takes great liberties in his valorization of Sutter in the script, who is depicted as fleeing his adopted city of Rünenberg, Switzerland, after being discovered for printing pan-German nationalist pamphlets based on the writings of Ernst Moritz Arndt. In reality, Sutter, who was born Johann Augustus Sutter in Kandern, Baden, in 1803, abandoned his family and fled Switzerland to escape debtors’ prison. In the fictionalized account Sternstunden der Menschheit, Zweig is merciless in his characterization of Sutter when he writes: “Mitten unter den Desperados,
einer unter Hunderten, Johann August Sutter, heimisch zu Ryneberg bei Basel, 31 Jahre alt und höchst eilig, das Weltmeer zwischen sich und den europäischen Gerichten zu haben, Bankerotteur, Dieb, Wechselfälscher, hat er seine Frau und drei Kinder einfach im Stich gelassen, in Paris sich mit einem betrügerischen Ausweis etwas Geld verschafft und ist nun auf der Suche nach neuer Existenz”44 (Amid the desperados, one among hundreds, was Johann August Sutter, a native of Ryneberg near Basel, thirty-one years old and anxious to put an ocean between himself and the European courts, a bankrupt, thief, and document forger, having simply abandoned his wife and three children, he is now in search of a new existence after procuring some money and a fake passport in Paris).

Trenker instead depicts Sutter as having been inspired by a vision of a character who appears in the credits only as “der Fremde” (the stranger), but who identifies himself as the apparition of Arndt by speaking the words of his poem.45 In Cendrars’s novel, it is Sutter himself who arrives in the town of Rünenberg as “l’étranger” (the stranger) wearing a “redingote” (frock coat) and carrying “une grosse épine à la main” (a blackthorn staff in his hand),46 which matches the costume of “der Fremde” in Trenker’s work. In the film, “der Fremde” waives his hand to show Sutter the first of many wide vistas of far-off California, and claims that “überall kannst du deinen Volk dienen—überall kannst du kämpfen!” (you can serve your people everywhere—you can fight everywhere!). As in Trenker’s film Der verlorene Sohn (The Prodigal Son, 1934), this transition over vast distance is accomplished cinematically by long dissolves that link the Swiss town with wide panning shots of the Sierra Nevada and Grand Canyon.47

Eventually arriving in California, Sutter changed his name and added the title “Captain” before establishing New Helvetia in 1839. Trenker plays Sutter with his characteristic energetic enthusiasm and portrays him as an idealistic leader who seeks to establish an agrarian paradise in the New World. The discovery of gold in the American River Valley by Sutter’s close associate James W. Marshall (Reinhold Pasch) is the crisis point of the narrative and is depicted as something entirely unwanted by Sutter. Men who had previously worked in harmony on his land begin to fight for the newly discovered resource, and the colony of New Helvetia fails as a result. In short, although the collapse of Sutter’s successful agricultural settlement after the discovery of gold is a matter of historical record, Trenker omits Sutter’s own interest in the gold find.

While the plot of Der Kaiser von Kalifornien presents gold explicitly as a Fluch (curse), the film’s mobilization of gold in its various metaphors deserves further scrutiny. Even though the overrunning of the colony by the 49ers is presented as a radically destructive event, gold maintains its elemental link to stable ground. For example, when Sutter first arrives in the American River Valley, he dismounts from his horse and, recognizing
the potential of the land, runs his fingers through the soil exclaiming, “Es ist wie Brot!” (It’s like bread!). Later, after the first harvest from his newly cultivated land, he plunges his hands into the grain and exclaims, “Es ist wie Gold! (It’s like gold!). Thus, gold is redeemed in an implicit valorization of schaffendes and agrarian capital. It is through the combination of this gesture with the excessive presence of the Californian landscape in drawn-out vistas and a Bergfilm (mountain film) aesthetic that Trenker completes the metaphorical circuit that links territory, grain, and soil to a notion of true or authentic value—to “true gold.”

Farming and gold extraction are both exploitative endeavors that make use of natural resources and require the acquisition of land and engagement with the money economy. However, Sutter is never shown handling money in Der Kaiser von Kalifornien, nor is there any mention of the financial instruments, such as futures contracts, relied on by farmers to guarantee demand for a harvest before risking the planting of grain. The omission of any sign of the advanced financial systems that accompany even an agrarian economy is particularly revealing of the complexities inherent in the presentation of gold and the authentic in Der Kaiser von Kalifornien. By radically rewriting Sutter’s history, the film powerfully connects the idea of purity associated with gold with the elevated place of the Bauer (farmer) in the German agrarian imagination. It should be noted that influential groups such as the Bund der Landwirte (Agrarian League) were instrumental in shaping German financial regulations and drove the banning of futures contracts in grain and other foodstuffs in the Börsengesetz (exchange reform law) of 1896.48 Thus, the protection of agrarian interests was deeply ingrained in German policy and political rhetoric and influenced the Reichserbhofgesetz (Reich Law for the Inheritance of Farmland) in 1933.49 Agrarian utopianism was central to the thought of Richard Oscar Walther Darré, who succeeded Alfred Hugenberg as Minister of Agriculture in 1933, and it was a cornerstone of the Blut und Boden (blood and soil) ideology, as well as of National Socialist economic policies written by Gottfried Feder.50 These policies also provided an economic rationale for the impulse toward colonization under the Third Reich. Control of the market for agricultural goods, and the curtailing of what was seen by the National Socialists as the speculative influence of high finance, were central to the motivation for the Drang nach Osten (drive to the east), and were the impetus to acquire more agricultural land following the recommendations of the Reichsnährstand (Reich Food Corporation).51

Californian land is the source of “gold” in both the mineral and the organic senses of the term that Der Kaiser von Kalifornien presents, but a sharp moral boundary is drawn between the two forms of resource extraction. This distinction rests on a basic misrepresentation of the relationship between use and exchange value that resonated with National Socialist
monetary theory. As Lutz Koepnick notes, Trenker, as well as Richard Wagner before him, “fetishize gold because they believe that the use value of commodities can be separated from their exchange value” suggesting that “value can be measured outside social contract and economic exchange.” Gold’s status as simultaneously foundational yet also anterior to systems of valuation is a result of its perceived role as a marker of the genuine in both the aesthetic as well as the economic sense. The fact that gold retains its original value independent of national currencies, in the same sense that it retains much of its aesthetic value independent of its form, imbues it with a powerful aura of originality.

Like Margit in Gold, Sutter’s wife Anna (Viktoria von Ballasko) is also absent through much of Der Kaiser von Kalifornien and is a figure of purity connected to the concept of Heimat throughout. When she eventually does arrive in California, with their two sons in tow, tragedy follows almost immediately. Sutter’s children are unceremoniously gunned down by the prospectors and fall into the river from which they were panning gold. Trenker’s mobilization of Wagnerian imagery in connection with the role of liquid and flow is also quite overt, as he bases the source of conflict on the literal extraction of gold from the bed of the American River. Sutter’s sons, arguably the only truly pure and priceless entities in the film, are in this sense returned to the bed of the river. Here the quick riches of the gold rush, like the artificial gold of the machine, are in direct conflict with the Echtheit (genuine-ness) of nature and the familial bond. It is the myth-making potential of these powerful images that function as the unarticulated emotional backbone of the worldview that the film supports. The final scenes are also based on Cendrars’s novel and show Sutter in a military uniform that combines the epaulet of an American Civil War Union general and an eisernes Kreuz (iron cross) hanging from his breast pocket, completing the conflation of German and American Western imagery. As in the novel, Sutter dies on the steps of the Capitol Building in Washington after pleading the case of his lost lands, but Trenker adds a final appearance by “der Fremde,” who once again shows Sutter a panorama of the world, now represented by the skyline of contemporary New York and intercut with images of moving machinery. The final shot tilts up from Sutter’s fallen body, dissolving between the architecture of the capital and the American River. Sutter himself dissolves into the flow of global capital and the modern age that his endeavors helped to create.

Though tragic, the presence of “der Fremde” is ultimately hopeful within the ideological universe of the film, and the many dissolves at the end serve to smooth over the conceptual inconsistencies inherent within it. Sutter is simultaneously shown to have been defeated by the unstoppable forces of greed and modern finance capital, even while the most advanced example of capitalist achievement of the time (New York) is
uneasily incorporated into the *Bergfilm* aesthetic. The mountains of the West dissolve incongruously into the canyons between the skyscrapers of the modern city. As such, the ideological obscurity of the film’s final message is representative of the National Socialist opacity concerning progress and modernity, even while it presents a forceful certainty of purpose.

### The Gold Standard and the Discourse of Authenticity

At times of economic and political crisis, gold functions as a marker of stability and security, and it is common for the price of gold to increase when capital flies to security in the face of a financial crash. The fact that gold has retained this role through centuries of modern civilization seems to suggest an inherent property of gold that has outlasted such temporary configurations as governments, empires, or nation-states. At the same time, the involvement of gold in the system of commodities and the larger logic of financial markets connects it to the problem of instability and flux. In the films discussed here, it is this dual nature that forms the kernel of tension and contradiction that motivates their narratives, and it is in the attempted resolution of the aporia of gold that they perform their ideological work.

In the section titled “Gold Assay” of his 1951 work *Minima Moralia*, Theodor Adorno claims that the concepts of *Echtbeit* (genuineness) and *Eigentlichkeit* (authenticity) only arise in commodity-based societies in which we are inundated by identical products of the industrial age. He writes: “The fraud of genuineness goes back to bourgeois blindness to the exchange process. Genuine things are those to which commodities and other means of exchange can be reduced, particularly gold. But like gold, genuineness, abstracted as the proportion of fine metal, becomes a fetish.” Both *Gold* and *Kaiser von Kalifornien* participate in a calculus of value that, although superficially wary of the role of gold in society, reifies the existence of a gold standard as not only a monetary but also a spiritual necessity. Adorno points out that gold and genuineness are treated as foundational, but this designation is by definition relational and socially constructed, and gold’s fungibility and physical inertness do not afford it a monadic unity, but rather bring it into relationship with the “comparability of all things.” In other words, by undergirding exchange as its “standard of standards,” gold functions to obscure the mechanism of exchange itself as well as the negative logic of any system of valuation. Adorno further states: “The ungenuineness of the genuine stems from its need to claim, in a society dominated by exchange, to be what it stands for yet is never able to be. The apostles of genuineness, in the service of the power that now masters circulation, dignify the demise of
the latter with the dance of the money veils.”

Adorno’s logic may begin to explain how gold in these films—and by extension in fascist ideology—exists in what has here been described as a state of paradoxical duality. For example, how Der Kaiser von Kalifornien can mobilize the sign system of the early American Western—with all of its connotations of Jacksonian manifest destiny, as well as its valorization of individualist venture—and still “rouse a paradoxical protest against capitalist modernity.” Likewise, this logic may help to illuminate how Gold aligns the rationalist and scientific sublime with a notion of truth and aesthetic value that is separate from the commercial, and also how it produces a fantasy of “reactionary modernism” in its rejection of technology and commerce. In both cases, the inherent contradictions within the foundation threaten the edifice of the narratives themselves in a manner similar to the relationship between the National Socialist anticapitalist rhetoric and its corporatist realpolitik. The “ungenuineness of the genuine,” then, is the doubled sign of both the fluid movement and space of the market, as well as of notions of stability, place, territory, family, and origin. These films provide the imaginary space in which the work of that fiction can take place and allow the dual nature of gold to remain in a state of suspended contradiction.

Marshall Berman has succinctly summarized the economy of desire at work in the flight to authenticity as “bound up with a radical rejection of things as they are,” and thus, as Martin Jay points out, the politics that arise from claims to authenticity are intrinsically bound to questions of mimesis, where “authenticity becomes ‘authentic’ only against the backdrop of reproducibility.” In this essay I have argued that gold promises to offer an end run around the problem of the original and authenticity in terms of both aesthetic and economic categories. The films under discussion here synthesize the constellation of powerful symbolic and mythical figures attached to the idea of gold with the specific economic ideology that is itself based on problematic notions of authenticity, exclusion, and an imagined national community.

Notes


9 The *Gründerzeit* (time of the founders) was marked by an explosion of newly founded companies, but the speculative boom that accompanied it came to an abrupt end in 1873. See Gerald Feldman, *The Great Disorder: Politics, Economics, and Society in the German Inflation, 1914–1924* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 28.


16 Feldman, *Great Disorder*, 553.

17 Feldman, *Great Disorder*, 49.

18 For more on anti-Semitism and the figure of the Raffke, see Valerie Weinstein’s essay in this volume.

19 See the satirical example of Roland Schacht’s “Verteidigung des Schiebers,” *Die Weltbühne* 18, December 14, 1922, quoted in Feldman, *Great Disorder*, 554.


21 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.


34. Schulte-Sasse, *Entertaining the Third Reich*, 250.

35. For more on Brigitte Helm in the role of Florence, see Mihaela Petrescu’s essay in this volume.


40. Feldman, Great Disorder, 28.


42. The assertion of a clear difference between *schaffendes* and *raffendes Kapital* was highly loaded at this time and was key to the National Socialist rhetoric concerning finance capitalism. Multiple examples can be found in *Mein Kampf* and Adolf Hitler’s speeches, as well as in Gottfried Feder’s influential text. See Gottfried Feder, *Kampf Gegen die Hochfinanz* (Munich: Franz Eher Nachfolger, 1933).


46 Cendrars, L’Or, 3.


52 Koepnick, Dark Mirror, 121.


54 Adorno, Minima Moralia, 155.

55 Adorno, Minima Moralia, 155.

56 Adorno, Minima Moralia, 155.

57 Koepnick, Dark Mirror, 125.


Part III. Concepts of Race and Ethnicity
5: Degenerate Disease and the Doctors of Death: Racial Hygiene Film as Propaganda in Weimar and Early Nazi Germany

Barbara Hales

Nor shall any man’s entreaty prevail upon me to administer poison to anyone; neither will I counsel any man to do so. Moreover, I will give no sort of medicine to any pregnant woman, with a view to destroy the child. Further, I will comport myself and use my knowledge in a godly manner.

—Ludwig Edelstein, From The Hippocratic Oath

One of the more disturbing details of the Nazi period is that physicians betrayed their Hippocratic oath and actively participated in mass genocide. Many people, however, are unaware that eugenics was not a product of Nazi ideology; rather, eugenic ideas that were being circulated in the Weimar period were largely responsible for shaping National Socialist ideas about racial purity. This essay reveals how medical hygiene films were used both in the Weimar and Nazi periods as propaganda tools to indoctrinate the German people about the dangers of “incurable” diseases and to compel them to adopt eugenic policies. In particular, I am interested in the role these films played in establishing an authoritative role for the genetics doctor as qualified to “treat” these diseases and thus save the body politic from further contamination. This message is conveyed through a curious mix of films with both narrative and documentary features that highlight the dangers of incurable diseases. These films are presented with scientific legitimacy, providing visual evidence of various physical ailments and symptoms. While the documentary elements establish a sense of scientific validity, the narrative elements play on the audience’s emotions regarding the ominous dangers posed by the spread of genetically transmitted diseases that lead to further degradation of the races.

I begin my discussion with a consideration of the historical background that gave rise to the idea of genetic diseases as a condition of
racial impurity and the role assigned to the genetics doctor in identifying, classifying, and treating—typically through sterilization—these conditions in the Weimar period. My analysis will include a discussion of various theories and proposed treatments of genetic conditions found in Weimar treatises on racial hygiene, including works by Alfred Hoche, Rudolf Binding, Eugen Fischer, and Fritz Lenz, as well as Walter Ruttmann’s narrative film with documentary footage, *Feind im Blut* (Enemy in the Blood, 1931). Weimar’s understanding of the genetics doctor persisted in the racial hygiene films from the early Nazi period, as is evident in the short narrative film *Das Erbe* (The Inheritance, 1935) and the documentary film with narrative scenes *Opfer der Vergangenheit* (Victim of the Past, 1936–37). The *Erbarzt* (genetics doctor) exemplifies the Nazis’ attempt to rid German culture of those deemed to be either psychologically or biologically inferior. Nazi propaganda promoted the idea that it was wasteful to use public funds to support asylums to treat individuals who were suffering from an incurable genetic condition when this money could be put to better use by improving the living conditions of healthy German citizens. The issue of the genetically “inferior” was thus an issue of national concern affecting the welfare of the entire state.

**Weimar’s Eugenics**

The modern genetic doctor can be traced to the racial hygiene movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. Based on the Anglo-American eugenics movement, German scientists and medical doctors supported the belief that individuals and races were not equal. Their theory attempted to give scientific legitimacy to the idea that individuals with psychological or medical “defects” were to be stopped from procreating, whereas “healthy” individuals should be encouraged to bear children. In *Essays upon Heredity and Kindred Biological Problems* (1892), the German biologist August Weismann notes that the characteristics that make up our species can only be maintained by natural selection: “every part of the organism is maintained at the level it has reached only by means of the continued activity of natural selection, and . . . any intermission of this activity leads to a diminution.” The German physician Alfred Ploetz also supported the ideas of the early racial hygiene movement with his 1895 work *Die Tüchtigkeit unserer Rasse und der Schutz der Schwachen* (The Fitness of Our Race and the Protection of the Weak). For Ploetz, *Rassenhygiene* (race hygiene) was paramount, and he defined race as any group living together for generations with common bodily and spiritual characteristics. If the fit are to survive, then weak members of society must be regulated so they do not threaten the community. Racial purity and the good of the community must be prioritized over the rights of the individual.
Prior to 1918 the eugenics movement in Germany had adherents from across the political spectrum. Some of the more famous scientists involved with the German racial hygiene movement include Fritz Lenz, Eugen Fischer, and Ernst Bauer, all with medical degrees and working across a wide range of disciplines including anthropology and psychiatry.9 The intention of these doctors was to support the procreation of the healthy members of society and to curtail births from groups deemed to be asocial, criminal, or mentally disabled. The role of the genetic doctor would become more prominent after Germany’s loss in the First World War. Burdened with the “stab in the back” myth and a general distrust of Jews and communists, the Weimar Republic developed a scapegoat mentality in targeting minority groups and women as unfit members of society.10 Weimar’s medical community produced a substantial number of essays and books covering the supposed racial health of the German people with specific emphasis on the “unhealthy” other.

The legal analyst Karl Binding and the psychiatrist Alfred Hoche promoted one of the more incendiary racial hygienic claims in *Die Freigabe der Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens* (Permission for the Destruction of Life Unworthy of Life, 1920).11 Binding compared fit German soldiers, who died in the First World War, with the mentally ill.12 Hoche noted that the latter group, who were deemed “incurable idiots,” felt no suffering and deserved no pity; they were not worth the cost of their care.13 According to Binding, a state mechanism should determine the extent of the person’s mental illness. A panel consisting of a doctor, psychiatrist, and lawyer would then recommend the “euthanizing” of the individual in question if he or she did not meet the minimum requirements.14 Binding and Hoche represent the extreme end of the eugenics debate. A somewhat more moderate view was advanced by Erwin Baur, Eugen Fischer, and Fritz Lenz in their popular two-volume work *Grundriß der menschlichen Erblichkeitlehre und Rassenhygiene* (Foundations of Human Genetics and Racial Hygiene, 1921). These men were respected scientists in the growing field of eugenics. Baur was an established plant geneticist, and Fischer, a career anthropologist, directed the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute (KWI) for Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics in 1927. A trained human geneticist, Lenz held the first chair for racial hygiene at the University of Munich in 1923 and later directed the Department of Anthropology at the KWI.15

The introduction to the first volume of *Grundriß* establishes the premise of the eugenics movement: changes in racial composition over time degrade the purity of the race, resulting in the sickness of an entire people. In order to avoid this condition, the authors caution that one must study the anatomy, physiology, psychology, and sociology of a people.16 Baur and Fischer posit that both the individual and the race follow hereditary patterns that can be studied over time. Lenz, an internationally
famous hereditary physician with six hundred publications to his name, discusses the idea of illness as the inability of an individual to operate in society. According to Lenz, “volle Gesundheit bezeichnet den Zustand der vollen Anpassung” (full health indicates the condition of full adaptation), and the farther the individual moves from this norm, the more he or she can be deemed sick.

The first volume of Grundriß sets up the theoretical markers of heredity in forming the individual and the race. In the second volume, Lenz provides practical advice on how to use psychological and physiological markers to promote the health of the individual and of the race. Lenz begins with physical conditions that allegedly are passed on by heredity (tuberculosis, syphilis, alcoholism, and race characteristics). He informs us that in nature, illness would be “weeded out” through natural selection, insofar as weak animals would not reach the stage of procreation owing to predators, weather, etc. In modern society, this natural selection does not occur, and individuals with the aforementioned illnesses, as well as illnesses such as nervous diseases, slight “feeblemindedness,” and epilepsy, can procreate and weaken the race. Lenz addresses the idea of negative selection, including laws forbidding certain individuals the right to procreate, as well as the medical certification to control marriage license. The state’s role in this process is an important one, namely, that the mentally ill, criminals, the feebleminded, vagabonds, alcoholics, and the physically handicapped would be forcibly placed in asylums or given the option to be sterilized. Lenz comments that the Spartans were more humane in casting off their “damaged” children than is the modern-day practice of “breeding” these children because we feel sorry for them. To encourage racial purity, Lenz argues for laws to be put in place in order to convince desirable or healthy married couples to procreate. To this end, the state could offer financial incentives for household allowances, as well as stipends for children. Undesirable individuals involved in miscegenation would not receive these allowances from the state. Lenz additionally argues that a program of racial hygiene cannot be undertaken without the support of the medical community. All physicians should receive financial support from the state in order to allow them to work on racial hygiene rather than transmittable diseases.

Lenz’s idea that every doctor was a genetics doctor had significant support in Weimar. In Berlin in 1925, racial hygienists founded the Deutscher Bund für Volksaufartung und Erbkunde (German League for National Regeneration and Heredity) for the purpose of education. National regeneration was the key slogan, noted in the League’s three journals, which had a significant influence in government circles. In coordination with the Catholic Center Party, the biologist Hermann Muckermann also advocated for eugenic causes. In the 1931 pamphlet Das Kommende Geschlecht: Zeitschrift für Eugenik Ergebnisse der Forschung
(The Coming Sex: Journal for Eugenic Research Results), Muckermann expresses the idea that every doctor must act as a eugenics marriage counselor, with couples providing documents to insure the creation of healthy offspring. Muckermann also discouraged the breeding of the inferior and the unhealthy. He vehemently opposed interracial marriages and argued for state-sponsored sterilization of these couples.27

Eugenics was supported by both mainstream political parties and far-right-wing circles, such as Adolf Hitler’s National Socialist German Workers Party (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, NSDAP). In Mein Kampf (1925), specifically in the chapters “Causes of Collapse” and “The State,” Hitler supports race hygiene by arguing that race must form the foundation of the state. According to Hitler, only healthy individuals should have children: “Wer körperlich und geistig nicht gesund und würdig ist, darf sein Leid nicht im Körper seines Kindes verewigen” (Those who are physically and mentally unhealthy and unworthy should not perpetuate their suffering in the body of their children).28 Modern medical professionals should render the sick and genetically damaged sterile. Those with “syphilis, tuberculosis, hereditary diseases, cripples, and cretins” would be forcibly sterilized so as not to reproduce.29 Conversely, healthy women should be encouraged to procreate through subsidies from the state.30

Lenz comments on Hitler’s ideas regarding racial hygiene, noting Hitler’s use of writings by Baur, Fischer, and Lenz and suggesting that Hitler’s political treatise is an extension of his own work on racial hygiene.31 Although Lenz does not approve of Hitler’s depiction of a conflict between the superior Aryan race and its Jewish nemesis, he does affirm his belief in the protection of the purity of race.32 For Lenz, it is a positive development that a popular political party would consider racial hygiene central to a German national agenda.33 Weimar racial hygiene ideas, proposed by Weimar doctors and scientists such as Lenz, gained support across the political spectrum, with lobbyists advocating for compulsory sterilization of inferiors during the Depression. In 1932, the Prussian Health Council brought forward a sterilization bill, with the geneticist Ernst Rüdin offering a proposal not unlike the 1933 Nazi sterilization law.34 With left-leaning doctors as well as National Socialists supporting the idea of compulsory sterilization, the stage was set for harsh measures against so-called inferiors enacted after the Nazi takeover in 1933.

Weimar Hygiene Films

Eugenics was a popular theory in the public discourse following Germany’s defeat in the First World War. Social hygiene films during the Weimar period reflected a common theme that the country had lost its
healthy citizens on the battlefield and was left with many “deformed”
individuals back home. Weimar hygiene films varied in format from sci-
centific educational films to popular entertainment films. Notable exam-
ples include E. A. Dupont’s Alkohol (1919), Friedrich Zelnik’s Paradies
der Der Dirnen/Leichtsinn und Lebewelt (Paradise of Whores/Recklessness
and Fast Living, 1919), and Richard Oswald’s Prostitution (1919).35
The popularity of these hygiene films continued throughout the Weimar
period with widespread interest in the latter half. Films such as Adolf
Trotz’s Fluch der Vererbung (Curse of Heredity, 1927), Ulrich Schulz
and Wolfram Junghans’s Natur und Liebe: Vom Urtier zum Menschen
(Nature and Love, 1926–27), and Gustav Ucicky’s Vererbte Triebe: Der
Kampf ums neue Geschlecht (Hereditary Instincts, 1929) reflect a Dar-
winian perspective according to which health and illness are determined
solely by genetic makeup.

Against the background of such racial hygiene films, Walter Rutt-
mann’s antisypilis, Swiss-German coproduction Feind im Blut was made
as a narrative film with documentary elements and served as an exam-
ple of how the state fostered eugenic ideas in popular culture.36 Feind
was commissioned by both the Deutsche Gesellschaft zur Bekämpfung
der Geschlechtskrankheiten (German Society for the Fight against Sex-
ual Diseases) and the Schweizerische Gesellschaft zur Bekämpfung der
Geschlechtskrankheiten (Swiss Society for the Fight against Sexual Dis-
ees) and premiered in Berlin on April 17, 1931, and in Basel on April
18, 1931.37 Michael Cowan notes that the film allowed Weimar specta-
tors a free space to manage their own health through the promotion of
individual initiative.38 The film presents Weimar society with an inverted
notion of the physician as racial hygienicist rather than healer of the sick,
as sworn in the Hippocratic oath. The doctor in Feind represents the
healthy faction of the body politic as responsible for defining and regulat-
ing the inferior and the sick.

As Sander Gilman notes, medicine categorizes and defines pathol-
ogy,39 and the medical doctor must decipher the code of illness in order
to mark boundaries between the healthy and the sick.40 Medical teach-
ings must uncover a sign to establish illness, with the purpose to “isolate,
stigmatize and control.”41 In Feind, there is a concerted effort to catego-
rize and control through tracking indicators of illness. We see the physi-
cian delivering a detailed lecture about the symptoms of syphilis before
an auditorium of university students. Within the frame of this pseudo-
documentary format lies a dramatic story of three intertwined individuals
and their fight against syphilis. The professor documents the dangers of
passing on the disease through images of mentally ill children who have
become wards of the state. Syphilis is depicted as a genetically incurable
illness through scenes at the beginning and ending of the film featur-
ving healthy and sick youngsters, with particular focus on the syphilitic
children’s ward. These scenes function in tandem with the birth of a couple’s syphilitic child. Throughout the film, disease is categorized, recognized, and thus controlled through a process of the hierarchical teachings of the genetics doctor.

Ruttmann utilizes an opening montage of a laughing child and healthy fruit, followed by worm-infested apples placed next to images of mentally ill children in an asylum to suggest that sickness in humans and nature is nonreversible. The scene ends with obscure wax faces seemingly in decay. This comparison of health and illness is followed by a history of the spread of syphilis. Extra diegetic sounds of Hilfe! Hilfe! (Help! Help!) accompany a historical summary of the spread of syphilis from the discovery of America to the present day of 1931. Large dates on the screen are interspersed with a bubbling puddle of black festering disease. A narrator describes the disease’s unstoppable path, carried by human urges (sexual orgy) that seem to be a permanent historical fixture. In a juxtaposition of sickness and health, the former is thwarted by German scientists noted in the film: Albert Neisser, Fritz Schaudinn, and Paul Ehrlich. After this montage, we encounter the white-coated professor providing detailed descriptions of syphilis and gonorrhea to a group of medical students at the university. Slides depict the rapid decline of the individual when the illness is not caught in time. A woman with syphilis is brought in for an
examination during the lecture and the students view red marks covering her exposed chest. Wax masks of sick and deformed individuals are passed around the room and are displayed in cabinets in the sick ward. In the lecture segments, the doctor provides graphs and animated examples of the spread of syphilis.

The doctor’s expertise in the classroom emphasizes the notion that health must be guarded through checkups in order to ward off the danger of syphilitic exposure. The imagery and action of the film give the viewer the sense of being a patient in an extended medical examination. In this sense, Cowan notes: "The animated ‘statistical’ drawings in *Feind im Blut* must be seen in relation to Ruttmann’s cross-sectional montage. They teach us how to read that montage: i.e. to identify individual bodies as part of a statistical group or population susceptible to syphilis, to identify individual symptoms." The doctor’s concerns about the spread of syphilis are further supported in the film’s dramatic narrative. A medical student (Wolfgang Klein), in attendance at the doctor’s lectures, has an affair with a woman who, unbeknown to him, is a prostitute, patronized by a machinist (Gerhard Bienert) whose wife (Ilse Stobrawa) is pregnant. The medical student meets his older friend (Helmut Krauss) and they go out. The evening ends with the friend leaving the nightclub with a prostitute. The dance hall scene cuts to a working-class beer hall, where the patrons are shown to act in a drunken and lascivious manner. The dank, winding streets seen in the early morning hours show the remains of the evening’s bestial behavior. The message is clear: the conditions are ripe in the licentious urban environment for infectious disease to spread. This is supported by the fact that the friend is found to have contracted a sexually transmitted disease.

Racial hygienists of the Weimar period noted the grave dangers of sexually transmittable diseases. In Baur, Fischer, and Lenz (1921), the latter reports that 10 percent of the contemporary German population was infected with syphilis and as much as 60 percent of men in Berlin had the disease. Lenz reads these high numbers as a factor that disrupts the birth of healthy children. Many individuals with syphilis did not marry since they believed that any offspring would not be viable. Although syphilis could be treated if it was detected at onset, individuals did not always seek immediate medical attention, and in later stages the disease was difficult to arrest. According to Lenz, these grim statistics lead to a diminished quality of life and result in difficulties for families.

Lenz’s emphasis on the fate of the children infected in the womb is illustrated in *Feind*. The most visually disturbing parts of the film follow the prognosis that physical illness is passed down to the children. In the tour of the syphilitic ward, the doctor gives his students a close look at the sick children who are offspring of parents infected with a sexually transmitted disease. The doctor notes that 7,500 syphilitic children are
born every year in Germany, with the disease often beginning with a rash, and later resulting in feeblemindedness and paralysis. The sick youngsters, depicted in images taken from the department for syphilitic and neurotic children, are captured in frenetic or impaired movement. Following these documentary segments, the film depicts the dramatic suicide of the mechanic’s wife after she gives birth to a syphilitic child. The latter is brought to the children’s ward (where we earlier saw his image) to live out his condemned life. Ruttmann repeatedly shows images of never-ending cots filled with ill children. Like the pocked apples at the beginning, the film’s denouement suggests that there is no cure for the syphilitic child. The latter’s markings paired with the stigma of institutionalization signal the separation of the ill from the healthy body.

Feind is defined from beginning to end by the teachings of the medical professional. The professor who is featured as primary lecturer, and whose lectures are interspersed with narrative actions that validate his opinions, assumes an authoritative role throughout the film. The intensity of the images of sickness begin with the initial shots of the asylum and extend to depictions of the syphilitic children’s ward. The final scene begins with healthy children on a snowy mountain, who are then joined by the medical student and his chaste girlfriend. This pairing symbolizes the importance of matching healthy individuals with one another through careful scientific examination in order to assure healthy offspring. The medical student, who conscientiously made a doctor’s appointment as soon as he learned he had been with a prostitute, has been deemed healthy, as has his girlfriend, who is portrayed as the symbol of a diligent and pure woman, a secretary who refuses to take part in the nightlife. The couple, in turn, will avoid hereditary illness. The site of the mountain signifies the pristine atmosphere indicative of the health and vitality of the German people. The student will work toward the health of his people as a future doctor. The final scene calls to mind Muckermann’s essay on marriage counseling in Weimar, stipulating that couples should see a doctor to check for health issues. Muckermann quotes a Weimar pamphlet on marriage counseling: “Deutscher, denk an Deine und Deiner Kinder Gesundheit” (German, think about your health and that of your children).

Nazi Racial Hygiene Films

With the Nazi rise to power in January 1933, laws regarding supposed hereditary illness were quickly enacted, building on the racial hygiene theories developed during the Weimar era. On June 28, 1933, Reich Interior Minister Wilhelm Frick addressed the Committee on Questions of Population and Racial Policy, purporting that 20 percent of the German population was erbbiologisch geschädigt (hereditarily damaged). According to Frick, “undesirables” should not be allowed to procreate. The Gesetz
zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses (Law for the Protection against Hereditarily Diseased Offspring) was passed on July 14, 1933, stipulating that an individual must be sterilized if he or she suffered from any one of the specified genetic illnesses, including feeblemindedness, schizophrenia, and severe depression. All doctors in the Third Reich functioned as genetics doctors and were ordered to turn over individuals with Erbleiden (hereditary weakness). Hereditary courts staffed by doctors would then make the final decision on sterilization.

In June 1934, in the first edition of the medical journal Der Erbarzt, a supplement to the journal Deutsches Ärzteblatt, the editor of the volume and biologist Otmar von Verschuer notes that the doctor must not regard the patient as an individual person, but instead as a member of a race and a people. The life of the Volkskörper (people’s body) must be privileged in a doctor’s quest for Erbgesundheitspflege (hereditary and racial health). It is the doctor who must decide who is hereditarily healthy and who is ill. In an effort to support the genetics doctor, courses on hereditary illness and race were made available for all medical personnel. Additionally, the new journal Der Erbarzt would cover hereditary research and praxis to inform doctors on specific illnesses. The journal would also educate doctors on hereditary assessment, including practical questions concerning sterilization and the various laws laid down by the state and party. Fischer made the prediction in 1933 that hereditary clinics would soon be as numerous as eye clinics or children’s clinics in Nazi Germany.

In addition to being responsible for identifying hereditary illnesses, doctors were in charge of safeguarding racial purity in marriage. Early laws concerning these issues included the Gesetz zum Schutze des deutschen Blutes und der deutschen Ehre (Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor, September 15, 1935), which prohibited marriage between Jews and Germans, and the Gesetz zum Schutze der Erbgesundheit des deutschen Volkes (Law for the Protection of the Hereditary Health of the German Volk, October 18, 1935), which regulated marriage on hereditary grounds. With the close temporal proximity of these laws passed in fall 1935, the insinuation was that race was also a hereditary disease, and that the immediate threat was the Jew. Frick addressed the Committee on Questions of Population and Racial Policy, noting that “degenerates” were immigrating at an unacceptable rate to Germany. Frick proclaimed that these high numbers of incoming Jews would create both a mixed and degenerate offspring that threatened the health of the German people.

In Der Erbarzt, von Verschuer supported the claim that the Jew was a dangerous carrier of disease that would be inherited by any offspring. He further noted the need for legal measures in securing racial hygiene and thus provided a medical basis in legitimating the anti-Jewish Civil Service and immigration restrictions. Although ethnic groups were included
under the sterilization policy, Hitler felt that there was little reason to improve “alien races” by subjecting them to sterilization. Specifically, it was determined that many Eastern European Jews were feebleminded, and they were forcibly sterilized. German Jews were also found to be schizophrenic, depressive, and suicidal, and were also sterilized under law. Jews in asylums or even those who visited physicians for mental illness were candidates for sterilization.

The racial hygiene films of the Nazi era took their cues from this political legislation, including support for sterilization, racial purity, and hereditary health. Similar to late Weimar hygiene films like *Feind*, Nazi films reflected political support for separating the sick from the healthy. Both late Weimar and early Nazi hygiene films utilized asylum footage of the mentally “ill,” often placing these images next to the figure of the doctor as the purveyor of health. Much of the asylum footage used for the films was shot in the Berlin area at the institutions in Dalldorf, Potsdam, and Buch, as well as at other institutions like Wiesloch near Heidelberg. Early Third Reich racial hygiene films included *Sünden der Väter* (Sins of the Fathers, 1935), *Abseits vom Wege* (Off Track, 1935), *Erbkrank* (Hereditarily Ill, 1936), and *Alles Leben ist Kampf* (All Life Is Struggle, 1937), among others, these films directed and produced by Herbert Gerdes from the Rassenpolitischen Amt (Racial Political Office).

The early race hygiene film *Das Erbe* (The Inheritance, 1935) follows the format of utilizing images from mental institutions. The film was produced by the Department of the Reich Head of Agriculture and written and directed by Walter Lüddecke and I. C. Hartmann. Rated “staatspolitisch wertvoll” (politically valuable), the film premiered on October 28, 1935, with the *Film Kurier* praising the production as “außerordentlich aufschlußreich und sehr zu begrüßen” (extremely informative and much welcomed). It was screened widely in cinemas and was made available to schools. Like many late Weimar and early Nazi racial hygiene films, *Das Erbe* features the scientist or doctor, who is responsible for determining the boundaries of health and illness.

*Das Erbe* begins with the Darwinian logic of survival of the fittest. A worldly doctor staffs a laboratory with other physicians and a blonde female assistant, Fräulein Volkmann. The doctor explains to her why two stag beetles must kill each other, delivering the lesson that the stronger survives. Fräulein Volkmann is then invited to view a film that depicts the strong surviving in nature. Here she sees the terrible retribution of nature on the sick: the cat will eat the bird, the dog will capture the rabbit, and so on. And just as horses and dogs are bred for special strengths, humans must consider the effects of miscegenation on the purity of the racial makeup and how to maintain racial purity when breeding.

In the beginning of *Das Erbe*, we also encounter two other doctors in the dark auditorium explaining to Fräulein Volkmann the significance
of hereditary illness as represented in the medical documentary they are watching. They discuss the case of US Lieutenant Kallikak, who has two distinct branches in his family tree: one filled with healthy family members through a pairing with his wife, and the other with unhealthy family members created through pairing with a mistress.66 After establishing the opposition of physical and psychological health through heredity (dogs, horses, Kallikak’s family tree), a series of images of the mentally and physically ill from the asylum are presented. The extended images of distorted faces are finally wiped away by a series of healthy bodies including marching girls and boys and a happy family.

_Das Erbe_ underscores the authoritative role of the genetics doctor in determining incurable diseases. While the two physicians are lecturing about health in the auditorium, viewers are presented with shots depicting illness: asylum inhabitants are depicted in a series of dissolves, with faces screaming or gazing into the distance. Men with robes and shaved heads exhibit confused expressions. Profiles of children with swollen eyes and damaged lips stare blankly ahead. The film’s intertitle notes that these individuals are unhealthy and unworthy and that they should not perpetuate these traits by propagating. These images and descriptions resemble those found in contemporary medical journals.67 _Das Erbe_’s doctors are upheld as arbiters of science and truth who are responsible for teaching the public, which is represented by Fräulein Volkmann and stands in for the witnessing spectator. The self-reflexivity of foregrounding the film within a film uncovers the filmic apparatus; film has the ability to capture evidence and thus serves to validate its authenticity. In _Das Erbe_, disturbing documentary images of psychological and physical illness break into the narrative drama of doctor and assistant. The mixed form combining documentary and dramatic narrative thus allows the terror-inducing racial impurity to be captured through both the authenticity of image and the tension of dramatic action.

The genetics doctor is also featured in the film _Opfer der Vergangenheit_. Released by the Racial Political Office and the Reich Propaganda Ministry, _Opfer_ premiered in Berlin at the Ufa-Pavilion in Nollendorfplatz in April 1937. _Opfer_ was the extended sound version of the short documentary film _Erbkrank_, which had received special notice by Hitler.68 Directed by Gernot Bock-Stieber, and based on a script by the medical doctor Rudolf Frercks, a member of the Racial Political Office, _Opfer_ was rated “staatspolitisch wertvoll” and had mandatory screenings in 5,300 German cinemas.69 It was also available in schools for students fourteen years and older.70 In the documentary film, images of asylum patients are juxtaposed with shots of the caring asylum doctor. The penultimate scene highlights the importance of marriage counseling in maintaining racial purity. A couple seeks out the doctor’s opinion about their
hereditary health. With a portrait of Hitler hanging in the waiting room, the doctor’s office becomes an arm of the Nazi Party.

*Opfer* presents the overarching theme that the hereditarily diseased are undesirable and should not be allowed to procreate. This theme is conveyed through tension between beauty and health versus “ugliness,” a dynamic often found in the medical classification of the insane. The beauty of nature is set against images of “Idioten” (idiots) who cannot communicate. The documentary section of the film begins with a dark sky, waves, and a storm breaking, setting the atmosphere for the danger lurking in the asylum. In a sunny natural setting, the narrator introduces the weak, who we are told are unfit to survive. Rows of disfigured faces are followed by a man in a field of wildflowers who is thrashing his hands. Subsequent images are foreboding: we are drawn into a world of the unhealthy where a man has a child’s body and a woman in a straightjacket eats grass. The narrator tells us that these situations could have been avoided if the sick did not reproduce. The film’s meaning is unequivocal: follow the rules of nature by removing *Unkraut* (weeds) in order to insure blooming health.

Once again, there is a clear message that the doctor is authoritative in determining who is fit to live. The film informs us that there is one doctor for every two hundred patients in the asylum and that these patients often live to old age. We follow one of these doctors as he makes his daily rounds interviewing the patients. His patience and knowledge are juxtaposed to the patients’ speech, which is often incomprehensible or grandiose. The narrator also informs us that race is exposed in these interviews when the doctor speaks with a woman typecast as Jewish. The doctor stands silently to the left as the woman with dark curly hair props her hands on her hips, mentioning the Jewish personalities Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx. The conflation of Jewishness with illness is confirmed later in the film when the narrator tells us that a high percentage of mentally ill patients come from the Jewish race and thus pose a particular burden on publically funded institutions.

The end of the film’s documentary section features a good looking young doctor standing tall as the narrator promises that he will protect the people against hereditary illness. The doctor’s image is then replaced by an emaciated naked woman, tucked in a ball and rolling on a bed. The calm doctor in his lab coat is set against the frenetic woman in this sequence, creating the opposition of good and beauty versus evil and ugliness. Ultimately, *Opfer* justifies the Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkran-ken Nachwuchses. The doctor as the representative of health will protect the people against hereditary illness. The images of illness in the film, of those individuals crawling, scurrying across the yard, or sitting around morosely, are meant to depict an ugliness that is a sign of mental disease.
The role of the doctor in stopping hereditary illness through marriage certification is a key component in *Opfer*'s narrative sequence. The penultimate scene involves the doctor’s depiction as hereditary mentor, featuring a young man and woman who consult with him on their health. The doctor notes that a couple does not just want to have children, but they want to create “gesunde wertvolle Menschen” (healthy worthwhile people). The doctor must approve both members of the pair for their hereditary soundness before certifying their union. When the doctor congratulates the couple, he lets them know that they are a pair he can be proud of, substantiated by a cut to a nurse filing paperwork. The spectator is privy to her or his duty should the need arise. In contradiction to the documentary scenes where the viewer is forced to witness asylum members “through the spyholes on the doors of cells in secure wards or the bars of psychiatric prisons,” the narrative section in the doctor’s office evokes a feeling of peace and harmony with its open and bright rooms. Here the doctor is deemed a healer and a friend, a person with whom the bride is happy to consult.

This idea of the doctor as a hereditary policeman and protector of the people promoted discussion among physicians in early Nazi Germany. The medical doctor Walter Gmelin, writing in the journal *Ärztliche Rundschau*, noted that various documentation had to be provided to insure the hereditary health of the people, including doctor’s reports, medical histories, letters, photographs, fingerprints, hair, and handwriting samples. The Gesetz zum Schutze der Erbgesundheit des deutschen Volkes, or the Marriage Law, was already in effect when the film *Opfer* was completed, and stipulated that both partners had to present a certification from the Department of Health for marriage eligibility. Marriage would be denied if either party was mentally ill or carried a hereditary disease. One of the final sequences in *Opfer* depicts an oversized image of a doctor placed next to a smaller image of a “hereditarily ill” patient. The doctor’s large size infantilizes the patient. This image is followed by the voiceover that the sick should not live amongst the healthy. The film’s last segments capture the medical professional’s overwhelming service to the state in enforcing the power of the healthy over the sick.

**Conclusion**

As is evident from the preceding discussion, film played an important role in establishing the physician as a hereditary policeman, responsible for saving the society from the incurable and thus maintaining the genetic health of the wider population. The ideology of genetic health, perpetuated in the Weimar period was formalized by the Nazis in 1940–41 through the Aktion T-4 program. Under the Nazi eugenic program, some two hundred thousand individuals diagnosed as incurably sick, “life unworthy of
life,” were exterminated. Additionally, Nazi propaganda adopted the constructs of genetic diseases as a means of marginalizing racial groups who were labeled as afflicted with incurable diseases and consequently were draining the public resources. The history of eugenics preceding the Nazis rise to power challenges us to rethink the atrocities committed under the Third Reich as the actions of several thousand sociopaths. Likewise, we are challenged to rethink the supposed objectivity of scientists and physicians in any time or place in which doctors could support killing under the pretense of preserving health.

Notes

1 Ludwig Edelstein, *From The Hippocratic Oath: Text, Translation, and Interpretation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1943), 56.
2 For information on Nazi medicine in the Third Reich, see Francis R. Nicosia and Jonathan Huener, “Introduction,” in *Medicine and Medical Ethics in Nazi Germany: Origins, Practices, Legacies*, ed. Francis R. Nicosia and Jonathan Huener (New York: Berghahn, 2008), 1–12. Nicosia and Huener note that although not all German physicians during the Third Reich “mutilated humans as subjects for medical experiments [or] murdered them,” these doctors practiced in a medical profession that “pursued racist goals based in large measure on eugenic theory and practice” (5). Thus, doctors were complicit in crimes of the state.
3 It goes without saying throughout the paper that the genetics doctor and the science of eugenics employ dubious notions of illness and health and spurious science regarding the transmissibility of disease and the so-called degradation of a race by way of indiscriminate propagation. I completely denounce the practices employed and the underlying premises of the eugenics movement. Rather than qualifying each term throughout the paper, for example, illness, health, racial purity, racial impurity, degenerates, inferior, incurable, degradation, defects, idiots, feeblemindedness, damaged, breeding, undesirables, beauty, ugliness, euthanasization, and creatures, I will be using them with the understanding that these terms are utilized in their historical sense as defined by the medical and scientific discourse during the periods discussed.
7 Ploetz, *Grundlinien einer Rassen Hygiene*, 4.
See Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, vol. 1, *Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, trans. Stephen Conway (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), ix–xvii. Theweleit reveals that the Freikorps soldiers were hired by the Social Democratic government to hunt communists, thus alienating the far left and solidifying the gulf between the government and far-right-wing groups.


12 Binding and Hoche, *Die Freigabe der Vernichtung*, 27.

13 Binding and Hoche, *Die Freigabe der Vernichtung*, 32, 57.


15 With four editions, the third edition translated into English in 1931, *Grundriß* offered both theoretical and practical examples supporting the notion that human psychological and physical traits were racially determined. The two-volume set was reviewed by three hundred professional journals, with many of these originating in non-German speaking countries. See Weiss, “German Eugenics, 1890–1933,” 28.


27 Hermann Muckermann, “Ursprung und Entwicklung der Eheberatung (Tatsächliches und Kritisches),” *Das Kommende Geschlecht: Zeitschrift für Eugenie Ergebnisse der Forschung* 6, nos. 1–2 (1931): 3–6, 18. In 1923, there were marriage clinics in Munich, Halle, and Dresden. In 1925, “hereditary counseling clinics” were set up by the anthropologist Fischer at the Freiburg Anatomie.
cal Institute. Marriage counseling became part of municipal welfare and by 1928 there were 224 clinics in Prussia, with other states such as Bremen and Saxony following Prussia’s lead. See Paul Weindling, *Health, Race and German Politics between National Unification and Nazism, 1870–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 424–26. Weindling points out that these clinics were forerunners of the Nazi clinics for “heredity and racial welfare” (430).


