

The Impact of Submission of Creativity on Creative Durability: German Film Directors in the 20th Century

by

Benjamin Diner

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Professor Marti G. Subrahmanyam

Faculty Adviser

Professor Lawrence White

Thesis Adviser

Introduction

Does emigrating from, or remaining in a nation with a censorship regime have a significant impact on the creativity of artists over their lifetime careers? To answer this question, I have compiled and analyzed a dataset covering 31 German cinema directors and their work from the Weimar period (pre-1933), through the Third Reich (1933-1945), and post-war years. Some of these directors emigrated from Germany to the United States (hereafter referred to as “emigres”), and others remained (“non-emigres”). By comparing the creative durability of the emigres and non-emigres, as measured by the availability of their works on Amazon in 2017¹, it is possible to determine whether those artists that submitted to censorship experienced a significant impact in regards to the creative durability of their work.

The rationale for the choice of film as proxy for art comes from the emphasis the Nazi regime placed on controlling the collective emotion of the German populace. As early as the mid-1920s, key Nazi figures were theorizing on the power of the moving image and its ability to influence. As Adolf Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*,

One must also remember that of itself the multitude is mentally inert...that it is not naturally prone to read something which does not conform with its own pre-established beliefs...the picture, in all its forms, including the film, has better prospects...²

¹ Giorcelli, Michela and Moser, Petra, Copyrights and Creativity: Evidence from Italian Operas (December 28, 2016).

² Hitler, Adolf. *Mein Kampf*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971. Print.

In 1932, Nazi propagandist Hans Traub wrote,

Without a doubt the film is a formidable means of propaganda. Achieving propagandistic influence has always demanded a 'language'...the most effective is the moving picture...it has an unimaginable richness of rhythm for intensifying or dispelling emotions³

With the consolidation and later nationalization of the German film industry under Joseph Goebbels during the Third Reich, film would become akin to a weapon in its ability to affect a populace, a potentiality fully understood and realized by Goebbels' Ministry of Propaganda. Importantly, the role film was envisioned to play in the Nazi process of *Gleichschaltung*, or the effort to control all aspects of German society, was made clear to those involved in the film industry. All employed in the industry were required to become members of Goebbels' *Reichsfachschaft* (department coordinating film industry professionals), under the *Reichsfilmkammer*, or Ministry of Film.

For the non-emigres, then, participation was compliance. Their potential reasons for remaining in Germany and submitting to the creative directives of the government are numerous—they may comprise a desire for personal security and familiar customs; fear of fleeing to the unknown; and passionate identification with and support of the Nazi regime—but together represent submission of creativity to the will of the government.

At the outset, I predict a significant negative impact on the durability of non-emigres' subsequent work due to the non-emigres' compliance with the demands of the censorship

³ Hans Traub, *Der Film als politisches Machtmittel*, Munich, 1932, p. 29.

regime. My instinct is that the underlying factor in the success of creative works is creative freedom, and that audiences are able to recognize and reward free art, and likewise reject and punish controlled art. While the majority of the films of the Third Reich are not obviously propagandistic—Goebbels understood that overt propaganda would bore, and preferred a popular film industry that more subtly influenced audiences—they were all submitted for vetting, thus putting them in the same league, if not the same ballpark, as the obvious works of propaganda during this period.

Regarding impacts on emigres' creative durability, it is important to understand the potential challenges that emigres faced upon moving to the United States, apart from the professional challenge of producing successful films. On arriving in the United States, “[these] directors, who [were] at the top of their game in Europe, suddenly [were] dirt poor, stateless, [and] homeless...some of them...managed to claw their way up again”⁴. For this reason, it is difficult to attribute changes in the durability of these directors' works solely to the choice of leaving the censorship regime in Germany, as the impact of potential cultural and social obstacles that emigres faced in the United States is not measured in this analysis.

Background

⁴ King, Susan. "German Emigres' Effect on U.S. Cinema Saluted." *Los Angeles Times*. N.p., n.d. Web.

