[3] Student Proposals

Katherine Hamburg: *Nazism as Romantic Comedy* (Basu)

The arts and specifically film scene of Weimar Germany are justly famous for their rich expressionist and technical innovations. Weimar films reflected distinctively on the challenges and possibilities of modernization, urbanization, industrialization, and democratization, arguably expressing fear of chaos and temptations to authoritarian stability (Isenberg, 2009; Kracauer, 2004). With the onset of the Nazi Third Reich, some of the most important German film-makers and actors of the Weimar-era fled to America and had second careers in Hollywood. By contrast, Nazi cultural production, including its films, are notorious for their overtly hateful and propagandistic purposes and depictions of comradeship, blood and soil, leadership, war and militarism, and enemies including especially the Jews (Welch, 1983). What is not widely known though is that, in responding to consumer demand (Cocks, 1997, Weisen, 2010), the Third Reich produced a plethora of entertainment and escapist films, often co-opting Hollywood successes to do so, and that the largest single genre of such Nazi-era films was comedy. Of the 1000 films made under the Nazis, 1933-45, half were comedies.

What can we learn from the contrasting topics and tropes of Weimar and Nazi entertainment films, and specifically comedies, about the political vision at stake under each regime? To answer this research question, and on the advice of Prof. Basu, I propose to reflect comparatively and contextually on the political significance of two pairs of films, one each from the Weimar and Nazi eras [See Images 1-4]:

(1) F. W. Murnau's *Der letzte Mann* (The Last Man, though titled The Last Laugh for its US release) (1924), a tragicomedy in which an aging doorman is undeservedly fired from his role at a lavish urban hotel and forced to endure the scorn and laughter of family and

acquaintances before being miraculously saved by an American millionaire's bequest and getting to have the last laugh; and Werner Klinger's *Die Degenhardts* (1944), a drama in which an aging civil servant is forced into disgruntled retirement but returns patriotically to his post when his city, Lübeck, is devastated by Allied bombing. That the latter responds to themes in the former – loss of generational masculinity and status among others – has already been suggested in recent scholarship (Nathansen, 2010). Though neither film is an overt comedy, both rely on laughter in character dynamics and afford the audience distinctive redemptive happy endings.

(2) Max Ophüls' *Lachende Erben* ('Laughing Heirs' or 'Merry Heirs') (1932/3), a romantic comedy in which a young man must abstain from alcohol for a month if he is to inherit his uncle's champagne business; and Helmut Weiss' *Die Feuerzangenbowle* (The Fire-Tongs Bowl or The Punch Bowl) (1944), a comedy set in Wilhelmine Empire in Germany, in which a now famous writer returns to his small town school to recover some missing sense of his own identity. In these overtly comedic films, the audience is offered contrasting visions of how Germany might negotiate a modern world of rampant economic and personal circulation and exchange.

This project builds upon my prior coursework, including an English class on Freedom and the American Dream, Political Philosophy, and Prof. Basu's class on Nazism. In this last class, I wrote a paper on the Nazi approach to Music. This project allows me to move from music to film, in an effort to see what the Nazis hoped to accomplish and affirm. As a major in Politics and minor in (US) History, the German failed experiment with democratization and tortured record of Nazi authoritarianism remain important sources of insights into contemporary life.
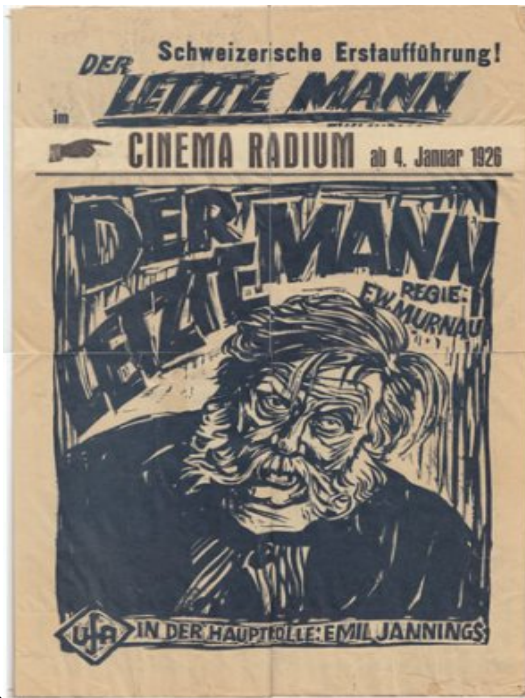
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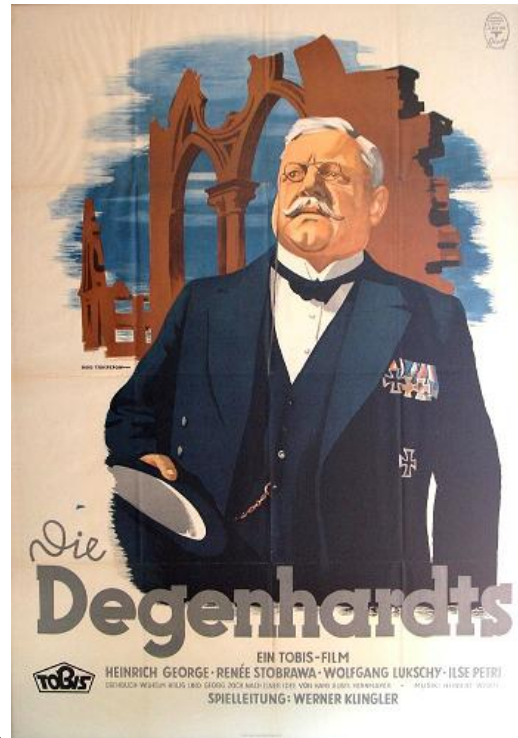
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