32 Lenz, “Die Stellung des Nationalsozialismus zur Rassenhygiene,” 303. After 1933, Lenz had no trouble accepting the ideas of race presented by the Nazi state. He was promoted to lead the Department of Anthropology at the KWI, serving as the institute director until 1942.

33 Lenz, “Die Stellung des Nationalsozialismus zur Rassenhygiene,” 308.


36 Alongside *Feind im Blut*, Ruttmann’s Nazi propaganda film *Blut und Boden: Grundlagen zum neuen Reich* (Blood and Soil: Fundamentals for the New Reich, 1933) shows his early interest in biopolitics.


41 Gilman, *Disease and Representation*, 9.
42 These German scientists investigated the diseases of gonorrhea or syphilis. Albert Ludwig Sigesmund Neisser (1855–1916) discovered the causative agent of gonorrhea. Fritz Richard Schaudinn (1871–1906) codiscovered with Erich Hoffmann the causative agent of syphilis. Paul Ehrlich (1854–1915) uncovered the first effective treatment of syphilis.
43 Cowan discusses the significance of the wax masks and notes that the scientific gaze was keyed on every face in order to uncover pathology. See Cowan, *Walter Ruttmann and the Cinema of Multiplicity*, 114–16.
44 Cowan, *Walter Ruttmann and the Cinema of Multiplicity*, 112. Cowan also notes how the film acts as a marker for the role of cinema in medical education: “This was, in fact, the very period in which film was beginning to find widespread usage in the medical establishment as a means of illustrating bodily processes and teaching medical procedures, and Ruttmann’s film was clearly also about the role that cinema could play in medical education” (113).
47 For more information on asylums in Weimar Germany, see Burleigh, *Death and Deliverance*, 25–42.
53 Otmar von Verschuer, “‘Der Erbarzt’- zur Einführung,” *Der Erbarzt* 1, no. 1 (June 1934): 1.
54 Verschuer, “‘Der Erbarzt’- zur Einführung,” 2.
55 Verschuer, “‘Der Erbarzt’- zur Einführung,” 2.
59 Frick, Bevölkerrungs und Rassenpolitik, 7.
60 Verschuer, “‘Der Erbarzt’- zur Einführung,” 2.
62 Henry Friedlander, “From ‘Euthanasia’ to the ‘Final Solution,’” in Kuntz, Deadly Medicine, 171.
63 Karl Ludwig Rost, Sterilisation und Euthanasie im Film des “Dritten Reiches”: Nationalsozialistische Propaganda in ihrer Beziehung zu rassenhygienischen Massnahmen des NS-Staates (Husum: Matthiesen Verlag, 1987), 61.
64 Qtd. in Rost, Sterilisation und Euthanasie, 65.
65 Rost, Sterilisation und Euthanasie, 63.
66 An illustration of Kallikak’s family tree is available in the 1924 educational booklet Foundations of Racial Hygiene. See Weiss, “German Eugenics, 1890–1933,” 25.
68 Rost, Sterilisation und Euthanasie, 63.
69 For coverage of Opfer der Vergangenheit, see Karl Heinz Roth, “Film Propaganda für die Vernichtung der Geisteskranken und Behinderten im ‘Dritten Reich,’” in Reform und Gewissen: “Euthanasie” im Dienst des Fortschritts, ed. Götz Aly, Karl Friedrich Masuhr, Maria Lehmann, Karl Heinz Roth, and Ulrich Schultz (Berlin: Rotbuch Verlag, 1985), 130–32. Roth (132) notes that the film was not well received by the public: “Das Publikum blieb aus” (The public stayed away).
70 Rost, Sterilisation und Euthanasie, 81.
71 Gilman, Picturing Health and Illness, 34–36.
72 Burleigh notes that people with physical and mental disabilities are “elided” with common criminals: “The walls between the asylum and the prison become suggestively transparent.” See Burleigh, Death and Deliverance, 193–94.
73 Gilman, Picturing Health and Illness, 53.
74 Burleigh, Death and Deliverance, 191.
77 Friedlander, “From ‘Euthanasia’ to the ‘Final Solution,’” 75. T-4 organizers decided gas was the best method of killing. Doctors gained a general impression of the patients, who were then marked and sent to the gas chamber. After they were gassed, the physicians pronounced them dead. After the “euthanasia” program garnered bad publicity from the German public, the mentally ill were then killed at institutions and hospitals through medication and starvation. Jews were subjected to both sterilization and the T-4 operation (Friedlander, “From ‘Euthanasia’ to the ‘Final Solution,’” 171–77). For more information on T-4, see 155–84.
IN THE NEW CULTURAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT in Germany after 1933, the reuse of existing humorous stereotypes instigated not only laughter with but also laughter at and ultimately ostracism of Jews.¹ Yet explicitly anti-Semitic film comedies such as *Robert und Bertram* (Hans Zerlett, 1939) were rare in the Third Reich. Instead, racial and racist codes adapted from anti-Semitic discourses of the Weimar Republic and earlier periods reverberate in film comedy in more subtle ways. Situating film comedies within their original cultural and discursive contexts can reveal anti-Semitic intertexts that are largely invisible to twenty-first-century spectators. Doing so complicates scholarly understanding of film comedy’s relationship to the era’s anti-Semitism and sheds light on the role of seemingly innocuous film humor in building the Nazi *Volkgemeinschaft* (racial community).

This essay interprets *April! April!* (*April Fools!*), a representative mistaken-identity comedy from 1935, in light of anti-Semitic tropes unfamiliar to most viewers today. Specifically, the film’s anticapitalism dovetails with anti-Semitic currents in German culture of the early 1930s via the figure of the “white Jew.” The term “white Jew” was a common insult in the Third Reich used to criticize non-Jews perceived as corrupted by and behaving like “Jews.” By ridiculing figures that fit this paradigm, *April! April!* discourages behaviors construed by the era’s anti-Semites as “Jewish” and thereby indirectly supports a national identity and community free of perceived “Jewish” influence.

The director of *April! April!*, Detlef Sierck, emigrated to Hollywood in 1937 and became Douglas Sirk. Since the 1970s and the rise of auteurist film criticism, scholars have lauded the stylistic excess and ambiguity of Sirk’s melodramas. Although Sirk’s reputation makes *April! April!* more noteworthy from a film-historical perspective than other run-of-the-mill German comedies made in 1935, the following analysis resists
the temptation to use Sirk’s later oeuvre as an analytical lens. April! April! was not a project controlled by an artistically independent, mature director with a recognizable stylistic signature and social agenda. Instead, it is the first feature film by one of many fledgling directors who rose to fill the vacuum created by the Nazi expulsion of Jews from the German film industry. As such, April! April! is a typical 1935 comedy by the Ufa studio, which not only emulated Hollywood’s studio system, resulting in fairly standardized products, but also functioned at the time under significant Propaganda Ministry influence. Thus April! April! shares many stylistic features, character types, and narrative tropes with other film comedies of the transitional period—features, types, and tropes that had proven themselves commercially viable as well as acceptable to censors. Whether or not so intended by any individual director, some of these stock features of Third Reich film comedy resonated with aspects of Nazi anti-Semitism, reinforcing “‘moral pictures’ . . . underlying configurations of moral thought, perception, and feeling” consistent with Nazi ideology and its envisioned Volksgemeinschaft. April! April! is one example of such a case.

April! April! begins with an April Fool’s hoax on the Lampe family, the pretentious, nouveau riche owners of a noodle factory. After Frau Lampe announces with undue pomp that the Prince of Holsten-Böhlau has ordered dried noodles from them for his next African expedition, an acquaintance makes a fraudulent phone call informing Herr Lampe that the prince will visit their noodle factory the next day. The Lampes announce their good fortune to their acquaintances and the newspapers. After learning in the morning that the phone call was a hoax, the Lampes hire Müller, a traveling salesman, to impersonate the prince and to help them save face. At the same time, the true prince reads about his purportedly upcoming visit in the papers, thinks his secretary forgot to tell him about the appointment, and heads to the Lampe factory. The Lampes mistake the impostor and the prince for each other and confusion ensues, compounded by the Lampes’ idiocy and social ambitions. In addition to wanting to impress her friends with the prince’s visit, Frau Lampe wants her obnoxious daughter, Mirna, to charm and marry him. Meanwhile, Leisegang, a sensitive flour dealer, wants to marry Mirna. As the Lampes humiliate themselves with each faux pas building on the previous one, the true prince falls in love with Mr. Lampe’s secretary, Friedl Bild. Despite Friedl’s hesitations about royalty and her desire to meet a hardworking common man, the prince ultimately convinces her to travel with him to Africa.

April! April! responds to the Weltpirtschaftskrise (world economic crisis), as the Great Depression was called in German, when the stock market crash in the United States resulted in a banking crisis, deflation, decreased production and trade, and mass unemployment in Germany.
Like other Depression-era comedies, it perpetuates Weimar-era film conventions and expresses both anticapitalist sentiments and fantasies of individual economic gain. In his well-known 1927 essay “Little Shop Girls Go to the Movies,” Siegfried Kracauer argues that film, as a capitalist product, both reflects the daydreams of its audiences and protects the status quo. In doing so, film reflects society—not as it appears on the surface, but rather society’s internal mechanisms and the wishes and ideologies that drive it.4 Kracauer describes fantasies of upward social mobility, nestled in comic escapism, similar to Friedl Bild’s trajectory in April! April!, and explains how such fantasies support the capitalist status quo.5 Ulrich von Thiäa describes similar escapism and secretaries marrying “den Bankdirektor als modernen Märchenprinzen” (the bank director as a modern fairy-tale prince) in comedies made between 1930 and 1933.6 Existing analyses of April! April! interpret the film in this vein. Karsten Witte evokes Kracauer’s claim that Rolls Royce owners dream of scullery maids dreaming of rising to their level and frames April! April! as a capitalist projection of young working women’s fantasies.7 Witte describes the film as a “Wunschtraum kleinbürgerlicher Klassenversöhnung” (daydream of petit bourgeois class reconciliation), fulfilled through the rational alliance of noodle and flour manufacturers and the reward of an undemanding secretary with a modern prince charming.8 Katie Trumpener focuses on the representation of servants in April! April! She highlights the contrast between the Lampes’ ineptitude and their staff’s competence and how the film reveals both to be motivated by dreams of the prince’s impending arrival.9 As Kracauer asserts in his essay, and as Trumpener interprets April! April!, dreams of nobility keep incompetent capitalists in their positions and employees serving them efficiently. Thus, while April! April! mocks industrialists’ wealth, greed, pomp, and aristocratic pretensions, and therefore appears to criticize the social and economic order, its narrative fantasies of upward mobility and the double marriages at the film’s conclusion reinforce rational capitalist hegemony and reward humility.

Like many other German film comedies of the transitional period, April! April!’s social and economic fantasies are consistent with fascism, as Witte has already shown.10 What this essay adds to Witte’s work is the relationship between film comedy’s support for the fascist economic system and Nazi racial ideology. April! April! casts crisis as a positive turning point for a diligent secretary and sells hope and dreams of upward mobility through felicitous marriage rather than criticize a broken system. Yet even as the film propagates fantasies underlying the capitalist status quo, it also adopts an anticapitalist tone, mocking the Lampe family throughout, sometimes using modernist techniques to do so.11 In addition to criticizing specific capitalists while promoting fantasies of success within the current economic system, April! April!, like National Socialism, promotes a postclass Volksgemeinschaft. The film concludes with a tableau of
renewed, happy society united by affective bonds and appropriate behavior rather than one that is divided by class. This tableau illustrates some of the racial implications of the film’s class politics: the secretary and her prince ride off to Africa on a horse-drawn cart full of bags of flour. This shot symbolically unifies German white-collar workers, the nobility, and the agrarian in colonial pursuits. Audiences readily can see how April! April!’s economic and social fantasies are interwoven with colonial fantasies. What is less visible in this shot and in prior analyses of this film is that April! April!’s anticapitalism connects to strands in Nazi anti-Semitism as well. Such connections are indirect and dependent on context and intertext. April! April! evokes anti-Semitic discourses without making them explicit. Yet Germans in the 1930s would have been much more likely to recognize such subtle references than spectators today, for economic and social thought and discourse in the Third Reich were heavily racialized.

Nazi anticapitalism reflects tensions in the party around economic policy and other National Socialist ideals. The Nazi party (National Socialist German Workers’ Party) promoted a Volksgemeinschaft that was united by race rather than divided by class. Expansionism, anti-Semitism, and colonialism figured strongly among the party’s social and economic visions. In its early years, the Nazi Party included strong socialist voices. Moreover, party leaders deployed anticapitalist rhetoric long after Ernst Röhm, the loudest advocate for socialism among the Nazi leadership, was executed on July 2, 1934, as part of the Night of the Long Knives. In contrast to persistent anticapitalist utterances, as the economic crisis tapered off, the regime’s actions favored private enterprise (when in “Aryan” hands), for example “reprivatizing” firms between 1935 and 1937 that had been nationalized in 1931 and 1932. Despite struggles between more traditionally leftist socialists and the economic policies that emerged as dominant in the party, the NSDAP did not abandon anticapitalism, albeit an inconsistent, contradictory, and in the words of Timothy S. Brown, “essentially irrational and emotional” anticapitalism.

National Socialist anticapitalism tapped into long-standing anti-Semitic strains in German anticapitalism. Nazism borrowed the symbolic and rhetorical association between “capitalist” and “Jew” from Marxism, although it otherwise looked very different. Whereas Marxism espoused internationalism, for example, in the oft-sung “Internationale,” Nazism was a profoundly nationalist movement that positioned itself in opposition to both communism and capitalism, construed as the domains of “internationale[m] Judentum” (international Jewry). Both the theory and practice of Nazi anticapitalism had racial elements. As Brown describes:

alongside the anticapitalist theory of people such as [Gottfried] Feder [who distinguished between productive and exploitative, or
“Aryan” and “Jewish,” capital [who likewise promoted “racialized anticapitalism”] was a heartfelt rank-and-file anticapitalism fused in many cases with a thinly veiled class resentment, an emotive soldierly idea of socialism as a community of shared sacrifice, and a vague but powerful myth of the Volksgemeinschaft.17

Anticapitalism and “socialism,” conceived by the National Socialists as supporting members of a racially defined Volksgemeinschaft, were predicated on anti-Semitism. Although there was substantial redistribution of wealth in the Third Reich, property was not transferred based on class but on “race,” as Jewish businesses were “Aryanized” and Jewish people were forced to surrender their property, whether they were executed, deported, or able to emigrate. “Jews” stood in for the evils of “capitalism.” Joseph Goebbels wrote: “Wir sind als Sozialisten Judengegner, weil wir im Hebräer die Inkarnation des Kapitalismus, das heißt des Mißbrauchs mit den Gütern des Volkes sehen” (As socialists we are foes of Jews, because in the Hebrew we see the incarnation of capitalism, that is, of the misuse of the people’s goods).18 National Socialism thus conflated “Jews” and capital, proposing that the defeat of the former would lead to economic justice. Such conflation of anticapitalism and anti-Semitism, of the capitalist and the “Jew,” was common in Weimar-era and Nazi journalism and would have been a familiar concept for German film spectators in the 1930s.19

In the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich, caricatures of nouveau riche “Jews” were an anti-Semitic standard and central to the mythical conflation of capitalist and “Jew.” Many such caricatures appeared both in the pages of Julius Streicher’s popular anti-Semitic weekly newspaper Der Stürmer (The Stormer) and in more moderate publications.20 Some Weimar and Nazi-era representations of Jewish nouveaux riches also perpetuated older stereotypes of parvenu Jews embracing German high culture as a mark of assimilation and purchasing socially advantageous marriages for their daughters.21 Ernst Lubitsch good-naturedly mocked such notions in Die Austernprinzessin (The Oyster Princess, 1919), an earlier mistaken-identity comedy also involving a prince and an industrialist family, in which, unlike in April! April!, the industrialist’s daughter does win the prince in the end.22 In 1939, Robert und Bertram represented nouveau riche Jews’ attempts to assimilate and to wed their daughter to a nobleman in a grossly anti-Semitic way.23 In that film, the blustering Ipelmeiers are robbed when trying to win a (fake) count for their daughter, and the thieves are rewarded with a balloon ride to heaven. April! April! falls between Die Austernprinzessin and Robert und Bertram in both production date and tone: the Lampes’ efforts to fit in and their daughter’s attempts to sing poetry by Goethe, behave like a lady, and marry a prince result in repeated humiliation.
Fig. 6.1. Werner Finck and Charlott Daudert in *April! April!* (1935).

*April! April!* ridicules the Lampes, wealthy capitalists who live in luxury owing to industrial noodle production rather than hard work or noble birth. The first scene establishes that the Lampes occupy an economic station to which they were not born, that they use money to present themselves as upper-class Germans, that they fancy themselves better than others, and that their social peers dislike them for it. In the opening scene, Mirna, accompanied by Leisegang on the piano, sings loudly before guests in her palatial home. Although the audience applauds, many guests look uncomfortable, as if they were only showing polite interest. Mirna’s mother brags about Mirna’s expensive voice lessons, cuing eye rolling from her guests. Mirna announces that she will sing a final piece with lyrics by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and accompanying music by Reinhold Leisegang, at whom she gazes affectionately. This introductory sequence illustrates the Lampes’ social ambitions: to purchase the ability to perform German high culture, an audience to witness it, and a husband to accompany the performance.

The Lampes’ social climbing is shown from the outset as negative. The exaggerated arrogance of Frau Lampe, snide comments by the guests, and gossip about the Lampes’ lowly origins (Herr Lampe formerly was a baker and Frau Lampe a cook) cue viewers to scorn the Lampes’ social aspirations. The public’s negative view of the Lampes is cemented
when, after receiving Finke’s fraudulent call announcing a visit by the prince in the morning, Frau Lampe abruptly withdraws her hospitality to her guests, insisting they all leave immediately so that she can prepare for a visit by the Prince of Holsten-Böhlau. The film does not rely on audience members’ own standards to judge Frau Lampe’s sudden ejection of her guests as rude. Guests’ physical and verbal reactions show that they judge her poorly as well. Finke regrets his mean-spirited April Fool’s joke, but after Frau Lampe’s announcement, he proclaims the Lampes can wait for their fictional prince to come “bis sie schwarz werden” (until they turn black), a metaphor for rot that also, in its use of the word “black,” conjures veiled racial associations.24 By their inappropriate behavior, the Lampes have earned the disappointment and humiliation that will follow. Thus Finke’s April Fool’s prank and its humorous consequences perform didactic functions for both the Lampes and the audience.

In the opening scene, like many others in April! April!, excess and exaggeration generate humor and cast the Lampes’ behavior as inappropriate—a point also underscored by the plot and by other characters’ acting and dialogue. The Lampes’ palatial home and its rococo décor are out of place in the twentieth century and visually assert a noble heritage that the Lampes lack. By contrast, the elegant economy of the art deco furnishings in the prince’s office show that instead of lingering on the past he has kept up with the times. Like her home, Mirna’s dress is both over the top and out of style. Instead of accenting her silhouette with the long lean lines of the mid-1930s, this ridiculous white confection overwhelms Mirna in flounces and frills. Her costumes in other scenes are likewise ostentatious and unflattering. Her heavy makeup and hairstyle, bleached platinum blonde and set in curls, appeal to artificial rather than natural standards of beauty. The girl-next-door look of Friedl Bild, the secretary, called in late to take dictation, highlights Mirna’s artificiality. Mirna’s voice is too loud and too shrill. The low camera angle during her vocal performance exaggerates her large, wide-open mouth and intensifies the humorous effect of her failure to present herself as artistic and classy. Her mother brags that she pays 30 marks an hour for Mirna’s singing lessons not for “ein bißchen Gesang” (a little bit of singing), as her friend questions, but for “unsere gesellschaftliche Stellung” (our social standing). Although Frau Lampe’s appearance is more staid than Mirna’s, her dialogue and behavior are more exaggerated. She performs her oversized fantasies of gentility assertively and forces her family members and friends to participate in them, even when she becomes a target of laughter and scorn. As a counterpoint to his wife and daughter, Herr Lampe’s behavior emphasizes his ambivalence toward adopting upper-class habits. He sleeps through Mirna’s performance and seems generally uninterested in his wife’s soiree and her demonstrations of social superiority. When dictating a letter, he has no
idea how to address a prince. He relies on Friedl to coach him in the proper language, and stumbles repeatedly attempting to use it.

Although the caricature of the Lampes in *April! April!* indirectly references representations of nouveau riche Jewish industrialists, such as those in *Die Austernprinzessin*, it does not explicitly target “Jews,” as defined racially in the Third Reich. The film gives spectators little reason to assume the Lampes are Jewish, although in Nazi Germany there could well have been spectators who understood them as such. The dialogue does not refer to the Lampes as Jews, nor do they exhibit any Jewish religious practices. They do not have stereotypically Jewish names or physiognomies, and they do not speak broken pseudo-Yiddish accented German, as do Jewish characters in *Robert und Bertram*, *Jud Süss* (*Jew Süss, 1940*), and other explicitly anti-Semitic Nazi-era films. Nevertheless, the nouveau riche Lampe family embodies numerous anti-Semitic stereotypes, notably greedy, immodest social climbing and extravagant behavior. In addition to the frequent overlap of anticapitalist and anti-Semitic vitriol in Nazi discourses, and of anticapitalist and anti-Semitic caricature in the Weimar period, another concept familiar to Nazi-era filmgoers would have linked the Lampes to broader anti-Semitic discourses: the “white Jew.”

The notion of the “white Jew” dates back to the early nineteenth-century anti-Semitic writings of Hartwig Hundt-Radowsky. Nazi anti-Semites used the term to condemn specific individuals and rhetorically evoked types who thought or behaved in ways construed as “Jewish.” In 1932 Goebbels described “white Jews” as “Schweinehunde unter uns, die, obwohl sie Deutsche sind, nach unsittlichen Methoden ihre eigenen Volks- und Blutgenossen unterdrücken” (swine among us, who, although they are Germans, oppress their own folk-and-blood comrades using immoral methods). Goebbels’s language in this passage suggests the slur “white Jew” was current outside Nazi circles at that time, for he presumes a non-Nazi reader who is both familiar with and uses it. He continues: “Aber warum nennst Du sie weiße Juden? Du verstehst auch unter Judensein etwas Minderwertiges und Verachtenswertes. Genauso wie wir [Nationalsozialisten]. Warum fragst Du uns, wieso wir Judengegner sind, der Du, ohne es zu wissen, selbst einer bist?” (But why do you call them white Jews? You, therefore, understand Jewishness as something inferior and despicable. Just like we [Nazis] do. Why do you ask us why we are opponents of Jews, when you, without knowing it, are one yourself?).

Writings by other prominent Nazi intellectuals elucidate the concept of the “white Jew.” Reichsfilmintendant (General Director of Reich Film) Fritz Hippler, director of *Der ewige Jude* (*The Eternal Jew, 1940*), wrote about the “white Jews” in the film industry as: “Geschäftshuber mit viel Rührseligkeit, aber ohne Herz, viel Routine ohne Können, Rückgratlosigkeit ohne Anpassung, Miesmacherei ohne Ernsthaftigkeit,
Pompous eager beavers with much sentimentality, but without heart, much experience without prowess, spinelessness without conformity, defeatism without gravitas, boundless self-conceit without a trace of personal substance. In an article on “weiße Juden’ in der Wissenschaft” (“white Jews” in the sciences) the Nobel laureate Johannes Stark listed some attributes of “white Jews” that obtained in broader contexts as well. According to Stark, “white Jews” were “Anbeter eines spitzfindigen Intellekts” (worshippers of a hairsplitting intellect) who were characterized by an “unkontrollierbare[r] Selbstherrlichkeit” (uncontrollable self-importance) and their “propagandistische[m] Geschäfts betrieb” (propagandistic business operations). Generally speaking, in the Weimar and Nazi eras, anti-Semites used the term “white Jew” as shorthand for Germans who lacked strong character and authentic, regime-, folk-, and nation-affirming values and who exhibited inflated self-worth, greedy, business-oriented behavior, intellectualism and cunning, or undeserved influence over others. Such individuals spread the “Jüdischen Geist” (Jewish spirit) despite their “Ariernachweise” (Aryan documentation) and needed to be stopped.

The Nazis strove to remove the “Jewish spirit” from German film on multiple seen and unseen levels. The propaganda ministry invested heavily in ridding German film and German culture from widespread “Jewish” influence. Such investment went well beyond purging racially labeled “Jews” from the film industry. Theorists sought to define “German” Humor (humor) in opposition to “Jewish” Komik (comicalness) and encouraged filmmakers to avoid purportedly “Jewish” traits such as irony and verbal wit. Corresponding stylistic shifts can be found in Third Reich film comedies. April! April! alludes to the Nazis’ anti-Semitic agenda, however, more through plot, theme, and character and its use of humor as pedagogy, and less through its style, which—like other transitional-era comedies—is indebted partially to Weimar models, to the work of German Jewish directors like Lubitsch, Richard Oswald, and Reinhold Schünzel, and to the French director René Clair. Viewed in concert with Weimar and Nazi anti-Semitic and anticapitalist discourses about “white Jews,” April! April! can be seen to complement the anti-Semitic project by discouraging behavior and economic practices anti-Semites construed as “Jewish” and promoting those the Nazis defined as “German.” In this film, the characters coded as “German” are more likeable and reap better rewards than the mocked and humiliated characters whose behavior is too culturally and economically “Jewish.” Although not explicitly anti-Semitic, April! April! reinforces a “moral picture,” patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior conducive to the larger Nazi project. From a Nazi perspective, April! April! helps create Volksgemeinschaft through ridicule, by teaching Germans to exclude and not be “white Jews.”
April! April! uses humor to discipline spectators, teaching them how to think and behave, even as it engages and amuses them. Building on the work of Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud, and others, Michael Billig theorizes humor’s disciplinary functions. For Billig, “ridicule [is] at the centre of social life and [humour is located] in the operations of social power,”34 and he explains how laughter and ridicule encourage normative behavior and build community. April! April! mocks and regulates a set of negative characteristics related to capitalism, wealth, social climbing, and greed, characteristics associated by anti-Semites of the time with Jews. Although April! April! does not target actual Jews, it paints a moral picture consistent with the Nazis’ anti-Semitic agenda. April! April! teaches viewers that behaving as “Jews” do (as posited by Nazi- era anti-Semites) is wrong.

Reviews of April! April! functioned in tandem with it pedagogically. They lingered on the Lampes and their inappropriate social ambitions.35 In doing so, they reinforced the film’s moral picture, which discourages a suite of behaviors associated by Nazi anti-Semites with “Jews.” Some reviewers praised the actors playing the Lampes and their obnoxious yet laughable social posturing, whereas others, such as E. K. of the Deutsche Filmzeitung, a Munich film weekly with a conservative bent, found the representations of the Lampes excessive and overdone.36 Even the reviewers who found the Lampes funny used language that characterized their behavior as distasteful. In addition to using an assortment of negatively connoted words and phrases related to snobbism, pretension, and social climbing, reviewers described Herr Lampe as a “Gernegroß” (wan- nabe)37 and called the Lampe women names like “Fräulein Neureich” (Miss Newlyrich) and “Mathilde Nudelreich” (Matilda Noodlerich).38 These names not only make fun of the characters’ nouveau riche status but also recall stereotypically “Jewish” names that are compound words connoting wealth (i.e., Goldstein, Silberberg). Moreover, the word “neu- reich” (newly rich) had specifically anti-Semitic connotations. According to Klaus Kreimeier, “dieser Begriff wurde schon im 19. Jahrhundert vorzugsweise mit wohlhabenden jüdischen Familien in Verbindung gebracht, denen unterstellt wurde, sie seien, meist aus Galizien kommend, auf dunklen Wegen, jedenfalls auf Kosten ehrbarer Deutscher zu ihrem Wohl- stand gelangt” (this term was already used in the nineteenth century first and foremost in connection with prosperous Jewish families, mostly from Galicia, who were assumed to have come into their wealth in a shady way, or at least at the expense of honest Germans).39

Several reviewers described the Lampes as “Raffke,” or money-grub- bers, a word used in Weimar and Nazi Germany to describe the First World War profiteers and stock-market speculators, categories of individuals frequently targeted by anti-Semitic screeds.40 The stereotype of the nouveau riche Raffke had existed since the Imperial era and surged
in popularity during the hyperinflation of the early 1920s. Some films conflated images of Raffke and of nouveau riche Jews, as in Alles für Geld (Everything for Money, dir. Reinhold Schünzel, 1923) and Familientag im Hause Prellstein (Family Day in the Prellstein House, dir. Hans Steinhoff, 1927). The Lampes evoke such representations through their absurd social pretensions and their ostentatious wealth—cast as undeserved in that it is new to this generation, from an industrial source, and from the manufacture of a whimsical, unserious product.

E. K.’s words also refer indirectly to racial discourses of the era. The review describes “den Zusammenstoß zweier Milieus, . . . das Emporkömmlingsmilieu und . . . das echtbürtige Milieu alter Tradition” (the clash of two milieus . . . the upstart milieu . . . and the pure-blooded milieu of old tradition). German film reviewers had used the word “milieu” to describe Lubitsch’s early comedies, set in the recognizably Jewish milieu of the Berlin garment district, and the word may have connoted a Jewish milieu for readers of this review as well. Moreover, E. K.’s use of the term “echtbürtig” (pureblooded), also used in Nazi Germany to refer to someone’s genuinely Germanic origins, hints at potential racial connotations of the class and “milieu” conflict in April! April!

April! April! mocks the “upstart milieu” represented by the Lampes and repeatedly shows the negative consequences of such foolishness and misguided social ambition. The Lampes, unable to distinguish between pomp and nobility, honor Müller because of his dapper appearance and haughty behavior, and insult the prince, who arrives on foot and therefore must be an impostor. They fail to realize that honest, down-to-earth behavior, such as the prince’s, is superior to extravagant superficial displays of wealth. For this they are punished: first wining and dining Müller at great expense, and then owing him a fee for his performance, the Lampes pay for their own humiliation. Mirna’s attempts to curry favor with the prince, in hopes of a royal marriage, also backfire. For example, sent to the prince’s office to apologize because her family failed to recognize him, Mirna collides with the prince on the stairs. Still failing to recognize him, she declares: “so eine Unverschämtheit!” (such shamelessness!), presuming her own social superiority to any man she would meet in a stairwell. The prince’s ironic response, “das finde ich auch!” (I think so too!), reinforces all the other negative coding around Mirna and this incident and emphasizes that she and her family are the ones who are shameless. Mirna continues up to the prince’s office, puts on airs in front of his secretary, claiming to know the prince personally, only to learn that the man on the stairs was the prince. Ashamed and not wanting to return to her chauffeur right away—and thus reveal that she didn’t get in to see the prince—Mirna hides in the elevator. Her pearl necklace breaks in the hallway. When the prince’s secretary leaves the office and trips on Mirna’s
pearls, she picks them up and keeps them for herself. By the time Mirna comes out of hiding, she has lost her pearls and her chauffeur has left. She goes to a café to drown her sorrows in whipped cream, even as her mother spreads rumors that she is dining with the prince. Mirna’s arrogance and disdain for others as well as her family’s inappropriate, nouveau riche actions and assumptions have cost her time, money (the lost pearls), and esteem.

Ultimately, after many similarly humorous scenes of public and private humiliation, the Lampes learn a lesson and, instead of winning the prince, Mirna marries the foppish, clumsy, and inept Leisegang, whose humorous name can be translated as “soft step.” All the other characters push Leisegang around. He gets drunk on Kirschwasser (cherry brandy), thinking it is cherry juice, is friends with a dapper necktie salesman, and has a hysterical, squeaky voice when irate. Leisegang’s effeminate and ineffectual coding marks him as comic relief, not as romantic lead. Mirna can have a happy ending only by reducing her social and marital ambitions.

By contrast, Friedl, the Lampes’ secretary, attracts the handsome, assertive prince, despite all her efforts to push him away. Although he is noble and rich, the prince’s unaffected behavior and attempts to convince Friedl that he is an average working man prove his willingness and ability to join the Volksgemeinschaft. A deserving partner, the prince unites with Friedl and rides off into the sunset on a wagon full of bags of flour. E. K. finds it implausible that on her first date with the incognito prince, Friedl orders modestly, relishes her simple meal, and says she prefers men who save their money. Yet April! April! promotes such idealized behavior and identity: Friedl’s and the prince’s unpretentiousness and restraint are rewarded with romance and the promise of an African adventure, affirming proper German modesty and parsimony, in contrast to the Lampes’ extravagance.

There is a völkisch cast to April! April!’s anticapitalism, to its impulse to merge social classes, and to its colonial aspirations. April! April! mocks the Lampes to caricature and criticize greed and ambition, which the era’s anti-Semites understood as “Jewish,” while reinforcing an imperial economy and promoting a Volksgemeinschaft that otherwise unifies previously separate social castes. Although the nobility lost their privileges in the Weimar Republic, April! April! takes place in a world where a prince commands much wealth, attention, and respect and in which his title still matters. Those around him—and the audience—need to learn, as Mirna admits, accepting Leisegang as a husband, that “ein Prinz ist auch nichts Besseres” (a prince isn’t any better). The prince, a very positive figure, already knows this. Despite his status, the prince enters the film prepared to join the common folk. He walks among them rather than being driven to the Lampes’ factory by a chauffeur. Throughout the film, the prince’s attitudes, expectations, and behavior
are entirely different from what the Lampes and Müller, whom they hire to impersonate him, presume they will be. Neither arrogant nor demanding, but rather modestly dashing, the prince passes as a common salesman and prefers a simple woman to an extravagant one and a simple meal with her to a banquet. Once she discovers his true identity, he must convince her that he is as good as the common salesman he pretended to be. His persistence ultimately leads her to accept him as an ordinary man and a partner.

When Friedl embraces the prince on behalf of the Volksgemeinschaft, she commits to join him on his African adventure, validating colonial fantasies. The prince’s occupation as an African explorer points to the brief and bygone days of German empire, where the pride and identity of the nation relied on both royalty and colonies. The African art on his walls evokes the colonial legacy and underscores the prince’s whiteness, which, along with his modest behavior, predetermine his integration into the Volksgemeinschaft. Their decorative fusion with his modern furnishings depicts a new imperial future that integrates modernity, colonialism, and hereditary royalty, if they unite with the common people. The first shot in which we see the prince reading a paper and smoking a pipe, balancing the symmetry between an art deco lamp and an African statue, envisions such a combination as a harmonious one.

Fig. 6.2. Our first view of the prince (Albrecht Schönhals) in April! April! (1935).
After having convinced Friedl that he is as authentic and humble as a salesman, the prince is rewarded with an attractive companion to journey with him to Africa, a pragmatic, capable woman who can help him transition from exploration to settler colonialism. This representation suggests the Volk will embrace such nobles as are willing to join them and that if they work together they can rekindle Germany’s colonial aspirations. The colonial impulse in this film thus recalls an earlier era and imagines a modern hybrid of Volksgemeinschaft and imperialism. This vision is in contrast to the greed, self-absorption, and flamboyance of the seemingly non-Jewish Lampes, who, as “white Jews,” represent a nexus of anticapitalist and anti-Semitic representation in a seemingly innocuous entertainment film. Ridicule of the “white Jews” and reward of their opposites have disciplinary functions whether or not these characters were intended to be or were recognized as such: April! April! paints a moral picture that, from a Nazi perspective, teaches behavior suitable for the racial community and promotes industrious colonial conquest over Raffke-style capitalism. Having previously maligned and ultimately disciplined domestic, industrial food producers, with its happy ending April! April! unites a healthy young German couple representing formerly disparate classes and sends them off to Africa for new discoveries and conquests. After correcting greedy, social-climbing “Jewish” behavior and its influences on the domestic, industrial economy, the ending of this film romanticizes Volksgemeinschaft and imperialism. April! April!’s mockery of pompous nouveaux riches is typical of German film comedy in the early 1930s and its responses to the Great Depression, among them fantasies of upward mobility and resentment of wealthy capitalists. Considering the imbrication of anti-Semitic and anticapitalist discourses in the period and Nazi condemnation of “white Jews,” “Aryans” who, according to anti-Semites, behaved like greedy, self-important “Jews” elucidates the function of characters like the Lampes vis-à-vis Nazi visions of the Volk. Within the narrative of April! April!, the Lampes’ behavior, which is consistent with Nazi anti-Semitic stereotypes, is punished, teaching viewers not to behave that way. Humor also serves as a form of discipline for spectators. By witnessing the Lampes’ ridicule and sharing in laughter at them, audience members learn as a community to reject “Jewish” behaviors (in anti-Semitic terms), even as other, positively depicted, characters model values and behaviors more consistent with the Nazis’ imagined Volksgemeinschaft. Although political conformity was likely not the director’s intent, April! April! illustrates how the standard character tropes and narrative patterns of German film comedy in the early to mid-1930s, as exemplified by this particular film, were consistent with the Nazis’ “moral pictures” and conducive to the building of a Nazi Volksgemeinschaft.
Notes

2 See the Introduction of this volume for more details.


7 Karsten Witte, Lachende Erben, Toller Tag: Filmkomödie im Dritten Reich (Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 1995), 97.

8 Witte, Lachende Erben, 96.


10 Witte, Lachende Erben, 95–98.


14 Matthew Lange, Antisemitic Elements in the Critique of Capitalism in German Culture, 1850–1933 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007).


17 Brown, Weimar Radicals, 52–53.

18 Goebbels, Die verfluchten Hakenkreuzer, 18.


29 Johannes Stark, “‘Weisse Juden’ in der Wissenschaft,” *Das Schwarze Korps*, July 15, 1937, 8.

30 Stark, “‘Weisse Juden,’” 8.


46. The actor playing Leisegang, Werner Finck, was a cabarettist whose cabaret was closed in May 1935 and who spent a brief time in a concentration camp.


49. *Völkisch* translates literally as “of the folk.” In the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich, the term encompassed a nationalist, racist, and populist sociopolitical outlook.

Part IV. Genre Cinema
7: The Zigeunerdröma Reloaded: Leni Riefenstahl’s Fantasy Gypsies and Sacrificial Others

Anjeana Hans

When the lights went out, I sat incognito in a corner seat in order to view “Tiefland” as an ordinary film-goer for the first time—free of all the problems I had endured since the making of my film. As the first few takes flashed across the screen, I was assailed by memories of all the pain associated with the making of this picture. Were the sacrifices worth it?

—Leni Riefenstahl

Leni Riefenstahl’s two best-known films, Triumph des Willens (Triumph of the Will, 1935) and Olympia (1938), and even her directorial debut, Das blaue Licht (The Blue Light, 1932), have been analyzed and argued over by critics and supporters alike. Quite understandably, the tendency has been to quibble over the same questions: How does her work relate to the ideology of the Nazi regime and what does it tell us, if anything, about her complicity? Does her early work prefigure—and her later work echo or contradict—the propaganda films she produced so successfully? The responses have been wide-ranging. Her supporters emphasize that she was a groundbreaking director and accept her insistence that she was only an artist, never a committed Nazi. Her detractors point to her resume as more than sufficient evidence of her culpability and insist that, artistic achievement aside, she served Hitler’s regime far too enthusiastically to be excused. And critics such as Robert Sklar have questioned the tendency to accept unhesitatingly the notion of her directorial excellence, suggesting that we should “give her the credit [and blame] that she deserves. . . . Her films are mixtures of the remarkable . . . and the commonplace.”

Considering the controversy that Riefenstahl elicits, it is surprising that her second and final nondocumentary film, Tiefland (Lowlands, 1954), for which, as she stated in her memoirs, she made so many “sacrifices,” has not been examined more carefully. This analysis attempts to expand on the understanding of Riefenstahl’s work by focusing on a
narrow question, considering the way in which it points not only forward, but also back, and builds on and redefines existing filmic traditions and genres in her own work, in particular in the dramatic films. In his analysis of *Das blaue Licht*, Eric Rentschler begins an excavation of Riefenstahl’s cinematic roots, suggesting that she draws on everything from the romantic iconography of Caspar David Friedrich to romantic literary structures such as the frame narrative to conventions of the *Bergfilm* and of Expressionist films, specifically F. W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922). His analysis compellingly demonstrates how *Das blaue Licht* functions both as articulation of Riefenstahl’s approach to cinema and as expression of an ideology that at least in part parallels that of National Socialism, a system that drew on and appropriated existing traditions in the service of its own ends. I want to expand on Rentschler’s impulse and excavate a further reference that we can uncover but that has gone largely unremarked, that of the *Zigeunerdrاما*, a generic form that was popular in German film of the 1910s and 1920s. Especially when considered in connection to *Tiefland*, where Riefenstahl’s “gypsy problem” extends outside of the cultural fantasy of the narrative and into the real circumstances of production, the generic legacy on which she builds is an important factor in understanding her work. Indeed, it gives us a different perspective on the narrative at the heart of the later film and suggests that, far from being a work of resistance, as some critics would have it, *Tiefland* in fact stages the same type of exclusionary dynamic that motivated *Das blaue Licht* and that fueled the racist ideologies of the Nazi regime. At the same time, her apparently unconcerned reuse of generic conventions associated with figures whose real counterparts were targeted by Nazi race policies betrays the tenacity of the fantasies associated with them and the peculiar way in which Riefenstahl staged her own role as artist. *Tiefland* was Riefenstahl’s pet project, the film she supposedly wanted to make as early as 1934, before being “strong-armed” into producing *Triumph des Willens*. Based on Eugen d’Albert’s opera (1903) of the same name, it focuses on a dancer, Martha (Riefenstahl), who comes to the village of Roccabruna with her accompanist. Seeing her dance, both Don Sebastian (Bernhard Minetti), the cruel marquis who is devastating the villagers by diverting their water for his cattle, and Pedro (Franz Eichberger), the naïve shepherd who lives in the mountains above the suffering “lowlands” that give the film its title, fall in love with her. Don Sebastian soon brings her to his castle for a private performance and initiates an affair. As his financial difficulties intensify, he agrees to the marriage he has been delaying to Amelia (Maria Koppenhöfer), the daughter of the wealthy mayor and the holder of much of his debt. To keep Martha as his lover, he devises a scheme of marrying her to Pedro and bringing them to live in the village mill. Pedro, unaware of Don Sebastian’s machinations, is overjoyed, yet once married soon realizes that he has been made
a laughingstock. When Don Sebastian comes to Martha on the night of both weddings, a fight breaks out between the men and Pedro strangles him in front of the villagers and Martha. Freed, Pedro and Martha return to the mountains, presumably to a happier future.

More remarkable than _Tiefland_ itself, which is ultimately a fairly mediocre melodrama, are its production details, which betray Riefenstahl’s privileged position in the regime and belie her assertion that she “refused to work with the Party [and insisted that] the film could only be funded privately.”9 Filming took from 1940 to 1944, and _Tiefland_ would become the third-most expensive film of the Nazi era, topped only by the sprawling war film _Kolberg_ (Harlan and Liebeneier, 1945) and the fantasy extravaganza _Münchhausen_ (von Bäky, 1943), both, unlike _Tiefland_, color productions. Her requests for financial and logistical support were generally met; when difficulties arose, she often bypassed Walther Funk, the Reich Minister for Economics, and appealed more directly to Hitler via his deputy, Martin Bormann.10 What would become most controversial about the film went back to her tendency to aim for verisimilitude by including extras embodying a certain “type,” much as she used the “Sarnotalter Bauern” in _Das blaue Licht_. This time, she was given permission to draw on the Roma and Sinti populations of the concentration camps at Marzahn and Salzburg-Maxglan in order to find suitable extras.

_Tiefland_ would not be released until 1954, and its unspectacular reception seems ironic, given the continued grief it caused Riefenstahl. She had come through the 1948 process of denazification with her record cleared, yet questions focused on her complicity with the Nazi Party would (quite rightly) continue to dog her throughout her life, with the circumstances of the gypsy extras looming large. How to take her insistence of innocence seriously when she looked to concentration camps as resources at her disposal? Had she known about the conditions at the camps, and that inmates would be deported to Auschwitz once work on _Tiefland_ was completed? The depth of her “gypsy problem” was evident as early as 1949 when an article appeared in the Munich magazine _Revue_ commenting on the as-yet unfinished _Tiefland_ and posing a pointed question regarding the extras: “‘How many will have survived the concentration camps?’”11 In perhaps typical fashion, Riefenstahl responded aggressively, suing _Revue_ and winning,12 but this was not to be the last of the problems caused by _Tiefland_. In 1982, the release of _Zeit des Schweigen und der Dunkelheit_ (Time of Silence and Darkness, 1982), Nina Gladitz’s television documentary on the Lowlands extras, spurred Riefenstahl to file another suit charging defamation. This time, she was less successful, the case concluding in 1987 with her winning only the concession that she could not have known that the extras were destined for Auschwitz.13 Still Riefenstahl insisted on her innocence, going so far as to assert that she had herself “bumped
into many of my *Tiefland* Gypsies [after the war],”¹⁴ a patently absurd claim that has been proven false by comparing filming records with Auschwitz death lists.¹⁵ More was to come: Nearly fifty years after the release of *Tiefland*, on the occasion of Riefenstahl’s centenary, the Frankfurt Prosecutor’s Office announced that she would be investigated as a Holocaust denier for her statement in an interview claiming that the *Lowlands* extras had, in fact, *all* survived the Holocaust.¹⁶

In the scheme of things, Riefenstahl is likely more notorious for a myriad of other reasons; in her all-too-checkered life, the circumstances of the extras in her final, fairly unsuccessful film might seem an unsavory footnote, and yet they are symptomatic of her attitude generally and of particular note within the context of a film that capitalizes on the cultural fantasies focused on “the gypsy.” For both of her feature films allowed Riefenstahl to stage herself simultaneously as quasi-mystical object of desire and as persecuted outsider, drawing on precisely the tropes that coalesced around the figure of the gypsy in German film leading up to the Third Reich and that persisted well into the era, in spite of the very real persecution of Sinti and Roma in the regime.

The *Zigeunerdrama* is a little-known genre, in spite of the remarkable number of films from the 1910s and the Weimar era that are labeled thus in reviews and advertisements. *Paimann’s Filmlisten* suggest additional terms that could be used to designate such film beyond the straightforward *Zigeunerdrama: Künstlerdramen* or *Artistendramen*, emphasizing the way the gypsy serves as shorthand for the fantasy of a bohemian lifestyle; or *Sittendramen* or *Sittenbilder*, shifting emphasis implicitly to the different *Sitten*, “customs” of the “foreign” represented by the gypsies, even while suggesting, given the ambiguity of the German term, that these differences are moral ones. The shifting terminology hints at the genre’s ambiguity: the figures at its center embody bohemianism, a more “natural” way of life, and a fantasy of escape from reality; at the same time, they pose a dangerous challenge to Western identity and culture by drawing into question its formative assumptions and representing another viable culture.

The films of the genre follow recurring narratives, often coalescing around the doomed love affair between a Western man and a gypsy woman. They point to a construction of identity aligned with racial background and couched explicitly in terms of *Blut*. For example, *Zurück zu ihrem Stamm* (Back to Her Tribe, 1912) tells the story of a gypsy child, raised in a Western family, who unexpectedly encounters her tribe, has her palm read, and is told that she will return to them and marry a king. This leads to a transformation in the young woman:

*Im Innersten bewegt durch diese Worte, wendet sich das Mädchen zum Gehen*; dabei begegnet ihr Blick dem eines hochgewachsenen

Deeply moved by these words, the girl turns to leave; her gaze meets that of a tall, proud man, the gypsy king Pedro, who forces her with irresistible power into his thrall.—Since that day she was a different person. The voice of the blood had awoken in her and a hot, consuming love for the handsome gypsy soon overcame in her heart her feelings of affinity to another world and of gratitude toward her adoptive parents.—One day Judith is gone. A letter left for her mother tells her everything: The child of the pußta has found herself.