The recognition of the power of film to influence and shape audiences was not an overnight realization, but rather a reflection on the development of the medium from World War I through the early 1930s.

One of film's first uses in coordination with the state in Germany was towards military purposes. In 1917, as the war reached its third year, General Ludendorff, the Supreme Commander of the Army, saw the potential of "visual methods" in promoting what had become a total war effort in Germany⁵. In November 1917, Ufa, which was to become the greatest German film company, was formed in association with the German High Command. Its official mission was, "to advertise Germany according to government directives. These asked not only for direct screen propaganda, but also for films characteristic of German culture and films serving the purposes of national education"⁶. Film's importance in a society-level struggle was understood by nations on both sides of the conflict, and its use in this vein was not unique to Germany.

What was unique to Germany was the line of development that film took from the end of World War I onwards. During the Weimar period, cinema's popularity expanded rapidly. This was the start of German expressionism, characterized by New Objectivity (*die neue Sachlichkeit*) films, which broached anti-Semitism and homosexuality, among other taboos of the time⁷. A 1920 film censorship law nominally threatened to stem this growing liberalism, yet, "in its wording, every hint of willful, biased, or political censorship was carefully avoided"⁸. As such, filmmakers such as Georg Wilhelm Pabst, director of the 1930 anti-war (and later to be

⁵ Wollenberg, H. H. *Fifty Years of German Film*. New York: Arno Pr. U.a., 1972. Print.

⁶ Wolffsohn, Karl. *Jahrbuch Der Filmindustrie. 3 Jahrgang 1926/1927*. N.p.: n.p., 1927. Print.

⁷ Shapira, Avner (December 20, 2010). "Going Into the Night - New Look at Early German Cinema by Ofer Ashkenazi". *Haaretz*.

⁸ Wollenberg, H. H. *Fifty Years of German Film*. New York: Arno Pr. U.a., 1972. Print.

verboten) film, *Westfront 1918*, had considerable artistic freedom—and consequently, considerable political freedom.

Further characteristic of the Weimar film industry was its internationalism, especially in regards to American influence. Two major Hollywood studios, Paramount and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, established themselves in the German market in the mid-1920s through a deal with the struggling Ufa, requiring Ufa to distribute American films in the German market⁹. Until sound films appeared at end of the 1920s, American film distribution in the German market was merely a matter of translating the intertitles in silent films. American film regularly outpaced German productions in quality and popularity; as one film critic in 1934 lamented after viewing several recent Hollywood productions, “German films...seemed dusty and worn out next to these images made under the California sun”¹⁰.

The creative liberty and internationalist bent of the film industry upset the revanchists in Germany who were still reeling from the German Empire’s defeat, and who readily accepted the “stabbed-in-the-back” myth that Hitler would successfully advance, which explained Germany’s defeat as a function of Jewish malevolence at home rather than strategic defeats on the battlefield. The connection of Hollywood with perceived global Jewish power—Jews featured prominently in Hollywood film production¹¹—fit well with the myth’s implications of the danger of non-Aryan influence. Films from America had, already during the Weimar period, “occasioned heated debate, playing the part—depending on one’s persuasion—of German

⁹ Kreimeier, Klaus. *The Ufa Story: The History of Germany's Greatest Film Company 1918-1945*. Berkeley, Ca.: U of California, 1996. Print.

¹⁰ H. N., “Abstecher nach Brüssel. Fim-Eindrücke—das ‘helle Bild’ des USA-Films,” *Film-Kurier*, 26 September 1934.

¹¹Gabler, Neal. *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*. New York: Doubleday, 1998. Print.

cinema's nemesis or its role model"¹². A liberal and international film industry was a threat to those who sought to recast German culture in strict domestic—and, moreover, National Socialist—terms.