Certain key terms dominate this synopsis and speak to the cultural associations with the gypsy, evoking dual fantasies focused on their heightened sensuality and on their fundamental difference: the “irresistible power” of the gypsy king’s gaze, “forcing” her into his thrall, the “voice of the blood” that awakens in the young woman, fueling “a hot, consuming love” for the man and overcoming her sense of loyalty to her adoptive family. This is a fantasy in which two worlds, that represented by the parents, in which the young woman is about to enter into a passionless yet socially advantageous marriage with a likeable young man, and that represented by the tribe, in which she, the “child of the pußta,” will once again “find herself,” are irreconcilably opposed. Zurück zu ihrem Stamm is an example of a typical tendency in Western culture, for it imputes to the gypsy a transgressive eroticism that is incommensurate with civilized society. Reunited with her natural milieu, the young woman’s real character emerges, one emphasizing passion over rationality.18

Other narratives that fall into the genre shift the emphasis slightly to the intersection between the “gypsy milieu” and the artistic/bohemian life, yet, again, women—and their simultaneous function as dangerously desired and desiring—occupy the centers of these narratives. The review of Amanant (Haras, 1916) in the Kinematograph exemplifies the ways that these cinematic narratives conceptualize “the gypsy” and the genre itself:

Amarant ist der Name eines Malermodells, einer heissblütigen Zigeunerin, die den Mann ihrer Wahl, den Maler, dem sie als Modell dienst, bis zur Raserei liebt, um so mehr als sie sich von ihm verschmäht sieht. Er unterliegt aber doch ihrem dringlichen Werben, er vergisst eine frühere Leidenschaft zu einer verheirateten Gräfin . . .,
Amarant is the name of a painter’s model, a hot-blooded gypsy who madly loves the man she has chosen, the painter for whom she models, even more so when he spurns her. He succumbs to her urgent courtship, forgets an earlier passion for a married countess, devotes himself entirely to his art, and wins a gold medal for a painting. The exhibition is visited by the countess, who encounters the painter, Amarant sees this, throws herself at the painting with a dagger in blind jealousy and rage, destroys it, and then kills herself. Two popular settings are mixed here: artistic and gypsy life, which always have had such close affinities.

The synopsis hits all the key points of the standard Zigeunerdrama. Amarant is fundamentally irrational: she is “hot blooded” and loves “madly,” ultimately falling victim to her “blind jealousy and rage.” At the same time, she exerts an irresistible attraction on the painter, in terms of both erotic desire (she causes him to forget his previous “passion”) and artistic inspiration (she inspires him to focus entirely on his art). Amarant has some agency: the “man she has chosen,” after all, “succumbs” to her. But, inevitably, her pursuit of an unsuitable man ends in tragedy, both her life and his masterpiece destroyed. Here we have all the hallmarks of the stereotypical gypsy woman: her excessive desire causes her to “push” the painter into a relationship, while her uncontrollable temperament leads her to destroy his work and herself. We see this pattern again and again in these narratives, in which the desired and desiring woman ultimately pays for her status as fantasy with her life.

The ambivalence toward the cultural construction of the gypsy that we find in films of the 1910s and the Weimar Republic, her simultaneous function as object of desire and as embodiment of the absolute other, was certainly not new to the era: Karl Hölz notes precisely this constellation in his reading of Victor Hugo’s Hunchback of Notre Dame, asserting that this “other” must be expelled owing to the danger it poses to the status quo, even as it is figured as desirable. What Hölz identifies in Hugo’s 1831 novel persists in the Zigeunerdrämen of German film: these figures become articulations of a desired exotic, even as they represent that which must be removed in order to affirm one’s own identity. Indeed, as Katie Trumpener argues, gypsies came to function
in a range of ways in Western cultural production over the course of the nineteenth century, simultaneously “stylized, exoticized, ‘generic’ figures of mystery, adventure, and romance” and “intimately identified, on several different levels, with the formation of literary tradition itself, acting as figurative keys to an array of literary genres.” Trumpener suggests that the role of the gypsy, although crystalizing around a set of distinct qualities, was specific to genre: whereas gypsies continued to stand “as figures of magic and malevolence” in mysteries and sensational stories, other genres focused on “the mysterious origins of art,” positioning them as sorts of spiritual ancestors to the artist. Thus the functionalization of gypsies in the Zigeunerdrama is not new, but rather builds on preexisting cultural fantasies.

Consider the perhaps best-known example of a Zigeunerdrama, Ernst Lubitsch’s Carmen (1918). One of many cinematic versions of Mérimée’s novella (1845), Lubitsch’s film epitomizes the way in which, as Anat Zanger argues, “the Carmen figure, as Gypsy and woman, functions both as a source of attraction and dread to society.” Zanger notes the significance of space in the narrative: “Carmen brings together two kinds of space, each belonging to a different social order. The wall and the guarded gate exist in order to separate the orderly and structured world from the nomadic life and open spaces of the Romanies.” She sees the emphasis on smuggling as epitomizing the conflict between different spaces, and reads it as signifying on two levels, the literal, smuggling of illegal goods, as well as the metaphorical, “smuggling in” the dangers represented by the gypsies themselves. Indeed, Zanger suggests that the gypsies are a threat not because they might physically attack, but because of “the customs and beliefs that [they] ‘smuggle’ in with them. Because what is really disturbing about these ‘others’ is the way they organize their pleasures: their excess of desire, their exaggerated enjoyment, their dancing and singing, their strange habits, and their relation to work.”

Zanger’s analysis is relevant here because her conceptualization of the oppositional spaces that dominate the story and the threat that the gypsies broadly—and Carmen most pointedly—pose to these spaces as they traverse and transgress their borders points to some of the key problems at the heart of the genre. After all, it stages and restages the way in which distinctive sociocultural spaces must be protected, in which the incursion into such a space by the “alien other” represented by the gypsy might satisfy a longing for that exotic difference, but will ultimately end in tragedy for all concerned. The gypsy clearly serves as the desired object when staged in cinema, where her visual appeal is augmented by her association with the sensual arts of music and dance. Yet the desire for her may only be satisfied fleetingly: she must be expelled or destroyed in order to protect the integrity of the dominant Western culture. When examined in this way, with
an eye to the spatial dynamics represented in film and assigned to the two respective groups, the role of the gypsy and her treatment as cultural fantasy already point quite clearly toward the policies of Nazi Germany, where these “separations” will be borne to their horrific end.

How does the _Zigeunerdrama_ relate to Riefenstahl’s feature films? Her first film, _Das blaue Licht_, does not, in fact, bill itself as a piece with any type of gypsy content, yet there is something about the depiction of Junta, who lives outside of the closed community of the village, speaks a different language, and is simultaneously desired, feared, and hated by the villagers, that suggests her kinship to the women who populated the earlier genre. The unconscious identification of Junta with the mythical gypsy did not go unremarked. For example, one review from the _Münchener Telegramm-Zeitung_ summarizes _Das blaue Licht_ thus: “It is exhilaratingly beautiful, the moving story of the gypsy Junta, her great loneliness, her great secret, her great love, and her sad death.” And this is not an isolated incident: no less than Siegfried Kracauer referred to Junta as “a sort of gypsy girl” in his _From Caligari to Hitler_.

This interpretation is no accident, for Riefenstahl builds explicitly on the preexisting construct of the gypsy. Junta arouses precisely the sort of ambivalent emotions as do the tragic heroines of the _Zigeunerdramen_, and she, too, must be destroyed to allow the survival of the “civilized space” represented by the village. Riefenstahl conflates the purely erotic attraction embodied in a figure like Lubitsch’s Carmen with a distinctly economic value: the villagers “desire” Junta as much because she represents the crystals to which she has access as because she functions as erotic object. Consider the scene in which we initially see Junta enter the village. Her approach is presented in shots in which she is isolated, repeatedly moving from shadows into light and retreating when she encounters another person. These shots are cross-cut with others of villagers returning home and entering the church. We see a lingering shot of the priest outside the church door, staring at Junta, then cut to a close-up of her face as she lowers her eyes, then back to him as he crosses himself and enters the building. A crowd of old women moves toward the church and, as one, turns and stares at Junta, who looks back silently, again in close-up. As the villagers enter the church, Junta flees, stopping to look back over her shoulder as though afraid of being pursued. We next move to a sequence in which Vigo, the artist who will fall in love with and betray Junta, shares a glass of wine with the hotelier at the village plaza. After a series of close-ups of the dour villagers, the hotelier explains the village’s curse to Vigo, then the sequence cuts to a long shot of the square as the villagers rise. The camera pans right, following their gaze, to show Junta moving slowly toward them, her basket raised as though to offer its contents to them, as shots of her questioning face are cross-cut with close-ups of the hostile villagers.
The stereotypical image of the gypsy is already invoked in Junta’s clothing—the ragged and revealing skirt and blouse, the fringed shawl—which echoes the costuming we see, for example, in Carmen. She is marked decisively as an outsider by the cross-cutting between the anonymous, similar villagers and her figure isolated within the frames, a spatial exclusion that parallels the way in which the gypsy was imagined as a fundamental outsider. As in Zanger’s analysis, Junta transgresses a boundary by entering the village, threatening the community simply by her presence. And she is clearly intended as an object of desire, the contrast between her beauty and the plainness of the villagers heightened through the soft focus used in close-ups of her face, so different from the sharply focused shots of the villagers. We also, here and throughout the film, see her aligned with nature: she lives apart from the community and has a mystical connection to the mountain, for, as the hotel owner notes, she succeeds in reaching the grotto when all the villagers fail. This suggestion that Junta is somehow more natural than are the villagers, along with the notion that she has some sort of magical power (being a verfluchte Teufelshexe, “cursed devil witch,” as the hotelfrer states), parallels again the contemporary construction of the gypsy. And Vigo, the artistic outsider, is fascinated precisely by Junta’s difference. Junta thus embodies to the villagers an example of the “old chronotopically anachronistic parts, as figures of magic and malevolence” and to Vigo that of “the Gypsies as an emblem for [the artist’s] own bohemianism, aesthetic autonomy, and artistic alchemy.”

Rentschler suggests that Das blaue Licht stages a fantasy of desire and exclusion that echoes the ways in which Nazi ideology conceptualized “Germanness”: “Junta is denuded of life, rendered as ornament so that she might enjoy further existence, a transformation that eradicates any threat or independent life and shapes what once was a continual disruption into a more manageable form.” The way in which Riefenstahl references the Zigeunerdrama implicates her in an ideology that aims toward a functionalization of the other in order to preserve a homogeneous community. Junta, like her gypsy forebears, embodies the ultimate other, whose presence in the community acts as a fundamental threat that must be countered. Unlike in the earlier films, Das blaue Licht conflates erotic desire with economic value and thus doubly functionalizes the exotic female body, yet it too suggests that the community will be stronger once this “other” is expelled.

In contrast to Das blaue Licht, Tiefland draws more explicitly on the tropes of the Zigeunerdrama, for Martha, the heroine, is explicitly characterized as a gypsy and this characterization is the source of her attraction. Thus, both Pedro and Don Sebastian fall in love with her simply by witnessing her dance; this encounter positions her as so magnetic a figure that Pedro views her as the woman of his dreams and Don Sebastian seeks
her out, compelling her to come dance for him. Her second performance takes place at his castle, where she is taken to a private dining room, while her accompanist joins the nobleman’s administrator in the kitchen, is plied with drinks, and eventually chased away. The conversation between Don Sebastian and Martha is telling: “Erzähl mir von dir, Martha.” ‘Da ist nicht viel zu erzählen, Herr. Wir wandern die Landstraßen entlang und wo ein Wirtshaus ist, da tanze ich.’ ‘Wo hast du das Tanzen gelernt?’ ‘Ich hab’ es nie gelernt.’ ‘Es steckt im Blut, was? Und hast du einen Geliebten?’ ‘Nein, Herr.’” (“Tell me about yourself, Martha.” “There is not much to tell, my lord. We wander along the country roads and where there is an inn, I dance.” “Where did you learn to dance?” “I never learned it.” “It’s in the blood, eh? And do you have a lover?” “No, my lord.”)

The brief moment alludes to the cultural fantasies around which Riefenstahl constructs her Martha: she is an outcast with a nomadic lifestyle characterized by hardship; her overwhelming talent, this ability to dance and thus enchant the spectator, is not a practiced skill, but rather an inbred trait, something that lies “in her blood.” In this, she embodies perfectly the fantasy of the gypsy. The difference between Martha and those of the earlier films is that the former is untouched by desire: she insists that she has no lover, an abstemiousness emphasized by her refusal of wine. Tempting as it might be to read this moment as critically subverting the cultural fantasy of the gypsy, it seems far more convincing to read it as part of Riefenstahl’s self-staging, in which her power to enthral is unintentional: her lack of desire and thereby of consent is part of her creation of a “persona who is patently helpless, indeed subservient to male power.” Don Sebastian’s subsequent linking of both dance and eroticism to her “blood” points back to the way in which race, culture, and gender become enmeshed in cultural fantasy.

How do we reconcile Riefenstahl’s use of the conventions of the gypsy drama in Das blaue Licht, made in the last years of the Weimar Republic and before Hitler’s rise to power, and in Tiefland, filmed during the war and completed only long after the fall of the Third Reich? By the time Riefenstahl began filming Tiefland in 1940, most of Germany’s population of Sinti and Roma had been imprisoned in labor or concentration camps. Whereas the Nuremburg Laws of September 1935 themselves focused on Jews, a decree from November 1935 implicitly extended the racial laws to gypsies as another group that threatened to “[pollute] the German blood.” Yet even the legal status of the gypsies in the Third Reich reveals the shifting position they occupied in German fantasy: they were both a threat to and themselves representative of a “racial purity” considered an ideal. Indeed, Himmler argued for special treatment of “pure” gypsies: “The intact endogenous kinship organization of the ‘pure’ nomadic Gypsies was held up as a völkisch ideal of cultural autonomy and racial segregation. . . . Himmler’s initial plans for the
Gypsies . . . involved the simultaneous incarceration and sterilization of ‘mixed’ Gypsies and the group resettlement and species preservation of ‘pure’ Gypsies on special protected preserves.”

Although, in practice, these ideas about separate categories collapsed and the population as a whole was ultimately targeted for murder in concentration camps, we see here clearly the peculiar position of the Zigeuner in German culture.

Riefenstahl’s reprisal of conventions of the genre speaks to this odd ambiguity. The fact that she not only referenced the Zigeunerdrama in her pre-Nazi film, but then did so again—even more explicitly—in that made during the Third Reich and financed by the regime; the fact that she was a cinematographer strongly supported by Hitler who staged herself as a gypsy figure in Tiefland: this points to the continued cultural fantasies associated with the gypsy and with the conventions of the Zigeunerdrama underpinning Riefenstahl’s work, as well as to her own peculiar blind spot. For even as the flesh-and-blood Sinti and Roma were persecuted, imprisoned, and killed, the fantasy gypsies that populated German culture continued to fascinate and attract. Tiefland thus demonstrates both the gulf between the real and the imaginary gypsies and the tenacity of the associations with them, for they fundamentally embodied an ambiguity that persisted even as the regime’s racist policies were enacted.

That Riefenstahl references the Zigeunerdrama in her only two non-documentary films makes clear just how deeply embedded the ambiguous fantasies focused on the gypsy were in German culture. At the same time, it adds to our understanding of the way she staged herself as well as how her work derived from older genres and how she drew on that legacy in articulating an ideology that, however she might have protested, nevertheless remained easily reconcilable with that of the Nazi regime. Regarding the former, Riefenstahl insisted, particularly after the Second World War, that she was anything but an insider; she staged herself as a misunderstood genius, pushed by an intransigent regime into producing their documentaries when she would have much rather been continuing her own work as actress and director. This conceptualization of her own role connects to the way in which she exploits the cultural associations with the gypsy. As Karin Wieland suggests:

Die Künstlerin wendet als Drehbuchautorin, als Produzentin, als Regisseurin und als Schauspielerin all ihre Kräfte auf, um ein Selbstbild als omnipotente, begehrte Frau zu inszenieren, von dessen Erfüllung sie ihr ganzes Leben träumt. Da sie stets um Distanz zur Normalität bemüht ist und sich als Künstlerin als etwas Besonderes fühlt, muss die von ihr geschaffene Figur eine Außenseiterin sein. In kaum einer anderen Ausdrucksform sind erotische Phantasien und soziale Ächtung mehr miteinander verquickt als in der schönen Zigeunerin.
The artist uses all her power as screenwriter, producer, director, and actor in order to stage an image as omnipotent, desired woman, the fulfillment of which she dreams of her entire life. As she always strives for distance from the normal and feels herself as an artist to be something special, the image she creates must be of an outsider. In hardly any other representation are erotic fantasy and social ostracism tied to each other as they are in that of the beautiful gypsy.

Wieland correctly points to the *Zigeunerin* as embodying just those traits that Riefenstahl strives to project: her simultaneous power and desirability, as well as the fundamental “otherness” resulting from her exalted position as artist and outsider. The fact that both *Das blaue Licht* and *Tiefland* cast her as women embodying these qualities and pointing back to a long line of similar ancestors in the *Zigeunerdrumen* that solidified the cinematic trope of the desired-yet-feared gypsy suggests that Riefenstahl cultivated this image from the start of her directorial career.

In broader terms, Riefenstahl’s reprisal of her citation of the *Zigeunerdrama* in *Tiefland* undermines any attempt to read the film as articulating an ideology resistant to that of Hitler’s regime. Recalling Rentschler’s suggestion that *Das blaue Licht* builds on precisely the sort of dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that fed into Nazi policies, we can see certain similar structures at work in *Tiefland* when we consider the generic conventions of the *Zigeunerdrama*. At the extreme, Riefenstahl’s defenders have pointed to *Lowlands* as representing an act of resistance. Robert von Dassanowsky, for example, calls the film “Riefenstahl’s ‘inner emigration’ from the hostility of the Nazi inner circle, the shock of the war, and her slow disillusionment with Hitler.” To him, Martha and Pedro’s escape into the mountains represents Riefenstahl’s rebellion, in which, he suggests, “she does not relinquish her equality with men but leaves behind a leader and a society she previously celebrated [and] transcends into a natural world without politics, war, or even human beings, aside from the man of her fantasy: attractive, gentle, and good.”

Taking the recuperation of Riefenstahl one step further, the feminist filmmaker Helma Sanders-Brahms famously suggested that we might even read *Tiefland* as a film advocating rebellion against the Nazis and enacting a metaphorical murder of Hitler himself. Readings such as these might well be tempting: If Riefenstahl inserts herself in the role of Martha, the figure who—as a gypsy—would be considered an absolute outsider under Nazi racial laws, does this not suggest that she aligns herself with the victims of Nazi persecution? Yet such readings both overlook the way in which the fantasies of the gypsy are entirely separate from the real conditions of the Sinti and Roma and elide those structures of *Tiefland* that hearken back to the *Zigeunerdrama*. Like
the films of the older genre, *Tiefland* resolves the issue of the dangerous others embodied in both Don Sebastian and Martha decisively and brutally, by expelling those who represent the threat to the homogeneous community. Martha’s escape to the mountains is as much a part of the process by which the community is again made whole and healthy as is Don Sebastian’s death; neither she, the fascinating and dangerous outsider, nor he, the exploitive tyrant whose greed and unwillingness to stop diverting the community’s water supply threatens its livelihood, has a place in a well-functioning *Volkskörper*. And indeed, the fact that she ultimately ends up with Pedro, a figure associated repeatedly with a virginal naiveté and thus diametrically opposed to Martha’s inherent eroticism, neutralizes the threat posed by her body and her art. It is, in other words, not nature that is opposed to culture and society in the end, for Martha and Pedro’s return to the mountain does not so much establish that sphere as superior as it does remove the threat both of them posed to the productive society of the village. Rather, once again—as in *Das blaue Licht*—a woman is sacrificed for the greater good of the community; the village is made whole not simply because Don Sebastian is killed, but rather because Martha, the threatening and alluring stranger, departs once again.

In the end, neither of Riefenstahl’s feature films was received entirely positively. *Das blaue Licht* already elicited a characteristic ambivalence, with some critics calling it overwhelmingly kitschy, whereas others insisted that it was a work of artistic innovation. One critic, for example, argued that reviewers were misunderstanding the fundamental “Germanness” of the film and were unable to value “deutsche Dichtkunst [und] die Lyrik deutscher Romantik” (German poetry and the lyricism of German Romanticism). Yet this review itself already implies some of the problems at the heart of *Das blaue Licht* by referencing the notion of some innately German quality in a film that stages the construction of community through a process of exclusion effectively based on race. And this problem might well have been reshaped by the time *Tiefland* was released, yet it still sits at the center of the narrative. For that film, particularly through its reference to the *Zigeunerdrama*, builds on a generic legacy that is fundamentally driven by the opposition between community and other, and that fashions itself around a central figure at once desired and feared. Indeed, in both of her feature films, Riefenstahl constructs narratives that might well profit from the otherness of the women at their centers, but that ultimately can be resolved only through the exclusion of that same woman. The cinematic roots of the films, then, clearly implicate Riefenstahl’s work both in the fantasies of desire and exclusion that the *Zigeunerdrama* staged in the 1910s and 1920s and in the nationalist and racist constructs that were at the heart of Nazi ideology.
Notes


2 She directed two other propaganda films, *Der Sieg des Glaubens* (Victory of the Faith, 1933), a documentary of the 1933 Nazi Party Congress, and the short *Tag der Freiheit! Unsere Wehrmacht* (Freedom! Our Wehrmacht, 1935).


7 A note about terminology: although *Zigeuner* and the English equivalent, “gypsy,” are problematic terms more properly replaced with “Roma” or “Sinti” (though these, too, are not unproblematic), I follow the lead of Katie Trumpener, who suggests that she retains the term because her analysis focuses not on “real” Roma or Sinti, but rather on the Western construction of “gypsy” identity. Similarly, the *Zigeunerdrama*—and the fictitious gypsies that we find populating the filmic fantasies of the era—have little to do with reality, and thus I use the terms in circulation at the time specifically to emphasize their function as embodiment of cultural fantasies and fears. Katie Trumpener, “The Time of the Gypsies: A ‘People without History’ in the Narratives of the West,” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 4 (1992): 843–84.


10 Tegel, “Leni Riefenstahl’s Gypsy Question Revisited,” 24–25. See Tegel’s article as a whole for a detailed discussion of the process of producing the film and of Nazi policy on Roma and Sinti.


A comparison of lists of the extras with death lists from Auschwitz has made it possible to trace forty-eight names; it is likely that even more were killed. Tegel, “Leni Riefenstahl’s ‘Gypsy Question,’” 4–5.


Similarly, the Asta Nielsen film Eine Rose der Wildnis (A Rose of the Wilderness, 1918) emphasizes the impossibility of gypsies integrating into Western society. For a summary and review, see Paimanns Filmlisten 98, January 11–17, 1918.

Review of Amaranth, Der Kinematograph 485, April 12, 1916.

This is not to suggest that all of these films draw on this pattern. There are a few instances, such as Stiefkinder des Glückes (Stepchildren of Happiness, dir. J. Stein, 1918) and Die Zigeunerprinzessin (The Gypsy Princess, dir. Emanuel Gregers, 1918), in which the narrative ends happily and the ostensibly impossible marriages between gypsy and Western man survive and thrive. However, by and large, the Zigeunerdrama follows a tragic narrative, resolved through the death of the threatening other represented by the gypsy woman. For a summary of Stiefkinder, see Paimanns Filmlisten 124, July 12–18, 1918; for one of the latter film, see Paimanns Filmlisten 126, July 26–August 1, 1918.


Zanger, “Desire Ltd.,” 89.

Cited in “Ein Gipfel des Erfolges” (ad for Das blau Licht), Film-Kurier, April 18, 1932.


This character is played, incidentally, by one of the extras Riefenstahl procured from a concentration camp.


Trumpener, “Time of the Gypsies,” 855. For more details on Himmler’s ideas about race and the gypsies, see Lewy, “Himmler and the ‘Racially Pure Gypsies.’”
35 See, for example, Riefenstahl, *Leni Riefenstahl*, 156–58.


38 Dassanowsky, “‘Wherever You May Run,’” 120.


40 “‘Kunst und Natur sei eines nur. . . .’,” *Film-Kurier*, March 29, 1932, 3.
8: Regaining Mobility: The Aviator in Weimar Mountain Films

Wilfried Wilms

Looping about freely above the beautiful snow- and ice-covered rock faces of Germany’s highest mountain—the Zugspitze—the inexperienced pilot-to-be Heinz Muthesius loses control of his glider and begins to tumble uncontrollably out of the sky. As the glider plummets and breaks into smithereens, the young Muthesius descends via parachute and lands inaccessibly atop the icy slopes. Immobilized and hurt, he needs help—a mountain rescue involving ropes, crampons, ice axes, and torches, which one might expect to see in a film that is advertised as an “exhilarating, celebratory Bergfilm.”1 Instead, the rescue that unfolds at the end of Wunder des Fliegens (Miracle of Flight, 1935) comes in the form of Germany’s most famous war pilot, Ernst Udet. Udet, the highest-scoring ace to survive the First World War, approaches from faraway Berlin and lands his plane on a nearby snowfield, thereby saving the future German aviator from certain death. With his arm draped in a fatherly way around the self-doubting Icarus’s shoulders, Udet encourages the boy’s ascension and ambition: “Wenn’s auch mal schief geht . . . Jugend muss wagen!” (Even when things go wrong from time to time . . . youth has to dare!)2 Just before Udet flies Muthesius out to safety, the two admire a squadron of German planes thundering above the mountains. The future of Heinz Muthesius, whose father fell in 1918 on the Western front as a German fighter pilot, is all but certain. He, too, will fly for Germany.

While Wunder continues the well-established genre of mountain film, it is anything but a mountain film in the classical sense. Rather, it is an aviation film that was directly sponsored by the Luftwaffe Ministry and its chief Hermann Göring,3 and consequently reflects the ubiquitous discussions that were taking place in military and conservative circles regarding a future German air force. True to its propagandistic form, the film ultimately ties rescue and survival not to the stout mountain climber, as is typical of mountain films, but to the flier and his aircraft. Wunder, a popular crowd-pleaser at the time,4 openly touts the necessity of a German air force and cleverly employs the mountain-film genre alongside past aviation greatness to generate a narrative of
a nation’s enduring vocation to fly. This symbolism is particularly evident when Udet takes the young Muthesius to his Berlin apartment, which is decorated with aviation memorabilia that showcase his days as a fighter pilot during the First World War and his exploits in mountain and exploration films in the years that followed. Later in the film we see images of the former war ace Oswald Boelcke, who is considered to be the father of German fighter tactics. Additionally, a flashback shows documentary footage of Manfred von Richthofen, nicknamed the Red Baron, taken on the Western Front, to which the audience reacted with enthusiastic applause. The film ultimately reduces the mountains to a mere backdrop, focusing instead on Muthesius’s experiences in Bavaria, where his eager wings remain clipped by a mother who is too concerned about her son’s safety to allow him to fly. Having already lost her husband at the front, she is less than willing to sacrifice her son as well. It takes a chance encounter with Germany’s most famous flyer, the boy’s idol, Udet, to convince her that Heinz’s future lies in his calling to fly. As Udet puts it to the mother, Heinz is one of the “Auserwählten” (chosen ones) and has “das Blut seines Vaters” (his father’s blood). Of course, the nation is also calling: “Wir brauchen unsere junge Generation heute mehr wie je . . . auf jeden Einzelnen kommt es an!” (We need our young generation now more than ever. We depend on each and every one!) It is worth mentioning that the young aviator who has crashed his plane on the mountainside is no other than the actor Jürgen Ohlsen, who had achieved stardom two years prior when he died as Heini Völker in one of Nazi Germany’s notorious propaganda films, *Hitlerjunge Quex: Ein Film vom Opfergeist der deutschen Jugend* (Hitler Youth Quex: A Film of the Sacrifice of German Youth, 1933). Killed on the movie screen by communists in 1933, Heini is literally reborn for the German audiences in 1935 as a future aviator.

Mountain films, which had successfully enthused Weimar audiences with previously unseen vistas of snowy Alpine peaks, increasingly mutates into a vehicle of political crusading from around 1930 onward. For example, with Luis Trenker’s *Berge in Flammen* (Mountains on Fire, 1931), the mountain film is melded with war and thereby popularizes the image of the mountain climber as warrior. Aviation begins to creep into Arnold Fanck’s mountain films in the late 1920s, a trend that culminates in the mid-1930s in barefaced propaganda films such as *Wunder*. Nazi productions like Werner Klingler’s *Standschütze Bruggler* (Militiaman Bruggler, 1936) further steep the genre in contemporary politics, with the issue of South Tyrol as traditionally German homeland taking center stage. This essay traces the emergence of aviation in mountain films around 1930 and ties it back to concerns over Germany’s supposed political and cultural standstill after the First World War. I argue that the participation of Udet as a widely recognized war hero in Fanck’s *Die Weisse Hölle*
vom Piz Palü (The White Hell of Piz Palü, codirected with G. W. Pabst, 1929), Stürme über dem Mont Blanc (in English as Avalanche, 1930), and S.O.S. Eisberg (S.O.S. Iceberg, 1933) reveals three interconnected issues marked by crisis: first, the experience of defeat in war that becomes associated with a subsequent sense of standstill viewed as catastrophe and regression; second, an emphasis on and desire for mobility, a “dynamic offensive” expressed through aviation as well as cinema; third, underlying efforts by nationalist circles of Weimar society to break the perceived crisis caused by the “shackles of Versailles,” especially with regard to the limitations imposed on a future German air force. Fanck’s later mountain films are deeply indebted to both a prevailing general fascination of the Weimar audience with flying—including a deep veneration of war aces like Boelcke, Udet, and Richthofen—and to debates about an indispensable future rearmament of Germany, especially regarding an air force. By accident or design, Fanck’s later mountain films further the militarization of German society in the years leading up to the Nazi takeover.

The cultural historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch provides a compelling analysis of the patterned reactions displayed by history’s losers. He finds astonishing similarities in the complex psychological and cultural responses produced by the vanquished in their coming to terms with defeat and its consequences, including the threat of potential extinction. Of particular interest for the present essay are the reactions to Germany’s defeat in the fall of 1918, especially the perception of crisis seen as a general standstill and regression following the military surrender and the economic collapse in 1923. Both events blended into a single trauma of defeat with long-lasting consequences for the future health of the young democracy that followed. The end of an unsuccessful war meant the loss of all grand aspirations that had energized the generation of 1914: promises of cultural renewal that the front generation would bring back to civilian life, the healing of a bourgeois society that was perceived to be in deep crisis, spiritual growth through battle and camaraderie put forth during the 1920s, especially by Ernst Jünger, and a new idealism. The disastrous war also meant the loss of millions of young and able men, the return of many more permanently crippled and immobilized—or with ghastly disfigurations. The lost war brought long-term economic stagnation and for many an increased need for a worldview, orientation, and even salvation. What characterizes Germany in defeat, according to Schivelbusch, is the desire to regain its momentum, that is to say, to find or generate mobility at a time when the perception is one of death through inertia.

This longing for motion expresses itself throughout the 1920s in a number of ways, for instance in the initial hope for a German levée en masse—a popular uprising and war against the French invaders. Other examples include the (jazz) dance mania, experienced as a release from
the military’s marching in straight lines and an affirmation of life and physicality, as well as the vitality and productivity of the assembly line and Fordism that reached Germany after the publication of Ford’s autobiography in 1923. The German rationalization movement of 1925 to 1929, with its origins in Max Weber’s prewar notion of “scientific management,” sought to fuse American Fordism and its material prowess with German intellectual and cultural sway. Last but not least, the affordable Volkswagen automobile and a network of highways that the National Socialists built to mobilize the masses, literally and figuratively.17

In fact, watching a Nazi prewar featurette like Gestern und Heute (Yesterday and Today, 1938) by Hans Steinhoff, one gets a sense of the crisis of standstill and deterioration that followed military defeat and economic collapse. The eleven-minute educational film is intended to remind its contemporary audience of the kinesis reintroduced to the nation by the Nazi leadership. Visually, the short film accentuates Weimar’s supposed lethal standstill—dead harbors, collapsing factories, reminders of the Treaty of Versailles and the paralyzing consequences it had for Germany’s military, the occupation of the Rhineland by French colonial troops, and mass unemployment that forces able men “die Zeit tot zu schlagen” (to kill time). It then counters this all-encompassing crisis with close-ups of moving machinery and the mass mobilization of an army of workers marching and toiling away for a reinvigorated Germany that is moving toward a better future. Dominating the screen is the launching of ships and deliberate and repeated displays of Strength through Joy steamers promising social mobility. Furthermore, we see the construction of new housing projects, as well as a new highway system, which allows the nation’s blood to once again pulsate freely in all geographic directions—including into the air—as the film ends with a proud display of Germany’s newly acquired air force.

In the late 1920s, the situation was certainly different from the time when Fanck worked on his earlier mountain films. Shot in the first half of 1929, Piz Palü premiered within days of the financial crash that would spell doom for the Weimar Republic. As one of the last silent films of the era, Piz Palü introduces a wholly new element of the technological age to the mountain film—an airplane navigated by Udet. The film tells the story of Dr. Johannes Krafft (Gustav Diessl), an enthusiastic mountain climber true to his surname, which indicates power and vitality. He spends his time wandering the mountain like a ghost, grieving the loss of his beloved wife Maria, who had fallen to her death. Four years after his wife’s passing, another Maria, played by Leni Riefenstahl, is on the mountain with her fiancée Hans Brandt (Ernst Petersen). Against Krafft’s wishes, all three set off toward the summit. All goes well until Hans, who has insisted on taking the lead despite his inexperience, slips and falls, and Krafft breaks his leg while rescuing
him. Stranded on a ledge for three days and nights during a snowstorm, unable to retreat or move on, they are now slowly freezing to death. A search party is formed but it struggles to reach the climbers. Udet, who by 1929 was also widely known as a stunt pilot and an easily recognized star in Weimar Germany, reads about the accident and rushes to the rescue. In a sequence of shot/counter shot, the film contrasts the stasis of the climbers, which is accentuated by a now tied-up Hans who has lost his nerve and would otherwise jump to his death, with the fast and wide-ranging movements of Udet’s airplane circling overhead. Cameras mounted on the plane alternate between close-ups of the heroic and popular pilot and sweeping vistas of the mountains, which allow the audience to ascend and descend the mountains with enormous speed, crossing glaciers and yawning crevasses below. Udet’s audacious attempts to provide the climbers with supplies fails, and after showing the rescue party the way, he has to retreat. During another stormy night on the mountain Krafft sacrifices himself so that the young couple may survive. By means of special effects, the film fuses him with the eternal ice of the mountain, and he joins his wife in her frosty grave.

The film shares some narrative similarities with two of Fanck’s earlier works, Der Berg des Schicksals (The Mountain of Destiny, 1924) and Der heilige Berg (The Holy Mountain, 1926), and with Der Kampf ums Matterhorn (Battle for the Matterhorn, 1928), for which Fanck wrote the screenplay. There is, for one, an intrinsic discussion of appropriate and inappropriate behavior on the mountain. Krafft’s obsession is as ill placed as Brandt’s immature zeal to prove himself in front of his fiancée. Moreover, Krafft attempts to climb the dangerous north face out of vanity, after he learns that a group of students from Zurich are on their way to do the same. As he had done years ago, now too he disregards the advice of his guide, and the price he pays for his ambition is high both times: then, he had lost his wife, now he loses his own life. As inner-alpine discussions of the time show over and over again, mountaineering has to be a sober activity, performed with respect for the environment and a profound understanding of its dangers and one’s own abilities. Rivalry, vanity, and youthful exuberance are kept in check by a mountain that is seemingly alive and actively interfering by means of avalanches and storms. An avalanche sends the students into a crevasse, killing all of them and setting the stage for the cinematographic highlight of Piz Palü: a search and rescue attempt deep inside the belly of the glacier. The retrieval of the mangled bodies from the depths is especially powerful and echoes the war many of the participants in Fanck’s film had experienced firsthand. Second, as he had done in his previous films, in Piz Palü Fanck works again with the motif of the love triangle, a motif that focuses on the disastrous consequences caused by a woman’s presence in the Alpine environment.20
However, despite these narrative continuities, Fanck’s 1929 production represents a significant modernization of the genre. The heavy-handed symbolism and eccentricity of *Der heilige Berg* is now replaced with what Fanck himself had called a more realistic and levelheaded approach. The mountain is a real peak with a name, not a mere mythical place of challenge and redemption. The result is a more realistic film, a fact not lost on the critics from both the Right and Left. That the plot of *Piz Palü* was more convincing and less tawdry than *Der heilige Berg* has also everything to do with the fact that Fanck worked together with Pabst, one of the greatest directors of the time. *Piz Palü* fused the climbing focus of *Der Berg des Schicksals*, albeit transported to the aesthetically more rewarding region of ice and snow, with the human element that carried *Der heilige Berg*—in particular the conflict-ridden positioning of a female between two climbers.

*Piz Palü* was an artistic and financial success. The rave reviews, such as Hans Wollenberg’s commentary for the *Lichtbildbühne*, centered primarily on the cinematic uniqueness of the camera work as well as the fact that the story, which he summed up as “die elementare Verbundenheit des Menschen mit der Natur in Sieg und Niederlage” (the fundamental connection of man with nature in both victory and defeat), was what he considered a “thrumpfales und grunddeutsches Thema” (a triumphant and quintessentially German topic). “Man ist wieder stolz zum deutschen Film zu gehören” (One is proud again to belong to German film), Wollenberg writes enthusiastically about what he calls “deutsche Filmkunst” (German film art).21 Wollenberg stresses Udet’s presence and his triumph high above the mountains: “Im Flugzeug der Berge spottend. Großartige Leistungen des deutschen Fliegers Udet. . . . Welch unglaubliche Kurven zieht dieser Flieger um Höhen und durch Schluchten!” (Mocking the mountains from his plane. Exceptional achievements by the German flier Udet. . . . What incredible turns this flier pulls off around peaks and through gorges!)22 On the same page but in a separate article, Udet himself advertised the versatility of the airplane for reconnaissance and rescue missions in the mountains. He stressed the airplane’s mobility and speed insofar as he was able to cover in a mere ten minutes a distance that would have required a full day’s march for Fanck and his assistants.23

In the following three years, Udet returned to Germany’s cinemas twice in similar roles in *Stürme über dem Mont Blanc* and *S.O.S. Eisberg*.24 *Stürme* premiered on Christmas Day in 1930, and garnered great acclaim as “das Grandioseste, was die Kamera bisher der Natur abgerungen hat . . . ein Wunder!” (the grandest that a camera has ever wrestled from nature . . . a miracle!)25 For *Der Film* it was the ultimate achievement—and therefore the end—of Fanck’s mountain-film career: “Hier liegt die Unbeezwingbarkeit dieses Films. [W]as einmalig an ihm ist und wohl immer einmalig bleiben wird. . . . Diese Rekorde
körperlicher und filmischer Leistungen sind nicht mehr zu überbieten. Die höchste Grenze ist erreicht. Einen weiteren Film dieser Art zu machen, wäre sein Untergang.” (Here lies the insurmountability of the film. What is unique about it and will probably always remain unique. . . . This apex of physical and cinematic accomplishment cannot be surpassed anymore. The highest limit is reached. To make another film of this kind would lead to its downfall.)

In this feature, Udet comes to the aid of the meteorologist Hannes (Sepp Rist), who is about to lose his life in a snowstorm on the Alps’ highest peak. Riefenstahl portrays Hannes’s love interest, Hella Armstrong, who, with the help of a telegraph, calls Udet once again to the rescue. Although Stürme can indeed be seen as an extension and possibly perfection of Fanck’s previous film, its striking difference rests in the sheer amount of aerial footage the director worked into it in comparison to his previous feature. Scenes of Udet and his plane frame the entire movie. The audience is treated to extensive aerial views of the magnificent snow-covered Alps shot from the moving plane, as well as views of the plane amidst the peaks. The camera shares with the audience the speed of the moving objects, thereby vastly increasing its own sense of mobility. The press took notice of the seemingly godlike efforts displayed by the participants high above the clouds: “Alle Rekorde sind gebrochen.

Fig. 8.1. Ernst Udet in Stürme über dem Mont Blanc (1930). Image reproduced by permission from Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek.
Sie zu überbieten, ist den Menschen nicht gestattet. . . . Ernst Udet fliegt über die grandiose Landschaft der Gletscher, in Nebel und Sturm hinein, wird umhergeworfen, vollbringt unglaubliche Leistungen. Seine Tollkühnheit—ein lächelndes Spiel mit dem Tode—gibt dem Film seine dramatische Stärke. (Es kommt ja gar nicht auf die Handlung an.)” (All records are broken. It is not within mankind’s power to surpass them. . . . Ernst Udet flies above the grandiose landscape of the glaciers, in fog and storm, is being thrown around, performing unbelievable deeds. His daredevilry—a tickled play with death—provides the dramatic strength to the film. [The plot doesn’t matter anyway.])

_Stürme_ emphasizes the speed and unmatched versatility of the aircraft when compared to the slow-moving climbers who trudge across crevasses while weighed down by the burdensome supplies that they must carry on their backs. The aerial reconnaissance of the First World War, guided by an attempt to make the hidden of the battlefield visible, returns to the equally obscured glaciers and climbers by means of Udet’s biplane. Just as the airplane made possible a privileged speed of penetration during the war, so too does it rush audiences of the late 1920s, now equipped with airborne vision, to the narrative and cinematographic highlight of the film. A key scene unfolds during the last ten minutes, when Hannes fails to retreat from the stormy mountain on foot. Facing certain death, he sends a final SOS down to the valley. The men coming to his rescue on foot, however, cannot reach him. All seems hopeless until Hella sends a telegraph to Udet: “wetterwart auf montblanc in lebensgefahr—rechtzeitige hilfe nur durch flugzeug möglich” (meteorologist’s life on Mont Blanc in danger—timely rescue only possible by plane). Unlike the slow-moving climbers, Udet’s aircraft reaches the unfolding drama on top of the mountain within minutes. Several shots of the rescuer are filmed from a second plane, which also captures thunder and lightning all around while he approaches. Not only Hannes’s life is in danger; the elements are threatening Udet’s rescue effort, too, by throwing his plane around a dark and hostile sky. Yet Udet, shown frequently from a camera mounted on his airplane, pushes on. Shots of the aircraft tumbling through the sky, interwoven with images of Udet’s determined face, give viewers the impression that this is a duel between nature and the superior German fighter ace, who is risking it all for his dying comrade on Mont Blanc. This time the film ends successfully with Udet overcoming the storm and saving his friend. He lands on a nearby slope, rushes inside the cabin, and without uttering a word, prepares a fire. Oddly enough, by the time Hella arrives, Hannes is halfway de-iced, sitting with frostbitten hands at a table set with tea mugs and some food, provisions that only Udet could have supplied. The final scenes show Hella lighting a life-saving fire as she lovingly glances back and forth between the hearth and an incapacitated Hannes, a detail that suggests the ensuing relationship between the two.
S.O.S. Eisberg concludes this emphasis on increased or regained mobility by means of airborne vision as it makes the forward motion through icy waters, from iceberg to iceberg, key to survival. In fact, this forward motion is the main theme of the film. Shot in Greenland in 1932, S.O.S. allocates even more screen time to Udet than Stürme, while it replaces the peaks of the Alps with the towering icebergs off Greenland, and the avalanches with the rolling of the icy giants. S.O.S. operates with not only the same themes as Fanck’s previous mountain films, but it also employs the same formula, protagonists (down to the name Johannes Krafft, albeit this time brought to life by the actor Sepp Rist, and another Hella figure played again by Riefenstahl), director, and film crew. The improbable plot has the heroic explorer Krafft concerned about his reputation as a “comrade.” He leads an expedition to Greenland, where he hopes to find his missing colleague Professor Lorenz (Gustav Diessl). During their mission, however, the group is stranded on a giant iceberg—coincidentally the same iceberg that Lorenz is on—which threatens to drift into the open sea. A desperate rescue attempt by Lorenz’s wife, Hella, fails when her plane crashes on landing. Their fate appears to be sealed. Krafft, true to his name, sets out to find help in the Eskimo village of Thule. That, however, requires a superhuman eight-mile journey through icy waters. During the last thirty minutes of the film we are thus watching two parallel feats of mobility: Krafft trying the impossible by struggling from ice sheet to ice sheet, battered by howling winds; and Udet circling above and around icebergs in his effort to locate Lorenz and his men. Driven mad by hunger, three of Lorenz’s men attack one another and die on the iceberg. Yet again Udet rescues the remaining survivors, Lorenz and Hella, and shortly thereafter he also scoops up his friend Krafft out of the open sea.

Cameras mounted onto several airplanes repeatedly showcase Udet, who directs the search efforts in the endless wilderness of floating ice and drifting icebergs, and his aerial acrobatics from various angles. Nothing but aerial reconnaissance stands a chance of success here. When Udet finally locates Hella standing atop the iceberg, she utters his name in relief, knowing that such a daring rescue operation could only be performed by him. She runs into her husband’s arms, exclaiming, “Udet ist da!” (Udet is here!) The ace has done it once again, and this time with more grandeur than ever before. Together with Krafft, he sets out to marshal the Eskimos for help. The final scenes, which are probably the most famous of the film, present an instant of mass mobility when we see some fifty Eskimo kayaks swiftly and in unison paddling around the icebergs to bring Hella and her husband to safety. In the end, and after all this action, Udet is shown celebrating amidst the boats, coolly smoking on his plane. He then circles the iceberg a few more times, which has rolled over and partly collapsed, and flies off into the distance.
The critics noticed in unison that the plot of this expedition film was less rounded and convincing than that of Fanck’s predecessors. The protagonists in S.O.S. are clearly nature, which is unforgiving, and the plane, which might explain why a critic felt that the film is “sparsam dialogisiert” (contains very little dialogue). What Fanck had painted was a “grandiose[s] Naturgemälde. . . . Und über allem schwebt fühlbar die Technik, der wir an diesem Film den Löwenanteil des Erfolges geben müssen” (magnificent nature painting. . . . And what hovers tangibly above it all is technology. It deserves the lion’s share of the film’s success).

What can we make of Udet’s increasing presence in these films and corresponding commentary by critics of the time? I argue that they are more than a manifestation of interest in aviation during the 1920s. In the German context of a paralyzing defeat, Udet’s various roles as aerial rescuer project a future that is built on the front generation of the past war and closely tied to the possibilities and necessities of a German air force in defiance of the Versailles Treaty—an air force for which the nation needed to be mobilized not only mechanically but emotionally as well. I contend that we can look at German climbers, explorers, and especially fliers in late Weimar films as patently dedicated to restoring to Germany a national honor lost in defeat. Udet is meant to rally and motivate a German audience bogged down by defeat and massive loss of life. Fanck’s later mountain films provide, on a number of levels, codes of conduct for an ailing society, which indirectly prepare the nation’s will for a future conflict. To an extent, the cumulative presence of the war ace and his aerial acrobatics in mountain and exploration films in the late 1920s and early 1930s is therefore a befitting extension of the adulation that fighter pilots received during the war and immediately after, when aces like Boelcke, Max Immelmann, and of course the “Red Baron” himself “resembled the movie stars of the 1920s.” In a conflict that quickly ground to a halt and had practically immobile mass armies opposite one another, the aviator gave the war a new face and a masculine ideal: one that fused the fast-moving plane, the machine gun, and the chivalrous individual fighter pilot into a deadly apparatus characterized by tempo, mobility, and unrivaled vision—a trio that would eventually return to Germany’s movie screens in Fanck’s films.

To better understand these films in context, it is helpful to consider the writings of Ernst Jünger, who reflected throughout the 1920s on the lasting impact of modern war on the individual man and his emotional makeup, as well as on societies and their political and industrial organization. The toughened worker-soldier that Jünger engineered was an amalgam of flesh and steel, aided by technology. For him, the men who built and then directed the machines of war, whether they were tanks, airplanes, or submarines, were “eine Rasse . . . die ein eisiges Hirn über glühendem Herzen trägt” (a breed that wears an ice-cold brain above a
Jünger stresses that many of these airmen were “aufgewachsen in den rauchenden Revieren der großen Industrie, den Mitteln und Mächten unseres Zeitalters von Kind auf nahe gewesen” (reared in the smoking centers of large industry and accustomed to the means and powers of our age from childhood on). They were, therefore, familiar with the enhancement of life by the machine. Again and again, Jünger turned to aviation when describing the new face that war had brought to twentieth-century Europe. The aviator, perhaps more than others, symbolizes this new tempo and fusion of man and machine—but he also balances the image of a “steeled machine-man” with that of a knight in the air. At least early in the war, Jünger (and with him the wider public in Germany) considered air warriors an ideal type in overalls, “mit dem wie in Stein geschnittenen Gesicht unter der Lederkappe” (with a face hewn in stone under a leather cap), engaged in a chivalrous duel that had long become obsolete elsewhere on a fixed battlefield, which endured a war of attrition. The single pilot, however, retained his mobility and was seemingly able to avoid becoming one with the anonymous masses. “Down below,” one pilot explained, “I am a miserable worm that must burrow in the earth . . . mines and shells rend the soil that protects me—and are likely to rend me too.” Yet “up above I am a free bird that does not need to crouch motionless. I can . . . wriggle my way through the narrow meshes of the net of steel splinters and leaden bullets that is set for me.” In the public imagination, the airman entered combat on his own and fought skillfully and tenaciously against a single foe, each looping and climbing around the other. Self-reliance and skill, nerves of steel, and disregard for danger were the decisive qualities of the fighter pilots—qualities we also see promoted in Fanck’s films, where they are initially associated with the climber, and then progressively with the pilot coming to his rescue.

In 1928, in his introduction to the extravagantly illustrated collection of essays on aviation entitled Luftfahrt ist Not!, Jünger eulogizes German flight past and future as an absolute necessity for the salvation of the stunted German nation, and against what he calls the “Verfall unserer Rasse” (degeneration of our race). The collection includes historical, political, and technical pieces on German aviation, addressing everything from nostalgic wartime experiences in contributions like “Schlachtflüge” (Combat Flights, by Friedrich Ritter von Kraußer) and “Zeppeline im Krieg” (Zeppelins in Wartime, by Richard Frey) to the general usefulness of the airplane. Several propagandistic essays, such as “Die Jungfliegerbewegung” (The Young Aviator Movement, by Bruno Zinneker) and “Aus dem Jungfliegerleben” (An Account of the Life of a Young Aviator, unknown author), are aimed in particular at youth. Two pieces entitled “Luftpoltik” (Air Politics, by Friedrich Andreas Fischer von Poturzyn) and “Das Luftwesen in anderen Ländern” (Aviation in
Other Countries, by Carl Cranz), respectively, also illustrate the sense of crisis reverberating in circles supporting a return of Germany to geopolitical relevance. The qualities necessary to achieve this were will and determination, alongside propaganda and its most powerful instrument—cinema—which would rally a German public that had by and large embraced a pacifist attitude. Both these writings and Fanck’s films respond to this attitude by marshaling the climber and the aviator in tandem, unleashing onto the audience a kind of “hyper-generation of movement” through airborne vision and a speed of penetration typically associated with war.43

For example, von Poturzyn’s essay “Luftpolitik” posits traffic and “Verkehrsbedürfnis” (a need for traffic) as the pivotal requirements of modern times.44 After the revolution that was brought about by the train in the nineteenth century and the system of highways that would soon crisscross Germany, the plane is imagined as the next and most modern key to unlock the nation’s and even the world’s potential. The country’s lifeblood ought to flow freely, and closely tied to this imagined free flow is power. The “[Luftozcan bedeutet] durch faktische Beherrschung für die Existenz der Nationen in ihrem berechtigten Machtstreben einerseits oder andererseits in ihrem lebensnotwendigen Verteidigungswillen ein neues Medium” (The ocean of the air impacts the existence of nations by providing a new avenue for their justified pursuit of power and their indispensable will to defend themselves).45 Increasingly throughout the essay, the economical argument is pushed aside by disdain over the Versailles Treaty, which is referred to in the traditionally conservative tenor as a “Diktat” (dictate).46 Von Poturzyn, who joined Junkers Aircraft Company after the war, observes ominously: “Deutschland ist wehrlos, wenn sich die feindlichen Fluggeschwader der Nachbarstaaten auf seine Industriezentren, Städte und Verkehrsmittelpunkte stürzen würden” (Germany would be defenseless if the hostile squadrons of our neighboring nations were to throw themselves at our industrial centers, cities, and transportation hubs).47 The treaty not only deprived the nation of its airpower but it also attempted to rob from Germany the will to civil aviation: “Die Ententemächte hatten versucht, Deutschland auch den Willen zur Handelsluftfahrt zu rauben” (The Entente attempted to rob from Germany also its will to pursue civil aviation).48 But against all odds, von Poturzyn claims, the nation preserved for itself a “Wille . . . zur Luftgeltung” (will . . . to air relevance) even in the face of defeat.49 To turn this will into action, Germany requires a new “Rasse von Luftfahrern” (race of aviators).50 To prevent Germany from nourishing this will, to deny its actualization, is for him a “Verbrechen . . . gegen den Weltfortschritt” (crime against world progress).51 According to von Poturzyn, air politics ultimately means that it will be possible for Germany to build up its air forces free of restrictions.
Fig. 8.2. “Die Kriegsflugzeuge sämtlicher Staaten der Welt” (The fighter airplanes of several states in the world). Excerpt from Ernst Jünger’s collection of essays Luftfahrt ist Not! (378).

Authored by the German career officer Craniz, “Das Luftwesen in anderen Ländern,” provides a comparative analysis of military planes around the globe and condenses Germany’s dire situation into a graph showing how this former European powerhouse has been wiped off the map. Despite a population of some 62 million, Germany had zero military planes in its possession. Even Bolivia, Albania, and Afghanistan each owned 10 such planes. Germany’s foe across the Rhine, France, with almost 42 million inhabitants, ranked at the top with an all-mighty air fleet numbering 2,560 planes. It is difficult, if not impossible, to discern the extent to which Fanck was tuned into these discussions concerning aviation. Suffice it to say, however, that with Udet, Fanck had his finger
on the pulse of the very military and political circles in which these issues were deliberated with great urgency. Furthermore, Fanck’s own military background as well as that of several members in his team provided a shared platform for their at times grueling work in ice and snow. In his autobiography, Fanck reveals at least a basic interest in aviation prior to meeting Udet in person: “Ich hatte schon mehrmals Udets tollkühne Fliegerkunststücke gesehen” (I had repeatedly seen Udet’s daredevil stunts). Fanck could not have been naïve enough not to fathom that the increasing presence of the war hero Udet as aerial rescuer introduced a chapter of recent military history into his mountain films—with the resultant consequences.

With a keen eye on geopolitical developments, it was not lost on Jünger that throughout the 1920s a hotly contested debate on the future of aviation in war occupied the military and nationalist circles of the victorious nations. But while the former adversaries were contemplating how to win the next European or worldwide conflagration from the air, Germany saw its own conservative elite lament the fact that the nation was tied down by wide-ranging and stringent limitations concerning the production and use of engine-powered aircraft in the years after the war. In reference to the restrictions imposed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles, Jünger writes: “Es ist weniger der Stolz auf den Besitz von Maschinen und Flotten, den wir in uns wachhalten und züchten müssen, obwohl auch dieser seine . . . Berechtigung besitzt, sondern weit mehr noch der Stolz auf das Feuer, die Macht und die Unerbittlichkeit des Willens” (It is less the prideful possession of machines and fleets that we have to keep alive and rear in ourselves, although that too has its . . . justification, but rather the pride of the fire, the power, and the ruthlessness of the will). What Jünger hopes to achieve with his volume on aviation is nothing other than “Erziehung” (education) toward a future Germany that will break the shackles of Versailles. As part of this education, the mobilization of the will toward a German air force precedes any material armament. He writes: “Gerade für Deutschland, dem die Friedensverträge viele schwere Hemmungen auferlegen, ist es von höchstem Wert, sich in den räumlichen Ordnungen von morgen die Stellung zu sichern, die es in denen von gestern verloren hat. Daher gilt es, den Blick zu weiten und zu schärfen und das Gefühl der Enge zu vertreiben.” (Especially for Germany, hemmed in by the peace treaties, it is of utmost importance to secure within the spatial arrangements of the future the very position it has lost in the past. It is therefore necessary to broaden and sharpen our vision and to chase away the sensation of narrowness.)

Recent scholarship on the history of civil-military relations around 1930 bespeaks the need felt among the military to tout its cause, and in fact to “educate” the general population, as Jünger put it. With a society increasingly frayed by the second economic collapse within a mere decade,
military elites longed for an alternative system that would be more in line with their worldview and mentalities. But sensing a fundamental alienation from wide segments of society, and fearing their potential insignificance, these elites deliberated how to bring about a change in climate. Propaganda seemed to be a way out of the dilemma. German society would need to be prepared, both physically and psychologically, for any struggle looming on the horizon. Emre Sencer’s close reading of two of Weimar Germany’s journals belonging to the defense press, *Deutsche Wehr* and *Militär-Wochenblatt*, reveals three main themes emerging around 1930: the defenselessness of Germany after 1919, an increasing enthrallment with strengthening the ties between the nation and the military, and an obsession with ideas the military deemed detrimental to the nation’s unity and the military’s role in Germany, such as pacifism or socialism.58 Of particular concern to the military was the erosion of its authority over the youth after the collapse of the monarchy. The responses produced in these journals, unsurprisingly, center on changing the popular image of the war, displaying at times violent nationalism, and project a rebirth that is closely tied to mobilizing the population against Versailles and the imagined leadership of a charismatic figure. The preparation of the nation for the next conflict stretched from remembering and hailing the generation of the Great War (to whose level the youth was expected to rise) to worries about pacifism and antiwar sentiment expressed in literature, paintings, and especially cinema.

It is precisely in the context of these debates that we need to read Fanck’s films of the years 1929–1933 not only as examples of the continuity of the mountain-film genre, but especially as an expression of the crisis of standstill that was to be undone by the unencumbered mobility of the aviator. Udet’s presence as well as the aerial photography afforded by the fast-moving airplane literally and figuratively achieve what Jünger called for: a broadening of the horizon that would chase away any sense of claustrophobia. With Udet, German movie audiences regained a sense of mobility lost in defeat. Both the antirational veneration of glaciers and rocks and the ever-present heroism that seemed eerily close to the experiences of the First World War are staples of the films discussed here.59 Throughout the 1920s, mountain films derived at least some of their attraction from the psychological responses they evoked on multiple levels in a climate of trauma. The primordial manhood exposed in figures and surnames like Dr. Krafft are examples of an imagined and desired vigorous German masculinity, which, intriguingly, Udet did not fit visually with his plump corporeality. What sets Fanck’s 1929–1933 works apart from his earlier mountain films is the fact that the increasing presence of a war ace and his aircraft is linked to the mobilization of the German audience for a future German air force. Toward the end of the Weimar years, Fanck’s films become vehicles for the politics of future rearmament
by initially linking the qualities of the mountain climber with those of the modern aviator, yet ultimately tilting the balance in favor of the flier. Although both have much in common in their quest for liberation, conquest, mobility, and rejuvenation, the trend in the films analyzed here indicates that the aviator increasingly supplants the climber or explorer. Survival ultimately rests with the aviator and his machine.

Notes

1 Jacket of DVD cover.
2 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.
4 See, for instance, the review of the film in *Lichtbildbühne*, May 16, 1935, that describes Udet being “umrasscht von stürmischem Beifall” (swept away by thunderous applause). A review in *Der Film*, May 18, 1935, speaks of “riesiger Andrang” (masses of visitors).
6 *Der Film* reports on May 18, 1935, 6–7, of the substantial attendance during the premiere of the film, which was introduced outside the theater by an “Ehrenspalier . . ., der sich aus alten Weltkriegskämpfern zusammensetzt. . . . Ein schneidiger Fanfarenmarsch leitete zu der Aufführung des Films über. Der Beifall unterbrach die Aufführung, als Udets einstiger Geschwaderkommandeur Manfred von Richthofen im Bilde erschien.” (A guard of honor consisting of former world-war fighters. . . . A spirited march provided the transition to the screening of the film. The screening was interrupted by applause when Udet’s former squadron commander Manfred von Richthofen appeared on screen.) The review in *Deutsche Filmzeitung*, May 19, 1935, 3–4, stresses the political and educational value of the film.
8 At the end of the First World War, South Tyrol is annexed by Italy. Throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, the Italian fascists pursue a ruthless Italianization campaign. Whether South Tyrol ought to be returned to Austria remains a hotly contested issue and is settled only in 1939 when Hitler and Mussolini devise the South Tyrol Option Agreement. See Wilfried Wilms, “The Alps as Lebensraum—Cinematic Representations of the Alpine War and the South Tyrol Question in 1930s Germany,” *German Studies Review* 40, no. 1 (2017), forthcoming.
There are earlier examples of aviation films reminding the audiences of the First World War. The German production *Richthofen, der rote Ritter der Luft* (*Richthofen, the Red Knight of the Air*, 1927) gave birth to the genre. Charles Lindbergh’s successful transatlantic flight in May 1927 dramatically increased interest in aviation as well as aviation films. The Hollywood production *Wings* of the same year won the very first Academy Award for best film in 1929. Consider also Howard Hawks’s *The Dawn Patrol* (1930) in this context.


One such expression is the well-attended *Flugtage* (air shows) of the Weimar years that contributed greatly to Udet’s fame after 1918. For information on Udet’s various enterprises and international stunt flying after 1918, see van Ishoven, *Ernst Udet*.


Here, too, the desire for mobility found expression in the subsequent development of prosthetics that was meant to provide the individual with useful limbs. Medical films at the Hygiene Museum in Dresden illustrate the bewildering array of innovations, stressing the regained movement of the soldiers whom we see walking in and out of the frame, up and down the stairs, hopping, shoveling, lifting, etc.

One could look at Ernst von Salomon’s novel *Die Geächteten* (*The Outlaws*, Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1930) as a literary example describing prevailing fantasies concerning a German national resistance after November 1918. The narrator’s despair in the opening three chapters illustrates his hope for a popular German uprising, as anything else can only mean utter destruction of the world the young cadet aspires to inherit.


Steinhoff is considered one of the most ideologically devoted Nazi film directors. He is particularly known for films like *Hitlerjunge Quex* and *Ohm Krüger* (1940).


See also Christian Rapp, *Höhenrausch: Der deutsche Bergfilm* (Wien: Sonderzahl, 1997), 121–23, 127. Rapp interprets the existence of a woman in the mountains as a “sexual challenge,” present only “to expose ‘manly’ virtues.” His reading of the film emphasizes the “vaginal morphology” of the crevasse in Fanck’s film:
Krafft’s fate originates in the crevasse when his wife disappears, and concludes when he returns into its ice “womb.” Rapp pays no attention to Udet’s role in the film.

21 Hans Wollenberg, “Die weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü,” Lichtbildbühne, November 16, 1929, cover. The critic A. Kossowsky strikes a similarly patriotic tone, stating, “daß es wieder einmal deutsche Filmleute gewesen sind, die ein solches herrliches Werk von Weltformat geschaffen haben” (that once again it was a German film crew that created such a magnificent work of international distinction). See A. Kossowsky, “Berliner Erstaufführung im Ufa-Palast am Zoo: Die weiße Höhle vom Piz Palü,” Der Film, November 16, 1929.

22 Wollenberg, “Die weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü,” Lichtbildbühne, November 16, 1929, cover, and November 18, 1929, 2.

23 Ernst Udet, “Loopings über Gletschern,” Lichtbildbühne, November 18, 1929. Reviews in the United States, for example in The Washington Post, stress the presence of “the renowned German ace” and “his spectacular stunting among the towering summits.” “His efforts are largely responsible not only for many thrilling airplane maneuvers but for Alpine photographs of incomparable beauty and uniqueness.” See “Alpine Romance Filmed in Clouds by Noted War Ace,” The Washington Post, May 25, 1930; and “White Hell Pitz Palu,” The Washington Post, May 26, 1930. The Billboard reports on October 4, 1930, 11: “The sequences of the aviator stunting and risking his life amid the sharp peaks and over dangerous crevasses are indeed thrilling.”

24 At the same time Udet plays aerial rescuer in Weimar’s cinema, he does indeed lend his services to find the men of the airship Italia that crashed after crossing the North Pole in 1928. Udet never gets the chance to actually look for the lost Italian airman Umberto Nobile, who was rescued by the Swedish air force pilot Einar Lundborg.

25 Anon., Lichtbildbühne, February 3, 1931, 2.

26 Anon., Der Film, February 7, 1931, 11.


28 Anon., Der Film, February 7, 1931, 11.

29 Hella’s “homecoming” appears as a form of taming and is tied to her increasing lack of mobility. Initially she is described by her father as a typical girl of the times and “not good for anything,” by which he means that she cares primarily about science and skiing and not for household chores. Hella is introduced into the film as a hand operating the telescope of an observatory, and she leaves it as a hand starting a nurturing fire for her admirer. In S.O.S. Eisberg, another Hella figure also embodied by Riefenstahl is further reduced to the role of worrying wife and rather incompetent pilot. In Fanck’s earlier film Der Berg des Schicksals, we have another Hella, portrayed by Hertha von Walther. In that film, too, Hella is introduced as “das wilde Mädel” (the wild girl) who loves climbing and teases Trenker’s character, yet in the end has to be rescued by him and is shown to be an inferior climber. On women as a potentially disruptive agency in mountain film, see Eric Rentschler, “Mountains and Modernity: Relocating the Bergfilm,” New German Critique, no. 51 (1990): 137–61.
30 In 1929, Nunzio Malasomma and Mario Bonnard had made a comparable film starring Trenker, *Der Ruf des Nordens* (The Call of the North). Both films are inspired by the well-publicized polar exploration of men like Roald Amundsen and especially Alfred Wegener that took place early in the twentieth century. At the time of *Der Ruf des Nordens*, Wegener went on his third Greenland expedition. He died during his fourth a year later. On Germany and polar expeditions, see David Thomas Murphy, *German Exploration of the Polar World: A History, 1870–1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

31 Anon., *Lichtbildbühne*, August 31, 1933.

32 Anon., *Der Film*, September 2, 1933.

33 In this context of reclaiming national prestige, we also need to consider German attempts to climb peaks in the Himalayas that began with expeditions in 1929 to Kangchenjunga, and then focused on the German “Mountain of Destiny,” Nanga Parbat, from 1932 onward. See Harald Hoebusch, “‘Mountain of Destiny’: The Filmic Legacy of Nanga Parbat,” in *Heights of Reflection: Mountains in the German Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Sean Ireton and Caroline Schaumann (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2012), 285–301.

34 Fritzsche, *A Nation of Fliers*, 76.

35 Interestingly, wide segments of the Jewish community also embraced this ethos of regeneration and steeling, particularly as it was put forth by Ernst Jünger. See Todd Presner, “Muscle Jews and Airplanes: Modernist Mythologies, the Great War, and the Politics of Regeneration,” *Modernism/modernity* 13, no. 4 (2006): 701–28.


37 Jünger, *Das Wäldchen 125*, 83.

38 Fritzsche, *A Nation of Fliers*, 64.


41 Fritzsche, *A Nation of Fliers*, 74.


52 The cameraman Sepp Allgeier was at Verdun, and his colleague and war hero Hans Schneeberger took part in the Alpine war, as did the actors Luis Trenker and Hannes Schneider.

53 Arnold Fanck, *Er führte Regie mit Gletschern, Stürmen und Lawinen: Ein Film- pionier erzählt* (Munich: Nymphenburg, 1973), 195. The autobiography contains numerous indications that Fanck’s own war experiences haunted him. While filming *Stürme* in the mountains, he notes (220): “Wenn ich wie zumeist als letzter noch auf war . . . hatte ich oft den Eindruck, wieder im Lazarett zu sein. Um mich herum ein nächtliches Konzert von Stöhnen, Alpdruckschreien und fluchendem Herumwälzen.” (Usually I was the last one to be awake . . . I was often under the impression of being back in the military hospital. Around me a nightly concert of moaning, screams brought about by nightmares, and people angrily tossing and turning.)

54 It was in particular the Italian general and air-power theorist Giulio Douhet who, already in 1921, put forth a new air-power doctrine that centered on morale bombing. The experience of trench warfare, that is, pitting hundreds of thousands of men against one another in a meat-grinding storm of steel, had to be avoided in a future conflict. Air power seemed to provide the answer. As the Allies understood it, air power was meant to break a people’s will in the next war by destroying their vital urban centers from above. Douhet found support for his ideas from the American Billy Mitchell, who, convinced that the First World War was not the war to end all wars, strongly advertised air power despite much initial opposition in the United States. In England it was Hugh Trenchard who became Chief of the Air Staff after the war under Winston Churchill and turned into one of the earliest champions of strategic bombing.


Part V. Making Cinema Stars
9: Brigitte Helm and Germany’s Star System in the 1920s and 1930s

Mihaela Petrescu

Brigitte Helm, the “European Übervamp”¹ of the late 1920s and early 1930s, is all but forgotten today. Although her life and films are depicted by Daniel Semler and she is included in Friedemann Beyrer’s recent anthology of Ufa actors, she is excluded from several contemporary accounts that investigate the German star system.² Helm made her cinematic debut in a leading role as vamp and virgin in Fritz Lang’s famous Metropolis (1927), a double role for which she was mostly praised in the press of the time.³ However, as Tim Bergfelder points out, Helm has been “virtually obliterated by the retrospective reception of Metropolis and its director,” and she is barely mentioned in contemporary works on the film.⁴ In contrast to the critical interest garnered by Metropolis, scholars have paid little attention to Helm’s other films, which is an astounding oversight, given her continuous popularity during her time with Ufa (1925–35).⁵ In addition to Bergfelder’s work, the scholarship of Andrea Böhm, Robert Müller, and Valerie Weinstein constitutes significant exceptions to the dearth of critical examinations of Helm’s career.⁶ While these scholars emphasize the continuity of the actress’s vamp image, they also argue that her career was revived with the comedy Die Gräfin von Monte Christo (The Countess of Monte Christo, 1932), and that her femme fatale image was incompatible with Nazi views.⁷ As I show elsewhere, Die Gräfin was only somewhat successful at reinventing Helm beyond her vamp image; though this reinvention worked narratively, the gestural and behavioral codification of Helm’s performance remained that of a femme fatale.⁸ In contrast to Böhm, Müller, Bergfelder, and Weinstein, who consider only a select few of Helm’s films and offer no interpretation of the bulk of her work produced between 1933 and 1935, in this essay I focus on the films produced during this time span and argue that Helm’s image was changed to reflect Nazi ideology. My analysis of Die schönen Täge in Aranjuez (The Beautiful Days in Aranjuez, 1933), Inge und die Millionen (Inge and the Millions, 1933), Gold (1934), Die Insel (The Island, 1934), and Ein idealer Gatte (An Ideal Husband, 1935)⁹ reveals Ufa’s continuous though not always similarly intense efforts to remodel Helm’s
image. In these films, Helm portrays women whose personal sacrifice protects the community (Inge) and their male partner, who in turn helps the community by being active in forms of industry vital for the Third Reich (Die schönen Tage), creating jobs (Die Insel), or both (Ein idealer Gatte), or by preventing a world economic crisis and saving the lives of hundreds (Gold). This positioning of the individual in the service of the community is a cornerstone of National Socialist doctrine, as is the creation of jobs and industry, and seen through this lens Helm’s roles are to various degrees in tune with Nazi views about women’s role in society.

On the one hand, these films constitute a look back to some of Helm’s earlier work as a vamp reformed through sacrifice: in the silent Alraune (1927) Helm’s character renounces her seductive ways and is integrated into marriage, whereas in Die wunderbare Lüge der Nina Petrowna (The Wonderful Lie of Nina Petrowna, 1929) and the talkie Alraune (1930), her characters sacrifice their life to save their beloved. Notably, the latter have more bohemian inclinations. On the other hand, in contrast to the Alraune films and Die wunderbare Lüge, by making sacrifices for male characters that embody Nazi ideology, Helm’s roles in her films from 1933 on foreshadow the sultry and self-sacrificial persona developed for Zarah Leander, the quintessential female star of Third Reich cinema. The press noted this link on the occasion of Leander’s first German film, Zu neuen Ufern (To New Shores, 1937). Although it did not consider the thematic similarities between the sophisticated and sacrificial female figures played by Helm since 1933 and Leander’s debut role, an anonymous review in the Film Kurier emphasized that Leander’s beauty, acting talent, and emerging international success filled the void caused by Helm’s retirement in 1935. Furthermore, by showing that Helm’s roles functioned as a blueprint for those of Leander this essay adds new insights to scholarly discussions that, as Erica Carter remarks, usually consider Leander a “copy, facsimile, uncanny double for two of Hollywood’s most prominent émigré divas: Garbo and Dietrich.”

Helm is not the only actress of the time mostly forgotten by today’s public and neglected by critics. As Joseph Garncarz asserts, over 40 percent of Weimar’s top stars are absent from film lexica that explore the period. In contrast to the elaborate investigations of female stars during the Third Reich, Weimar’s star system has been the object of less intense scrutiny, and among the few works that address it there is a significant discrepancy. Thus, whereas Helmut Korte and Stephen Lowry claim that Weimar Germany had a Hollywood-style star system, Garncarz shows that the Weimar period had a nationally distinctive star system. Garncarz argues that Weimar stars worked predominantly as freelancers without having long-term contracts with a single studio, as was the case in Hollywood, and that their work was viewed through the lens of an art discourse because they had multiple ties to the theater world. He also
notes that Ufa’s 1927 crisis, when the studio avoided bankruptcy owing to its takeover by the nationalist media mogul Alfred Hugenberg, led to some changes of the star system: media reports on stars’ private lives were no longer a rarity, and film directors were subordinated to producers, a measure that prioritized economic efficiency over the artistic process. However, when one considers Helm’s career in tandem with Garncarz’s observations, it becomes apparent that some of his caveats are in need of revision. For example, Helm had a long-term contract with Ufa, although there is some discrepancy in the records with regard to its precise length. A source of the time indicates that the actress’s initial contract spanned from her employment in *Metropolis* to January 3, 1930, Semler notes that she had a ten-year deal, and Michael Töteberg asserts that she was signed on for one year with the option of renewal. Helm was additionally bound to Ufa since, as Töteberg states, she owed the studio money after her unsuccessful legal battles with it in 1929, an aspect I will elaborate on later.

Scholars have not only disregarded the transformation of Helm’s roles into images of womanhood reflective of Nazi ideology, but have also failed to scrutinize the moments of crisis and incoherent Ufa strategies that marked her entire career. These include her casting, before and after 1933, in films of uneven quality and in supporting roles for which she was paradoxically advertised as the lead, the overemphasis on her potential to the detriment of her artistic recognition, and her financial—and consequently artistic—subjugation to Ufa after the loss of the above-mentioned litigations with the studio. By analyzing these perplexing and idiosyncratic strategies, this essay underscores the disjointed star image Ufa shaped for Helm in the Weimar years and retained during the Nazi period, and thus highlights some of the challenges faced by the emerging National Socialist star system such as poor-quality scripts and confusing casting and advertising. Ultimately, the essay sheds light on Helm’s tense relationship with the studio and helps clarify some of the misconceptions that surrounded—and continue to surround—the actress’s abrupt retirement.

**Helm’s 1933–35 Films**

As scholars have shown, Nazi films often displayed maternal, housewifely, selfless, and chaste figures as models of femininity. However, as Laura Heins indicates, these traditional images of womanhood were “rarely romanticized” and were “generally considered unappealing” by Third Reich audiences. Although they were present in numerous films, such traditional views of women coexisted, Heins argues, alongside quick-witted, fashionable, and independent female figures. Helm’s 1933–35 roles illustrate the model of National Socialist femininity described by
Heins, as they interweave the image of a selfless woman who protects the male character at the cost of her own happiness with that of the sophisticated, independent heroine.

In *Die schönen Tage*, Helm is the con artist Olga, who steals a string of pearls by means of an elaborate scam. The theft recalls the opening scene of Joe May’s *Asphalt* (1929), where, similarly, a vamp is shown to be both seductive and threatening as she steals a precious stone. Olga’s beguiling power and dangerousness are symbolized, moreover, by the automobiles she drives. At the beginning of the film, she is shown at the wheel of an opulent Mercedes that is bigger and faster than the small car driven by her love interest, the automobile engineer Pierre (Wolfgang Liebeneiner). The numerous shots that portray Olga driving self-assuredly establish an arc to the automobile Amazon, an image that, as Julia Bertschik states, abounded in Weimar’s imaginary and connected the modern woman and technology in ways that spurred both fear of and attraction to the New Woman. Intriguingly, Helm herself embodied the automobile Amazon: she was often photographed posing with and advertising for Mercedes cars, and in an interview she described herself as a “begeisterte Autofahrerin” (passionate driver). Furthermore, Helm’s fascination with automobiles led to several traffic accidents. As she states in the above-mentioned interview, in 1928 she was involved in three car accidents, and on March 24, 1933, shortly before filming for *Die schönen Tage* started, she was involved in a hit-and-run for which she was fined.

Olga’s transformation from a vamp into a remorseful person who wants to leave the criminal ring of which she is part and who progressively falls in love with Pierre is also reflected via car imagery. In contrast to the lavish Mercedes she drives initially, toward the end of the film Olga is shown alternatingly driving and riding as a passenger next to Pierre in his modest car, details that illustrate her renunciation of luxury in favor of a simple existence with Pierre. Her sacrifice in the final scene further underlines her transformation as she prioritizes Pierre’s safety over her freedom once she understands that a future together is impossible owing to her past transgressions of the law. When Olga notices the police at a village festival she attends with Pierre, she ultimately gives herself up in order to spare him from being arrested as her accomplice. Furthermore, her friendly interaction with a policeman leads Pierre to believe that she is married to the man and that, consequently, she is an adulteress who only had an affair with him. Olga does not tell Pierre the truth about her criminal past and thereby refuses to turn herself into the object of his disdain, and she seeks to spare him the humiliating realization that he had courted and planned a future with a thief. To some extent Olga’s sacrifice is rendered futile when Pierre discovers a wanted poster of her and thus finds out about her unlawful behavior. At the same time, however, Olga’s sacrifice is particularly relevant if one considers Pierre’s occupation. He
is an automobile engineer undertaking a “propaganda tour”—a road trip meant to advertise the car model he was driving—which, according to Rudy Koshar, was a marketing strategy customarily used by Daimler-Benz. As Thomas Zeller argues, the automobile engineer played a vital role in Germany’s efforts to increase its car production. In protecting Pierre, Olga thus protects a figure who was socioeconomically indispensable for Germany’s automobile industry, and whose relevance increased further after Hitler’s 1934 speech in which he announced the need for a “people’s car.”

The glamorous and self-sacrificial femininity portrayed by Olga also crops up in Inge, in which Helm plays Inge, a secretary who helps Seeumann (Paul Wegener), her boss and lover, smuggle money into Switzerland. Inge’s independent spirit is suggested by the way she interacts with men, with whom she refuses to flirt, as is illustrated early in the film in a scene that shows her during a train ride. Inge’s refusal to flirt contrasts with Helm’s iconic vamp characters in the silent Alraune and in Manolescu (1929), characters whose seductiveness manifested itself through repeated coquettish interactions on a train. When Inge meets class-conscious Walter (Willy Eichberger), she ends her affair with Seeumann, and the film intertwines the story of their budding love with contrasting depictions of the upper and the working class, and Inge’s emerging sense of social justice. On the one hand, Inge zooms in critically on the debauchery and corruption of the rich by showing their extravagant parties, which involve massive drinking and the presence of women with dubious morals. On the other hand, the film’s group of workers is portrayed as a tight-knit community that celebrates a wedding modestly yet joyously and that sticks together in the face of Seeumann’s fraudulent schemes that cost them their jobs. After Inge discovers that Seeumann fired forty workers when he hastily liquidated the trucking company of Walter’s boss, who was driven to suicide by Seeumann’s shady business transactions, Inge decides to turn him in to the authorities. The letter she sends to the police uncovers Seeumann’s criminal actions and her role in them, and leads to his arrest and the recovery of his illegal fortune. The missive also places Inge in police custody, though she is released after a short time to await trial. Similarly to Olga, Inge sacrifices her freedom, although in this case in order to achieve justice for the community of workers. By standing up for them Inge embodies Nazi views about the supremacy of the collective over the individual, and concomitantly also becomes an appropriate, class-conscious mate for Walter. Intriguingly, the film’s critique of unemployment places it conceptually alongside both National Socialist and Communist views regarding the need to create jobs. However, the media reception was less ambivalent and primarily underscored Inge’s affiliation with National Socialism: Fritz Olimsky lauded the film for expressing the “Gedankengut des neuen Staates” (body of thought of
the new state), while an anonymous reviewer praised the depiction of the “Volk,” a quintessential Nazi concept.26

As one of Nazi Germany’s few science-fiction films, Gold gathered critical attention, as did Helm’s character Florence. The self-assertive daughter of a rich Englishman, Florence is enamored with the German engineer Holk (Hans Albers), who is employed by her father to transform lead into gold. For Linda Schulte-Sasse, Florence is a vamp who stands for the erotic temptation of gold, whereas for Weinstein she is incompatible with Nazi ideals.27 I argue that Florence is a heroine who reflects Nazi views about women, and that the director Karl Hartl plays with viewers’ expectations of Helm as a vamp, something he had attempted before in Die Gräfin. Key to this understanding is the dinner scene in which Florence and Holk meet for the first time. Holk assumes, as does the audience, that Florence is a seductress entrusted by her father to entertain him. However, it is not Florence who flirts with Holk, but vice versa. Florence swiftly satirizes Holk’s monosyllabic answers and unrefined comportment, and throughout their discussion she retains a matter-of-fact tone. In contrast, Holk uses a flirtatious tone and unabashedly compliments her.

It is important to note that after his initial reservations, Holk becomes interested in Florence only after she warns him that he is being surveilled, in other words, once she protects him. In this capacity Florence is similar to Margrit (Lien Deyers), Holk’s wholesome fiancée, who donates blood to save his life and tirelessly worries about him. Florence and Margrit, both of whom receive little screen time and are schematic figures, display a quality highly cherished in Nazi cinema, a selfless concern for the well-being of their male partner—who stands in for National Socialist values. Played by Hans Albers, one of the most popular male stars of the Third Reich, Holk personifies Nazi masculinity with his “Ayran” looks and his behavior. He proves his loyalty to his murdered mentor by clearing his name, and inspires workers to stand up for themselves and refuse to play a role in the industrial production of gold. He also prevents an economic crisis of global magnitude by destroying the facility that can produce gold, a process during which he saves five hundred workers from drowning.28

Florence’s ambivalence as, seemingly, a vamp but also a caring figure finds its visual equivalent in the evening gown she wears during the dinner scene. Created by Mahrenholz, Helm’s go-to couturier,29 the gown appears to fuse two garments. One is a figure-hugging bodice dress that recalls the tight clothes of Helm’s vamps. Nevertheless, the sensual impression created by the snug fit is tuned down to a demure gown by the billowy sleeves and the full coverage of her chest. Florence’s behavior and her intricate dress work together to overcome associations with the vamp and emphasize the proto-Nazi heroine as caregiver and protector. This ideal of femininity also transpires from Florence’s last scene, in which she helps an exhausted Holk find refuge in her car.
Fig. 9.1. Brigitte Helm in *Gold* (1934).

Fig. 9.2. Brigitte Helm in *Gold* (1934).
Directed by Hans Steinhoff, whose *Hitlerjunge Quex* (Hitler Youth Quex, 1933) received accolades from the Nazi government, *Die Insel* is imbued with Third Reich views about women and one’s duty to the fatherland. Helm plays Karin, niece to the ambassador of an unnamed country to an unidentified island, who falls in love with the attaché Raak (Willy Fritsch). Through Karin, Steinhoff articulates a misogynist understanding that denies woman rational capabilities. For instance, her uncle, the ambassador, tells Karin, “Ich habe dich nur um deine Vermittlung gebeten, nicht um dein Urteil” (I have only asked for your mediation, not your opinion)—a patronizing view underscored by his gesture of patting her back and calling her a child. Furthermore, Karin and Raak’s relationship unfolds within parameters reflecting Nazi views about the supremacy of camaraderie over passion: with the exception of one scene that concludes with a dissolve of Karin and Raak embracing, the two do not express their emotions in romantic gestures but instead often shake hands.

*Die Insel* distances Helm from her vamp roles by featuring the French actress Françoise Rosay as the femme fatale Silvia, who erroneously blackmails Raak, whereas Karin embodies Nazi ideals of female sacrifice meant to protect the male lead. Karin thus severs all ties to her ambassador uncle, presumably the only family she has, and stands by Raak’s side when Silvia unjustly accuses him of fraud and when her uncle denies Raak the possibility of clearing his name. The uncle refuses to conduct an investigation because to him the untarnished honor of the state trumps the individual’s desire for justice. As Carter argues, such blatant anti-individualism is congruent with the collective ethos of the Third Reich and was deeply embedded in the aesthetic structure of its cinema. The core values that characterize the nameless state in the film—honor, loyalty, and duty to the fatherland—strongly suggest its identification with Nazi Germany. Although Raak is praised for developing industry and creating jobs, both of which were of utmost importance for the Nazi regime, he and Karin still have to learn an important lesson about one’s duty and subordination to the state. Karin and Raak are overly individualistic, and their focus on proving his innocence, in other words their fixation on personal justice, threatens the island’s Nazi-inspired community. Although Karin’s choice to follow Raak off the island symbolizes the acceptance of her role as future wife and homemaker, the exile is also an expression of their current incompatibility with the island’s ideological postulation of the state and the collective above the individual. Additionally, Raak’s choice to retire into private life underscores the idea that not everybody is cut out to participate in the militarized diplomacy practiced by the film’s Nazi-coded state and according to which diplomats are officers fighting for their nation.

*Ein idealer Gatte*, Helm’s last film, once again discards associations with the figure of the vamp by casting the actress as Gertrud, a
perfect, self-sacrificial Nazi wife. The fact that Sybille Schmitz, and not Helm, plays the vamp Gloria has to be considered within the film’s production context. When shooting started, Helm resumed work after a six-month break caused by Ufa’s decision not to cast her in the aftermath of yet another automobile accident, this one on August 27, 1934. After the March 1933 accident mentioned earlier, this was the second time that Helm had hurt a pedestrian seriously while driving, and the court revoked her driver’s license, sought a two-month jail sentence, and was not inclined to let her off with a fine as it had done before. The ensuing trial caught the attention of the national and the international press, and Ufa’s damage-control strategy consisted of sending Helm on a promotion tour to Greece and lending her out to the Terra studio for their film *Ein idealer Gatte*.

After this uniquely long pause in her career, Helm was featured in a role most unlike her staple vamps, one that continued the star’s reinvention beyond her femme fatale image and inscribed her into the gallery of emerging Nazi heroines.

Thea von Harbou’s film script for *Ein idealer Gatte*, which was based on Oscar Wilde’s play *An Ideal Husband* (1895), made several modifications to the latter: it changed the setting to contemporary London, increased the relevance of Helm’s character, and featured her husband, Robert Chiltern (Karl Ludwig Diehl), as an industrialist who made his fortune in metallurgy. Gertrud dominates the opening scenes, which build her up as the ideal wife to an imperfect husband: Robert’s entrepreneurial career had started—unbeknownst to her—with his dubious decision to sell a stock-market secret, which now threatens to become public owing to a revealing letter in Gloria’s possession. Gertrud is the epitome of elegance and grace, loving toward her husband, kind with her friends, and caring and protective of her sister-in-law, Mable (Annie Markart). One sequence in particular stands out because it separates Gertrud from Helm’s image as a vamp: it shows her entering the bathroom where Mable takes a bubble bath. The scene recalls a bathing episode from *Manolescu* (1929), in which Helm was displayed as an object of sexual desire. There, viewers saw Helm’s femme fatale character sitting in a bathtub, and scrubbing her arms, shoulders, and neck. The camera then transitioned from a medium shot that zoomed in on the naked character from shoulder level up to a shot that portrayed her calmly continuing to sit and wash herself even after she had discovered the desirous male gaze lingering on her. Interestingly, according to an interview, Helm complained to Ufa about the bathtub scene in *Manolescu*, which supposedly led to the use of a body double. Although Helm’s alleged statement is at odds with the title of the interview, which indicates that Ufa forced her to do the scene herself, and it is thus difficult to know what happened, it is nevertheless important to note the tense relationship between Helm and the studio. A comparison between the bathing
scenes in *Manolescu* and *Ein idealer Gatte* suggests important changes in the conceptualization and visual representation of Helm’s characters. In *Manolescu*, the allure of the femme fatale is rendered through the erotically charged partial display of the naked female body (whether Helm’s or that of a double). In contrast to her seductive appeal from *Manolescu*, in *Ein idealer Gatte*, Helm assumes the more settled role of the dutiful wife. Concurrently, Mable symbolizes a younger generation of women whose sexuality—unlike that of Helm’s figure in *Manolescu*—is controlled, since the way she is presented in the bathtub (her face is covered in foam and her body visible only from the neck up) is not sexual, an aspect bolstered by the humorous banter between her and Gertrud.

Another way the film differs from Wilde’s play is that it gives Gertrud a crucial role in saving her husband. Whereas in Wilde’s text this responsibility falls to Robert’s best friend, in the film it is Gertrud’s love and sacrifice that ensure her husband’s future. Although she becomes upset at Robert when she finds out the truth about how he started his career, Gertrud begins to worry about him once she discovers that he is entrusting his business responsibilities to a colleague. In a desperate attempt to save Robert’s honor and life, Gertrud sacrifices her moral principles and secretly seeks out Gloria, whom she despises owing to her past as a thief, which Gertrud knows about from their mutual days in school. Gertrud pleads with Gloria for the letter that incriminates her husband, and shortly before she succeeds in obtaining it she shows her devotion to Robert by revealing her determination to stand by him irrespective of the consequences.

As she does in *Die schönen Tage*, *Gold*, and *Die Insel*, here too Helm’s character protects a male partner that embodies Nazi values. Although the setting of the film and the characters are not German, Robert’s identity as an entrepreneur in metallurgy—a crucial industry for the Third Reich, particularly for the production of Krupp steel—and the fact that he creates numerous jobs for his country illustrate his conceptual linkage to National Socialism. Moreover, Robert’s one negative action, the stock-market secret he divulged in his youth, is counterbalanced throughout the film by his good deeds. In this sense he shows kindness toward a loyal worker who had stolen a small sum of money from him and gives him a monetary gift for his firstborn—another detail that supports his affiliation with the Third Reich and its pronatality views.

The antagonism between Gloria and Gertrud is established with the former’s first appearance in the film: whereas Gloria wears a vamp’s typical accoutrement—a feather fan—and a dark dress that suggests her dangerousness, Gertrud’s moral dominance is symbolized by her white outfit. Gloria’s threatening presence is also emphasized by Arthur (Georg Alexander), her former fiancé and Robert’s best friend, who compares her to a snake. This comparison is intriguing owing to its double entendre. It alludes to
Gloria’s seductive movement as well as her perfidious behavior, yet also brings up associations with Helm’s own labeling by critics, who often claimed that the actress lent a snake-like quality to her characters because of their seductive and threatening behavior. By satirizing Gloria as snake-like, the film ironizes the same quality that had been attributed to Helm’s previous roles, thus further distinguishing Helm from her vamp characters. After playing Gertrud, a character whose absolute dedication to her husband and sacrificial valence perfectly reflects Nazi views of women, Helm disappeared from the big screen.

The attributes that define Helm’s characters in her 1933–35 films are not only their sophisticated looks and independent spirit but also their self-sacrificial behavior. Unlike Helm’s earlier vamp figures, which made sacrifices for bohemian men, in these films the heroines she plays protect the community and the male partners, who represent the Third Reich through either their occupation or their dedication to creating jobs and strengthening industry. This combination of glamour and self-sacrifice for both bon vivant male characters and those associated with National Socialism formed a template for the femininity embodied by Leander. For instance, in her early films, Leander’s sensual heroines relinquish their passion for a scoundrel and uphold Nazi values such as honor, loyalty, and motherhood, themes that percolate through all her films, and in her penultimate National Socialist feature, *Die große Liebe* (The Great Love, 1942), her character...
supports Nazi masculinity by becoming the docile wife of a pilot. Although Helm’s characters were never linked to Nazi militarism as directly owing to the time span during which her films were produced, her 1933–35 characters were nevertheless an integral part of Nazi views about women.

**Helm’s Star Image**

Throughout her career Helm’s press coverage blended reports that highlighted her glamour, international appeal, and uniqueness with accounts that stressed her ordinariness, a strategy that, as Richard Dyer argues, is typically employed in crafting star images. Articles thus presented Helm as an international star and fashion icon, and underlined her expensive hobbies such as horseback riding, traveling, and automobiles. Simultaneously, they emphasized her commonness by revealing that her pastimes also included embroidery, reading, listening to music, and doing gymnastics, and by stressing her desire for a family, motherhood, and for playing maternal figures. In opposition to Leander, Helm played a mother figure only in *Gloria* (1931), although her wish to play such characters was reiterated in an interview as late as December 1934, in a statement that could be interpreted as a signal in favor of the Third Reich’s predilection for portraying motherhood. Although dovetailing strategies that emphasize uniqueness and commonness were also used in shaping Lilian Harvey’s and Leander’s personas, Helm’s media coverage did stand out because, unlike Harvey and Leander, whose artistry and work ethic were praised in the press, Helm was seldom considered an artist. Instead, until her last film the press constantly underlined Helm’s promise as an actress, placing her in a state of perpetual artistic deferment. In addition, the media stressed the importance of directors for Helm’s films, attributing to them not only her poor performances, her miscastings, and her future development, but also those roles they deemed successful. As Garncarz states, the emphasis on the director as the central force of the artistic process carried over from the earlier years of the Weimar Republic when directors, almost all of them male, enjoyed great creative and economic freedom, a role he traces back to the importance theater directors played in the nineteenth century. This criticism, which denied Helm agency, should be viewed in the historical context that led German artists to the film industry. According to Garncarz, numerous German film actors and actresses came from the theater, and as Ascheid points out, others, such as Harvey, started out in small parts and systematically worked their way up to leading roles. Helm neither enjoyed a theater pedigree nor had she honed her skills in minor parts, and this lack of artistic schooling may explain why the press relentlessly focused on her potential but rarely acknowledged her efforts to improve, and subordinated the relevance of her own work to that of her directors.
A close look at the steps Ufa took to craft Helm’s star image reveals several incongruities and perplexing decisions that had a negative effect on her career. Helm, whose only training consisted of three months of acting classes before *Metropolis* and elocution lessons before her first talkie, *Die singende Stadt* (The Singing City, 1930), was cast in twenty-eight films (not counting multiple-language versions), and worked with twenty-four different directors and various leading men. This gave the actress little opportunity to grow, in contrast to Harvey, who in the mid-1920s worked repeatedly with her discoverer, the director Richard Eichberg, and who, after returning from Hollywood in 1935, appeared several times in films by “her” director Paul Martin. Ufa made several questionable choices regarding the distribution and casting of Helm’s films. For instance, it had her play in Herbert Wilcox’s British production *The Blue Danube* (1932), although the film was not released in Germany. Despite the customary practice of featuring the same lead actress in both the German and the international version of a film, Ufa cast Helm in *L’Étoile de Valencia* (1933), the French version of *Der Stern von Valencia* (The Star of Valencia, 1933), yet in the German film Liane Haid played the main role. Similarly, whereas Helm played the lead in *Die singende Stadt*, the main role went to Betty Stockfield in the English version, though Helm spoke English—alongside French—so her language skills were not an impediment to casting her in the foreign-language versions of her films. Other problematic aspects related to casting and advertising include Helm’s appearance in *Die Yacht der sieben Sünden* (The Yacht of Seven Sins, 1928), which consists of confusing, loosely connected episodes in which Helm is but one of the many members of an ensemble cast, although she was billed as the star. Moreover, in an attempt to emulate Marlene Dietrich’s sultry song performance in *Der blaue Engel* (The Blue Angel, 1930), in one of her double roles in the talkie *Alraune*, Helm sings and dances as the prostitute Alma, a farcical performance that triggered laughter in the audience. Another unsuccessful Helm song-and-dance routine included in *L’Étoile de Valencia* was decried in the French press.