Emigres and Non-Emigres during the Third Reich

Whatever the characteristics that differentiated German film directors in the Weimar period, the most important by June 1933 was whether or not one was Jewish. Nazi officials had long called for Jewish influence to be eliminated from cinema; as Hans Traub wrote,

German films should in the future be made only by Germans...Only those films that are made by a German company in German studios with German ideas, a German author, German composers, and German film crews will be recognized as German films.¹³

Despite the abilities of Jewish directors, producers, and film industry workers in general, all were considered an “alien” influence¹⁴.

The majority of the emigres in the dataset are German-Jewish, and for this reason, it is difficult to discern whether a director who emigrated did so because of opposition to creative control, or out of fear for his life. The period 1933-1938 saw increasing anti-Semitic rhetoric and actions, culminating in *Kristallnacht*, but a German-Jewish director would have been unable to see exactly what lay ahead in 1933. Since any Jewish director who remained in Germany would eventually be imprisoned and sent to the concentration camps, there is no counterfactual required

¹² Rentschler, Eric. *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and Its Afterlife*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002. Print.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 228. The connotation being that Jews are not German.

¹⁴ *Die Phantasiemaschine. Eine Saga der Gewinnsucht*. Berlin: Paul Zsolnay, 1931.

for a proper assessment as to whether emigrating from a country with a censorship regime has a significant impact on one's career.

The flipside of this question—rather than emigrating, does remaining in a country with a censorship regime have a significant impact upon one's future creative output?—offers a better methodological grounding, since non-emigres could equally have been emigres, but except for rare cases, not vice versa. As creative freedom was stifled within the first half of 1933, non-Jewish German directors had many years, at least until the outbreak of war in 1939, to make a decision as to whether they would continue to comply with the government's artistic demands or leave.

Film and Control in the Third Reich

In order to understand the motivations of the non-emigres as they adapted to the new order, it is important to recognize that Nazi cinema was not entirely, or even mostly Fascist agitprop, nor did full censorship begin immediately. As Goebbels emphasized, "We do not want representations of National Socialism to be a matter of choosing the correct material, but rather of granting this material a proper shape"¹⁵. National Socialist ideals were to be embedded in even the most seemingly apolitical film; Goebbels understood that suasion would be ultimately more effective than coercion, stating that,

...even entertainment can be politically of special value, because the moment a person is conscious of propaganda, propaganda becomes ineffective. However, when propaganda

¹⁵ Goebbels, in *Volkischer Beobachter*, 9 February 1934, cited in D. Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933-1945* (UK 2001) p.74.

as a tendency, as a characteristic, as an attitude remains in the background and becomes apparent through human beings, then propaganda becomes effective in every respect¹⁶.

By allowing a certain fluidity within an otherwise confined space, Goebbels was able to limit the public's consciousness of propaganda, which might have otherwise threatened the financial success—and thus the persuasive effect—of National Socialist cinema. Indeed, “the Nazi regime allowed itself the luxury of ironizing its own operations, hoping all the better to anticipate and neutralize collective dissatisfaction”¹⁷. While films such as 1933's *Hitler Youth Quex* clearly showed the path that the Nazi party intended for Germany—the film glamorizes a Hitler Youth member who sacrifices himself for the sake of the party against Communist agitators—other films, such as 1936's *Lucky Kids*—the German counterpart to Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night*—seemed benign and disinterested in politics. A non-emigre director would have found it easy to convince himself that by not making overt propaganda films, such as Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 film *Triumph of the Will*, he was an entertainer rather than a tool of the state.

Non-emigre directors would be able to fool themselves even as Goebbels sought to rid German cinema of American films. The popularity of American films in German cinema had continued unabated through the 1930s, and the contrast in audience engagement was stark. Despite Goebbels' best efforts, “German comedies left people cold, melodramas incited open scorn, tendentious as well as intellectual film alienated viewers”¹⁸. As long as American films remained on screen and in the minds of Germans, the messages embedded in domestic German film, both discrete and obvious, would fall on distracted eyes.