It is puzzling that in *Die Liebe der Jeanne Ney* (The Love of Jeanne Ney, 1927), *L’Argent* (Money, 1928), and *Die Herrin von Atlantis* (The Mistress of Atlantis, 1932) Helm plays supporting roles, which, nevertheless, receive a decent amount of screen time. But most perplexing is her casting in *Gold*, in which she appears only in a few brief scenes. *Gold* and its advertising materials give insights into how confusing and contradictory Ufa’s branding of Helm was. The opening credits of the film display Helm’s name in big letters after that of the male lead, Hans Albers. The resulting impression that she plays a major role is swiftly contradicted by the list of characters, where her name is presented only on the second slide. *Gold*’s German poster lists Helm’s name slightly below Albers’s
and at the same level as that of the other female supporting role played by Deyers, thus reflecting Albers’s central role in the film and its dominance over the two female figures. The film leaflet for the Palast am Zoo, Ufa’s cinema for premieres, however, presents Helm’s name in big letters after Albers’s, with the remaining cast following in small print, which—similar to the film’s opening credits—gives the impression that Helm is the female lead. In Ufa’s advertising booklet Helm’s name appears after Albers’s and Deyers’s, which positions her in a supporting role to the two, while on the booklet’s cover her name is displayed only fifth, a position it also has in Ufa’s film flyer, both examples presenting her as one of the many supporting characters. While these various advertising materials sent out conflicting messages about Helm’s role in Gold, they also expose complex problems, namely, Ufa’s self-contradictory crafting of Helm’s star image and the incongruities that operated in the German star system in the late Weimar and the early Third Reich years. Although in the mid-1930s Ufa also mismanaged the debut of the newcomer Marika Rökk, the future star of National Socialist musicals who started to deliver on her potential (which, similar to Helm, the press emphasized recurrently) only toward the end of the decade, one must recall that, unlike Rökk, Helm was an established star trapped by the insistence on her potential. A possible reason for Ufa’s flawed management of Helm’s career may be that despite the actress’s tremendous national and international popularity, and despite the well-known directors and A-list cast who were involved in her films, with a few exceptions her movies were of uneven quality and did not do well at the box office. Importantly, by the late 1930s the National Socialist film industry changed its approach to stars’ careers. It carefully shaped and closely monitored Leander’s star image in light of her remarkable box office draw, and even tolerated aspects that were fundamentally at odds with the NS star system, such as her remuneration in foreign currency and her exorbitant salary. More problematic aspects become evident in Helm’s career when one considers the litigations between the twenty-one-year-old actress and Ufa. After weeks of written complaints addressed to the studio, Helm resigned on August 11, 1929. The reasons she invoked were: bad casting, publicity unworthy of a star, the immorality of some of the clauses in her contract, particularly with regard to controlling her weight, and better payment in talkies. In response, Ufa took the actress to an arbitration court of the “Spio”—Spitzenorganisation der deutschen Filmwirtschaft (Main Organization of the German Film Industry). After she lost the Spio case on September 19, Helm sued the studio. Although sources disagree where she filed her suit—according to Semler, in a municipal court, whereas Töteberg claims in a labor court—on October 8, 1929, the actress was defeated once more. She filed again, yet eventually withdrew her legal complaint owing to financial problems, since, in addition
to the trial fee of 5,000 reichsmark (RM), she had also acquired a debt of 18,000 RM. She had to start working quickly in order to make up for the time she had not been filming during the litigations and to repay the 23,000 RM advance that the studio had lent her upon resuming her career. If she failed to repay Ufa within the time span of her contract, the studio reserved the right to extend her employment for one more year. To put things in perspective, it is important to recall that, as Töteberg explains, Helm’s monthly salary had increased from 500 RM in 1925 to 7,000 RM in 1928 and 9,000 RM in 1929. The situation was particularly challenging for the actress financially because by early November 1929, when the press announced that she was to act again for Ufa, the value of money was tremendously unstable since the Great Depression had rocked both the United States and Germany. Complications with Helm’s star image also become visible when one considers the ridicule she faced after the trial. She was accused of being arrogant, and the renowned writer Erich Kästner mocked her inability to escape her vamp roles. Additionally, her femme fatale roles were satirized in one of the best-grossing films of the 1931–32 season, the comedy Bomben auf Monte Carlo (Bombs over Monte Carlo, 1931), in which the actress Anna Sten mocked the dance mannerisms of Helm’s vamp figures via comically exaggerated body postures.

Helm’s critical attitude toward Ufa persisted well after the trial in some of her press statements. On November 25, 1929, shortly after she withdrew her lawsuit against the studio, she indicated that she wanted to play more diverse characters if her directors would allow it, thus alluding to the limits imposed by them. In early 1930, she stated that she had to refuse roles with the famed theater director Max Reinhardt owing to Ufa’s unwillingness to open up her filming schedule, and later the same year she declared that she would renounce cinema in favor of domestic life and motherhood, a statement suggesting that in her view a career with Ufa and maternity were incompatible. The statement about this incompatibility implied a cautiously disapproving attitude toward Ufa, and Helm’s announcements to the foreign press became more critical of this irreconcilability in the years to come. In a French report from 1934 she affirmed her conviction that motherhood and stardom were incompatible, and in another from 1937—two years after her retirement—Helm asserted her decision to permanently stay away from the film industry because she did not want to subjugate herself again to the studio’s demands. The wording used at different times to describe her work with Ufa, which includes the verbs “unterwerfen” (comply) and “unterordnen” (subordinate) as well as the phrase “geplagte Filmschauspielerin” (besieged actress), indicate that Helm was not at ease with her career. Contrary to Garncarz’s claim that the Weimar star system consisted mainly of freelance actors who had control over their public image—which seems to apply more aptly
to the period before Hugenberg’s takeover—Helm’s relationship to Ufa indicates that this star was studio property. She had a long-term contract with Ufa, was financially indebted to the studio after her legal battles with it, and, unlike Harvey and Leander, she had no input into her roles, aspects that, as Bergfelder states, resemble Hollywood’s star system.

Conclusion

There are several opinions about the reason why Helm did not renew her contract once it expired on April 1, 1935, and contemporary reports ran stories that contradicted one another. One article claimed that Helm’s second husband, the wealthy entrepreneur Hugo Kuhnheim, whom she had married in spring 1935, was half Jewish, and that the actress therefore was apparently forbidden to film. Another denied that Helm had received an acting ban and had left the country. A different source announced that she had been chased out of Germany and even threatened with jail. In an open letter to a French newspaper in 1937, Helm stated that she chose to leave Germany for a while in light of the commotion created by her 1934 traffic accident. More recent scholarly accounts are also conflicting. Böhm suggests it was the actress’s languishing career that led to her retirement. Müller points to her dwindling popularity after her 1934 car accident and to her incompatibility with Nazi cinema, a view Weinstein shares while also emphasizing Helm’s wish for a home life. Semler offers a more nuanced explanation, and highlights important details such as Helm’s withdrawal from the Reichsfilmkammer (Reich Film Chamber) on March 28, 1938, the SS’s 1944 inquiry with the Reichsfilmkammer into her husband’s ethnic background, which the former could not answer, and the fact that neither spouse was a member of the National Socialist German Workers Party (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, NSDAP). Semler argues that there are no indications that the actress either attempted to connect to the new regime or that she withdrew from the film industry owing to political reasons. Furthermore, he reveals the opposing viewpoints of two of Helm’s sons regarding her departure from film: whereas one believes she withdrew for political reasons because she did not want to play in Nazi propaganda films, the other points to personal motives. Paradoxically, neither of them mentioned Helm’s relationship with Ufa as possible grounds for her retirement. To the wealth of competing opinions surrounding Helm’s curtailment of her career, this essay adds a new insight: Helm’s turbulent relationship to Ufa and her disjointed star image functioned in tandem with her yearning for home life and children and led the actress to turn her back on the studio. Although she considered a comeback in the late 1940s, she stayed away from the big screen.
As I have argued in this essay, a critical investigation of Brigitte Helm’s films spanning the years 1933 to 1935 reveals Ufa’s sustained efforts to reshape her image in order to increasingly reflect Nazi ideology. Furthermore, the studio’s confusing and incoherent casting and advertising strategies vis-à-vis Helm persisted from the Weimar Republic into the Third Reich. This continuity indicates that Ufa consistently had a problematic view of the actress, which led to her tense relationship with the studio and ultimately to her withdrawal into private life. Ultimately, Helm’s career between 1933 and 1935 exposes the idiosyncrasies of the incipient Nazi star system, which reinvented her roles thematically but carried on her problematic image crafting and branding from the Weimar years.

Notes

3 For a selection of Weimar responses to Helm’s debut see Semler, *Brigitte Helm*, 24–32.
5 In the early 1930s, Helm was ranked fifth among Germany’s most popular actresses. See Hans Helmut Prinzler, *Die Grossen Stumm- und Tonfilme der Weimarer Republik* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2012), 48.


9 Fürst Woronzeff (Count Woronzeff, 1934), the only other film Helm did after 1933, could not be viewed for this essay.

10 For more details, see Mihaela Petrescu “Domesticating the Vamp: Jazz and the Dance Melodrama in Weimar Culture,” *Seminar* 46, no. 3 (2010): 276–92.


18 Laura Heins, *Nazi Film Melodrama* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 49.

19 Heins, *Nazi Film*, 49–50.


22 Semler, *Brigitte Helm*, 188.


28 For more, see Owen Lyons’s contribution in this volume.


33 Semler quotes the interview as Richard Behrens, “Die Ufa zwingt ihre Stars zu Badewannenszenen,” *Der Deutsche*, Berlin, September 22, 1929. Unfortunately, the article could not be located. See Semler, *Brigitte Helm*, 77.


39 For Harvey, see Antje Ascheid, “Nazi Stardom and the ‘Modern Girl’: The Case of Lilian Harvey,” *New German Critique*, no. 74 (Spring–Summer 1998): 74, 81; and for Leander, see Bruns, *Nazi Cinema’s New Women*, 130.


Rare articles that applaud her improvement are: Bernhard von Brentano, *Frankfurter Zeitung*, May 13, 1929; and Anon., *Kinematograph*, October 4, 1934.


Semler, *Brigitte Helm*, 112.

Semler, *Brigitte Helm*, 21, 106.

Helm’s name is listed first in the opening credits and on a separate slide from the other actors. On her publicity as star of this film, see Ernst Jäger, *Film-Kurier*, August 7, 1928. The press criticized Ufa’s decision to cast Helm in the film, pointing out the inexperience of its directors, Jakob and Luise Fleck. See Anon., *Lichtbildbühne*, August 7, 1928; Anon., *Der Film*, August 11, 1928; Anon., *Reichsfilmblatt*, August 11, 1928.

Haßreiter, *Der Film*, December 6, 1930; and Anon., “Neue Filme—Alraune,” *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, December 7, 1930.

Anon., *Pour Vous*, June 22, 1933.

See folder 5933 of the Bildarchiv at the Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv Berlin.


Even if one considers that interviews published in the name of film artists were often penned by press personnel, this does not detract from the problematic relationship with Ufa that emerges from these statements.


64 The verb “unterwerfen” was used in the 1934 interview, “unterordnen” in her 1937 statement, and the phrase “geplagte Filmschauspielerin” appeared in 1934, in the Ufa Presseheft for *Die Insel*, which is quoted in Semler, *Brigitte Helm*, 167.


66 Bergfelder, Harris, and Street, *Film Architecture*, 148–49. For Harvey, see Ascheid, “Nazi Stardom,” 63; and for Leander, see Bruns, *Nazi Cinema’s New Women*, 139.

67 Helm married her first husband, the aspiring actor Richard Weißbach, in 1928. They were divorced by 1934, presumably because of his unfaithfulness and greed. Semler, *Brigitte Helm*, 68–69. Although Kuhnheim documented his “Aryan” identity, rumors to the contrary lingered. Semler, *Brigitte Helm*, 185.


71 Böhm, “Brigitte Helm,” 211.


75 Semler, *Brigitte Helm*, 200–204.
10: Foreign Attractions: Czech Stars and Ethnic Masquerade

Kevin B. Johnson

Anny Ondra and Lída Baarová were the biggest stars of Czech origin at work in the German film industry of the 1930s. Ondra’s star trajectory in German cinema began in the early 1920s and she continued to play lead roles opposite male stars such as Paul Hörbiger and Heinz Rühmann well into the latter years of the Third Reich, for example, in Der Scheidungsgrund (Grounds for Divorce, 1937) and Der Gasmann (The Gasman, 1941). By contrast, although Baarová also received top billing in a number of high-profile features, she was active in German cinema for only a few years. Her career in the Third Reich was cut short, just as it was beginning to take off, when she was banned from German films in the fallout from a scandalous affair with Joseph Goebbels. Ondra’s and Baarová’s popularity in Germany peaked in the mid-1930s, during which time each played the lead in big-budget Ufa productions. Both circulated heavily through the German star system at this time, appearing regularly in film-industry promotional materials as well as in cinema journals and the popular press. Yet their careers were marked by significant differences in how they were perceived and utilized as foreigners. This disparity in reception was primarily a factor of their physical appearance and performance style, but was also precipitated by the time and manner in which they entered German cinema.

In this essay, I examine the German careers of Ondra and Baarová with specific attention to issues of ethnic performance, masquerade, and racial policy. My analysis shows that Ondra successfully “passed” as German, which endowed her with a relatively high degree of agency, permitting her to engage in types of performances that can be understood as holdovers from Weimar cinema that were otherwise actively suppressed during the Third Reich. This privileged position lasted roughly until the end of the 1930s, when Ondra’s image became domesticated, assuming a more ideologically correct role. By contrast, Baarová’s position in Germany was always precarious and pushed her to the center of the racial debate in the Reich. Whereas Ondra was fully assimilated into German cinema and public life during the mid-1930s such that her body type and...
performance style were read as quintessentially German, Baarová’s identity as “foreign” persisted throughout her brief German career.

Between January and April 1935 the leading German film journal *Film-Kurier* published a series of brief articles titled “Was sie auszeichnet—was ihnen fehlt” (What Distinguishes Them—What They Are Lacking), which listed the supposedly defining characteristics for the most well-known German directors and actors.¹ The inclusion of both Ondra and Baarová in the group of female actors confirms their integration into the German industry’s marketing apparatus in the mid-1930s. Whereas many of the positive comments focused on the stars’ acting abilities, for example, “echtes Spieltalent” (true acting talent) or “überragende Begabung” (supremely gifted), the assessment of Baarová emphasized her physical appearance, ascribing to her a “marmorne Schönheit” (marble beauty), like a sculpture from antiquity, an immobile object of visual pleasure. Yet this statue-like quality is also perceived as her primary shortcoming when the article claims that the actress lacks “Durchblutung” (blood flow), thereby suggesting that she is void of emotional depth or spiritual life force. In other words, for all her outer beauty, she does not possess sufficient inner spiritual beauty. In contrast, Ondra is judged strictly by performance when she is labeled “der einzige Clown im europäischen Film” (the only clown in European cinema).² As with Baarová, Ondra’s distinguishing characteristic is also the source of her shortcoming: for all her clown skills, Ondra is criticized for lacking “die Träne hinter dem Lachen” (the tear behind the laugh). Although the trite comments in this list were compiled primarily for entertainment purposes and do not constitute a serious discussion of performance or star presence, the assessments of Ondra and Baarová nevertheless employ tropes that commonly surface in considerations of the two actresses, namely, the emphasis on Baarová’s physical beauty and Ondra’s clownish performance skills. Likewise, the presumed gap between outer appearance and inner emotional states evokes a central paradigm in the interpretations of performance and ethnicity outlined in this essay.

Such public expressions of desire for Ondra and Baarová and the very fact that non-Aryan women appeared in Third Reich films point to a disconnect between official Nazi doctrine and cinema practice. As both Antje Ascheid and Jo Fox have demonstrated, the array of roles played by female stars in Third Reich cinema is highly multifarious and a significant number of on-screen images of women directly contradicted those ideals fostered by the party line. Ascheid argues that these filmic images provide deeper insights into the Nazi system as a whole: “owing to the particular dichotomies surrounding National Socialist stardom, the stars of fascism must be seen as containing the cultural incongruities of the period, or better, as the embodiments of particular societal conflicts and contradictions.”³ Whereas Ascheid reveals “the underlying instability of National
Socialism’s homogeneous conception of femininity,” my analysis of Czech stars explores the latent ambiguities in Nazi Germany’s conception of “Czechness” in relation to “Germanness.” My essay also contributes to the growing body of work on the formation and articulation of Czech, German, and Jewish identities in Prague and Bohemia during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By extension, my work exposes underlying instabilities in Third Reich conceptions of identity, race, and nation more generally. In other words, the current examination of tranethnic and cross-cultural performance is intended as a specific case study symptomatic of larger phenomena at work in the films of the Nazi period. In a number of significant ways, the position of Czechs within Third Reich cinema shifted radically after the establishment of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia in 1939. However, a satisfactory examination of the highly complex and racially fraught developments that accompanied the integration of the Czech film industry into the Nazi apparatus, particularly as it affected actors, is beyond the scope of the present essay.

The radical differences in how these two actresses were integrated into and instrumentalized by Third Reich cinema is due in large part to the fact that they had very different performance styles and thus typical roles in German films. Ondra, the highly physical and unruly clown, usually played in comedies, whereas Baarová, the dark, seductive “other woman,” appeared primarily in romantic dramas. However, the distinction between them also has much to do with the historical context of their entry into German cinema and their physical characteristics, which were often articulated in implicitly or explicitly racialized terms. Ondra’s unruly, even subversive performance style in many films from the Nazi period can be understood as a carryover from Weimar cinema that operated far removed from Nazi ideals of female behavior. The star currency she had accumulated during the 1920s and early 1930s together with the financial security of the production company she co-owned (Ondra-Lamac-Film) supplied Ondra with a certain degree of agency to operate somewhat independently of official doctrine in the initial years of the Reich. Thus Ondra continued to provide German audiences with wild performances reminiscent of pre-Nazi films until the late 1930s, even though this style did not conform to the officially sanctioned cinema aesthetic. Critics consistently framed Ondra’s disruptive potential as a factor of her physical prowess as a performer, and her Slavic origins were never at issue. Indeed, in many ways Ondra was unproblematically accepted as “German” by the film industry and public alike. By contrast, Baarová’s status as a foreigner was a consistent factor in her reception in the Third Reich. The Nazi film industry’s instrumentalization of foreign stars in response to the personnel crisis that ensued in March 1933 displays a sort of “split consciousness,” which was particularly acute in cases of “racial others.” On the one hand, the industry badly needed to attract
and integrate new talent from throughout Europe in order to maintain the vitality of German cinema. On the other hand, this created a situation whereby audiences were invited to take pleasure from or identify with figures that were in violation of the Reich’s official racial doctrine. Thus, as in the case of Baarová, the position in Third Reich cinema of these foreign actors was consistently wrought with tension and introduced its own form of crisis to the industry and public alike.

Anny Ondra

Anna Sophie Ondráková began her film career in 1919, working with both Karel Lamač and Gustav Machatý, two early pioneers of Czech cinema whose later international successes in the 1930s made them the leading representatives of Czechoslovak film at the time.8 Early in her career, she modified her name to “Anny Ondra,” by which she became known worldwide as a top-billed actress in big features such as Hitchcock’s Blackmail (1929) and Reinhold Schünzel’s Donogoo Tonka: Die geheimnisvolle Stadt (Donogoo Tonka, the Mysterious City, 1936).9 She worked in several European film industries in the 1920s, but the flexibility of her performance skills became most evident with the arrival of sound. Unlike other actors who were immediately restricted to their home industry owing to a lack of foreign-language skills, Ondra’s linguistic talents permitted her to continue working throughout Europe. Between 1930 and 1937, she successfully appeared in a number of multiple-language versions (MLVs) performing Czech-, German-, and French-speaking parts.10 With ongoing engagements in France, Austria, Germany, and Czechoslovakia until the mid-1930s, Ondra was a truly transnational star, not firmly bound to any one national cinema.

As the 1930s progressed, her international presence gradually ebbed, however, as she became increasingly rooted in Germany. Giving preference to work in her new German home, she made her last French film in 1934 and eventually disappeared from the cinema of her Czech homeland.11 Despite her Slavic origins, Ondra faced no great opposition from the National Socialists with regard to acting in German cinema. Indeed, she was actively admired by many Nazi leaders and often appeared publicly with both Hitler and Goebbels.12 The actress had become so assimilated into German film culture by the 1930s that journalists of the day and contemporary cinema scholars alike do not even comment on her status as a foreigner.13 Ondra willingly adopted the guise of Germanness and was in turn also readily accepted as a German star by both the general film public and Nazi authorities.

A number of biographical and professional similarities invite comparison between Anny Ondra and Lilian Harvey.14 Like Harvey, Ondra was born outside of Germany to a German-speaking father, had a career
in German cinema dating to the early Weimar period, and was linguistically gifted enough to perform in many MLVs (including French German productions). Likewise, both had established themselves as stars of international renown well before the National Socialist consolidation of power and subsequently remained more akin to Weimar stars than Nazi heroines. Furthermore, both actresses tended to play unruly girl figures in musical comedies, characters far removed from the National Socialist ideal of womanhood. Yet, although both had a penchant for roles as naïve, almost prepubescent girls, Ondra’s on-screen performances tended to be more overtly sexualized than Harvey’s. Especially in the early part of her career, Ondra had a reputation for exposing her legs in every film appearance, an overt display of sexuality employed to promote her films.

Even more important than sexuality for her star image was Ondra’s physical humor, which granted her privileged status in comedies. Early in her career, Ondra was widely known for her comedic style, which was inspired by American slapstick and not often encountered in German cinema. By the 1930s, Ondra had gained a reputation for her wild performances and audiences were drawn to the newest “Ondra film” to see what extravagant costumes and new hilarious situations the actress would display. Slapstick scenes, which defined her pre-Third Reich star career in films such as Baby (1932) and Die vom Rummelplatz (Fair People, 1930), were also consistent features of her post-1933 films, whether in small films like Großreinemachen (The Big Cleanup, 1935) and Ein Mädel vom Ballett (A Girl from the Ballet, 1936) or large-scale Ufa features such as Donogoo Tonka.

Ondra’s exuberant performance style with its elements of physical grotesque fascinated the general public and also won ecstatic praise from critics and intellectuals. In a Film-Kurier review of Die Kaviarprinzessin (The Caviar Princess, 1930), the film critic Lotte Eisner expressed great admiration for her unique acting presence, calling her an inimitable, “herrlichem Clownturn einer Frau” (marvelous clown of a woman). Often journalists ascribed to her an aura of otherworldliness, whether in terms that highlighted her comical talent, “Kobold” (imp), or her uncanny potential for transformation, “Golem” (golem). Others emphasized her puppet-like qualities with terms such as “Marionettenkunst” (marionette artistry) or her facility for slapstick (“grotesk”) performance. In 1932, the renowned critic Rudolf Arnheim wrote of Ondra:

She too is a small art object amidst the weather-beaten remains of the comic-opera. She has something of Keaton’s cold beauty and his acrobatic dancer’s talent with his limbs. This unusual type of girl golem is a treasure, which our industry does not know how to appreciate. A true film operetta style of international proportions could be built up around this woman.
With its emphasis on the superhuman, even supernatural, qualities of her performability, Arnheim’s praise of this “girl golem” echoes a broader discourse that frames Ondra’s body as a highly charged, fantastical attraction.

Although she tended to embody the same type in her roles—a young, energetic, and mischievous girl—Ondra displayed a surprising versatility, playing figures representative of various social classes, professions, and national identities. Building on the performance style that Ossi Oswalda made popular in Germany, Ondra gained fame in the early 1920s playing flirtatious “flapper” girls. Even as the Czech actress became increasingly settled in the role of a German star, she retained a high degree of transnational appeal, embodying Parisian women in Kiki (1932), Donagoo Tonka, and Der Unwiderstehliche (The Irresistible Man, 1937), as well as a British girl in Tochter des Regiments (Daughter of the Regiment, 1933). In addition to her typically comedic characters, she also displayed a talent for serious roles, such as the murderous Alice in Blackmail or the destitute Dorrit in an adaptation of Dickens’s novel Little Dorrit (Klein Dorrit, 1934). She was equally at home in the role of a poverty stricken girl in Die vom Rummelplatz and Klein Dorrit or a rich heiress in Baby (1932) and Narren im Schnee (Fools in the Snow, 1938). Commenting on her versatility from role to role, Eisner stated: “Es ist der Zauber der kleinen Anny, daß sie stets wie hineingeboren wirkt in ihre Tracht, daß sie nie kostümiert ausschaut . . . sie kann alles tragen und—trägt einen ganzen Film” (Part of little Anny’s charm is that she always seems naturally suited to her clothing; she never appears to be costumed . . . she can wear anything and carries an entire film).20 This chameleon-like ability to adopt any guise liberated Ondra’s cinematic persona from strict categories of identity.

Moreover, Ondra unequivocally and unproblematically assumed the conceit of “universal performability” generally reserved exclusively for the body of the male German actor. This view is rooted in a long discursive tradition on German acting that believed in the imagined ideal of the German body’s innate ability to mimic the widest range of human behaviors and emotions, ultimately enabling German performers to convincingly embody a full range of ethnic others.21 In Katrin Sieg’s words, this conceit of “universal performability” believed in “the white body’s ability to transcend its gendered and racial coordinates.”22 Conversely, according to traditional German racial thinking, foreigners, and Jews in particular, lacked the necessary emotional and intellectual depth to effectively portray German characters.

Many Ondra films overtly thematized masquerade, whereby her on-screen character enacted multiple identities within the narrative diegesis. She often played the part of a theater performer, who naturally adopts various roles for onstage performance, as in Die vom Rummelplatz and Der junge Graf (The Young Count, 1935). In a double role inspired by
“prince and the pauper” she performed the part of both an heiress and a poor girl who are mistaken for each other in Die vertauschte Braut (The Switched Bride, 1934). In Großreinemachen her working-class character dons a fancy dress and speaks French so that she can pass as a fine lady. Perhaps the most subversively charged performances are those in which she engages in gender masquerade, playing the part of a young man in Baby and Der junge Graf. Ondra’s performances are littered with cases of mistaken identity and situations in which her on-screen character explicitly assumes an imposter identity. For most of her career, the typical “Ondra film” featured volatile characters of unfixed identity that playfully transgressed established categories of gender, class, and nation. Such performances were typical for Weimar films, and the fact that they continued more or less unchanged into the late 1930s is testament to the heterogeneous character of early Third Reich cinema and the persistence of certain officially “undesirable” generic forms into the Nazi period.

Ondra’s agency derived in part from the high degree of independence from Ufa and other big studios that she and Karel Lamač enjoyed owing to their joint-owned Ondra-Lamac-Film Company. Just as important, though, were her ability to “pass” as German and her overall star clout at the start of the Third Reich. Since she was an established star with
a popular career stretching back to the early 1920s, and since her external features conformed to the Aryan ideal, Ondra’s acceptability for German cinema was never contested. Her Slavic origins presented no hindrance whatsoever in her career as a film star and celebrity in the Third Reich because for all practical concerns she was a “German” who happened to have grown up in Prague.

Eventually Ondra succumbed to the ideological leveling of the Nazi system. No longer playing the part of the anarchic sex-bomb of fluid identities, her last two films in the Third Reich, Der Gasmann and Him- mel, wir erben ein Schloss (Heavens, We’ve Inherited a Chateau, 1943), both depict her in the ideologically correct role of a faithful wife and practical mother. These overtly domesticated images are a departure from her earlier staple roles, in which she usually played chaotic and impish young girls who exuded a transgressive air. This shift in Ondra’s on-screen image indicates that Third Reich cinema was no longer able to incorporate and contain the type of volatile performance style that was in many ways reminiscent of both American slapstick and the instable, insecure “impostor” culture of the Weimar Republic. These later films place Ondra in an ideologically correct position, but also bestow on her the moral strength to reform the men close to her and bring them into proper ideological alignment. This is a significant affirmation of Ondra’s acceptance as a “German” in Nazi terms.

Lída Baarová

Like Ondra, Baarová had an established career in Czechoslovakian cinema before appearing in German films. She entered the film business in 1931 (over a decade later than Ondra) with the Czech feature Kariéra Pavla Čamrdy (Pavel Čamrdá’s Career) and performed in nearly twenty films in her homeland before going to Germany. Baarová appeared in all of the Czech films produced by Ufa’s Prague branch in its first two years of operation, whereby she came to the attention of German film executives. In the wake of the mass emigration of film personnel after the Nazi takeover, Ufa invited Baarová to Berlin and began grooming her as a new star of the recently nationalized cinema.

Thus, in contrast to Ondra, who had established herself in Germany already in the late 1920s, Baarová made her entrance into German cinema at a time of heightened “racial awareness,” and her rising star coincided with the most intensive period of Gleichschaltung (forcible coordination) and Entjudung (de-Jewification) in the German film industry. She began work on her first German film (Barcarole) in late 1934, a year and a half after the formation of the Nazi Reichsfilmkammer (RFK, Film Chamber of the Reich) and just a few months after the ratification of the Reichs-lichtspielgesetz (Reich Cinema Law), which substantially increased the
political influence of the RFK over German film production. At this time, German cinema was no longer open to the plethora of ethnicities that was evident during the Weimar period. Jews were systematically expelled from the industry and the new atmosphere of open racial discrimination was far from welcoming toward other non-German ethnic groups. Although not as actively or systematically persecuted as Jews, non-German, particularly non-Aryan actors, were consistent objects of scrutiny and even condemnation. Baarová stood out as “other” in German cinema primarily because of her Slavic accent, but also because of what was often perceived as typical Slavic physiognomy: dark hair, almond-shaped eyes, and high cheekbones. Unlike Ondra, who was unproblematically accepted as a “German” actress, Baarová’s marked otherness pushed her into the center of debates about foreigners in Nazi cinema and had a significant effect on the types of roles she would play.

In January 1935, Luise Flaskamp, an activist working to reinstate the former star Henny Porten in German cinema, wrote a letter to the president of the Reichskulturkammer (RKK, Reich Chamber of Culture) complaining about the preponderance of foreign actors on German screens: “Our German artists cannot get cinematic jobs and Ufa, the primary German film concern, employs foreigners again and again. In the film Barcarole, a Hungarian [sic!] was employed and even before the film had its premiere, she was already contracted to make a second film.” The “Hungarian” to whom Flaskamp refers is the Czech Baarová, who had her German debut playing the female lead in Barcarole. This confusion as to the actress’ ethnicity testifies to how little the general public in fact knew (or perhaps even cared) about the specificity of a foreign actor’s racial background. It also hints at a leveling of all Eastern Europeans into one lump category in which little distinction is made between individual ethnicities. Flaskamp’s later statement, “first work and bread for our German artists and then, when there is an emergency, call upon such foreigners,” demonstrates that economic concerns are as equally at stake for her as race. Implicit in Flaskamp’s argument is the assumption that in National Socialist society actors have the same function as workers. Furthermore, her presumption is that German actors are capable of convincingly playing characters of any nationality and that they should be given preference over foreigners in employment, regardless of the specific demands of the part. According to this view, the service of foreigners should be called on only if qualified Germans cannot meet the industry’s demands.

Most arguments against foreigners during the Nazi regime overlooked such purely “economic” motivations to invoke issues of “biological correctness” and outright racist arguments. In September 1935, the Film-Kurier reprinted portions of an article titled “Ausländer im deutschen Film” (Foreigners in German Film) that had originally appeared in the publication Nationalsozialistische Partei-Korrespondenz
The work was penned by Curt Belling, one of the party’s official spokesmen on film, who published a number of important works on political and racial issues related to film in the early years of the Third Reich. Belling operates on the premise that it is generally acceptable, indeed often desirable, for talented foreign (and, of course, non-Jewish) actors to appear in German films, as long as they perform appropriate ethnic roles. As a prime example of the specific need for foreigners in German productions, Belling cites *Friesennot* (Frisians in Distress, 1939), in which the Russian émigré actor Valéry Inkijinoff plays a Soviet commissioner of Asian heritage. According to Belling, Inkijinoff provides an indispensable element of authenticity to his character owing to his own Asian background and physical appearance. Yet, whereas the casting of non-German actors such as Inkijinoff to play the parts of (usually villainous) foreign characters is seen as an asset to Third Reich cinema’s authenticity, Belling deems it entirely unacceptable for foreigners to be cast in the roles of ethnic Germans. Indeed, invoking the belief in the uniqueness of the German spirit, Belling suggests that foreigners are psychologically incapable of performing as Germans: “Es ist zunächst fraglich, ob ein Ausländer die innere Einstellung zur deutschen Mentalität und Psyche besitzt, die zur Schaffung urwüchsiger deutscher Filme notwendig erscheint” (To begin with, it is questionable whether a foreigner even possesses the inner alignment with the German mentality and psyche that appears to be essential for the creation of genuinely German films). Belling’s wording clearly echoes official Nazi doctrine and traditional German discourses on performance. Like Flaskamp, Belling also singled out Baarová as prime target of his attack. He writes:

Unverständlich ist auch die Verpflichtung der tschechischen Filmkünstlerin Lyda [sic] Baarova für die Rolle eines Hamburger Mädels in dem Film *Einer zuviel an Bord*. Sieht man von einer kritischen Würdigung der schauspielerischen Leistung der Künstlerin einmal völlig ab . . . ist schon die Tatsche befremdend, daß eine Ausländerin ein deutsches Mädel in einem deutschen Film verkörpern darf.

Likewise incomprehensible is the engagement of the Czech actress Lyda [sic] Baarová for the role of a Hamburg girl in the film *One Too Many on Board*. Completely foregoing for the moment a critical appraisal of the actress’s performing abilities . . . the simple fact that a foreigner is permitted to embody a German girl in a German film is disconcerting.

Although he does not deny Baarová’s acting skills per se, Belling does contest her ability to convincingly embody a German character. His argument relies on two fundamental assumptions: (1) spectators can easily
recognize an actor as a foreign impostor, and (2) the incompatibility of the actor’s body and the on-screen character disrupts the viewing experience. To think of it in terms of what Amy Robinson calls a “triangular theater of identity,” Belling essentially describes the estranging effect on an “in-group witness” from viewing a drag performance, whereby a known foreigner attempts to pass as German. Significantly, Belling makes no comment about the Czech actress’s embodiment of an Italian woman in Barcarole. His concern with biologically incorrect casting takes issue first and foremost with the specific misrepresentation of German identity rather than misrepresentative casting in general.

Belling perceived Baarová not just as an imperfect casting choice but also as a dangerous impostor. Beyond the simple “estranging effect” of witnessing a Czech playing a German on screen, he implies that such casting decisions are also a detriment to the ideal of the German body itself in that they project images that literally distort how that body is perceived: “Wir begrüßen jede ehrliche Mitarbeit ausländischer Künstler, wenn sie im Rahmen eines filmischen Werkes tragbar ist, wir lehnen sie ausnahmslos und entschieden ab, wenn sie das Gesicht völkisch-deutschen Lebens in der Filmgestaltung verändert” (We welcome the honest participation of any foreign actors when it is acceptable within the context of the film work. But we refuse such participation with determination and without exception when it alters the face of ethnic German life in cinematic form). His biological metaphor warns of a literal disfigurement to the German body itself, specifically to the face. Belling’s argumentation for judging Baarová was her appearance, in which he supposedly recognized typical Slavic traits. No matter how well Baarová might perform German behavior and speech, her rendition will always be recognizable as masquerade, or as what Sieg would call ethnic drag, owing to what are deemed her “foreign” (non-Aryan) physical features. According to the German tradition of the “physiognomic gaze” that informed Nazi racist ideology, facial characteristics were inseparably linked to inner being.

Thus, from Belling’s point of view, Baarová’s cross-racial performance suffers equally from her non-German, outer physiognomy as from what he understands to be her inner biological (Slavic) makeup. He sees this act of drag as disingenuous both to the outer appearances and to the inner essence of the German character. Furthermore, he asserts that the racial disconnect inherent in the performance is displeasing to the common film spectator, who demands “biologically correct” performances.

Yet, despite National Socialism’s ostensibly xenophobic policy and such dogmatic treatises as Belling’s, the performances of foreign actors—with the exception of Jews—never disappeared altogether from the Third Reich’s screen. Nazi cinema was never totally “German” in terms of its performers. Foreign stars not only remained a part of Nazi cinema, but they also ranked among its most visible performers, including the Swedes
Zarah Leander and Kristina Söderbaum and the Hungarian Marika Rökk. Together with these actresses, Baarová was part of a “first generation” of foreign stars to begin a German film career under the auspices of the National Socialist system. In many ways, this generation of new stars can be framed precisely in economic terms like those invoked by Flaskamp in her polemic against Baarová. In fact, it was exactly this type of labor demand that the film industry was facing after the Nazi policy of de-Jewification and the subsequent mass emigration of actors and filmmakers decimated the talent pool in Germany.

Contrary to Belling’s racially charged objections, the film industry’s decision to cast Baarová as a German girl in *Einer zuviel an Bord* (particularly since she was still far from mastering the language at that time) appears to be rooted in the presumption that the actress’s beauty would outweigh any demands for biological correctness in the eyes of spectators. It is conceivable that many viewers saw her performance for the drag it was, but accepted it under the same pretext that they did the performance of foreign characters played by German actors, such as Ferdinand Marian as a Puerto Rican in *La Habanera* (1937). This example together with Baarová’s entire body of work in Germany illustrates Nazi cinema’s ambivalence with regard to the distinction between mimetic performance

![Fig. 10.2. Lída Baarová in *Einer zuviel an Bord* (1935).](image-url)
and ethnic masquerade, at least in certain cases, namely, those involving beautiful foreign female stars. Curiously, Baarová never played what Nazi ideology would envision as strictly biologically correct roles in German cinema, namely, a Czech woman. The film industry not only devised ways to account for her foreign looks and accent within the filmic narrative, but they also sought to capitalize on Baarová’s exotic status.

For as much as the official Nazi policy condemned certain Rassenfremde (racial others) for engaging in racial masquerade and actively strove to unmask such perpetrators—most notoriously in a demonstrative sequence from the anti-Semitic “documentary” Der ewige Jude (The Eternal Jew, 1940), whereby the film exposes the “true” racial identity of assimilated German Jews—the film industry was more ambivalent in its practices, permitting and even actively fostering certain forms of racial masquerade when it was expedient. In this sense, Ascheid states: “It seems that these [foreign] actresses’ exotic looks, charming accents, and worldly flair were precisely what distinguished them from the overdetermined imagery of the ‘German woman,’ which in turn enabled them to function as stars . . . capitalizing on actresses’ foreign allure and exotic looks simply was the rule rather than the exception.” With identifiable “Slavic” features such as her dark hair, Baarová was more recognizably “foreign” in comparison with her fair-haired compatriot Ondra. Likewise, Baarová was much more “exotic” in appearance than fairer foreign actresses like Harvey, Rökk, or Söderbaum. Baarová exuded a dark beauty similar to that of Leander, who did not, however, share the same racial scrutiny as Baarová since her Scandinavian origins placed her more securely in the Aryan camp.

The sound of Baarová’s voice was just as significant an indicator of her status as foreigner as her visual appearance, if not more so. Whereas Belling saw the betrayal of the pass in Baarová’s looks, more often than not it was her voice that was the most problematic element of her performance. Unlike Ondra, whose mastery of the German language facilitated her passing as German, Baarová faced tremendous difficulty in her effort to lose her Czech accent, despite years of intensive training. Newspapers and film journals made no attempt to obscure this fact, indeed, they often commented on her deficiencies in German pronunciation as well as how she struggled to learn the language. For example, the Film-Kurier review of Ein Teufelskerl emphasizes that the actress is still grappling with difficulties in her spoken German, and few years later, the Künstler-Biographien volume dedicated to Baarová makes repeated comments about her intensive study of the language. The biography claims that she did not begin to fully master German until she started acting on the stage, and notes the great strides she made in one year from her role in Patrioten (Patriots, 1937) to that in Die Fledermaus (1937), where, in the author’s opinion, she demonstrated that she had “perfected” her ability with the
Clearly, Baarová’s language hindrance was more problematic at the beginning of her German career, and as a consequence she was often cast in the role of foreigner or as a character with some sort of foreign connection.

When Baarová was cast in German roles, the filmmakers sought ways to narratively account for her accent. This is a significant detail of Baarová’s performance in *Einer zuviel an Bord*, which is so subtle that Belling completely ignores it, likely because of his preoccupation with visual as opposed to aural signs of race. When she is first introduced in the film, Baarová’s character, Gerda Hegert, is described as an “Auslandsdeutsche” (roughly, German living abroad), who only recently returned to Germany after living and working in Buenos Aires as a foreign correspondent. The producers inserted this minor biographical detail in the attempt to diegetically justify Baarová’s accent, thereby also perhaps implying a higher degree of biological correctness in her performance. Even this “German” girl is marked by a tinge of “foreignness,” which somehow rationalizes any “exotic” traces recognized in her.

Baarová’s primary assets as a performer in Third Reich cinema were the exotic and erotic qualities of her physical appearance, which secured her position despite ideological concerns deriving from what would have been construed as her inner (Slavic) nature. It was precisely this double game as necessary outsider, participating in the national cinema but only to play the role of foreigner, that made Baarová’s position on German screens so precarious. In fact, Baarová’s erotic appeal served to intensify the disruptive potential that she already embodied by virtue of her status as foreigner. According to Laura Mulvey, classic narrative cinema imagines the female body as a pure visual spectacle and a potentially destructive force. By all accounts, Third Reich cinema operated within this framework, and exotic females like Baarová offered a doubly charged attraction. In most cases, the seductive desire that Baarová embodied on film can be read in both national and racial terms. Many of the narratively marked “foreign” women she played wield a seductive power over the typically German male protagonists, threatening to lead them astray, distract them from their priorities, and set them on a destructive path. In *Barcarole*, the male German protagonist falls for the charms of the Italian lady played by Baarová and is subsequently killed by her jealous husband. Because of his obsession with Baarová’s character, the male protagonist of *Der Spieler* descends into a cycle of compulsive gambling that destroys his life. Her seductive potential is most threatening to the national body in *Verräter* (Traitors, 1936), where she plays an innocently destructive girl whose materialistic demands compel her boyfriend to betray the fatherland.

Of course, Baarová was famous as an object of male desire in her offscreen life as well: first as the partner of Gustav Fröhlich, one of Third Reich cinema’s leading heartthrobs, and later as Goebbels’s lover.
In some ways, her life story took on many attributes of her on-screen characters as she came to be seen as an erotic body whose foreignness was dangerous and untrustworthy. This had tragic consequences for the actress when her increasingly visible affair with Goebbels began to threaten the latter’s public image. Hitler himself stepped in to defuse this politically explosive threat and preserve the integrity of the Nazi leadership by forcibly expelling the actress from the Reich and forbidding any further appearances in German films. This ban remained in force until the end of the war, despite numerous appeals on Baarová’s part. Upon being ejected from Germany, she relocated to Prague, where she was able to perform in a number of films between 1939 and 1941 until the Nazi administration extended her ban to the Czech industry as well. After a few years without work, the acclaimed director Enrico Guazzoni invited her to Italy. After the Nazi capitulation, Baarová was shunned by her own nation because of her role in the Nazi cinema apparatus. The remainder of her film career played out exclusively in Italian and Spanish features such as La vendetta di una pazza (Revenge of a Crazy Girl, 1951), Todos somos necesarios (We Are All Necessary, 1956), and Federico Fellini’s I Vitelloni (1953). She was thus condemned to the role of a permanent foreigner, rejected by both her country of birth and by her adopted homeland, where she strove to pass as German during one of the most inopportune historical moments imaginable.

Conclusion

For the period after 1939, there can be no real discussion of Czech stars within the German film industry. At the same time that Baarová entered forced exile in 1939, Ondra had all but ended her film career. The actress who had averaged three or four films per year in the early 1930s appeared in a mere two films during the war years—Der Gasmann and Himmel, wir erben ein Schloss—and here in roles that starkly contrasted with the playfully disruptive characters that defined her career in the 1920s and 1930s. By the 1940s Ondra had been transformed from a figure of energy and travesty into “the very image of the contemporary German woman.” The radical shift in the types of on-screen characters Ondra played is symptomatic of ideologically and formally conservative German film culture during the war years. Although a number of Czechs entered the German industry as new stars under the auspices of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia—Adina Mandlová as Lil Adina, Hana Vítová as Hanna Witt, Nataša Golová as Ada Goll, and Zita Kabátová as Maria von Buchlow—none of them ever acquired the recognition among German audiences worthy of the star label, due in large part to the complications of racial identity and performance that plagued Baarová’s career in the Reich.
Diversity in cultural expressions persisted in German cinema throughout the 1930s and early 1940s despite the ideological tenets of the Nazi rulers because “audiences persistently continued to express their predilection for residual forms that did not conform to Nazi doctrine.”

The cases of both Ondra and Baarová highlight the gap between official Nazi doctrine and cinema practice. Ondra’s masquerades and slapstick-inspired performances are echoes of Weimar culture in Third Reich cinema, whereas Baarová’s instrumentalization as desirable sex object exposes fractures and tensions in the Reich’s cinematic depictions of otherness. Whereas Baarová was consistently restricted by the demands of biological correctness and criticized for improper racial performances, particularly when she was required to play German characters, Ondra stands out as an intriguing example of an actress who was openly recognized as possessing the concept of universal performability traditionally reserved for German actors alone. In this, she maintained a unique status not only among Czech actors but also among foreigners in Third Reich cinema overall.

Notes

1 The series consisted of four parts that ran over the course of several months, each one addressing a specific group of personalities: male and female actors, and male German and foreign directors. Each listing consisted of two columns, one summarizing what made that individual distinct, and one suggesting what they lacked. The series ran as follows: Film-Kurier 17, no. 9, January 11, 1935, 2 (male actors); 17, no. 16, January 19, 1935, 7 (directors of German cinema); 17, no. 81, April 5, 1935, 3 (female actors); 17, no. 96, April 25, 1935, 12 (directors of world cinema).

2 “Was sie auszeichnet,” Film-Kurier 17, no. 81, April 5, 1935, 3.


4 Ascheid, Hitler’s Heroines, 8.


Numerous scholars have diagnosed similar phenomena in Nazi cinema and in Third Reich society more generally. Ascheid, for example, frames the dominant reality of Nazism as one of “fragmentation” and emphasizes the Nazi state’s “uneasy binarism . . . schizophrenic operations . . . [and] irreconcilable antagonisms.” Ascheid, Hitler’s Heroines, 19, 21, 41. Similarly, Eric Rentschler, borrowing from Hans Dieter Schäfer and Detlev Peukert, talks of the “double life” led by many Germans who toed the official line in public while pursuing nonpolitical pleasures in private, and describes Nazi Germany as a “site of a collective schizophrenia, a function of the gap between an official representative culture and an everyday popular culture that offered a variety of unpolitical, even illicit, diversions.” Eric Rentschler, Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and Its Afterlife (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 107.


For the purposes of this essay, I use the international version of her name, since the primary concern here is with her work outside her Czech homeland. It was only in her native Czechoslovakia that the original, inflected “Ondráková” form persisted, and this remains the accepted version of her name to this day.

For example, in MLV pairs such as Eine Nacht in Paradies/Une nuit au paradis (One Night in Paradise, 1932); Die vertauschte Braut/L’amour en cage (The Switched Bride, 1934); and Důvod k rozvodu/Der Scheidungsgrund (Grounds for Divorce, 1937).

Aside from the three MLV projects for which she acted in the Czech version as well as in the German—On a jeho sestra/Er und seine Schwester (He and His Sister, 1931), Polská krev/Polenblut (Polish Blood, 1934), and Důvod k rozvodu/Der Scheidungsgrund (Grounds for Divorce, 1937)—Ondra’s only Czech-language film in the 1930s was Kantor ideál (The Ideal Schoolmaster, 1932).


Fox, for example, neglects to mention Ondra in her listing of foreign-born actresses working in the Reich. Jo Fox, Filming Women in the Third Reich (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 16.

For an overview of Harvey’s career and analysis of her performance style, see Ascheid, Hitler’s Heroines, 98–154.

Exceptions are Dorrit Weixler, the biggest female comedy star in Germany prior to 1920, and Ossi Oswalda, one of Ernst Lubitsch’s preferred German actresses, with whom Ondra was often compared.


Lotte Eisner, “Kiki,” Film-Kurier 22, no. 9, September 28, 1932, 2; dr. lo. (pseud.), “Das verliebte Hotel,” Film-Kurier 15, no. 298, December 20, 1933, 2; and g. (pseud.), “Klein Dorrit,” Film-Kurier 16, no. 205, September 1, 1934, 2. For more on Ondra as “Golem,” see dr. lo.
(pseud.), “Fräulein Hoffmanns Erzählungen,” *Film-Kurier* 15, no. 200, August 26, 1933, 2.

18 On Ondra’s mechanical, puppet-like qualities, see r. (pseud.), “Die Tochter des Regiments,” *Film-Kurier* 15, no. 79, April 1, 1933, 2; and j-n. (pseud.), “Die grausame Freundin,” *Film-Kurier* 14, no. 163, July 13, 1932, 2. For more on Ondra as “grotesk” see Georg Herzberg, “Eine Freundin, so goldig wie du . . .,” *Film-Kurier* 12, no. 296, December 16, 1930, 2; g. (pseud.), “Eine Nacht in Paradies,” *Film-Kurier* 12, no. 56, March 5, 1932, 2; and g. (pseud.), “Baby,” *Film-Kurier* 14, no. 303, December 24, 1932, 11.


24 These films are: *Okénko* (The Small Window, 1933), *Madla z cihelny* (Madla from the Brickworks, 1933), *Její lékař* (Her Doctor, 1933), *Zlatá Kateřina* (Golden Kateřina, 1934), *Dokud máš manínu* (As Long as You Have a Mother, 1934), and *Grandhotel Nevada* (1934). She continued to perform in Czechoslovak Ufa productions until 1937, well after she had become an established star in Germany.


27 Flaskamp’s allusion to a contract for a second film is likely a reference to *Einer zuviel an Bord* (One Too Many on Board, 1935). In fact, Baarová’s second German-language film was *Ein Teufelskerl* (aka *Leutnant Bobby, der Teufelskerl* [A Devil of a Fellow, 1935]), which was produced in pre-Anschluss Austria and premiered in Germany one month after *Einer zuviel an Bord*.

28 Fox, *Filming Women*, 153.

29 Curt Belling, “Ausländer im deutschen Film: Braucht der deutsche Film ausländische Mitarbeiter?” *Film-Kurier* 17, no. 208, September 6, 1935, 1–2. The introduction to the article indicates that Belling’s original piece appeared in *Nationalsozialistische Parteikorrespondenz* (NSK) 207, September 5, 1935.
Belling’s works include *Der Film in Dienste der Partei* (Berlin: Lichtspielbühne, 1936); *Der Film in Staat und Partei* (Berlin: Verlag “Der Film,” 1936); “Film und Partei,” *Film-Kurier*, December 31, 1936; “Film und Nationalsozialismus,” *Der Autor*, July, 1937; and (coauthored with Alfred Schütze) *Der Film in der Hitlerjugend* (Berlin: Limpert, 1937). He was also coauthor (with Carl Neumann and Hans-Walther Betz) of the notorious anti-Semitic publication *Film-“Kunst,” Film-Kohn, Film-Korruption: Ein Streifzug durch vier Film-Jahrzehnte* (Berlin: Herman Scherping, 1937).

Belling, “Ausländer,” 2.

It should be noted that Belling’s piece was published within a week of the premiere of *Einer zuviel an Bord* when the film was still fresh in the public consciousness. Thus his focus on Baarová likely had less to do with a particularly strong (perceived) egregiousness of her performance than with the simple coincidence of timing.


Belling, “Ausländer,” 2.

Richard T. Gray, *About Face: German Physiognomic Thought from Lavater to Auschwitz* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 177–82. Of course, with very different intentions, Béla Balázs was promoting a similar linkage of inner being and outer, especially facial, expression. Although Balázs did not argue in racialized terms, he nevertheless praised the filmic close-up as a modern tool for reading the inner human spirit. In his words, “what appears on the face and in facial expression is a spiritual experience which is rendered immediately visible without the intermediary of words.” Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*, trans. Edith Bone (New York: Dover, 1970), 40.

Likewise, the press booklet for *Die Fledermaus* contains a presumed interview with the actress in which she recounts her struggle with German, ending with the proclamation “Jetzt beherrsche ich die [deutsche] Sprache!” (Now I have mastered the [German] language!) See *Tobis-Pressheft* 15 (1937).

She embodied an Italian in *Barcarole*, a French woman in *Patrioten*, a Russian in *Der Spieler* (The Gambler, 1938), and a Lithuanian Pole in *Preussische Liebesgeschichte* (A Prussian Love Story, 1938). The non-German roles provided an easy explanation for her accent, even if the sound of her speech patterns did not necessarily merge convincingly with the nationality performed.

The term “Auslandsdeutsche” dates back to the nineteenth century and covers not only German expatriates but also people of presumed German ethnicity who were born abroad. See Bradley Naranch, “Inventing the *Auslandsdeutsche*: Emigration, Colonial Fantasy, and German National Identity, 1848–71,” in *Germa-
This narrative trope reemerges a decade later to account for the foreignness of the Czech actress Hana Vítová in the film *Freunde* (Friends, 1944–45).


The script of *The Gambler* diverges from the source novel by Dostoevsky by reimagining the British gentleman, who takes the young Russian girl played by Baarová into his care, as a German doctor. This transformation from Mr. Astley to doctor Tronka inserts a figure of identification for the German spectator to vicariously and safely triumph over the precarious foreign female.


Part VI. Film Technologies
11: Objects in Motion: Hans Richter’s *Vormittagsspuk* (1928) and the Crisis of Avant-Garde Film

*Brook Henkel*

In the 1930s the avant-garde artist and filmmaker Hans Richter was moving about Europe in exile from Nazi Germany. After working on the Soviet-funded narrative film *Metall* (Metal, unfinished 1931–33) in Berlin and Moscow, Richter secured employment making industrial, advertising, and documentary films in the Netherlands and Switzerland before immigrating to the United States in 1941. Throughout this period of political crisis and exile, the German Jewish artist was persistent in applying avant-garde aesthetics to his commissioned film work, thus maintaining a degree of continuity with his more famous, experimental films of the 1920s. At the same time, he had also shifted his priorities in response to the social and political exigencies of the time. Whereas the 1920s saw Richter exploring the abstract formalism and medium-specific aesthetics of “absolute film,” by the mid-1930s he had come to privilege documentary and narrative modes of politically engaged cinema. Holding up the works of Eisenstein, Vertov, Chaplin, Flaherty, and Renoir as examples, Richter’s 1939 book manuscript *Der Kampf um den Film* (The Struggle for the Film, revised and first published 1976) calls for cinematic works that pursue formal innovations while also revealing social and political realities to a mass audience.

Within the context of these writings, Richter presents a somewhat unfamiliar picture of the 1920s cinematic avant-garde in Europe. Referencing works like René Clair’s *Entr’acte* (Intermission, 1924), Fernand Léger’s *Ballet mécanique* (Mechanical Ballet, 1924), Man Ray’s *L’Étoile de mer* (The Starfish, 1928), and his own *Vormittagsspuk* (released in English as *Ghosts before Breakfast*, 1928), Richter describes the “anarchistic” lyricism of such films as an attempt to undermine the formal conventions and sentimental, literary content of mainstream commercial films of the time. In addition to this well-known destructive side of the avant-garde, Richter also asserts a less familiar, constructive role: through the European avant-garde’s rather disorderly exploitation of all cinematic
possibilities, he argues, such films also functioned to awaken the audience’s sensibilities to the need for an alternative form of cinema, to make this need for new formal innovations literally “fühlbar” (palpable) for the viewer.4 Although these works had no discernable social content in themselves, Richter claims, the European avant-garde succeeded in breaking cinema apart and enabled viewers to get a feel for its various pieces so that future films could then be put together anew.

Although Richter’s cinematic priorities had clearly changed by the late 1930s, this provisional and transitional status attributed to the European avant-garde is not simply the product of hindsight. It was also central to Richter’s conception of avant-garde filmmaking going into the late 1920s, a period of considerable change in European and particularly German film. In a 1929 article, “Neue Mittel der Film-Gestaltung” (New Means of Filmmaking), Richter compared the situation of cinema in Western Europe unfavorably with what he thought to be happening in Russia. The social structure of Soviet film production, he argues, allowed for the integration of formal innovations with socially relevant content. In Western Europe, by contrast, Richter saw the artistically oriented avant-garde in rigid opposition to the commercial film industry, pitting a radical formalism against mainstream features that emulated theater and literary narrative. The challenge, as Richter saw it, was to become more closely involved in the mainstream film culture and transform a wider audience’s very experience and expectations of cinema. Richter’s freedom to pursue these goals would become severely restricted with Hitler’s rise to power after 1930. In the late 1920s, however, he could still envision that formally experimental films would become both socially relevant and commercially viable and might lead to a convergence of avant-garde and industry interests in Germany.5

Whether Richter’s rhetorical positioning of the European avant-garde and Soviet cinema accurately reflects the reality of the situation or not, this desire to transform the dominant film culture in Germany clearly informed his filmmaking and broader activities at the time. In what follows, I would like to look at Richter’s 1928 film Vormittagsspuk as an exemplary work of this transitional moment in the history of the European cinematic avant-garde. By situating a close reading of the film in relation to Richter’s contemporaneous efforts to popularize and promote experimental film in the late 1920s, I would like to offer a new understanding of his changing aesthetics—especially his move from pure abstraction to figuration and photographic representation—as a deliberate strategy to transform the popular experience of film and court a larger audience for avant-garde works, while also integrating sociocritical content into his formal experiments. Richter’s film can thus be understood, historically, as marking a degree of continuity between the classical avant-garde cinema of the 1920s and the more divergent developments after 1930.
At the same time, *Vormittagsspuk* proves to be a particularly compelling work for reassessing an older narrative of crisis in the cinematic avant-garde around 1930. As I will discuss below, traditional accounts of an abrupt end to the European cinematic avant-garde with the introduction of sound film and the rise of fascism around 1930 have been recently complicated by descriptions of significant continuities in avant-garde aesthetics, organizational activities, and personnel well into the 1930s—despite the significant challenges posed by these momentous, historical events. Appearing right on the cusp of rising fascism and the dominance of sound film, *Vormittagsspuk* finds Richter looking both backward and forward, attempting to reactivate and mobilize the past achievements of the 1920s avant-garde while also reflecting on a general atmosphere of rebellion, danger, and impending crisis. If existing readings of the film have tended to focus on this latter aspect, it is largely due to an opening English-language title card that Richter added to the film in the 1940s, effectively refashioning the surviving copy of *Vormittagsspuk* into a direct satirical critique of German fascism: “The Nazis destroyed the sound version of this film as ‘degenerate art.’ It shows that even objects revolt against regimentation.” While acknowledging the clear overtones of crisis in Richter’s images of objects rebelling against human control, I would like to offer a more historically grounded reading that situates the film in relation to Richter’s immediate efforts to transform 1920s cinematic experiments into a more pervasive cultural force going into the 1930s. To do so requires a close look at the film’s dominant visual motifs—its ticking clocks and rebelliously animated objects—not only for their socio-critical significance as allegories of crisis and rebellion, but also for their functional roles in sensitizing and attuning a popular audience to the formal possibilities of cinematic art.

**Moving Objects**

In 1928, the same year that *Vormittagsspuk* was first screened, Richter published an earlier version of “Neue Mittel der Film-Gestaltung,” which lacks the above contrast with the social content of Soviet film, though it lays out an identical program for the European avant-garde. First published in Czech and later French with the translated title “The Object in Motion,” Richter’s article imagines a popular film audience that has viewed the same commercial narrative films so many times that they begin to discern the visual rhythms and moving forms that exist behind the surface-level plots, themes, decorations, and theatrical acting. If a popular rediscovery of these basic elements of cinematic construction could not come about on its own, Richter suggests, then it was the task of the avant-garde itself to awaken a wider viewership to “das Wunder der Bewegung, die innere Struktur des Films” (the wonder of movement, the inner
structure of film). The use of animated objects in particular, Richter goes on to explain, was crucial for fixing the viewer’s attention on the cinematically possibilities of artificially constructed rhythms, movements, and plastic forms. Premiering in 1928 under the alternate title *Bewegte Gegenstände* (Moving Objects), Richter’s *Vormittagsspuk*—with its dynamic images of animated hats, bowties, clocks, guns, and bodies—can be read as a direct realization of this program.

The animated objects in *Vormittagsspuk*, as I will show, fulfill multiple functions at the same time. In a manner similar to Walter Benjamin’s notion of “Spielraum” (room for play) in film, Richter’s objects invite the viewer to experience the full possibilities and effects of cinematic movement. Through a diverse array of techniques, the film draws in its viewers with playful and flowing movements of repetition, reversal, and visual association: windows open and close, hoses unwind and magically coil back up, hats morph into birds, and a tea set smashes to the ground only later to leap back into the air unbroken. Richter’s animations of objects not only demonstrate a wide range of trick techniques and their effects but they also reveal the basis of their constructions, so that viewers can get a feel for the building blocks of cinematic form. Finally, as will be addressed later on, Richter’s objects and moving forms are carefully chosen to reference and directly cite a range of earlier avant-garde works so as to integrate a diverse and only loosely associated group of films into a more cohesive and coherent project of experimental cinema.

The most prominent objects in the film, the flying bowler hats, suggest the twofold significance of Richter’s *Vormittagsspuk* in relation to this key transitional moment in the history of avant-garde cinema. On the one hand, the hats’ immediate association with Charlie Chaplin and the popular genre of slapstick comedy makes these images metonymic of the broader possibilities and mass culture of film in the 1920s. In this sense, they relate to Richter’s contemporaneous project of moving avant-garde experimentation into a more popular context. On the other hand, the flying hats also evoke an older cultural meaning in German as symbols of destabilization, danger, and personal or social crisis. Given Richter’s early involvement in Expressionist circles, the opening line of Jakob van Hoddis’s apocalyptic poem “Weltende” (End of the World, 1911) may well have been a direct inspiration.

Reading these objects as symbols of both popular appeal and impending danger helps to situate the film according to contrasting historical narratives of continuity and crisis. Within Richter’s historical horizons of the late 1920s, these rebellious objects appear to function far more as a popularizing strategy, which might engage a broader viewership in the playful possibilities of avant-garde experiments with cinematic motion. By contrast, it is only retrospectively that the same animated objects take on an unambiguous significance as figures of impending crisis, leading at
least one critic to read a premonition of the Nazis’ later rise to power in the ghostly images of the flying hats. In contrast to this latter anachronistic reading, I would like to situate Richter’s *Vormittagsspuk* right on the cusp of this period of crisis and, in this way, read the film’s shifting aesthetic strategies as part of a continuous trajectory in avant-garde filmmaking that would only later be interrupted and diverted after 1930. Before returning to a close analysis of *Vormittagsspuk*, a discussion of Richter’s broader activities and the state of avant-garde filmmaking in the late 1920s will help to lay the groundwork for my reading and also lift this particular film from its relatively obscure position among other canonical works of the interwar cinematic avant-garde.

**The Avant-Garde in Transition**

Richter’s *Vormittagsspuk* has long been considered an exemplary—if somewhat late and minor—work of the classic 1920s avant-garde. This somewhat marginal status can be attributed, on the one hand, to difficulties in categorizing the film. With its mechanical rhythms and rebellious objects, *Vormittagsspuk* suggests an unstable assemblage of elements that have been variously linked to the subversive anarchy of Dada, the...
rhythmic abstractions of Constructivism, and the dreamlike qualities of Surrealist film. On the other hand, the film also marks an uncertain transition in Richter’s filmmaking and the avant-garde in general. In broader assessments of the interwar avant-garde, Richter’s shift from the purely abstract animation of his early *Rhythmus* (Rhythm) films (1923–25) and toward the photographic imagery of *Vormittagsspuk* appears as but a late and rather redundant iteration of the free montage and subversive live-action filming of earlier experimental works by Man Ray, Léger, and Clair. In monographs on Richter’s career, the film is additionally positioned, retrospectively, as a move from abstraction to the socially critical content that was the focus of his filmmaking and writing in the 1930s. Owing to the strange, hybrid, and transitional nature of the film, *Vormittagsspuk* has thus tended to float at the margins of available histories and close readings of avant-garde film.

A major reason for this marginality is an older periodization that posits an end or break in the history of interwar avant-garde film in Europe with the coming of sound and the rise of fascism around 1930. Along with the critical need for politically engaged cinema at the time, the emergence of synchronized sound further marginalized the avant-garde’s nonnarrative, formal experiments with purely visual phenomena in film; and where sound was employed, the avant-garde found itself increasingly subservient to the film industry for financial and technical support. The time around 1930 has thus been seen as either an abrupt end to the avant-garde or a point of departure.

The challenge to rethink the periodization of interwar German film, however, helps to rediscover this critical moment and its relation to Richter’s filmmaking and broader activities. The work of Malte Hagener, in particular, has profoundly revised the story and periodization of avant-garde film culture in interwar Europe. Rather than positing an end or break with the introduction of sound and the growing political crisis around 1930, Hagener situates the years between 1928 and 1932 as the major highpoint and watershed moment in the history of the European cinematic avant-garde. The technological, political, and economic pressures of the time would indeed have a transformative effect on avant-garde filmmaking. Yet these same years also saw an unprecedented level of international collaboration and public exposure for avant-garde cinema, a convergence of artistic, state, and industry interests, as well as the emergence of “hybrid forms” in avant-garde aesthetics. As filmmakers moved away from the visual purism and abstraction of absolute film, they also channeled their innovative spirits in different directions, contributing to new developments in sound, commercial narrative, and documentary, alongside work on advertising, political propaganda, and industrial films.

During this time, Richter was actively engaged in a diverse campaign to promote and popularize experimental film. Perhaps more so
than any other figure of the European avant-garde, he was committed to championing the past achievements of nonnarrative film art and sought to secure its potential future. Especially between 1928 and 1930, Richter wrote and lectured extensively on avant-garde film and was involved in organizing film societies, exhibitions, conferences, and filmmaking workshops, all with the aim of fostering a broader culture of experimental cinema in Germany and abroad. Throughout these years, Richter had no interest in identifying his films with Dada or Surrealism, nor did he overtly conceive of his shifting aesthetics as a response to the emerging political crisis. Instead, he understood his late 1920s films like *Vormittagsspuk* to be a positive outgrowth of his earlier, abstract experiments in cinema as a nonnarrative “Bewegungskunst” (art of movement). Along with other avant-gardists, Richter rejected the imitation of literature and theater in commercial narrative film and advocated for a cinematic art based on the medium-specific capabilities of film for producing articulated movement through projected light images. But whereas the exploration of motion in his 1923–25 *Rhythmus* films was restricted to the frame-by-frame animation of rectangular forms, Richter’s late 1920s films like *Vormittagsspuk*, *Filmstudie* (Film Study, 1928), and *Alles dreht sich, alles bewegt sich* (Everything Turns, Everything Revolves, 1929) make use of a wide variety of representational strategies and techniques, including animation, rapid montage, reverse motion, camera movement, multiple exposures, quasi-narrative structures, and live-action filming of moving objects and bodies.

Along with this late-1920s transition away from pure abstraction, Richter also departed from the esoteric style of his earlier writings on cinematic rhythm and motion and adopted a more populist approach in order to appeal to a wider audience. Whereas his early to mid-1920s articles were published for an initiated group of readers in small, avant-garde journals like *De Stijl* and *G.*, in the late 1920s he published a more accessible illustrated book and numerous articles on the art of cinematic motion. In the pages of popular trade journals like *Film-Kurier* and *Lichtbild-Bühne*, Richter informed the general public about avant-garde cinema, argued for the establishment of avant-garde theaters and experimental film studios, and solicited the state, film industry, and private investors for financial and technical support. These concerted efforts to promote and popularize experimental cinema in the late 1920s are key to understanding Richter’s simultaneous shift away from pure abstraction and toward the heterogeneous techniques and photographic representations of *Vormittagsspuk*.

With this context in mind, the dominant visual motif of the film—the rebellion of animated objects against human control—appears less a subversive or critical gesture and more an entertaining and humorous contrivance for drawing a wider viewership into the pleasures of a cinematic
art of movement. The dynamic interactions between animated objects and human bodies in the film function on multiple levels to introduce and sensitize the viewer to a nonnarrative and motion-oriented experience of film. In this sense, the film’s efforts to train the viewer in the experience of a cinematic art of movement can be related to what Yvonne Zimmermann calls the “educational impulse” that runs throughout Richter’s work. As I will show, this particular aspect of Vormittagsspuk is closely related to Richter’s wider pedagogical and self-promotional activities of the time.

Expanding the Avant-Garde

Richter’s ten-minute film was first screened on July 14, 1928, at the arts festival Deutsche Kamermusik Baden-Baden (German Chamber Music Baden-Baden), an annual event in the late 1920s for the performance of new music in combination with experimental film and theater. Produced in collaboration with the Bauhaus artist Werner Graeff, Vormittagsspuk was commissioned for the event and featured a musical accompaniment by the German composer and festival-committee member Paul Hindemith. Their collective efforts to synchronize the score mechanically (as rolled sheet music) with the projection apparatus already point to the transitional nature of Richter’s film in relation to new sound technology. When Vormittagsspuk was screened again at the festival the following year, Hindemith’s score had been recorded to sound film with the support of the film-technology company Tobis (Tonbild-Syndikat AG). After its premiere at the festival in Baden-Baden, Richter’s Vormittagsspuk was shown widely over the next few years. Screenings were arranged by film societies in London, Amsterdam, Nice, and Munich between 1928 and 1931, and the film was also featured at major events like the Film und Foto (Film and Photo) exhibition in Stuttgart in the summer of 1929 and later that same year at the Congrès International du Film Indépendant (International Congress of Independent Film) in La Sarraz, Switzerland.

From its initial run of screenings alone, Richter’s Vormittagsspuk appears strongly embedded in the international avant-garde’s organizational and self-promotional activities that promised to make experimental film a more pervasive cultural force going into the 1930s. In addition to showing his own films, Richter played a major role in these broader efforts. In 1928, he founded the Gesellschaft Neuer Film (Society [for] New Film) in Berlin to support the production and exhibition of experimental cinema, including his Filmstudie and Vormittagsspuk. At the 1929 Film und Foto show, he curated a fifteen-day film program designed to showcase the collective achievements of Soviet cinema (Dziga Vertov, Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevelod Pudovkin), artistic narrative film (Robert Wiene, G. W. Pabst, Charlie Chaplin, Carl Theodor Dreyer), and, most prominently, the European avant-garde (Léger, Clair, Man Ray, Viking
Eggeling, Walter Ruttmann, Germaine Dulac, Joris Ivens, and Richter himself). After the Stuttgart exhibition, he traveled to La Sarraz at the invitation of the wealthy art patron Hélène de Mandrot and convened there with Eisenstein, Ruttmann, Ivor Montagu, Béla Balázs, and others. Shooting impromptu scenes for an unfinished film, whose theme Richter later described as “Der Kampf des unabhängigen gegen den kommerziellen Film” (the war between independent and commercial film), the participants also discussed strategies of production, distribution, and exhibition that might secure a larger international audience for avant-garde films while ensuring sufficient artistic independence from commercial, state, and industry influence.

Whereas these activities and events mark a highpoint in the history of avant-garde film, the corresponding hopes were short-lived. In Hagener’s detailed reconstruction, the meeting in La Sarraz, for example, underscored the substantial internal rifts among avant-garde filmmakers at the time: their varying aesthetic and political dedications as well as their degrees of willingness to submit to the expectations and demands of the film industry. Whatever aesthetic ideals they held, the pressures of new sound technology, economic instabilities, and political crisis around 1930 forced the protagonists of the interwar avant-garde to realign their cinematic work in concert with outside interests. This “restructuring” of the avant-garde was not its end, Hagener insists; instead, the 1920s through the late 1930s saw significant continuities in both personnel and commitments to aesthetic innovations, and avant-garde filmmakers also revised their representational strategies and goals in response to new historical challenges.

In addition to this longer periodization of the interwar avant-garde, recent scholarship has followed Hagener in challenging the older picture of a coherent and independent movement of experimental cinema that was unified in opposition to the commercial film industry. There is now a far richer understanding of the close alignments between avant-garde aesthetics, mass culture, and the networks, organizations, institutions, and industries that played central roles in securing funding, technical support, and audiences for experimental filmmaking throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Ruttmann’s abstract Opus films (1921–25), for example, now appear in close relation to his contemporaneous advertising work, and his dedication to avant-garde aesthetics can be traced through his innovations in montage and sound for the commercial film industry up to his contributions to Nazi propaganda films in the 1930s. Hans Richter, as a German Jewish artist and committed leftist, presents a divergent trajectory, yet his career as an avant-garde filmmaker displays comparable intersections with advertising beginning in the late 1920s, leftist political propaganda in the early 1930s, as well as extensive, commissioned work on industrial and documentary films for the Swiss Werkbund, the Dutch
electronics firm Philips, and the Swiss banking and chemical industries throughout the 1930s.\textsuperscript{28}

An important consequence of this recent turn in scholarship is that the aesthetic qualities most associated with European avant-garde film—such as abstract animation, experimental montage, and rhythm—are no longer separated off in some supposedly independent and autonomous sphere of purely formal aesthetics or visual music. Instead, avant-garde cinema appears deeply implicated in various instrumental goals, functions, practical contexts, and broader cultural connections.\textsuperscript{29} By returning to Richter’s commitment to film as an “art of movement,” I have no desire to restore a rarified conception of avant-garde filmmaking as a detached formalist exercise and strict opposition to mass culture and commercial film. Instead, I am interested in how Richter’s focus on cinematic motion is refashioned in the late 1920s with the aim of popularizing experimental film. In both the context of its original screenings and its shifting representational strategies, \textit{Vormittagsspuk} can be read in terms of what Hagener calls the “self-propaganda” efforts of the cinematic avant-garde around 1930: their attempts to convince viewers of the full impact and capabilities of film as a medium and to make exploring these potentials a mainstream force in the broader culture of cinematic production and viewing.\textsuperscript{30}

In order to do so, Richter drew ever closer to industry support in the late 1920s. In an interview with \textit{Film-Kurier} at the beginning of 1929, he stated his wishes for “eine fruchtbare Beziehung zwischen Industrie und Avantgarde” (a fruitful relationship between industry and the avant-garde) in the coming year and specifically held up \textit{Vormittagsspuk} as an example of the type of low-budget, experimental film that the film industry could finance and produce at minimal risk.\textsuperscript{31} At the 1929 festival in Baden-Baden, the sound version of \textit{Vormittagsspuk} and Richter’s new film \textit{Alles dreht sich, alles bewegt sich} in fact premiered as experimental vehicles for promoting the optical sound technology recently developed by the company Tobis, which produced the festival’s entire film program.\textsuperscript{32} Richter’s forays into commissioned advertising work that same year, in turn, used the new platform as a way to self-advertise avant-garde aesthetics and the capabilities of the cinematic medium. Although ostensibly an advertisement for an illustrated newspaper, his short film \textit{Der Zweigroschenzauber} (Twopenny Magic, 1929), for example, is more convincing as a demonstration of the dynamic possibilities and pleasures of experimental, nonnarrative film. This mutual exploitation between industry and the avant-garde was indeed far more characteristic of the time than the avant-garde’s better-known rhetoric of independent opposition suggests.

This self-promotional aspect of Richter’s late-1920s films arises not only out of their surrounding contexts. It is also inherent to the shifting representational strategies of the films themselves. \textit{Vormittagsspuk}, in
particular, proves to be a highly self-reflective work focused on the very possibilities of the cinematic medium itself. As the film begins, there appears a large clock that ticks down toward noon. Playing on the German expression “fünf vor zwölf” (five of twelve), indicating a moment of impending crisis or imminent danger, the film proceeds by showing a ghostly haunting of animated objects, which are restored to their normal state right when the ten-minute film comes to a close with the clock striking noon. Throughout the film, the changing position of the clock hands indicates a stretching, compression, or reversal of time commensurate with the objects’ denaturalized movements, thus identifying this haunted period with the possibilities of the cinematic medium itself. While the theme of a haunting or “spook before noon” has often been read as a foreshadowing of crisis, it also functions as a pretense for exploring and demonstrating a range of cinematic techniques and gathering together a diverse assortment of images common to avant-garde films of the 1920s.

Fünf vor zwölf

The role of *Vormittagsspuk* as a self-promotional demonstration of techniques appears most strikingly in the film’s close relationship to Richter’s 1929 book *Filmgegner von heute—Filmfreunde von morgen* (Film Enemies Today—Film Friends Tomorrow). Published as an unofficial companion to his curated film program for the *Film und Foto* show in Stuttgart, the book both stages and attempts to bring about a broad transformation in cinematic viewership. In the foreword, Richter addresses an imaginary audience of “Filmgegner” (film enemies), who he claims have grown tired of bad commercial narrative films. In order to mobilize such a group to demand better, more artistic films, the book proposes to teach the basic principles and techniques of cinematic representation. Once the broader public was educated on the full artistic possibilities of film, so Richter’s thesis goes, they would be empowered to discern and protest the inferior products of the film industry and might organize to demand a variety of more innovative films.33

The particular strategy of *Filmgegner von heute* becomes evident upon flipping through its richly illustrated pages. Using films screened at the Stuttgart exhibition as a visual resource, the large-format book (26 x 19 cm) combines well over three hundred separate images with witty textual explanations in order to demonstrate to the reader an enormous range of cinematic techniques. In Richter’s juxtapositions of text and images, the films of the European avant-garde occupy a privileged position as both an archive of experimentation with different techniques and a model for a future cinematic art based on visual rhythms and movement. The book’s layout of reproduced filmstrips and stills does more than simply illustrate the visual possibilities and effects of cinema. Through its careful
arrangement of successive images, *Filmgegner von heute* also suggests motion between the frames, allowing the reader a guided impression of what Richter calls “die künstlerisch klar geregelte Folge der Bewegungen” (the artistically [and] precisely ordered progression of movements).34

Images from Richter’s *Vormittagsspuk* appear prominently in the book to illustrate techniques like the use of optical prisms, the off-screen manipulation of objects, reverse motion, rhythmic editing, double exposures, and frame-by-frame animation. The film itself also parallels the book’s strategy of an encyclopedic presentation. Richter’s positioning of avant-garde filmmaking as a “demonstration” of cinematic possibilities dates back to some of his earliest writings on his abstract *Rhythmus* films.35 But whereas these films were limited to the abstract animation of elementary forms, *Vormittagsspuk* vastly expands the range of demonstrated techniques. The film’s animation of photographed objects not only puts different techniques on display, but the film is also constructed so as to foreground their means of animation, enabling the viewer consciously to experience the underlying techniques themselves.

Toward the beginning of the film, a stop-motion sequence shows a bowtie and collar coming magically undone against the will of its wearer. Immediately following the scene, the film animates the same collar and tie on their own against a bare white surface, as if to demonstrate the stop-motion technique directly to the viewer. In the prominent sequences of animated pistols, the objects appear in both positive and negative prints, suggesting the illusion’s basis as but a photochemical reality. And in the iconic scenes of flying bowler hats, the means of animation are clearly inscribed in the image content of the film, through the visible inclusion of the strings and long sticks that were used to suspend and manipulate the hats. The cameraman’s struggle to keep the flying hats in view only underscores that their apparent animation is simply the effect of visual isolation and framing, achieved by the coordinated movements of the suspended objects and a portable camera. It would be a mistake to take this all as simply a shortcoming of the film. It is intentionally not a work of illusionary cinema, but rather a film about how these illusions are made.

While *Vormittagsspuk* clearly foregrounds its means of animating objects, the film also encourages the viewer to participate in these constructed movements. The flying hats are frequently framed so that only the human actor’s hands can be seen reaching to subdue the rebellious objects. The viewer is therefore able to identify with the chase and get “into the swing of the thing, into the swing of their lives,” which is how Richter describes the making of these shots in an English-language interview from 1972.36 The animistic play behind the production of the film is thus reproduced in the viewer’s embodied experience of the projected movements. As Richter notes in *Filmgegner von heute*, the difference between artificial and natural movement is erased through the “Gefühl”
(feeling) of cinematic motion. Vormittagsspuk exploits this insight as a general productive principle and also expands it to evoke all manner of visual associations between moving objects, from flying hats, birds, and balls to coiled hoses, clocks, targets, ladders, and legs.

In his choice of objects, Richter also cites and borrows his images from avant-garde precursors. The animated shirt collar appears to be a clear reference to Man Ray’s 1926 film Emak Bakia. The prominent images of flying bowler hats connect Vormittagsspuk not only to Chaplin but also, via a related reference, to Léger’s Ballet mécanique, a work additionally evoked by the fragmented dancing legs in the second half of Richter’s film. One might also read as citations of Clair’s Entr’acte the overarching chase sequences of Vormittagsspuk as well as its repeating figures of fire hoses, guns, target practice, and bearded women. This recycling of images suggests a deliberate attempt on Richter’s part to promote the past works of the avant-garde while also integrating their formal innovations as part of a broad demonstration of cinematic possibility. In this way, the film functions much like a cinematic supplement to Richter’s contemporaneous book Filmgegner von heute.

Although Vormittagsspuk seemingly departs from earlier abstract animation, the influence of these films can be seen in the mechanical movements of the human actors. As the composer Paul Hindemith remarked in a 1928 interview, the producers of the film considered it “eine Abart des abstrakten Films, bei dem Menschen nur Staffage bedeuten werden” (a variation of the abstract film, in which humans will count only as decorations). This identification of human bodies with abstract film is confirmed in Filmgegner von heute, where Richter juxtaposes frames from Eggeling’s Symphonie diagonale (Diagonal Symphony, 1923–24) with images of the crawling and marching motions of actors in Vormittagsspuk. In the 1928 film as well, humans move in and out of the frame in formal resemblance to the animated abstractions of Richter’s earlier Rhythmus films. This reinscription of formal abstraction through the movement of actors brings abstract animation into the more accessible scope and scale of the human body and enables Richter to integrate his earlier abstract work along with the more unruly motions of the French avant-gardists. In addition, the more flowing movements of animated objects in Vormittagsspuk appear in stark contrast to the mechanical rhythms of the human actors—with their repetitive movements of marching in unison, aiming guns, searching, crawling, boxing, and climbing ladders—suggesting a possible critique of fascist violence. The clear overtones of regimentation and militarism in these sequences indeed make one quick to take the side of the rebellious objects against the mechanical humans.

As a prototype of sorts, the hybrid experimentation initiated by Vormittagsspuk would be severely disrupted by the establishment of fascism
Fig. 11.2. Hans Richter’s book *Filmgegner von heute—Filmfreunde von morgen* (1929). Reproduced with permission from the Hans Richter Estate.
in Europe and would only resume after Richter’s move to New York City in 1941. As an émigré artist, writer, educator, and eventually director of the Institute of Film Techniques at the City College of New York in the 1940s and 1950s, Richter came into contact with a new generation of experimental filmmakers including Maya Deren, Jonas Mekas, Stan Brakhage, and Standish Lawder. In addition to contributing articles to the earliest mid-1950s editions of Mekas’s journal *Film Culture*, perhaps the central organ of the postwar cinematic avant-garde in the United States, Richter produced his own films, such as *Dreams That Money Can Buy* (1944–47) and the two-part *Dadascope* (1956–61, 1968), as explicit collaborations with other émigré artists and as direct engagements with the legacies of European modernism and the avant-garde. This longer view of Richter’s career poses a largely unexplored connection between cinematic experimentation in 1920s Europe and the later reemergence of avant-garde film culture in postwar America. Richter’s late 1920s explorations of cinematic possibility thus appear to have gone underground during the 1930s and early 1940s only to reemerge more forcefully after the Second World War. Looking back on Richter’s 1928 film *Vormittagsspuk* from the perspective of the present, the significance of its unruly, animated objects seems to pivot, in one direction, toward more overt sociopolitical content in response to rising fascism, and in another, toward continued formal experiments with the broader possibilities of cinema, a trajectory that would later resurface after the end of this period of profound historical crisis.

Notes


4 See Richter, *Der Kampf um den Film*, 103–4.


Richter, “Der Gegenstand in Bewegung,” 42.


See von Hofacker, “Richter’s Films and the Role of the Radical Artist, 1927–1941,” 134: “When a ghost in the morning causes hats to fly, things are bad enough; but that is only the beginning: after twelve, and the long night over Germany (here interpreted to mean 1933), heads will also fly.”


For a relevant assessment of the effects of sound and a turn toward realism after 1930, see Richter, Der Kampf um den Film, 83–96; and Noël Carroll, Theorizing the Moving Image (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 805–12.

See Malte Hagener, Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-Garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919–1939 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007).

See Hagener, Moving Forward, Looking Back, 23.

See the early programmatic text attributed to Hans Richter (but largely conceived by Viking Eggeling), “Prinzipielles zur Bewegungskunst,” De Stijl 4, no. 7 (1921): 109–12.

19 Relevant articles are collected in Goergen et al., *Hans Richter*, 39–67.


22 Both the original score and the sound version have not survived, so little can be said about the music itself. On Hindemith’s contributions to the festival in relation to contemporaneous debates about film music and synchronization, see Michael Beiche, “Musik und Film im deutschen Musikjournalismus der 1920er Jahre,” *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 63, no. 2 (2006): 94–119.

23 For details on these original screenings, see Goergen et al., *Hans Richter*, 95–96.


28 The rediscovery of Richter’s commissioned films of the 1930s can be attributed to the recent work of Yvonne Zimmermann. For a concise overview, see Zimmermann, “A Missing Chapter.”

29 For an exemplary instance of this broader approach, see the diverse collection of essays in Forschungsnetzwerk BTWH, *Hans Richters “Rhythmus 21.”*


31 Richter, “Der absolute Film braucht die Industrie,” *Film-Kurier* 6, January 5, 1929, reprinted in Goergen et al., *Hans Richter*, 44.


36 For Richter’s comments on how he and his collaborators produced *Vormittagspuk*, see the transcription of his filmed 1972 interview with Cecile Starr in

37 Richter, Filmgegner von heute, 89.


39 See, for example, the reiteration of 1920s avant-garde film aesthetics in Richter, “The Film as an Original Art Form,” Film Culture 1, no. 1 (1955): 19–23.
12: Seeing Crisis in Harry Piel’s *Ein Unsichtbarer geht durch die Stadt* (1933)

*Kalani Michell*

The crisis caused by an invisible man in Harry Piel’s *Ein Unsichtbarer geht durch die Stadt* (An Invisible Man Goes through the City, 1933) is announced on the radio. The “Ruhe” light (literally “quiet,” or “on-air”) shines behind the announcer in the studio as he speaks into the microphone: “Achtung, Achtung” (Attention, attention). A bank robbery has just taken place and is causing great concern throughout the city. Three shots depict different groups of listeners suddenly turning their attention to this disembodied voice and its disturbing message: “Jeden Augenblick kann ein neues Verbrechen geschehen und es gibt keine Möglichkeit, den Täter zur Rechenschaft zu ziehen” (A new crime can take place at any moment and there is no possibility of bringing the culprit to justice). Ladies having tea glance first toward the radio speakers, then apprehensively at each other. Film viewers return momentarily to the unified body and voice in the radio studio: “Nach den Berichten der Augenzwigen besteht kein Zweifel mehr, dass tatsächlich die sensationelle Erfindung sich unsichtbar zu machen, von einem kriminell veranlagten Unbekannten ausgebeutet wird” (Following eyewitness accounts, there is no longer any doubt that a sensational invisibility invention is indeed being utilized by an unknown person with criminal intentions). Halfway through the sentence, just before the announcer utters the word “invisible,” the film cuts to a shot of men in a bar playing cards. They look up from their game and stare in disbelief at the radio beside them. Back in the studio: “Seine Macht ist leider fast unbegrenzt und das Schlimmste ist zu befürchten, wenn es nicht in Kürze gelingt, seiner Person habhaft zu werden” (Unfortunately he has almost unlimited power and the worst is to be expected if he is not soon apprehended). The film cuts to people in the street who have gathered around to look up at the radio voice beyond the frame that is broadcasting this message of crisis and provoking at once social unrest, skepticism, and fantasies.

A voice can appear unexpectedly, out of nowhere. That is the source of anxiety and disbelief that is foreshadowed in this filmic depiction of a radio audience realizing the threat that the invisible man poses. Although
the voice is transmitted through a visible source in this scene, the broadcast simulates the effects that the invisible man’s escape would have on everyday life in the city: he could be anywhere at any moment, maybe in the very same room as you, and you wouldn’t even know it. His presence could be detected only at his will through the sound of his movements and the reverberations of his voice, the unpredictable manifestation of his aural address, giving him “the ability to be everywhere, to see all, to know all, and to have complete power. In other words: ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence.” He who cannot be seen is in fact he who is able to see the most. On the level of the narrative, there is an apparent crisis of seeing in this film that is set in motion by the main character, Harry, played by the director Harry Piel himself. When Harry stumbles on a technology that can make the human body invisible and this machine then falls into the wrong hands, Harry and the rest of the city must grapple with the problem of how to find—how to see—an invisible man. While this seeing crisis paves the way for the celebrated, adventurous stunts and trick scenes in the film, it also exemplifies broader concerns and contradictions about vision evident in the radio broadcast of the crisis, which relies on visual terminology to describe an invisible phenomenon: the invisible man can commit a crime in the blink of an eye, jeden Augenblick, which, by definition, we can never see, and there are eyewitnesses who can testify to the fact that he possesses the means to make himself invisible; they claim, in other words, to have seen him not be present while he was committing the crimes. The radio bulletin calls attention to the ironic persistence of visual strategies and discourse in the narrative of the film when faced with a crisis that drastically destabilizes the visual field. The seeing crisis, the crisis of not being able to see the body that could be within arm’s reach, is exacerbated by the crisis of seeing, of vision, which plagues the attempts in the plot to locate and secure this invisible threat.

Looking beyond the film’s narrative framework, crisis is not difficult to find, either. When Piel first openly expressed interest in making what would become Ein Unsichtbarer geht durch die Stadt (“Ein Unsichtbarer”) in the spring of 1933, the filmmaking landscape in Germany had profoundly changed not only because of the “spiritual film crisis” proclaimed by Joseph Goebbels, but also as a result of the crisis caused by the introduction of synchronized sound a few years prior. After the first full-length sound films were screened in Germany in 1929, talkies soon became the norm rather than the exception, significantly altering previous modes of film production, circulation, and experience in the process. This transition to sound during the early 1930s also “asked filmmakers and viewers alike to revise established codes of realism, illusion, identification, and pleasure, thus threatening what had often been hailed as the distinguishing mark of German cinema . . . : its self-confident exploration
Throughout this transitional period for popular film, the industry was experimenting with different constellations of sound-image relationships, testing them out in the genre of the musical, trying to circumvent redundancy in synchronized sounds and audience confusion in nondiegetic sounds, and figuring out how to best utilize music to underscore a dramatic narrative, just to name a few examples. The relationship between sound and image was still very much in a process of experimentation, and it is within such a context that Ein Unsichtbarer explores the possibility of showing something that by definition can’t be seen. As the main attraction in this film, the invisible man must be depicted not as entirely absent, but rather present in a very specific way: “Der Schein des Verschwindens selbst muss gewahrt bleiben und dort, wo die Unsichtbarkeit anscheinend geschieht, muss sie erkennbar anwesend und als Unsichtbarkeit sichtbar bleiben” (The semblance of the disappearing itself must be preserved and, at the place in which the act of becoming invisible supposedly occurs, the invisibility must be discernibly present, remaining visibly invisible). This translates on screen into a man whose voice and sounds exist in the space of the frame without his body as a visual anchor, an uncanny reflection of the disjunction between sound (emanating from speakers behind the screen) and image (projected onto the screen from the back of the auditorium) that contemporary audience members were negotiating throughout the previous years. Thus, “in theoretical and aesthetic terms, the coming of sound resulted in a ‘crisis of indexicality’—the (representational) film image now had to cope with an addition that was perceived by some observers to heighten realism, yet that also opened up a gap between the visible body on screen and the audible sound from the loudspeakers.” Ein Unsichtbarer not only challenges its characters and viewers to think through potential solutions for resolving the seeing crisis that governs the plot. It is simultaneously a reflection on the contemporary crisis of indexicality that filmmakers and the film public were mediating, and, as the narrative unfolds, it also offers an implicit criticism of these mediating strategies.

Beyond the etymological link between the terms “criticism” and “crisis,” their shared roots in the Greek κρίνω, or krinein, meaning to separate, distinguish, decide, or judge, criticism also accompanies the discourse of crisis throughout the filmic narrative. While viewers witness how characters in the film stubbornly continue to rely on standard methods of observation, decision making, and prediction in their attempts to apprehend the criminal, they also follow the protagonist, Harry, as he comes to realize that different modes of perception must be employed if one wants to follow the invisible man’s tracks. To capture the criminal, the film viewers, through Harry, begin to see the bigger picture. Rather than looking harder for the criminal, viewers learn to look smarter for him by, for example, expanding their field of vision and...
Taking the entire space of the frame into account, resulting in modes of processing visual and aural data that are initially based on breadth rather than fragmentation and acts of scanning rather than close analysis. Even though this crisis is an “imaginary” one, in the sense that it is anchored in the genre of science fiction, this doesn’t mean that the rhetoric of crisis in the film does not deserve to be closely considered. Crisis, as a rhetorical device, is something that is strategically declared rather than something that can be categorically tested, and thus the crisis-like moment of the past should not merely be dismissed if, in retrospect, it can no longer be defined as a crisis. “It remains relevant . . . that . . . people are experiencing it as a crisis and that they are constantly using the language of crisis in referring to what is taking place.”10 When exploring how the characters depicted in the film experience the threat of the invisible man as a crisis, one should, at the same time, take into account the film’s rhetoric and commentary on crisis. The seeing crisis thematized in the film becomes a catalyst for self-reflexive analysis: How do we react to crises and what mistakes do we make when working under pressure and in an atmosphere of chaos? It also serves as a means for reconsidering how the film frames and negotiates the responses to the other seeing crisis, the crisis of indexicality, which was heavily influencing and shaping the contemporary cinematic landscape.

The scholarly literature commonly discusses this film, like several of Piel’s other films, in the context of “films of the fantastic,” which encompass “alternative worlds, flights of imagination, expressions of intoxication and exhilaration, the realms of the irrational, inexplicable, and uncontrollable,” as the plot in *Ein Unsichtbarer* is motivated by a futuristic invention that has the potential to change the course of history.11 Evoking the motif of the magic cloak that can render its owner invisible, Harry, the taxi driver played by Piel, uses a fantasy technological device to get rich, entertain his friends, and get the girl. He happens upon the technology by accident after it is left behind in a suitcase by a most mysterious taxi passenger. Once back home, Harry sets the case aside and comes across an article in the newspaper about the peculiar robberies that recently have been committed around the city. He yawns as he begins to read it out loud and, after he trails off, the text is left on screen in an insert shot for viewers to finish: “Man möchte fast glauben, daß er [der Verbrecher] die Gabe besitzt, sich unsichtbar zu machen” (One is almost compelled to believe that he [the criminal] has the ability to make himself invisible). Harry then sets out to investigate the contents of his find. Instead of happening upon a load of stolen diamonds, as he had hoped, he is confronted with a case of clunky metal. Viewers first see only his mirror image as he tries on the strange device consisting of a helmet with long wires and a separate piece of chest armor. It looks utterly ridiculous: “Kann ich eigentlich im Winter beim Fahren tragen!” (I can wear it while...
Fig. 12.1. *Ein Unsichtbarer geht durch die Stadt* (1933).

Driving in winter! The camera recedes to reveal two Harrys, the one in the mirror and the one with his back to the audience. He tugs on the wires and eventually secures them to the armor, dubbing it “das reinste Elektrizitätswerk” (pure electric power). Will he flip the switch?

By the time he turns toward the viewers in a frontal shot, they are already eagerly anticipating the trick scenes to come. In the blink of an eye, Harry disappears. His cat, Peter, is clearly spooked, twitching his ears and jerking his head from left to right, up and down, as if he is searching the room for the origins of the sounds he is hearing. He darts behind the safety of a curtain. In a wide shot of the apartment, viewers watch as chairs suddenly move away from the table all on their own. The audience hears Harry’s voice calling out over the set: “Was ist denn los, Peter, Peter . . . Peter . . . Wo bin ich denn? Sowas gibt’s doch gar nicht, das ist doch gar nicht möglich!” (What’s going on, Peter, Peter . . . Peter . . . Where am I? This can’t be happening, this is simply impossible!) Peter peeks out from behind the curtain, still nervously scanning the space. Various items start to slide around the dresser—there goes the brush, then the book, then the ashtray. Eventually Harry figures out how to take off the magic suit and confirms his return to the realm of the visible index by taking a long, hard look at his reflection in the mirror. It’s not really a surprise that
another trick scene, even more elaborate, immediately follows. “[Science fiction films] were considered magical tricks more than stories, and early audiences went to see thrilling possibilities of the cinema as novelty rather than to view coherent features. . . . Piel’s productions epitomize this early spectacle-oriented infatuation with cinema’s technical possibilities.”

We take a brief trip back to the cinema of attractions, this time with recorded sound. In his next trick scene, Harry deliberately rearranges the room in his magic armor, scaring his unsuspecting friend Fritz half to death: chairs glide across the floor, doors slam without cause, and water taps turn on by themselves, not to mention poor Peter, who disappears into thin air after Harry picks him up. We learn that anything he touches while wearing the magic suit also fades away from vision.

With the trick scene initially staged in the mirror, viewers are provided a glimpse of the two Harrys who oscillate throughout the film: the diegetic “Harry,” the cab driver, and the director/actor “Harry,” promising his viewers daredevil stunts and innovative cinematographic techniques, a signature filmmaking style that he marketed carefully. Whereas the first shot of Harry wearing this magic armor tempts the audience with the loss of the body that is displaced in the mirror, prefiguring the ontological instability of the image that the audience expects in a movie about an invisible man, the next two shots alternate between narrative and spectacular registers, with the final shot of Harry taking his time to turn around and face the audience signaling the beginning of the latter. Moreover, these first scenes of invisibility, with their reliance on the mirror and various special effects and gags, suggest a certain cinematic self-reflection, that “modern cinema knows about its history as a medium of appearances and deceptions, whose ‘illusionism’ has to be foiled, blocked or fragmented by mirror images and multiple reflections.”

They recall the lure of invisibility and the fascination with disciplining the human body in the history of visual media, together with the crisis of vision experienced in modernity, to which these media devices contributed.

Throughout the mid- and late nineteenth century, visual representation had become increasingly unstable, a process that was incited by and responded to various social, aesthetic, and technological changes taking place in Western culture, with a crisis of vision that implicated cinematic technologies more specifically not long thereafter. “If photography and its improvements, like the three-dimensional stereoscope which came into prominence in the 1860s, could be praised for providing ever more faithful reproductions of the seen world, a subcurrent of skepticism also began to emerge. The most prominent inventor of the camera had, after all, been known as a master of illusion.” Triggers for the crisis of vision experienced during this time, the “crisis of the ancien scopic régime” of Cartesian perspectivalism, include the faltering optical realist paradigm and rising doubts about the mimetic potential of visual media,
with “technological innovations such as the camera contribut[ing] to the undermining of its privileged status.”

Although contemporary imaging technologies were often believed to be able to augment sight positively, with the camera lens functioning like a prosthetic eye that could extend and sharpen visual perception, this also came with particular limitations on vision, such as the confines of the frame, and with doubts about the objectivity and truthfulness of the images these technologies were producing. “The very apparatus [the camera obscura] that a century earlier was the site of truth becomes a model for procedures and forces that conceal, invert, and mystify truth.”

This tension between realism and illusionism in the discourse on earlier imaging technologies can be found in certain aspects of cinematic technology as well. While cinema’s means of capturing reality entailed a reduction of scope experienced in embodied, “natural” sight, the means by which it reconstructed, exhibited, and allowed these fragments of reality to be experienced had the potential to disturb this partiality of technologized vision. “With the shot, film puts a limited perimeter of vision on screen; but every film-take seeks to restore a striking ‘epiphanic’ vision of the world. Through editing, each shot proposes one and one vision only, but the sequencing of shots permits multiple—even ubiquitous—perspectives.”

If the latter half of the nineteenth century marks the end of the dominance of Cartesian perspectivalism, a mode of vision guaranteeing a sense of visual wholeness and faithfulness to “the real,” then the arrival of cinema toward the end of this century can be thought of as straddling the end of this particular scopic regime and the beginning of a different one. “From here comes the question that film poses to the twentieth century gaze. Should it move in the sphere of partiality, subjectivity, and contingency? Or should it aspire to completeness, objectivity, and necessity? . . . Film effectively seized this emergent duality of modern vision.”

In a film about invisibility itself, in which these tensions between a desire for a more complete sense of sight and the inevitable partiality of the cinematographic mode of vision are played out, one is drawn to consider both how this crisis of visibility is portrayed technically and how it is reconciled narratively. Although invisibility obviously cannot be shown as such on screen, Ein Unsichtbarer encourages an economy of spectatorial attention that embraces the vastness of the cinematic frame of projection followed by an acute awareness of sensorial cues contained within specific areas of the screen. Thus the film broadens the scope of vision and then constricts visual perception through techniques that emphasize details within the frame or that allude to invisible but present circumstances that exist beyond the frame. As evident in the first scenes depicting the invisible body, close-ups or zooms are not the primary means through which this film guides the spectator’s vision. This refusal of the camera to move closer to the set, which is being manipulated by an invisible hand, is
something that can be perceived by the spectator. Given the juxtaposition between this guided, broadened vision adopted by Harry, which is ultimately successful in helping him track down the criminal, and the misguided vision of others in the film who keep trying to see the invisible agent rearranging their world, one can also find a didactic function in the different means of perception advocated by the film. Although the spectator, like Harry’s cat, Peter, might be quite confused and spooked by the objects that are suddenly flying across the room, the camera models the patient scanning behavior that is eventually required to help put an end to the crisis.

To better understand the implications of this distancing effect, one could compare the film to its American counterpart produced in the same year by Universal Pictures. The eponymous adaptation of H. G. Wells’s *The Invisible Man* (1897), directed by James Whale, premiered just two months after *Ein Unsichtbarer*.22 There are several similarities between the two films. They both use comical trick scenes in which the subject’s agency is experienced visually through animated objects on set—chairs, mirrors, and hairbrushes that magically come to life—and aurally through the soundtrack.23 They feature tracking scenes that are key to teaching both the people in the film and the people watching the film how to pursue the invisible criminal in an unconventional way, namely, by overcoming the desire for a visible human figure in the center of the frame and then learning to trace the signs of this absence, such as indents in the couch and footprints in the sand. Finally, in both films there are protagonists that experiment with, as well as abuse, the voyeuristic pleasure of seeing while remaining unseen, a pleasure in which the viewers also partake. However, since the film directed by Whale more closely follows the narrative progression in Wells’s novella, one can notice some important differences between the German and the American versions of the tale in terms of how invisibility is achieved on screen. Whereas the protagonist in the American version is a mad scientist who created and injected himself with a chemical formula that causes his body to become invisible and his mind to deteriorate, the German version features a lighthearted protagonist who is able to wire up and slip out of his found magic suit without too much trouble.24 “Der Apparat bei . . . Piel, der wie ein unvollkommerener Taucheranzug aussieht, kann ein- und ausgeschaltet werden wie der Projektor, der den Apparat im Film und auf der Leinwand zeigt und verschwinden lässt. Eine Tarnkappe kann auf- und wieder abgesetzt werden” (The apparatus in . . . Piel’s film, which looks like an incomplete diving suit, can be switched on and off like a projector, allowing the apparatus in the film and on the screen to be shown and to disappear. A cloak of invisibility can be put on and then taken off again).25 Whereas the experimental drugs in the American version can make only the human body disappear, the technology in the German version extends its powers
to anything that is attached to this body—such as the body’s clothes, objects that the body is holding, and food that it is digesting. There is, for this reason, no infamous “striptease” in Ein Unsichtbarer that would show the protagonist vanishing after he strips off the clothes that are giving him shape.26

In the two filmic versions of the tale, the trick scenes with the invisible body satisfy two slightly different desires. In the American film, the technique by which the main character is rendered invisible seems to respond to an interest in being able to perceive invisible human processes, such as the smoke that enters the lungs and the food that runs down the throat. It reminds one of the pursuit to visualize a nonperceptible reality, which, for example, had fueled public fascination with X-ray imagery thirty years earlier.27 Wells’s novella, which was serialized shortly after the discovery of X-ray technology, imagines the ability to witness the inner workings of the human body, not in the form of static X-ray images but in terms of the “live” dynamic process of X-ray vision, as described by one of the characters in the novella: “It was strange to see him [Griffin, the invisible man] smoking; his mouth, and throat, pharynx and nares, became visible as a sort of whirling smoke cast.”28 In the American film, the ability to see X-ray images in motion is implied but never portrayed on screen. The invisible man, Jack Griffin, only tempts his audience with this future possibility: “I must always remain in hiding for an hour after meals. The food is visible inside me until it is digested. I can only work on fine, clear days. If I work in the rain, the water can be seen on my head and shoulders. In a fog, you can see me, like a bubble. In smoky cities, the soot settles on me until you can see a dark outline. You must always be near at hand to wipe off my feet. Even dirt under my fingernails can give me away.”29

Invisibility in the German film, in contrast, is experienced through the space of the frame and the sounds and objects in it that are usually overlooked. Since the body in Ein Unsichtbarer makes anything that it holds invisible, the human figure, that which usually directs the spectator’s gaze, can no longer be counted on as a way of centering and securing vision. The sense of sight must be altered, displaced to the margins of the frame, or replaced with different sensory observations altogether, recalling the antivisual modes of perception in early scientific film culture. Contrary to what one might expect, the disciplinary technologies in these scientific films were not always driven by a desire for positively augmented visual perception: “The augmentation of sight, and imaging as such, may not have been the central agendas in modernist science’s optical invasion of the body’s interior space. Rather than simply augmenting the senses of the scientific observer, cinematography supplemented or replaced sensory perception.”30 Paradoxically, to visualize the human body, these technologies often relied on antivisual and graphic tendencies. Although Ein Unsichtbarer is not interested in tracking the human body
quantitatively, as some of these technologies applied in scientific film culture were, it does deviate from established spectatorial conventions and expectations, especially when compared with the techniques that Whale employs in order to portray the invisible. Narrowing the filmic frame in *Ein Unsichtbarer* in order to home in on the space in which the invisible man is ostensibly located will not help reveal this figure, as it might in Whale’s film (e.g., finding the dirt underneath the invisible fingernails, noticing the outline of soot on the body, etc.). In the German version, Harry, while chasing down the invisible criminal, learns how to readjust his gaze, turning his attention in a different direction and thereby showing his viewers how to do the same.

This didactic turning away from what is commonly believed to be the indexical marker of visual presence occurs several times throughout the final third of the film when Harry loses possession of his fancy device. While the trick scenes featuring Harry as the invisible man take on a primarily comic register, they assume a more dramatic and thrilling tone when the futuristic technology is stolen from him by his friend Fritz (who was also the unsuspecting target of his invisibility tricks at the beginning of the film). Whereas Harry believes that he was using the technology innocently, donning the suit merely to manipulate the results of a horse race, Fritz steals it from him and uses it to rob a bank, physically harming bystanders in the process. When this occurs, Harry must remember the different kind of physical traces he left behind while wearing the magic cap, even if they seemed, at first glance, so minimal.

The terror begins at the Nationalbank. Harry, after having discovered Fritz’s plan, arrives at the bank to try to stop him. He hurries up the stairs, past the security guard, and then suddenly stops in the lobby, cautiously observing the area with the tellers from a safe distance. The slow pan shows his perspective as he scans the room: the space is full of people moving about, filling out forms, waiting in lines, speaking to each other. Phones are ringing in the background. The duration of the shot seems too long and its content rather banal. What exactly are we supposed to be looking at or looking for?

As soon as the bankers notice the stacks of cash disappearing before their very eyes, however, mass chaos ensues: papers fly into the air, customers are pushed out of the way by an invisible force, tellers rush to lock up the cash, and security guards struggle to keep everyone calm and block the exit, assuming that they can trap the criminal this way. Harry doesn’t look directly at the objects that are moving spectrally around the room or vanishing into thin air. Instead, he does what we might least expect: He turns away from the immediate chaos and focuses his attention on what the others are not able to see. While everyone else remains clueless, spectators follow Harry’s gaze as it directs them to the larger areas of the room, which he is scanning intently for clues that could help him...
follow the invisible man’s trajectory. The juxtaposition of the confused masses with Harry, who remains relatively calm and focused, forms an implicit criticism of this public reaction, as the protagonist, in contrast with everyone else in this scene, is aware that he cannot expect to find a visually materialized, moving body as the culprit. By suppressing this looking habit, he can more carefully observe not the invisible man, but the unique traces of his presence. It would be inaccurate to think of the invisible figure in this film as absent. Instead, he must be understood as visible, present, and active in medium-specific ways. “Weil . . . der Film nicht Nichts zeigen kann . . ., zeigt er das, was zuvor durch das Etwas verdeckt und nicht zu sehen war, nämlich den Grund für eine Form, deren Auflösung den Grund wiederum als Form oder Gestalt zurücklässt und sichtbar macht. Auf dieser medialen Ebene wird deutlich, dass das Unsichtbare nur durch Sichtbarkeit (und gerade nicht durch Abwesenheiten) un/sichtbar gemacht werden kann” (As . . . film cannot show nothing . . . , it shows that which was previously concealed by something and which was not seen, namely, the background for a form that, by being dissolved, leaves behind and makes visible the background as form itself or as a frame. On this medial level it becomes clear that the invisible figure can be made in/visible only through visibility (and precisely not through absence)).

This corrected and now disciplined vision recalls the spirit of inquiry in early scientific film culture previously mentioned, which suppressed visuality precisely in order to better understand how it functions, advancing the idea that “it is only through the stopping of a ‘normal’ activity—its suppression or destruction—that the function of an activity can be known.”

The scene in the bank makes spectators realize that Harry is most likely the only person in the city who has the abilities potentially to find the concealed criminal, increasing the stakes and the suspense, and the following scene more intently insists on the renunciation of visual proximity for tracking the antagonist. This chase scene relies on stunts that, at the time, were quite impressive, even for a Piel film, such as Harry’s pursuit of the criminal on the back of a car through the bustling city, on a motorcycle near the woods, and in a zeppelin high above a lake. But it is the protagonist’s unusual mode of tracking that deserves our attention here. By this point, the film has demonstrated that aggressively following Fritz’s movements using conventional forms of detection is completely ineffective. Instead, Harry has to learn how to see what is not there, resisting the urge to run up to where he believes the invisible criminal is lurking and instead remaining physically outside the environment that he plans on scouring for clues. He must make himself invisible as well. Such scenes depict the set or the landscape from a distance, encouraging viewers to watch for visual discrepancies, as in autonomously moving objects or sounds that are free-floating over the space, not indexically anchored
in a visible source. These scenes feature a visual tableau of “minimale Bewegungen, [die] paradoxerweise mehr Bildhaftigkeit . . . [erzeugt]. Es weist uns an, Welt kompositorisch in Bildern wahrzunehmen, selbst Bild zu werden und weigert sich, im Rasen der Bilder Kristallisationen von Bedeutungen und Intensitäten aus den Augen zu verlieren” (minimal movements, [that] paradoxically [result in] a richer image. . . . It instructs us to perceive the world compositionally, to become an image ourselves, and it refuses to lose sight of the crystallization of meanings and intensities within the frenzy of images).34

By relying on different seeing strategies, which require, for instance, a duration of attention for larger spaces in which the most minimal movements could in fact be the most significant, Harry is ultimately successful in shadowing the invisible man and, in the process, making viewers at least feel as if they have participated in this difficult endeavor by following Harry and his gaze. Yet, despite this helpful visual didacticism, contemporary audiences, as mentioned in the reviews of the film, might still have experienced confusion when confronting the erratic rearrangement of the image space on screen, the visual havoc being caused by the hidden body: “Die Illusion ist doch unheimlich, die Gesetze unserer sichtbaren Welt werden plötzlich revolutioniert. Das Unberechenbare verwirrt uns, wir verlieren alle Sicherheit des Augenscheins. Obwohl wir so sehr im Bilde sind, spukt [sic] und spuckt das Bild vor uns Überraschungen [sic]” (The

Fig. 12.2. *Ein Unsichtbarer geht durch die Stadt* (1933).
illusion is uncanny, the laws of our visible world are suddenly revolutionized. This volatility confuses us, we lose all confidence in vision. Although we are so completely involved with the image, it continues to throw more and more surprises our way). Uncanny specters, unruly visual laws. We used to have trust in vision. Can we trust it now? Ever again? Or, perhaps most important, should we have ever trusted it in the first place?

Even if these questions surface, however, it doesn’t mean that all hope is lost. Not all sense is thrown into a state of disarray. There is still a crucial filmic property that can take the spectators safely by the hand and assist in navigating the seeing crisis: the sounds and voices punctuating the visual landscape, which emanate from behind the screen. Focusing on the film’s aural cues, listening closely for movements in the tall grass or for a far-away voice, for example, can help localize the elements on the screen that are asking for further attention, and allow viewers to better follow the sequence of events.

Although Harry succeeds in secretly pursuing Fritz, sneaking into the zeppelin that he is using to escape and confronting him in an enclosed space, these methods for solving the seeing crisis are, at the end of the day, short-lived. While wrestling with the invisible man up in the zeppelin, Harry is pushed out of the door and dramatically falls—and keeps falling. He never reaches the ground, but instead wakes up at home in his bed, the “magic” armor still strapped to his body. His adventures as an invisible man and his bold attempt to track down the invisible criminal were all merely part of a dream. The technology was indeed left in the backseat of Harry’s cab and, after returning it to its rightful owner at the police station, he finds out that it was actually a top-secret radio invention for blind flying. The dream, beyond establishing narrative closure, illustrates the highest level of secrecy that such a device demands. By strapping it to his body, Harry/Piel lets the high-tech toy disappear as well (or in the first place). The “real” purpose of the technology is not without relevance. This goes for its classified status and for its intended purpose to aid in nonvisual orientation. Throughout the film, Harry and his viewers have been learning to trust in other audiovisual signals in order to navigate this new terrain, rejecting the primacy of the immediately visible and directing their focus toward the composition of acoustic signals on screen in order to more effectively apprehend the criminal. In contrast to the classical Sherlock Holmes method of locating the criminal body, which centers on “track[ing] visual clues in order to trace them back to and capture the individual criminal,” the invisible man doesn’t leave permanent, indexical traces and therefore his past crimes cannot give an indication of his present location. In order to find him, one must perceive his traces in the moment in which they appear: the sounds of someone breathing coming from over here, a chair turning around over there. Sounds are dislocated from the body that is expected to anchor them.
Instead of producing a coherent subject/object of the spectatorial gaze, this extraction of the voice from the body and this unprompted unhinging of objects from their proper places implies both a drastic disruption of the indexicality between sound and image and an opportunity to reflect on this desire for an indexically realistic alignment of these elements in a medium that is based, at its technical core, on visual fragmentation and illusion.49 “Here, what is beyond our gaze is . . . a hidden detail within the image. . . . The image hides something within its folds. Thus, it is a question of an invisibility that penetrates the visible, more than circumscribing it.”40

The existing literature attributes these scenes of invisibility to Piel’s interest in creating sensational visual spectacles, juxtaposing this with the regressive narrative tendencies in his work.41 One could also, however, take these scenes more closely into consideration to understand how they instigate the seeing crisis and the responses to this crisis, some far more effective than others, that are portrayed in the film. Rather than merely serving the purpose of visual thrills, the experimentation with different constellations of sound-image relationships, as a somewhat unusual preoccupation for German popular films from this time, can be contrasted with standard audience expectations and viewing habits. Conventional configurations of visual and aural information during this period of German cinema instrumentalized sound as “a new means of generating fantasies of wholeness and corporeal self-presence: ‘The addition of sound to cinema [introduced] the possibility of re-presenting a fuller (and organically unified) body, and of conforming the status of speech as an individual property right.’ Once a number of technological difficulties had been overcome, sound became an important element to anchor the body in the space of the narrated world.”42 In contrast to this desire to seamlessly unite body and voice, or image and sound, Ein Unsichtbarer challenges its viewers to explore their current modes of sensory engagement with cinema, which the seeing crisis sets in motion, even if it doesn’t ultimately rely on these mediating strategies to resolve the crisis or conclude the narrative because of the dream-sequence framing. Given the fact, however, that a significant portion of the film is devoted to playing with what viewers are anticipating—luring them, even in the very first scene, into believing that they know where the invisible man is hiding and then redirecting their vision to different areas and aspects of the filmic space—there is clearly an impulse in this work to address the synchronization of image and sound that filmmakers and audiences were figuring out how to process.

Whereas the secondary literature has afforded the political crisis affecting the production context of Ein Unsichtbarer a substantial amount of attention, a methodological approach that takes the seeing crisis in and surrounding the film as its point of departure yields very different
conclusions, which do not endorse the belief in synchronous paradigm shifts for all social systems and subsystems based on a uniform, systematic periodization of history, a periodization that follows the political history of events.\textsuperscript{43} Taking the thematization of audiovisual disjunction into account reveals the complex ways in which the crisis of indexicality influences not only the film’s aesthetic techniques but also its narrative progression, demonstrating that the two are, in fact, more interrelated than previously perceived. At a time when viewers were still learning, through the emergence of different popular genres, how to mediate their experience with synchronized sound in cinema, \textit{Ein Unsichtbarer} takes the opportunity to experiment with the sensory knowledge of cinematic space and time. Its techniques of invisibility probe the standardization of the sound-image relationship, exploring, for example, how the absence of one can emphasize the rich qualities of the other, or asking how long a wide shot of an almost static image can remain on screen before boredom, confusion, or frustration sets in. It is ultimately interested in how knowledge formation in cinema unfolds, what constellation of filmic elements will produce what expectations, and to what extent those expectations can be denied or ridiculed. The seeing crisis is, in the end, not about finding the invisible man, but about locating the limits of vision—through other senses specific to the cinematic medium, within the constraints of the generic formula, and in a climate of political and aesthetic uncertainty; an uncertainty that is, at once, about the disciplining of vision and the kind of knowledge that this redirection of sight is able to produce.

\textbf{Notes}

Many thanks to Rembert Hüser and Andrew Patten for their suggestions and comments on this essay.

\textsuperscript{1} In the promotional materials, “Mein ist die Welt” (The World Is Mine) is frequently referenced as this film’s subtitle and was also originally intended as its main title. See Matias Bleckman, \textit{Harry Piel: Ein Kino-Mythos und seine Zeit} (Dusseldorf: Filminstitut der Landeshaupstadt Dusseldorf, 1993), 424 n. 34.


\textsuperscript{3} In a letter to Hans Henkel, Landesführer des Verbandes “Kampfbund deutscher Kultur,” in May 1933, Harry Piel discusses \textit{Ein Unsichtbarer} as a new project he was working on in the name of “[der] nationalen Neugestaltung des deutschen Films” (the national reformation of German film) (Bleckman, \textit{Harry Piel}, 251). Bleckman suggests that Piel may have been trying to appease the Propagandaministerium by initially asking for advice on this upcoming project, although the film he ultimately directed maintains continuities with his previous filmmaking style (423 n. 29). In terms of the “spiritual film crisis” facing Germany, see Joseph Goebbels, “Dr. Goebbels’ Rede im Kaiserhof am 28.3.1933,” in \textit{Der Film im
Dritten Reich: Eine Dokumentation, ed. Gerd Albrecht (Karlsruhe: Doku-Verlag, 1979), 26. It was not long after this speech by Goebbels that Piel rejected the lucrative contract offered to him by the Universum Film A.G., but he had become a member of the Nazi Party and a “förderndes Mitglied” (supporting member) of the Schutzstaffel. See Bleckman, Harry Piel, 244–50.


15 Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses (New York: Routledge, 2010), 63. Although Elsaesser and Hagener associate this “second” mirror paradigm with the reflexive, neorealist cinematic tradition, they later explain that “such effects of doubling, mirroring and the play of distance and proximity, however, were common from the very beginning,
whether with critical and deconstructive intent or as a twist, a gag and an additional way of engaging the spectators in the takes and double-takes of performative self-display” (74–75).


17 Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 149–50. In Germany specifically there was also a crisis of vision that permeated criminalistic discourse during the Weimar Republic. See Todd Herzog, *Crime Stories: Criminalistic Fantasy and the Culture of Crisis in Weimar Germany* (New York: Berghahn, 2009), 88.


22 Bleckman suggests that Piel may have known that an American version of the tale was being produced at the same time as his film, even if he didn’t ever openly acknowledge it. See *Harry Piel*, 252.

23 Although animated objects are central to perceiving the realm of the invisible in both films, the kind of agency associated with such objects differs in the American and the German productions. In the American film, as in Wells’s novella, agency is achieved, in part, as a result of metonymy, and “by means of repeated visual contiguity, affect could be displaced on to things and complex symbolism created” (Keith Williams, *H. G. Wells, Modernity and the Movies* [Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007], 60). The animated objects in *Ein Unsichtbarer*, in contrast, are important for their potential to help constitute a more comprehensive screen space that invites attentive spectatorial engagement.

24 The trope of the technologically advanced *Tarnkappe* was also less common in science fiction films revolving around invisibility narratives at this time than the trope of the mad scientist (Keith M. Johnston, *Science Fiction Film: A Critical Introduction* [London: Berg Publishers, 2011], 55–58).


26 This difference between the films—the stipulation of nakedness for the ultimate implementation of this technology in the American version—shouldn’t be underestimated, as Williams argues: “[Griffin’s] superhumanity . . . is disastrously flawed. Nakedness, the condition of his absolute invisibility and power, also means bodily vulnerability, inescapable community with the ‘little men’ he strives to transform into instruments of his will.” Williams, *H. G. Wells, Modernity and the Movies*, 68.

27 Writing about the fascination with the “fourth dimension,” Linda D. Henderson chronicles experiments with X-ray cinematography during this time that enabled a closer examination of the human body by tracking, for example, its digestive functions, or its processing of outside elements. See Henderson, “X Rays and the Quest for Invisible Reality in the Art of Kupka, Duchamp, and the Cubists,” *Art Journal* 47, no. 4 (1988): 333–34.

29 This dialogue is based on a similar passage in Wells’s text: The Invisible Man, 154.


31 In contrast to this mode of sensory perception in Ein Unsichtbarer, the film that Piel directed one year later, Die Welt ohne Maske (The World without a Mask, 1934), proposes that moving closer to the body or object of interest does indeed generate a kind of scopic knowledge. The characters in this film accidentally develop a television device with futuristic X-ray powers and, when pointed in a particular direction, this machine’s scope of vision has the ability to transcend the physical barriers of buildings and walls. “All plot elements involving the x-ray machine start out by showing Harry and Bern [the protagonists] in front of, or next to, the TV screen. This frame within a frame . . . then widens to fill the whole screen, literally plunging the viewer into the suspense and action of the framed narrative” (Florentine Strzelczyk, “Innocent Action and Splendid Spectacle: Fascism and Entertainment in Harry Piel’s Movie ‘Die Welt ohne Maske,’” The German Quarterly 77, no. 4 [2004]: 431).

32 Paech, “Techniken des Unsichtbaren,” 44.

33 Cartwright, Screening the Body, 26. In the passage quoted here, Cartwright is referring to Claude Bernard’s “experiments of destruction,” which precluded the potential for the object under investigation to “present itself”: “What is ultimately shown is nothing more than an absence” (27).

34 Sabine Folie and Michael Glasmeier, Tableaux Vivants: Lebende Bilder und Attitüden in Fotografie, Film und Video (Vienna: Kunsthalle Wien, 2002), 51.

35 Review of Ein Unsichtbarer geht durch die Stadt, 1933, BArch, Film SG1/17975, Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv, Berlin. Original source unknown.

36 Bleckman refers to the dream sequence as a convenient means of achieving closure (Harry Piel, 253). Ironically, in its review of what it calls a “höchst anständig gemachter und sauber inszenierter Film” (very decently made and cleanly directed film), the Völkischer Beobachter regrets that the story turns out to be merely a dream (see Bleckman, Harry Piel, 256).

37 Herzog, Crime Stories, 93.

38 This necessary vigilance corresponds to a shift in perspective in what Herzog describes as the Weimar “criminalistic fantasy”: “The possibility of visually distinguishing criminal from non-criminal that had been a fundamental tenet of popular and scientific thought at the turn of the century . . . had clearly gone into crisis by the 1920s. . . . Everyone had to be on alert for the now-invisible modern criminal” (Crime Stories, 107). In contrast to Fritz Lang’s M (1931), for example, in which a community learns to become increasingly vigilant of the criminal on the loose, Ein Unsichtbarer does not rely on methods of total surveillance or a networked collective to track down the invisible man. See Herzog, Crime Stories, 118–33.
“In a film, what falls under our eyes really hides a significant part of itself, on at least two levels. In one respect, the filmic image possesses such complexity that it is nearly impossible to completely decipher. It ‘unfurls’ without allowing all its contents to come into focus. . . . In another respect, the filmic image is formed by running the film in the projector. Through projection, however, both the single frame and the black leader between one frame and the next are made imperceptible” (Casetti, *Eye of the Century*, 47).

Casetti, *Eye of the Century*, 47.

Strzelczyk, “Motors and Machines,” 547.


See Niklas Luhmann, “Das Problem der Epochenbildung und die Evolutionstheorie,” in *Epochenschwellen und Epochenstrukturen im Diskurs der Literatur- und Sprachhistorie*, ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Ursula Link-Heer (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985). In her work on soundscapes of the Third Reich, Carolyn Birdssall describes the consequences of attempts to carve out paradigm shifts for all cultural phenomena based on the logic of a standardized historical periodization, namely, the proliferation of “common stereotypes about sound, noise and silence during National Socialism. Noise is sometimes taken as the idea that the official discourses of the Nazi regime overruled all others, acting as a disruption in the signal, as a cancelling out of oppositional voices through censorship and coercion. The noise of the Nazi era, too, is sometimes represented in . . . the ‘sonic icon’ of Hitler’s shouting voice and the deafening crowds at party rallies. . . . Such clichés highlight the necessity to critically interrogate the use of categories . . . , and to problematise the academic task of studying the sounds and soundscapes of the past.” Birdssall, *Nazi Soundscapes: Sound, Technology and Urban Space in Germany, 1933–1945* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 12–13).
Part VII. German-International Film Relations
13: Playing the European Market: Marcel L’Herbier’s L’Argent (1928), Ufa, and German-French Film Relations

Margrit Frölich

When in June 1928 the Ufa star Brigitte Helm arrived in Paris, a crowd gathered at the train station to welcome the actress who had come to sudden fame through her debut in Fritz Lang’s Metropolis (1927). Eighteen months after the German premiere of Metropolis in January 1927, and after no less than six more film roles, Helm had come to Paris to work with the film director Marcel L’Herbier, one of the central figures in French cinema at the time. She had been contracted, alongside Alfred Abel, the accomplished Ufa actor best known for his portrayal of the imperious ruler of Metropolis, Joh Fredersen, to play a leading role in L’Herbier’s screen adaptation of Emile Zola’s novel L’Argent (Money).

As astounding as it may seem at first glance to find two prolific German actors in this French motion picture, their participation illustrates the collaboration between Ufa, the German film industry’s leading player, and the French film industry, which evolved in the second half of the 1920s. Collaborations such as the distribution of L’Argent in Germany by Ufa sowed the seeds for subsequent business ventures between the two European film industries, which turned out to be beneficial to Ufa before and after 1933. How did this engagement of Helm and Abel come about? What does it reveal about the specific nature of the German and French business interests at the time? What does it tell us about economic trends and technological challenges that affected Ufa and the French film industry, respectively, during this transitional period from 1928 onward? Considering these questions will give us insights into some of the continuities of Ufa’s corporate politics between the Weimar years and the Nazi era and the film’s connection to two of the pivotal crises of the transitional years—the economic crisis and the introduction of sound film.
Marcel L’Herbier will prove with _L’Argent_ that the French school has its proper qualities and that our country is entitled to a place of honor in the international film market.4

By 1928, foreign business had become of key importance to Ufa. The company had just recovered from financial collapse and hoped for economic stability and prosperity. Expanding its foreign markets by building ties to other European film industries, in particular to neighboring France, seemed a promising strategy on which Ufa embarked for the sake of reaching its financial goals. The networks to the French film industry that the German company built in the second half of the 1920s, as evidenced by Ufa’s distribution contract for _L’Argent_, proved to be beneficial to Ufa even beyond 1933, when its foreign business was crumbling as a result of the Nazi takeover. The French film industry, which was in constant crisis throughout the 1920s, saw a concentration of the industry in larger film consortiums. This trend, which also affected the smaller film production companies in Germany, required hitherto independent filmmakers in France like Marcel L’Herbier to sacrifice their creative autonomy: they had to explore new venues in order to obtain funding for their film projects through a potent investor.

Marcel L’Herbier belonged to a group of loosely connected French filmmakers, such as Germaine Dulac, Louis Delluc, Jean Epstein, and Abel Gance, who in the 1920s created an early model of _auteur_ cinema. Supported by independent production companies, they sought to distinguish cinema from other arts as a unique form of aesthetic expression by focusing on the refinement of visual style.5 The rise of this artistically innovative French cinema, which positioned itself in juxtaposition to the commercial mainstream, was also an attempt to counter the overwhelming hegemony of the American film industry, strongly felt all over Europe at the time.

To oppose the towering presence of Hollywood, which in France was perceived as a near stranglehold, European film politics attempted to strengthen the ties between the continent’s film industries from the mid-1920s onward. These attempts did not prevent Ufa, however, from simultaneously negotiating contracts with some of the American majors.6 “Film Europe” was the catch phrase touted by the German trade papers to promote this strategy of building European film relations, which was initiated by the influential Ufa producer Erich Pommer.7 It resulted in a range of cross-cultural contracts, such as Ufa’s 1924 agreement with the French film company Aubert about the reciprocal import-export of German and French films, and the collaboration between the Berlin-based
Westin Company and the French Pathé consortium the year before. The attempt to create a network across the Western and Central European film industries between 1926 and 1930 also led to a number of international congresses in Paris and Berlin under the patronage of the League of Nations. “Film Europe” mirrored the general trend of European foreign policy at the time, which aimed at easing the strained relations between Germany and other nations in the aftermath of the First World War, and thus was meant to also bring about a rapprochement between Germany and France.

The German film industry, the most competitive in Europe at the time, depended on the revenue it made in international film markets. Ufa’s expansion of its business with France during this transitional period of the late 1920s contributed to the German company’s financial respite, although the onslaught of the Great Depression and the Nazi takeover would soon change the political and economic parameters of German film production. Yet in spite of this business strategy to reach out to the neighboring film industry on the other side of the Rhine, anti-French resentments prevailed in the minds of Ufa’s leading management. For example, in January 1929, two months before Ufa brought L’Herbier’s *L’Argent* to German cinemas, the company’s board of directors dismissed the possibility of cooperating with the French star director Abel Gance—whose film epos *Napoleon* had been released in Germany with enormous success—because “er ist Franzose” (he is French).

The French film industry was in a state of constant crisis with regard to its finances and its production processes throughout the 1920s. Furthermore, the American—and to a lesser degree the German—film industry dominated the French market. Its chronic lack of capital led to the increasing internationalization of French cinema and the concentration of its film production in large consortiums toward the end of the 1920s. Casting a mix of foreign and French actors in leading roles became a common strategy to maximize a French film’s chances for international distribution. Importantly, a primary funding source for French films was international financing and coproductions, in particular with Germany, and this sometimes included using German facilities.

What made L’Herbier reach out to Ufa? From the very beginning, L’Herbier intended *L’Argent* to be a big-budget production with international appeal. This explains why he cast the two *Metropolis* stars, Brigitte Helm and Alfred Abel, in leading roles. To raise the large amount of necessary funds, L’Herbier had to sacrifice his status as an independent director-producer and find a solvent partner. In November 1927 he offered his project to Ufa: “Der französische Regisseur L’Herbier hat nach dem bekannten Roman von Zola ein Film-Manuskript hergestellt, welches er für 8.000 RM an uns mit der Massgabe zu verkaufen bereit ist, dass er bei der Herstellung des Films Regie führt.” (The French director L’Herbier has produced a film
script based on the well-known novel by Zola, which he is willing to sell to us for 8,000 reichsmark under the condition that he will direct this film.)

L’Herbier’s initial inquiry came at a time in which Ufa was itself recovering from a severe crisis. The studio had averted financial collapse when it was taken over by the ultra-right-wing media mogul Alfred Hugenberg in the spring of 1927. Since then, the company’s corporate structure had been reformed and a cost-reduction plan had been implemented.

Ufa’s interest in signing a deal with L’Herbier was motivated by the company’s goal to increase its position in the French market. As mentioned before, the German film industry depended on its exports, since it could not ensure that its investments would pay for themselves through the distribution of German films on the national market alone. Ufa’s annual business report for 1928–29 documents an overall increase in film exports by approximately 15 percent compared with the previous year, although the export of German films to the American market had dropped owing to the rise of sound film, which rapidly changed the preferences of American audiences. In 1927, the number of German films imported to France tripled, to a number exceeding the entire French film production of that year. An explanation is the formation of the Alliance Cinématographique Européenne (ACE) during the previous year in Paris as a subsidiary firm of Ufa, with the primary objective of distributing the latter’s films in France. From the second half of the 1920s throughout the 1930s, the ACE produced a substantial number of German-French coproductions under the Ufa label.

L’Argent promised further marketing opportunities for Ufa in additional European countries. The company’s board of directors intended to make an offer in the amount of 750,000 French francs to secure the rights to market the film in France, Belgium, and Switzerland, plus an extra 250,000 francs for Italy and Spain. However, Ufa’s offer did not materialize, and it was not until several months later that negotiations between L’Herbier and Ufa began anew. By that time, the need to find a coproducer had faded since L’Herbier had entered into a partnership with the French media tsar Jean Sapène and his company Cinéromans.

Yet optimizing the film’s international distribution remained essential, as was securing a distribution contract with Germany. L’Herbier’s key objective was to ensure the participation of an international star with box office draw. When on April 30, 1928, Ufa received an updated offer from France, L’Herbier’s intention to engage Brigitte Helm had come into focus. “Dieser Film wird uns jetzt . . . für den Verleih für Deutschland auf der Basis 50:50 mit einer Garantie von 6.000 $ angeboten, wenn wir für seine Herstellung Brigitte Helm gegen eine Vergütung von 6.000 $ überlassen. Möglicherweise erhalten wir durch die Inverleihnahme dieses Films noch Kontingente für die A.C.E., Paris, zur Einfuhr deutscher Filme.” (This film is now . . . being offered to us for distribution in Germany on
the basis of 50:50 with a guarantee of $6,000, if we let them have Bri-
gitte Helm for a compensation of $6,000. It is possible that through the
distribution of this film we will receive a higher quota for ACE Paris for
importing German films.) This was a lucrative proposition that suited
Ufa’s cost reduction strategy, since it did not involve any financial risk on
the part of the German studio. Ufa and the French producer would share
the profits from the film’s distribution in Germany equally. The guaran-
teed sum of $6,000 (worth roughly 25,000 reichsmark at the time) that
Ufa agreed to pay in exchange for the right to distribute the film in Ger-
many would be balanced against the profits. Only if the earnings from
the German release remained under $12,000 would there be no gains for
the German studio. Ufa’s financial investment in the film would even out
with the $6,000 the French company offered as honorarium for Helm,
an amount that would be paid directly to Ufa, who had the actress on its
payroll. Based on this new offer, Ufa’s board of directors decided to make
the deal, and when it became clear that the actress would play in the film,
her part was expanded.

The fact that actors under contract with Ufa were “loaned” to other
film companies, both in and outside Germany, was common fare, and
it was not the first time for Helm. Ufa benefited from these tempo-
rary transfers of artistic talent because the compensation offered by the
other company usually was higher than the honorarium Ufa itself paid the
respective star. Hence, Ufa could pocket the difference as profit while
continuing to pay its star no more than the honorarium agreed on in
the employment contract. In Helm’s case, this was a significant amount,
since at the time of the deal with the French producers of L’Argent, she
received a monthly payment of 2,000 reichsmark.

The distribution of L’Argent on the German market was an attractive
business opportunity for Ufa. Given the popularity of Helm and Abel, the
film promised to do well in Germany, which according to L’Herbier
it did. Most important, with this distribution deal, which signified a low
financial-risk investment on the part of Ufa, the company could pursue
its primary business goal: in exchange for distributing a French-produced
film in Germany, it would have the opportunity to increase the number of
German films exported to France, numbers that were limited by contin-
gency regulations implemented in February 1928 to protect the French
film market. As a result, Ufa could hope to further consolidate its crisis-
prone financial balance during this transitional period.

Money and the Evils of Modern Society
Ein Wille beherrscht alle Welt—ein Gedanke bestimmt die erbit-
terten, rücksichtslosen Kämpfe internationaler Finanz-Cäsaren—
ein einziger Schrei ist das brausende Lärmen, das nervenreißende
Hasten in den Hochburgen der Finanz, den Banken und Börsen: GELD! GELD! GELD!29

One will rules the entire world—one thought determines the bitter and ruthless battles of the international finance Caesars—the roaring noise-making, the nerve-wrecking hast in the strongholds of finance, the banks, and the stock markets are one single cry: MONEY! MONEY! MONEY!

Thematically, L’Herbier’s *L’Argent* is relevant for its focus on the symptoms of economic crisis and for its representation of the failure of the modern finance industry. With its hypermodernist portrayal of the mundane Parisian world of high finance, *L’Argent* captured like a seismograph the state of Western capitalist society on the verge of an economic abyss. The film’s compelling exploration of the circulation of money in modern society, risky financial investments, machinations, and conflicting human desires, capitalizes on the phenomena of urban modern life and market speculation as cinematic spectacle. *L’Argent* conveys a sense of the imminence of financial crisis at a historical moment when contemporaries did not yet otherwise anticipate the repercussions of the crisis that lay ahead of them. The year in which the film was released both in France and in Germany, 1929, saw the beginning of the Great Depression triggered by the Wall Street crash, with its devastating effects across the globe, including mass unemployment, the failure of banks and businesses, and in the case of Germany, the demise of the democratic system. *L’Argent* translated the abstract phenomena of the economic order, which in the real world remain invisible and intangible, into visual images and a dramatic narrative. In doing so, the film shaped the cinematic imaginary of financial speculation and the inner dynamics of the banks and the stock exchange, which play a key role in the circulation of money and the volatility of the markets in modern society.

Made at the very end of the silent era, *L’Argent* is of current interest because, as the film scholar Daniel Eschkötter writes, it establishes the “Genealogie und Kontinuität von Strategien und Paradigmen der Visualisierung finanzieller Ströme, Operationen und Zeitlichkeiten; zur Globalfinanz als Bildordnung, die hier zum ersten Mal monumentalisiert wird” (genealogy and continuity of strategies and paradigms about the visualization of financial streams, operations, and temporalities; about global financing as a visual order, which is monumentalized here for the first time).30 Although money is ubiquitous in this film, determining the characters and their interactions, it is never actually seen. Instead the film focuses on the chief symbol of modern capitalism and its economic order, the stock market, thus visualizing the dynamics and invisible flow of money in modern society and turning the thrill of financial jeopardy and potential doom into a first-rate cinematographic spectacle.
L’Herbier’s treatment of the stock market in *L’Argent* echoes, both narratively and visually, an earlier film concerned with the instability and economic crisis of modern society, Fritz Lang’s *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (*Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler*, 1922). In this episodic film, Lang represents the effects of maneuverings at the stock market as one of the many symptoms that characterize the early years of the Weimar Republic. The sinister Dr. Mabuse (Rudolf Klein-Rogge), with his ever-changing identities and demonic striving for power, personifies the omnipresent threat of the chaotic period of hyperinflation in Germany. He engineers a speculative coup at the stock market when he orders his minions to steal a file containing a crucial diplomatic document, thus causing a stock-market crash as the shareholders react to the incident by selling off shares. As I show below, this theme of stock-market manipulation, which touched on contemporary fears about the volatility of the financial markets and about unbridled mass behavior, reverberates in *L’Argent*.

L’Herbier’s choice of subject was inspired by his profound contempt for money and triggered by his increasing dependency on an industry that had taken on a more corporate structure, which forced him to compromise his creative autonomy. Zola’s novel about the role of money in modern society served L’Herbier as a foil to articulate his own disdain for money at a critical moment of transition in the French film industry and a lurking global financial crisis. L’Herbier’s modern adaptation, which transferred Zola’s narrative setting from the final years of the Second Empire to the 1920s, was an unusual choice because it set the film apart from the conventional screen adaptations of classic French literary works on which French films had come to depend as nonrisky sources for revenue. Paradoxically, despite L’Herbier’s antagonistic feelings toward money, *L’Argent* was an extraordinarily lavish production and the most expensive French film of that period. The film revels in exhibiting modern urban life and showcases glamour, adventure, jeopardy, crisis, and doom as inherent to the dynamics of modern society.

L’Herbier was known for his talent for creating hypermodernist, vast interior spaces that had a striking plasticity, as is illustrated by his films *L’Inhumaine* (*The Inhuman Woman*, 1924), *Le Vertige* (*The Living Image*, 1926), and *Le diable au cœur* (*Little Devil May Care*, 1928). Such plasticity also characterizes *L’Argent* and makes the film a prime example of the modern studio spectacular, a new genre that emerged in the French cinema in the second half of the 1920s. According to the film scholar Richard Abel, the film’s aesthetic catered to “the cultural internationalism that was beginning to characterize urban life in the industrialized centers of Europe.” Abel also writes that “decors in the genre of the modern studio spectacular tended to be large, but those in *L’Argent* are positively immense, even monumental.” This monumentality becomes
the aesthetic equivalent of the excess of financial transactions, speculation, and accumulation of capital that L’Herbier seeks to expose.

L’Herbier’s portrayal of the Parisian world of high finance in the 1920s shows a society spurned by the desire of its protagonists to increase their capital and social status and ignore the risk of financial crisis and doom. The central character is Nicholas Saccard (Pierre Alcover), a shark of the finance world, an impetuous and egocentric character, driven by his impulses and insatiable cravings.37 His flamboyant parties mark Saccard as a nouveau riche by exhibiting his wealth and they indicate his efforts to gain high status in Parisian society. His antagonist is Alphonse Gunderman (Alfred Abel), the dignified director of an old, powerful bank in control of extensive global oil resources, who plans his actions with the same strategic precision with which he moves the figures on his chessboard. Alfred Abel’s performance lends the old-school banker a cryptic, almost sinister note, and underlines the ambiguity of Gunderman’s supposedly noble intentions to restore equilibrium to a financial world gone awry.

_L’Argent_ interweaves two plot lines: the central conflict between the two rival bankers and the story of the romantic couple, Line (Mary Glory) and Jacques Hamelin (Henry Victor). Hinting at the aviation hype of the 1920s, L’Herbier’s adaptation makes Hamelin a passionate aviator modeled after Charles Lindbergh.38 In addition, the figure of the aviator can also be viewed as L’Herbier’s symbolic doppelgänger, since both are independent creative talents in need of finding an investor for their respective projects. The two plot lines intersect when Saccard finds out that Hamelin’s aviation project could be a lucrative investment opportunity, which would allow the former to overcome the initial blow he suffered at the stock market. Convinced that the cross-ocean flight will attract public attention, Saccard founds an oil company and a bank to back it, and sends Hamelin to French Guyana, where, assisted by Saccard’s secretary (Antonin Artaud), the aviator is supposed to tap the local oil reserves. Combining colonialist and technological pursuits, Saccard seeks to satisfy both his economic and his erotic interests, for he desires Hamelin’s wife, Line.

As Abel suggests, a salient feature of the film is the way in which it “links the sexual and the economic through fetishization.”39 This is most obvious in the relationship between Saccard and Line, who becomes the fetishized object of Saccard’s erotic desire from the moment he lays eyes on her, showering her with money and luxuries after her husband leaves for French Guyana. This link between the sexual and the economic also plays a role in the interactions between Saccard and the Baroness Sandorf (Brigitte Helm), his former mistress. The enigmatic and seductive Baroness is a classic femme fatale. An epitome of the materialism of modern society, her character embodies decadence, intrigue, and glamour. Like Saccard, the Baroness is driven by materialist motivations, so much so that
her erotic interest in Saccard fades as his portfolio crumbles. A defining confrontation scene between the Baroness and Saccard is set in the former’s stylish home and culminates with the two wrestling each other on a couch. Through its interplay of sensuality and aggressiveness, Helm’s performance in this erotically charged scene recalls her iconic performance of the seductive and destructive vamp in Metropolis. In L’Argent, Helm’s extravagant costumes and precious jewelry emphasize her flamboyant appearance. As a fetishized embodiment of luxury and an object of erotic desire, her physical presentation captivates the viewer’s gaze. L’Argent thus both contributes to and showcases Helm’s status as an icon of modern fashion, which the actress cultivated on and off screen.40
Another cinematographically striking dimension of the film’s exploration of the function of capital in modern society comes into view with the sequence of Hamelin’s departure on his solo flight across the Atlantic. Images of the plane’s takeoff, witnessed by a cheering crowd, are intercut with shots from the trading floor, whereby the film visually correlates two essential phenomena of modernity: the fascination with aviation and the maneuvers at the stock exchange. In a speculative coup that recalls the stock-market manipulation engineered by Dr. Mabuse in Lang’s film and reveals the de facto susceptibility of the stock market to rumors and manipulation, Saccard fabricates false information. As a result, the shares of his newly founded bank, which had gained enormously in value when Hamelin’s business alliance with Saccard was announced, take an intended plunge. Saccard runs the false news report of the aviator’s alleged plane crash and buys up large numbers of shares of his bank at their lowest value, only to earn a massive profit when the stock’s value bounces back to a new height—after it has been confirmed that Hamelin reached his destination safely.

L’Herbier’s *L’Argent* celebrates urban modernity, the thrills of the dynamic flow of money and capital investment, and the adventure of aviation as cinematographic attractions. The stock-market frenzy and the exterior scenes filmed at night in the square of the Paris Opera, where crowds gather to read the news about Hamelin’s transatlantic flight from large illuminated billboards, convey an almost documentary-style sense of the throbbing urban life of Paris in the late 1920s. These location-shot scenes resonate with Georg Simmel’s observations about the nexus between modernity, motion, and money, the latter of which he describes as “the most striking symbol of the completely dynamic character” of the modern world.

L’Herbier created a sense of the dynamism of modern urban society through his experimentation with sound and distinct cinematography. He recorded the tumultuous noise of the real stock market and the roaring sounds of the plane’s engine on shellac records, and overlaid both without synchronizing them. These sound recordings were played during the film screenings, thus emphasizing the connection between Hamelin’s aviation adventure and the activities at the stock market through both visual and acoustic means. The exacerbated dynamics at the stock market are further emphasized through the cinematography. During the national holiday of Pentecost, when the stock market was closed, L’Herbier recruited 1,500 stockbrokers as extras and a team of fifteen cameramen to recreate the agitated craze that typically governed the place. If the German film director F. W. Murnau and his cameraman Karl Freund invented the “unchained camera” in *Der letzte Mann* (*The Last Laugh*, 1924), where they used the technique to convey the accelerated pace of modern urban life at Berlin’s Potsdamer Platz, L’Herbier and his cameraman Jules Kruger took the technique to new heights with their exceptionally
mobile camera strategy in the stock-market scene. For example, a camera mounted on a rope on which it could be slid down from high above generated a memorable image of the madness of speculation on the floor, showing the crowd of investors romping about as though the place were a busy anthill. Adding to the sensation of the dynamic pace of modern society and financial speculation and crisis are also the means of modern communication, which are featured in abundance in L’Argent. We see typewriters, telegraphs, and telephones, and giant loudspeakers transmit the news about the status of Hamelin’s flight to the public. All these communication devices spread information and disinformation about Hamelin’s endeavor while they also register the effect of the events on the different stock exchanges across the globe.

**L’Argent and the Rise of Sound**

The release of L’Argent in the spring of 1929 marks a significant moment of technological transition. One of the last silent films in the history of European cinema, L’Argent represents the pinnacle of an era that was irrevocably coming to an end. The conversion to sound, which coincided with the film’s release, brings yet another dimension of crisis into view, in addition to the film’s thematic exploration of financial crisis, and the business strategy behind Ufa’s distribution contract with L’Herbier.

L’Herbier had nourished the hope that the two sets of phonograph recordings of the Parisian stock market and of the aviator’s plane, which were to accompany the film’s screenings, were cutting edge. Yet these innovative sound experiments were quickly overshadowed by rapid technological developments that forever changed the standards of film production. Only two weeks after the release of L’Argent in Paris, Warner Brothers’ The Jazz Singer opened in the French capital on January 26, 1929, and instantaneously became a hit for an entire year. When L’Argent premiered in Germany on March 15, 1929, Ufa was only a few weeks short of signing a contract with Tobis-Klangfilm. For L’Herbier as well as for the entire French film industry, the rise of sound signified a crisis, since no funds were available to invest in costly sound recording technology or to equip cinemas with sound reproduction systems. The German film industry was the only one in Europe that was able to make the transition to sound, and France became the territory where Germany and the United States rivaled each other over gaining influence with their competing sound systems, Tobis-Klangfilm and Western Electric, respectively.

The conversion to sound put a particularly severe financial burden on the smaller German film companies, whose profits dwindled as production costs for sound films multiplied. In 1932, the economically most devastating year for the German film industry since the beginning of the
Depression, when many companies were wiped out, even a strong corporation like Ufa struggled. Yet Ufa had built a solid basis of capital to draw from since its financial recovery in 1927–28 under Hugenberg, which, not least, was a result of its export business. In contrast to other companies, Ufa could afford the expensive new sound technology and survive the economic crisis, and it was a fortunate coincidence that the consortium undertook the technological conversion just shortly before the economic crisis reached Germany.

While most film production companies in Germany struggled to make the transition to sound on their own, Ufa, which had been lagging behind American development, caught on quickly once it realized the impact of sound film via the release of The Jazz Singer in Germany and worldwide. Over the summer of 1929, all Ufa studios were equipped with sound technology, as were Ufa cinemas. After the new state-of-the-art sound studio—the so-called Tonkreuz in Babelsberg—was completed at the end of September 1929, the production of Ufa’s sound films went into full swing. In only one year the conglomerate had completed the transition to sound and became the leading force in sound film production in Germany. Moreover, Ufa discovered lucrative new business opportunities in countries such as Britain and France through the production of multiple-language versions of its films. The German-French film collaboration, which had played a vital role in the second half of the 1920s, thus carried over into the production of sound films that continued beyond 1933. L’Herbier also benefitted from the relations he had established with the German film industry and from the new technology available in the German studio facilities. In 1930, he directed his first sound film, La femme d’une nuit (Woman for One Night, 1930) in Berlin.

**Ufa’s Cross-National Strategies after 1933**

Although the “Film Europe” initiative of the 1920s ultimately failed, alongside the political project of a joint Europe, it created the foundation for an extensive cross-national network that outlived the rupture posed by Hitler’s rise to power in Germany in 1933. When on March 29, 1933, Ufa laid off its Jewish employees, bringing about a brain drain of cultural, intellectual, and technical talent, France became the preferred European destination for many of the film émigrés who subsequently left Germany. Although the attempts of the émigrés to establish themselves in the French film industry did not always unfold smoothly, several of them did build on their previously established networks.

Ufa’s business with France, of which the German distribution contract for L’Herbier’s L’Argent is an example, outlasted the Nazi rise to power: throughout the 1930s, Ufa’s foreign business focused primarily on France, where its subsidiary firms produced foreign-language versions
until dubbing technology successfully established itself by the middle of the 1930s.\(^{57}\) The Third Reich certainly had a negative effect on Ufa’s international business, as the revenue made from film exports declined dramatically after the Nazi takeover and German films were boycotted abroad.\(^ {58}\) Yet the distribution of German films in France was unaffected by the boycotts, and Ufa concentrated even more than before on the French market.\(^ {59}\) As the film scholar Chris Wahl shows, between 1933 and 1936 Ufa produced thirty-two French-language versions, more on an annual average than before Hitler’s ascendance to power.\(^ {60}\) However, the Third Reich’s growing ideological influence on German films led to increased censorship procedures, and the demands made by the latter diminished the appeal of German productions to audiences outside the country.\(^ {61}\) In order to avoid German censorship and make its foreign business more profitable, Ufa began to produce original French films that were not based on German film versions, and between 1936 and 1939 it produced nineteen such films.\(^ {62}\)

**Conclusion**

L’Herbier’s *L’Argent* exemplifies several dimensions of crisis and continuity between 1928 and 1936. The film’s subject matter—stock-market speculation as part of the dynamism of modern society and the excitement of financial turmoil—reflects the symptoms intrinsically connected to the economic crisis of the period in which the film was made. In retrospect, *L’Argent* turned out to have been prescient, in that it explored the repercussions of the modern finance industry gone awry. Only six months after Ufa’s highly publicized release of *L’Argent* in Germany, the Wall Street crash triggered the worldwide economic crisis.

A cinematographically outstanding accomplishment, *L’Argent* represents an extraordinary encounter between the French cinematic avant-garde and Weimar cinema’s dramatic art, embodied in the two *Metropolis* stars from Babelsberg, Brigitte Helm and Alfred Abel, who participated in this French film production. With its visual splendor and state-of-the-art aesthetics, L’Herbier’s *L’Argent* reveals a hypermodern sensibility akin to the cinematographic modernism that was the trademark of German cinema in the mid-1920s. In terms of its aesthetic accomplishments, the film represents the pinnacle of the silent-film era. As one of the last silent European films, *L’Argent* is embedded in the technological crisis that beset film production all over the world in the late 1920s.

Moreover, the film gives us insights into the German-French film collaborations at the end of the 1920s, whose effects on Ufa’s foreign business lasted beyond 1933. *L’Argent* gives evidence of Ufa’s strategy to avert financial disaster by expanding its foreign business, which coincided with the increasing necessity of independent French filmmakers
such as L’Herbier to explore new venues to fund their film projects, given the chronic crisis of the French film industry at the time. Scrutinizing the cross-cultural relations that unfolded from the late 1920s into the 1930s, and the motivations that spurred them, allows us to highlight the continuity in Ufa’s corporate politics and foreign-business interests with regard to France between the Weimar years and the Nazi era. Such understanding challenges the prevalent assumption that Hitler’s rise to power in 1933—which was indubitably a decisive caesura—affected all realms of the German film industry instantaneously or in equal measure.

Notes

1 Footage of Brigitte Helm’s arrival in Paris filmed by Jean Dréville is included in the supplementary material on the DVD L’Argent: A Film by Marcel L’Herbier, Eureka Entertainment, 2008.

2 These films are: Am Rande der Welt (At the End of the World, 1927); Die Liebe der Jeanne Ney (The Love of Jeanne Ney, 1927); Alraune (Mandrake, 1927); Die Yacht der Sieben Sünden (The Yacht of the Seven Sins, 1928); Abwege (Crisis, 1928), whose French release Helm promoted while in Paris; and Skandal in Baden-Baden (Scandal in Baden-Baden, 1928), which was near completion.


4 Jean Tedesco, “‘L’Argent’ devant le public,” Cinéa-Ciné Pour Tous, February 1, 1929, 9. “Marcel L’Herbier vient de prouver avec L’Argent que l’école française a ses qualités propres et que notre pays a droit à une place d’honneur dans le marché mondial du Cinéma.” Supplementary booklet accompanying the DVD L’Argent: A Film by Marcel L’Herbier, 74.


7 Elsaesser, Weimar Cinema and After, 120.

8 Abel, French Cinema, 29–32; and Saunders, “Germany and Film Europe,” 162–64.
9 Kristin Thompson, “The Rise and Fall of Film Europe,” in Higson and Maltby, “Film Europe” and “Film America,” 56–81; and Andrew Higson, “Cultural Policy and Industrial Practice: Film Europe and the International Film Congresses of the 1920s,” in Higson and Maltby, “Film Europe” and “Film America,” 117–31.
10 Thompson, “Rise and Fall of Film Europe,” 59.
11 Minutes of Ufa’s Board of Directors, January 4, 1929, R 109-I/1026b, Bundesarchiv, Berlin (henceforth BuA).
12 Another financing source for French films during the 1920s were the Russian émigré producers in Paris. See Abel, “Discourse,” 15, 27. Cinégraphic, L’Herbier’s company, was key in initiating the first cycle of international coproductions. For example, L’Herbier’s Le Diable au coeur (Devil in the Heart, 1928) was a collaboration with Ufa and Gaumont-British. Abel, “Discourse,” 36.
13 Minutes of Ufa’s Board of Directors, November 4, 1927, R 109-I/1026b, BuA. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.
15 “Geschäftsbericht der Ufa 1928/29.”
16 Abel, “Discourse,” 46.
17 Chris Wahl, Sprachversionsfilme aus Babelsberg: Die internationale Strategie der Ufa 1929–1939 (Munich: edition text + kritik, 2009), 158–86; and Abel, French Cinema, 36, 46. Examples of Ufa films produced in cooperation with ACE include Die Apachen von Paris/Paname n’est pas Paris (Apaches of Paris, 1927), and French-language versions of Ufa films such as L’étoile de Valencia/Der Stern von Valencia (The Star of Valencia, 1933), La guerre des valses/Walzerkrieg (Court Waltzes, 1933), and Vers l’abîme/Die Insel (The Island, 1934) among others.
18 Minutes of Ufa’s Board of Directors, November 26, 1927, R 109-I/1026b, BuA.
19 It is unclear why the initial negotiations between L’Herbier and Ufa did not result in any deal. Ufa’s foreign-relations department most likely handled the details, but these files did not survive. Neither do Marcel L’Herbier’s files on the film provide a clear explanation. They reveal, however, that L’Herbier was simultaneously trying to interest an American investor in the film project. This might have been a reason for him not to seal the deal with Ufa, in addition to reservations any French filmmaker might have had in signing over the distribution rights for France to a foreign company. Legal difficulties with the heirs of Zola, who attempted to veto L’Herbier’s modernization of the novel, delayed the progress on the film project, and it was not until spring 1928 that L’Herbier took action to cast the parts. See L’Argent, [n.d.], BnF-4-COL-198 (369) and (374), Marcel L’Herbier collection, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris (hereafter BnF).
20 L’Herbier’s partnership with Sapène ended in a fallout when the latter cut and recut the film. Against L’Herbier’s will, the truncated version went into general release. In 1970 L’Herbier helped the national French film archives restore the original version, which is now available on DVD.
21 Casting the part of Baroness Sandorf took L’Herbier a long time. An early treatment lists Gina Manès and Lya de Putti as possibilities; later considerations included Lil Dagover, Pola Negri, and Irene Rich. See L’Argent, [n.d.], BnF-4-COL-198 (365), (369), and (375), BnF.

22 Minutes of Ufa’s Board of Directors, April 30, 1928, R 109-I/1026b, BuA.

23 In 1927, for example, the German Ama-Film GmbH “borrowed” Helm for Henrik Galeen’s Alraune (Mandrake).


25 Minutes of Ufa’s Board of Directors, December 16, 1927, R 109-I/1026b, BuA.

26 Alfred Abel was not on Ufa’s payroll and could negotiate his contract autonomously. L’Herbier agreed to pay him a honorarium of 15,000 reichsmark for three weeks. See L’Argent, [n.d.], BnF-4-COL-198 (374), BnF.

27 Claude Beylie and Michel Marie, “Entretien avec Marcel L’Herbier: La période muette,” Avant Scène Cinéma 209 (June 1978): 36/X, cited as “Marcel L’Herbier on L’Argent,” in supplementary booklet included with the DVD L’Argent: A Film by Marcel L’Herbier, 63. A review published in Reichsfilmblatt, the trade magazine of German movie-theater owners, projected the box-office success of the film to be fair. Reichsfilmblatt 12, March 23, 1929, 16. According to Semler, the film’s critical reception in Germany and in France was mixed. Daniel Semler, Brigitte Helm: Der Vamp des deutschen Films (Munich: Bellville, 2008), 64–68.

28 Abel, French Cinema, 47. These import restrictions applied to all foreign films made outside France. By contrast, French films produced in collaboration with international companies were considered domestic French films.


31 For a discussion of Lang’s film as a cultural-historical document of the inflation in Weimar Germany, see Bernd Widdig, Culture and Inflation in Weimar Germany (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 113–33.


34 Abel, French Cinema, 205–20.

35 Abel, “Discourse,” 42.

36 Abel, French Cinema, 521.
37 L’Herbier initially had the German actors Emil Jannings and Heinrich George in mind for this part. See L’Argent, [n.d.], BnF-4-COL-198 (383), BnF.
38 For more information on Weimar Germany’s enthusiasm for aviation, see Wilfried Wilms’s essay in this volume.
39 Abel, French Cinema, 514.
41 L’Herbier was the first filmmaker ever to receive permission to film inside the Parisian stock exchange. Fieschi, “Autour du cinématographe,” 38.
45 Abel, French Cinema, 61.
46 Ufa hoped to hold the monopoly as the exclusive producer of sound films in Germany. This plan was thwarted when Tobis, Ufa’s major competitor, signed a business agreement with Klangfilm GmbH. At the time Ufa and Tobis were the only film production companies in Germany that possessed the new sound technologies, and smaller companies had to rent the equipment from them. See Kreimeier, Die UFA-Story, 214.
47 Abel, French Cinema, 59–64; and the Introduction to this volume.
48 Kreimeier, Die UFA-Story, 217, 228.
49 As Kreimeier shows, only Ufa and Tobis survived this critical year through their own efforts. Kreimeier, Die UFA-Story, 228. See also “Geschäftsbericht der Universum-Film Aktiengesellschaft für das Geschäftsjahr 1932/33,” Digitale Texte der Bibliothek des Seminars für Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte, Universität zu Köln, http://www.digitalis.uni-koeln.de/Ufa/ufa_index.html (accessed January 26, 2016).
50 In the midst of Weimar Germany’s economic crisis, Ufa made profits from 1930–31 onward, which in part resulted from the company’s export business. Elsaesser, Weimar Cinema and After, 131; also “Geschäftsbericht der Ufa” 1931/32 and 1932/33; Kreimeier, Die UFA-Story, 228.
51 Kreimeier, Die UFA-Story, 218, 227–30.


54 Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After*, 120; and Thompson, “Rise and Fall of Film Europe,” 77–78.

55 Minutes of Ufa’s Board of Directors, March 29, 1933, R 109-I/126b, BuA.


14: A Serious Man? Ernst Lubitsch’s Antiwar Film *The Man I Killed* (aka *Broken Lullaby*, USA 1932)

Richard W. McCormick

When Ernst Lubitsch left Germany at the end of 1922, the German film industry expected him to return to Germany after one film; after it became clear that he was staying in America longer, the trade press kept reporting rumors that he would be coming back to work on film projects in Germany right up until 1933. In 1927 *Film-Kurier* even reported that there were negotiations to hire Lubitsch to replace the producer Erich Pommer, who had left Ufa as the commercial disaster of *Metropolis* was unfolding.¹ When Lubitsch visited Germany in May 1927 and November 1932, he was celebrated by the industry. Over the course of the 1920s, he brought over film artists to Hollywood from Germany, and he followed the German cinema closely, imitating technical innovations pioneered in Germany and copying popular genres—operetta films, Heidelberg romances, and even the *Bergfilm* (mountain film). He published articles in the German film press up until 1933. Throughout most of his career it was the European box office that usually made the difference when his films made money.

In this essay I will discuss another type of film Lubitsch made that clearly responded to what was happening in Germany: an antiwar film. His 1932 film *The Man I Killed* demonstrates that his interest in Germany up until 1933 was not based just on professional connections to the film industry but was indeed shaped by much deeper concerns about German politics and the situation of German Jews there. The film clearly critiques German nationalism and militarism, and it can be read as a response to the political crisis of late Weimar. Beneath the surface one can find evidence of concerns particular to the position of German Jews in Germany.

Lubitsch was famous above all for his comedies, but he attempted to tackle “serious” political issues three times in his career, and each time the topic was war. His final German comedy and first box office failure, *Die Bergkatze* (The Wildcat, 1921), satirized war and the military as well as
Expressionism. The second such film was *The Man I Killed* (USA 1932), another box office failure. The third film was *To Be or Not to Be* (USA 1942), his dark anti-Nazi comedy, which did not lose money but was not a big commercial success. It was controversial, and influential critics found it in “bad taste.”

Of these three films, only *The Man I Killed* was not a comedy. It was based on a French play by Maurice Rostand with the same name, *L’homme que j’ai tué* (1925). Lubitsch and Samson Raphaelson worked on the screenplay between October and December 1930. Filming began in early September 1931 and took forty-three days. The film premiered in New York on January 19, 1932. *The Man I Killed* was one of Lubitsch’s few attempts in the United States to make a serious film. It was also his last attempt to do so. Because of disappointing returns at the box office, the film’s name was changed to the supposedly less depressing *Broken Lullaby*. The advertisement in the *New York Times* on February 9, 1932, proclaimed that the film’s title had been changed to *Broken Lullaby* because “thousands . . . have insisted on a new title . . . more worthy of the greatness of its drama and magnificent love story!” The name change did not help, however.

*The Man I Killed* is a social melodrama, a “problem film” with an antiwar message. It is set in France and Germany in the aftermath of the First World War, and it addresses the trauma of war. Whether we call it “shell shock” or “male crisis,” crucial psychic dimensions associated with Weimar Germany are present in this film, and they are on the surface, not repressed or hidden. What is less overt, however, is the way the film addresses issues of special concern to a German Jewish audience, namely, assimilation and intermarriage.

Lubitsch’s social melodrama is clearly in the spirit of German pacifist and antiwar films made in the early 1930s, such as G. W. Pabst’s *Westfront 1918* (1930) and *Kameradschaft* (Comradeship, 1931), as well as Victor Trivas’s *Niemandsland* (No Man’s Land, 1931). Of clear significance was the very successful American film *All Quiet on the Western Front*, directed by Lewis Milestone and released in April 1930, six months before Raphaelson and Lubitsch began writing their screenplay. That is the specifically American context to which Lubitsch’s film responds, but Milestone’s film was of course based on Erich Remarque’s *Im Westen nichts Neues* (1928), the German novel so prominent amidst the wave of antiwar novels and films in the late 1920s. In December 1930, just as Lubitsch and Raphaelson were finishing the screenplay of *The Man I Killed*, all of Hollywood learned how *All Quiet on the Western Front* had been received in Berlin: on the second night of its run, a Nazi-instigated riot in the cinema led ultimately to the film being forbidden in Germany. This was an obvious sign of the political crisis of late Weimar, and Lubitsch was surely paying attention.
A Serious Man?

Synopsis

_The Man I Killed_ opens in Paris during the celebration of the first anniversary of Armistice Day, November 11, 1919—that is, a year after the First World War had ended. Bells ring, there is a parade, cannons explode, terrifying wounded veterans in a hospital, and then we see a pompous military mass in Notre Dame. Once the church empties, one lone man remains, a distraught young Frenchman who is a veteran of the war. This man, Paul Renard (Phillips Holmes), confesses to a priest that he is a murderer. As he does so, there is a flashback to the trenches, where we see Walter Holderlin (Tom Douglas), a young German soldier who is dying because of wounds inflicted by Paul. He dies while trying to sign a letter he has written to his fiancée. Paul reads the letter and learns that Walter too was a musician, and that he had spent time as a student in Paris, where he had loved the French—whom he now was forced to kill.

At the end of the flashback, the priest tells Paul that the murder of a German soldier was not a sin because he was only doing his duty. The priest’s words fail to alleviate Paul’s guilt, and in distress, Paul asks him if he should go to the village of the man he killed and beg forgiveness from his family. Moved, the priest encourages him to do so. Because of the letter

Fig. 14.1. Tom Douglas. Screenshot from _L’homme que j’ai tué_, DVD version of _The Man I Killed_ (1932).
Paul knows the German village from which Walter came—Falsburg in Baden—and the film then cuts to the set of this small town, where we see Paul put flowers on Walter’s grave. He meets Walter’s parents but does not have the courage to tell them how he knows Walter. The parents assume that Paul had been a friend of Walter’s from his student days in Paris. They are overjoyed to meet him, as is Paul’s fiancée, Elsa (Nancy Carroll), who had already noticed him in the cemetery at Walter’s grave.

Soon Elsa and Paul fall in love, and many Germans in the town are scandalized that Walter’s parents and Elsa have received this Frenchman so warmly. In response, Walter’s father, Dr. Holderlin (Lionel Barrymore), makes a pacifistic speech in the village tavern denouncing the nationalism that had made him and the other fathers of the town happily cheer as their sons had been led off to war in 1914. Paul cannot overcome his trauma and guilt about Walter, which leads Elsa to discover his secret: that he is the one who killed Walter. He wants to leave, but Elsa forces him to stay so as not to destroy the new happiness of Walter’s parents, who have accepted him as a replacement for their son. At the end of the film, Walter’s father gives Paul Walter’s violin and asks him to play. He does so, and Elsa accompanies him on the piano, as the parents look on in blissful approval at the young lovers. This somewhat morbid, melodramatic ending invites many readings, but let me note here the way the film implies the necessity of an intermarriage between a German and non-German as an (uneasy) solution to the war’s trauma.

The Transnational Context
To understand The Man I Killed, one needs among other things to place it in the context of Lubitsch’s relationship to Germany in these years. He had left for America already in 1922, but Lubitsch stayed in contact with and paid a great deal of attention to the German film industry, which in turn was closely following his American career. There was a great deal of traffic back and forth between Berlin and Hollywood in the 1920s. It is worth emphasizing how transnational Lubitsch—and the film industry in Europe and America—remained up until 1933. In fact his career had been transnational before he left Germany.

Lubitsch’s American career can be said to have begun while he was still in Weimar Germany: his last two German films, Das Weib des Pharao (The Loves of Pharaoh, 1922) and Die Flamme (Montmartre, 1922–23) were financed with American money and made with considerable American technical expertise and equipment. But even before this, Lubitsch was making films that could be considered “American,” as Thomas Elsaesser has argued. Die Austernprinzessin (The Oyster Princess, 1919), Lubitsch’s first comedy after the First World War, was a big-budget film that was both a parody of and a fantasy about America. Also in 1919,
and with an even bigger budget, he made *Madame Dubarry* (released in the United States as *Passion*), a racy historical costume epic about the mistress of Louis XV of France, with a narrative, visual style, and a use of the “look” that imitated but also critiqued the American cinema. When *Passion* premiered in New York in December 1920, it was an enormous hit, opening the American market to German films again, which had been unwelcome in the United States during the First World War. *Passion*’s success spurred Hollywood’s interest in financing other Lubitsch films and eventually in bringing him to Southern California. The American film industry was impressed and intimidated by the artistry and technical virtuosity of German cinema, and it began to acquire German talent in its quest for a bourgeois respectability that would efface its origins as a business largely owned by immigrants who made films that catered to the working class in America’s large cities. There is a delicious irony in the fact that eastern European Jewish studio bosses would employ Lubitsch to represent European taste and sophistication—Lubitsch, the director of racy costume dramas and wild, slapstick farces, a Berlin Jew with a father who was himself an Ostjude, a Jew from eastern Europe.

Lubitsch was the first of many German film artists to go to Hollywood in the 1920s. Among those who came after Lubitsch were Friedrich Murnau, Karl Freund, Emil Jannings, and Erich Pommer. Some of them would return to Germany, like Jannings and Pommer, but as a Jew the latter would go back to Hollywood after the Nazis came to power in 1933. Many film émigrés of the 1920s had close connections to Lubitsch, including the female star of many of his German films, Pola Negri, as well as the screenwriter Hanns Kräly, the film editor Henry Blanke, and the designer Hans Dreier. Blanke came on the ship with Lubitsch to America, and Lubitsch sent for Kräly and Dreier to join him in Hollywood.

Lubitsch continued to pay great attention to what was going on in the German film industry during the 1920s. He wrote articles for and gave interviews to publications of the German film industry. He used Central European operettas and plays as the basis for many of his American films, including his first “sophisticated comedy” for Warner Brothers, *The Marriage Circle* (1924). In *So This Is Paris* (1926), his last comedy with Warner Brothers, one sees camera techniques and montage effects comparable to those used in E. A. Dupont’s *Varieté* (Variety, 1925).

In Lubitsch’s *The Man I Killed*, there is an homage to Murnau, who had died in an auto accident in California in March 1931, only six months before Lubitsch began shooting his film. The homage, which I will discuss in more detail below, is evident in the manner in which Lubitsch films the spread of gossip through the small German town, clearly imitating a sequence in Murnau’s *Der letzte Mann* (The Last Laugh, 1924).

Besides paying attention to the technical advances of German cinema in the 1920s, such as the camera and montage techniques in the films by
Murnau and Dupont already mentioned, Lubitsch also followed closely the types of genre films being produced in Germany at the time: he directed an operetta film called The Student Prince in Old Heidelberg (1927) for MGM, which was meant to copy not only the success of fellow émigré Erich von Stroheim’s The Merry Widow (1925) but also arguably the wave of operetta films set in Heidelberg, Paris, and Vienna being made in Germany during the 1920s.17 He was also inspired by the Bergfilm genre, and his very last silent film was in fact a Bergfilm titled Eternal Love (1929), starring John Barrymore and Camilla Horn, who had just arrived from Germany.

Just as many of Lubitsch’s silent films were based on operettas, so too his first sound films were musicals in the style of operettas, beginning in 1929 with The Love Parade for Paramount and continuing through his own version of The Merry Widow in 1934 for MGM. Lubitsch’s musical The Smiling Lieutenant (1931) was based on Ludwig Berger’s silent operetta film Ein Walzertraum (A Waltz Dream, 1925).18 At just about the same time Lubitsch was perfecting the operetta style for the American sound musical, back in Germany Erich Pommer was employing the same model for the musicals he produced, beginning with Die Drei von der Tankstelle (The Three Men from the Filling Station) in 1930.

According to Steven Bach, in 1929, after returning to Germany from Hollywood, Erich Pommer wanted to bring Lubitsch back to Germany to make the first big-budget sound film there, a film project that was to star Emil Jannings, who had also just returned to Germany.19 Jannings had starred in Lubitsch’s The Patriot in Hollywood in 1928. Instead Pommer brought over Josef von Sternberg to direct the film with Jannings. Sternberg had also directed Jannings in Hollywood, in a film titled The Last Command (1928), in a role for which Jannings won the first Academy Award for best actor at the 1929 ceremony. Pommer chose Sternberg because he was $20,000 cheaper than Lubitsch, and the sound film that resulted was The Blue Angel.20 Scott Eyman writes that for The Man I Killed, Lubitsch originally wanted to use Jannings to play Dr. Holderlin, the father of the German soldier,21 and this is corroborated in various sources, but these plans did not materialize.22 Instead Lubitsch cast Lionel Barrymore in the role.

When Lubitsch had first left Germany in December 1922, he was the most successful director in Germany. A report that same month in the Kinematograph announced that he had promised to return after one film.23 After finishing his first American film, Rosita, Lubitsch indeed considered returning.24 But after the success of Rosita, and then his lucrative contract with Warner Brothers, which gave him in effect his own production unit and allowed him to develop his “sophisticated” comedies, he never looked back.25 He visited Germany only twice after 1922: in 1927 and again in late 1932. Both times he met with people in the German film industry, who celebrated his visit.
By January 1933 all that changed, of course. Jews in the German film industry would be fired in March 1933. As for Lubitsch, he would never return to Germany. The Nazi regime revoked his German citizenship in 1935. He became an American citizen in 1936. By then he was involved in antifascist and Jewish causes in Hollywood. He helped build the informal network in Hollywood that financed visas and jobs for exiled film artists from Europe, which would later be institutionalized as the European Film Fund.26

But already in 1930 he had decided to make a serious film that took a stand against war and nationalism. In September 1932, nine months after its US premiere, The Man I Killed was shown dubbed in German at a special preview in Munich.27 Lubitsch published an article on the film in Die Filmwoche in October 1932, focusing on the problem of adapting a drama for a sound film.28 In November of the same year, Lubitsch visited Berlin for the last time—to be there for the premiere of Trouble in Paradise, his first sophisticated comedy since the silent era that was not a musical. While he was in Berlin, The Man I Killed also premiered there, in English on November 14 in the Marmorhaus and in German at the Capitol on November 15.29 At the end of 1932 the German premiere of a Lubitsch film was still something very special. German critics were particularly interested in The Man I Killed because it was set for the most part in Germany.

Pacifism and the “Lubitsch Touch”

The opening of The Man I Killed is a fine example of the so-called Lubitsch touch, that is, the ability to communicate efficiently, and often with irony or sly innuendo, using only visual means. As Sabine Hake has observed, this is a legacy of Lubitsch’s skill as a maker of silent films with as few intertitles as possible.30 Of course, often the Lubitsch touch is about communicating without showing anything, but rather by omission, by ellipsis.31

After the images of tolling bells that open the film, Lubitsch has the camera positioned to shoot the first view of the parade through the missing leg of an amputee soldier, followed by a cut to a traumatized, wounded soldier in a hospital bed, screaming in reaction to the triumphant firing of cannons. Next there is a traveling shot down the aisle of the cathedral showing the shiny sabers of French officers, with a cut to a medium close-up of a row of gleaming spurs on the boots of kneeling soldiers. Finally the camera tracks into a side chapel of the cathedral, moving into a close-up of the body of a suffering Christ on a crucifix. In this way Lubitsch efficiently communicates far more than speeches could convey, commenting with bitter irony on the militaristic celebration of the first anniversary of the peace after the First World War.
As mentioned above, the way Lubitsch films the spread of gossip through the small German town is an obvious allusion to a similar scene in Murnau’s *Der letzte Mann*, famous for the moving camera pioneered by Karl Freund. In Murnau’s silent film, the gossip spreads in a courtyard via camera movement and editing between women at their windows. In Lubitsch’s film, moving camera and fast continuity editing follow the gossip about the budding romance between the Frenchman Paul and the German woman Elsa as it moves through the town. There is almost no dialogue. The only sound is the ringing of doorbells as individuals hurry into and out of shops on the main street to impart the news. This is yet another Lubitsch touch, this time with sound.

The overt politics of the film are made clear during the show-stopping pacifist speech that Dr. Holderlin, Walter’s father, delivers. When he finally grasps that the men at his *Stammtisch* in the village tavern are snubbing him because he has been friendly to a Frenchman, Dr. Holderlin launches into a tirade, proudly proclaiming that Elsa and his wife like Paul, and that he himself loves him like a son. He attacks all the German fathers, including himself, and the French fathers as well, who had cheered as their sons were marched off to be slaughtered in the war.

While the speech is a blatant critique of militarism and war, it is also about rejecting a bigoted, warlike nationalism directed against the French. Lubitsch, in mobilizing our sympathy for a German who defends a non-German, can also be understood to be addressing other types of national and ethnic identities and prejudices. Reminiscent of the nineteenth-century German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine, Lubitsch seems to sympathize with the French against a bigoted German nationalism, or at any rate he wants us to do so. Herr Schultz (Lucien Littlefield) is the prosperous man in the small German town who has continued to pursue Elsa, in arrogant disregard of her mourning and of her expressed lack of interest in him, and he is the character who is most upset that a Frenchman would be stealing one of “our” girls. Schultz is portrayed both as a pompous, oily character and as the instigator of the vicious bigotry depicted in the tavern.

**Male Crisis**

One important element that this American film shares with much of Weimar art cinema is the discourse of male crisis, whether one wants to understand it as Siegfried Kracauer did, that is, as male “retrogression,” or whether one wants to view it in connection with the lingering trauma of the male soldier caused by the horrors of the First World War, that is, with “shell shock,” as Anton Kaes has argued. Whereas Kaes finds this discourse in a number of important German films of the 1920s that do not thematize the war overtly, in Lubitsch’s American film, the war and
its trauma are of central importance. Kracauer sees male “retrogression” as pervasive throughout Weimar cinema, and he describes a particular visual motif as emblematic of this discourse, namely, the image of a man with his head in the lap of a woman, be it his wife, his mother, or his fiancée. Precisely such an image occurs in *The Man I Killed* when Paul places his head in Elsa’s lap.

At the point when this image occurs in the film, Paul is in despair about his guilt for the murder of Walter, no longer feeling able to keep up the fiction he has allowed the family to believe. Elsa, believing Paul to be intimidated by the anti-French sentiment in the town, tells him defiantly that she loves him and that it does not matter what the townspeople think. It is noteworthy that it is Elsa, not Paul, who first utters the words, “I love you.” In fact it was Elsa whose gaze first fell on Paul, whom she saw in the cemetery as he placed flowers on Walter’s grave, long before he would first see her in the office of Dr. Holderlin. This reversal of the conventional regime of the “look,” in which the male’s gaze is dominant and the female is primarily the object of his gaze, is perhaps one way in which Lubitsch can be said to critique Hollywood’s standard specular relations, as Elsaesser has suggested. Lubitsch has long been recognized as a filmmaker who depicted women willing to take sexual initiative in

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*Fig. 14.2. Nancy Carroll and Phillips Holmes. Screenshot from L’homme que j’ai tué, DVD version of The Man I Killed (1932).*
an era when this was very uncommon. But Elsa’s agency is more than sexual in *The Man I Killed*. In the end she dominates the narrative. Soon after Elsa holds Paul’s head in her lap, she discovers his secret: that Paul had killed Walter. When he wants to leave the town, she forces him to stay in the Holderlin home so as to keep Walter’s unknowing parents happy. Paul submits to her demands, even looking somewhat happy at the very end as he plays Walter’s violin for them.

Whereas Lubitsch’s strong heroines are more acceptable in the carnivalesque realm of comedy, in a serious film they disturb conventional expectations. Perhaps even more disturbing is the emphasis on a weak, traumatized male. This may indeed have had something to do with the commercial failure of the film—and also with the fact that Weimar art films riddled with male crisis tended to be critical but rarely commercial successes.

### The Politics of Intermarriage

The gender dynamics of *The Man I Killed* cannot, however, be understood without some attention to issues of national and ethnic identity. Lubitsch’s comic “bad girls” are closely related to the Jewish “bad boys” he played in the early milieu comedies of the 1910s at the beginning of his career. As Brandlmeier asserted, they are “alter-egos.” Of obvious relevance to political discourses about gender and ethnicity in the film would be the way in which it represents romantic love between a Frenchman and a German woman and the possibility of intermarriage. Let me stress again that the somewhat disturbing end of the film has our French protagonist more or less giving up his own identity to replace the German son he killed in the war. Such a discourse obviously resonates with long-standing concerns of the German Jewish population in Germany about both intermarriage and assimilation. If one reads Paul, the Frenchman, the non-German, to function to some extent as a covert or assimilated Jewish character, then the fact of his being emasculated also would resonate with certain stereotypes about Jewish men. More important would be the fact that he basically gives up his own identity to blend in with the German family.

At this point it is useful to introduce Ofer Ashkenazi’s concept of “double encoding,” which he explains first in his discussion of Lubitsch’s German comedies but which he finds relevant to many Weimar films made by German Jews. In them, the protagonist can be read both as a typical middle-class urbanite and as a Jew. Whereas in a comedy like Lubitsch’s *Meyer aus Berlin* (*Meyer from Berlin, 1918*), the main character is clearly Jewish, although not named as such in any intertitle, in many Weimar films that Ashkenazi discusses, the potential Jewish identity of a protagonist is much more covert, making that character’s dilemma seem
to be typical of the German middle class, with its specific relevance to German Jews much less obvious. Double encoding is a technique that is meant to be read in at least two ways, but it does require a kind of closeting of Jewish identity, in keeping with the ideal of Jewish acculturation formulated by Judah Leib Gordon in 1862, that one should “be a man in the street and a Jew at home.”

Ashkenazi also informs us that there were a number of films made about the war in Germany even before Remarque’s novel *Im Westen nichts Neues* and arguably in dialogue with earlier Hollywood war films like *The Big Parade* (1925) and *Wings* (1927). Many of these German films were made by Jewish filmmakers. For example, Leo Lasko made a two-part documentary on the First World War called *Weltkrieg* (World War) in 1926–27, and Richard Oswald made the feature *Dr. Bessels Verwandlung* (The Transformation of Dr. Bessel) in 1927. According to Ashkenazi, both of these films valorize a transnational bourgeois identity and critique nationalism as a threat to that identity, most obviously because it had led to war. In Oswald’s film, a transnational identity actually overcomes the trauma of war: the main character, Dr. Bessel, escapes capture on the battlefield by donning the uniform of a French soldier, and then by getting rid of that uniform and any national identity. He vanishes into the French population by marrying the man’s fiancée in Marseilles and assumes a new transnational, cosmopolitan identity, working in transnational commerce with the help of his excellent language skills. In Oswald’s film, a German takes over a Frenchman’s identity, whereas in Lubitsch’s film, a Frenchman takes over the identity of the German he killed. Beyond this uncanny resemblance, in both films we are confronted with the idea that peace can be achieved through what Ashkenazi calls a “new concept of transnational bourgeois identity whose members share a liberal worldview . . . in other words, a society whose members are, metaphorically, stereotypical assimilated Jews.”

But in *The Man I Killed*, to the extent the film might be read so as to suggest an assimilation of the non-German protagonist to the German middle class, something darker seems to be implied that makes the supposed happy end for the two lovers even more disturbing than it is on the surface. For if we read the Frenchman Paul as a Jew, the ending does not allow him to be “a man in the street and a Jew at home.” It is in the private realm that he must conceal his identity, a much more radical “closeting,” although not from his wife-to-be, rather only from his adoptive parents.

Whether Lubitsch knew Oswald’s film is unclear. As mentioned above, he did go to Germany in 1927. But the discursive convergence here does not require any such particular knowledge. Lubitsch had thematized assimilation and intermarriage since his earliest comedies, such as *Der Stolz der Firma* (The Pride of the Firm, 1914), *Schuhpalast*
Pinkus (Shoe Palace Pinkus, 1916), Die Puppe (The Doll, 1919), and Die Austernprinzessin. While visiting Germany in late 1932, just as The Man I Killed was premiering in Berlin, Lubitsch gave an interview to Vossische Zeitung in which he explained why he no longer worked in Germany: “Nothing good is going to happen here for a long time.” Lubitsch was not oblivious to the crisis of the early 1930s, and quite soon after 1933 that crisis would evolve in such a way that an assimilationist solution would become impossible. I am arguing, in fact, that such a solution is already being critiqued, in effect, by the strange ending of The Man I Killed. Lubitsch’s next serious political film would be his anti-Nazi comedy, To Be or Not to Be (1942). In that film, the crisis—now clearly identified as Nazism—can be overcome only by one heroic character, Greenberg, coming out as Jewish, not by concealing that identity in private. And by 1942, pacifism was no longer an option.

Notes

1 “Verhandlungen Ufa-Lubitsch,” Film-Kurier 197, August 22, 1927. Evelyn Hampicke and Christian Dirks report that Paul Davidson took over for Pommer at Ufa already in 1926. As the financial crisis at Ufa worsened in 1927, after the premiere of Metropolis in January, so did Davidson’s health; he committed suicide in July 1927. Had he taken the job, Lubitsch would have replaced Davidson, who had once been his producer, and whom he had visited while in Germany in May and June of 1927 and been concerned about his health. See Evelyn Hampicke and Christian Dirks, “Paul Davidson: Die Erfindung des Generaldirektors,” in Pioniere in Celluloid: Juden in der frühen Filmwelt, ed. Irene Strathenwert and Hermann Simon (Berlin: Stiftung Neue Synagoge—Centrum Judaicum & Henschel Verlag, 2004), 54. See also Stefan Drössler, “Ernst Lubitsch and EFA,” Film History 21, no. 3 (2009): 208–28.

2 On the reception of To Be or Not to Be, see Scott Eyman, Ernst Lubitsch: Laughter in Paradise (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 300–301.

3 The credits list Ernest Vajda first and then Raphaelson for the screenplay, but according to Raphaelson, Vajda contributed little to the screenplay. Lubitsch got no credit, as usual, but Raphaelson confirms that in this first collaboration with Lubitsch, the script emerged from the two of them talking together, with Raphaelson dictating the results to the stenographer. Eyman, Ernst Lubitsch, 179–80.

4 See Eyman, Ernst Lubitsch, 177–84, 384; James Harvey, Romantic Comedy in Hollywood, from Lubitsch to Sturges (New York: Knopf, 1987), 35–45; and The Man I Killed, Paramount shooting schedule (“Opens 9-2-31; Close 10-7-31”), Box 29 F. 1, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA.


6 Eyman, Ernst Lubitsch, 183.


9 See Drössler, “Ernst Lubitsch and EFA,” 208–28; and Kristin Thompson, Herr Lubitsch Goes to Hollywood: German and American Film after World War I (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005).


11 Elsaesser, Weimar Cinema and After, 216–17.


14 Heinz—in Hollywood, Henry—Blanke had been a film editor for Lubitsch in Germany and would work with him at Warner Brothers, where he later became a film producer. See Eyman, Ernst Lubitsch, 87. In 1924, while on loan at Paramount, Lubitsch sent for Dreier to work on Forbidden Paradise for him. Dreier would remain a designer at Paramount. See Eyman, Ernst Lubitsch, 194.


16 There is another connection to Murnau: when Lubitsch arrived in the United States in 1923, invited by Mary Pickford to make a film in which she could play an “adult role,” his first idea was to cast her as Gretchen in a film adaptation of Goethe’s Faust. Because the part of Gretchen was too adult for Pickford, at least in the opinion of her mother, who still played a dominant role in Pickford’s career choices, Lubitsch scrapped the project and made Rosita (1923) with Pickford. Thus it was Murnau in 1926 who would make the great Faust adaptation of the 1920s—Murnau’s last German film, as it happened, before he came to Hollywood.

17 Kracauer, From Caligari to Hitler, 140–41.


22 In “West Reclaims Lubitsch,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 7, 1931, it is stated that “‘The Man I Killed,’ originally intended as a Jannings vehicle until contracts in Germany interfered, is to be made in Hollywood.” Reports that Jannings seriously considered coming to America to work with Lubitsch appear in the *Film-Kurier* in early 1931. There was also speculation that Lubitsch might film in Germany. See “Ernst Lubitsch wird in Berlin drehen?” *Film-Kurier* 36, February 12, 1931; and “Emil Jannings fährt nicht nach Amerika,” *Film-Kurier* 70, March 24, 1931.

23 See Stratenwerth and Simon, *Pioniere in Celluloid*, 269. They cite an article in the *Kinematograph* from December 10, 1922, that states this.

24 Eyman, *Ernst Lubitsch*, 93–94.


32 Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 99, 122.

33 Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*.

34 Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 99.


36 Weinberg, *Lubitsch Touch*, 60–61. When other directors allowed women characters to gaze on men and take the sexual initiative, they were almost invariably “bad girls.” This is sometimes the case with Lubitsch, too, but not here. Elsa is no “bad girl”; she is portrayed as virtuous throughout the film.

37 Elsa thus has Paul replace Walter even though she has learned that he had killed him, which makes for an especially unique variation on the romantic triangles Lubitsch featured in so many diverse ways in his films, from the early Jewish comedies all the way to his final films in the 1940s.

39 Of course, these issues were also of concern to Jews elsewhere, including American Jews.


41 Ashkenazi, *Weimar Film and Modern Jewish Identity*, 47–48. Kaplan also cites Leib Gordon and points out that women as well as men were supposed to be Jews only at home. See Kaplan, *Making of the Jewish Middle Class*, 11.


43 Ashkenazi, *Weimar Film and Modern Jewish Identity*, 147.

44 Lubitsch may also have known Joe May’s *Heimkehr* (Homecoming, 1928), which has a plot somewhat similar to his and Oswald’s films.

45 Lubitsch’s films thematize intermarriage in complex ways. In his personal life, Lubitsch seemed usually to be infatuated with non-Jewish blondes. His own marriage to such a woman had just broken up a few months before he started working on the screenplay for *The Man I Killed*. Lubitsch’s first wife, Leni, had betrayed him with his friend and collaborator Kräly, leading to Lubitsch’s separation from her in June 1930 and to their divorce, which was finalized a year later, in June 1931. See Eyman, *Ernst Lubitsch*, 161, 164. One might speculate that this personal crisis could perhaps be related to the way that such issues are treated in the film, although most likely not with any conscious intent. Lubitsch would go on to marry another blonde Gentile in 1936.

46 Cited in Eyman, *Ernst Lubitsch*, 205.

Selected Bibliography

This bibliography contains sources useful for the study of continuity and crisis in German film 1928 to 1936 more broadly. Additional primary and secondary sources relevant to specific films analyzed and to specific issues elaborated on in individual essays can be found in the end-notes of each essay.

Periodicals 1928–1936

The following list of German periodicals, though not comprehensive, offers rich primary source material used by our contributors, including film reviews, film theory, and articles on film, culture, and current events in the 1928 to 1936 period.

Berlin Börsen-Courier
Berlin Tageblatt
Der Deutsche
Der Film
Film-Kritik
Film-Kurier
Die Filmwoche
Film Welt
Frankfurter Zeitung
Hamburger Echo
Hamburger Volks-Zeitung
Der Kinematograph
Lichtbildbühne
Märkische Volkszeitung
Der Montag Morgen
Paimanns Filmlisten
Reichsfilmblatt
Die rote Fahne
Tempo
Vossische Zeitung
Die Weltbühne
Secondary Sources


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Machatý’s *Ze soboty na neděli* (From Saturday to Sunday) for the Czech National Film Archive (NFA).

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Hitler's Machtergreifung, or seizure of power, on January 30, 1933, marked the end of the Weimar Republic and the beginning of the Third Reich, and German film scholarship has generally accepted this date as the break between Weimar and Nazi-era film as well. This collection of essays interrogates the continuities and discontinuities in German cinema before and after January 1933 and their relationship to the various crises of the years 1928 to 1936 in seven areas: politics, the economy, concepts of race and ethnicity, the making of cinema stars, genre cinema, film technologies and aesthetics, and German-international film relations. Focusing both on canonical and lesser-known works, the essays analyze a representative sample of films and genres from the period. This book will be of interest to scholars and students of Weimar and Third Reich cinema and of the sociopolitical, economic, racial, artistic, and technological spheres in both late Weimar and the early Third Reich, as well as to film scholars in general.


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