¹⁶ Rentschler, Eric. *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and Its Afterlife*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002. Print. p. 259

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 203

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 114

Goebbels' effort to make a truly popular domestic German cinema showed progress through the mid-1930s and up to 1940. An official decree on November 27, 1936 required that film reviews be descriptive rather than critical¹⁹. American movie premieres, which numbered in the dozens in 1933, quickly declined in number until their total ban from German screens in 1940²⁰. The elimination of American competition might not have seemed such a warning sign to non-emigres, since, "American successes made for double frustration: envy of what one lacked, dissatisfaction with what one had"²¹. The premiere of *Lucky Kids* in 1936 and its success at emulating its American counterpart was a sigh of relief for the German film industry; finally, "a German production proved it could keep up with its fiercest competitor, and do so without foreign—that is to say, Jewish—help"²².

Goebbels' propaganda machine ramped up as the German war effort began. German cinema shifted away from *Volkisch* films that fantasized the bucolic, such as Arnold Fanck's *Bergfilme* (mountain film), and towards a more strident nationalism in films that, "constructed the Nazi adversary in a multitude of guises: spies, agitators, saboteurs, and incendiaries of various nationalities"²³. The most notable of these films is *Jud Süß*, which sought to frighten audiences with the intimation that, "under his masks the Semite is an Aryan"²⁴.

That the film won the Ministry of Film's *jugendwert* (worthwhile for young audiences) and *staatspolitisch und künstlerisch besonders wertvoll* (politically and artistically especially worthwhile) awards demonstrates Goebbels' increasing commingling of the state and

¹⁹ Decree of 27 November 1936 in Wulf, *Die bildenden Künste im Dritten Reich*, p. 127

²⁰ Boguslaw Drewniak, *Der deutsche Film 1938-1945. Ein Gesamtüberblick* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1987), p. 814.

²¹ Rentschler, Eric. *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and Its Afterlife*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002. Print. p. 104

²² *Ibid.*, 121

²³ *Ibid.*, 153

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 163

entertainment industry in order to unite the German populace against the state's foes. As the war turned against Germany, the illusion of a mostly free and competitive film industry seemed dispelled. By 1942, four state-owned studios dominated the film scene²⁵.

Despite this, non-emigre directors would take advantage of the cognitive dissonance that a popular but monitored film industry engendered. As the director of *Jud Süß*, Veit Harlan, claimed at his post-war trial, "my party is art. I am a patriot. I love my homeland...I'm no politician. I'm a director"²⁶. Directors could blame Goebbels for his political interference in their films; theirs was an arm's-length complicity, not a full-throated one. In doing so, they precisely realized Goebbels' intent.

Methodology

The approach to this question began with data collection, chiefly from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) and the English and German-language versions of the Amazon site. Regression methods in R formed the basis of analysis. The dependent variable is Proportion Available on Amazon, measuring the creative durability of a director's filmography. This variable is the number of films directed after 1933 that are available on Amazon or Amazon.de as a proportion of all movies directed. Several additional independent variables are included with the main independent variable of interest, Left Germany (1/0). These additional independent variables control for the impact that professional experience, contemporary popularity, and other factors may have on a director's creative durability.

Years after Exile functions as a metric of productive time remaining for emigres.
Proportion of movies produced before 1933 (out of all movies produced by the director)

²⁵ Ibid., 216

²⁶ Siegfried Zielinski, *Veit Harlan* (Frankfurt am Main: R. G. Fischer, 1981), p.56.

represents the experience a director had before 1933. Additional premieres per movie post-1933 shows the contemporary popularity of a director's individual films, which can add to a director's professional reputation. International prizes per movie post-1933 is an impact factor—directors who won these prizes have produced movies deemed worthy of celebration, which are more likely to be preserved and viewed in the future. Academy Award wins and nominations is another impact factor, for emigres only.

Finally, the number of Reich prizes won illustrates the extent to which a director fulfilled National Socialist political goals with his or her movie. These were state-sponsored prizes with different categories of recognition, based on the similarity between a film's themes and the objectives of National Socialism. These prizes, such as the *kuenstlerisch besonders vertvoll* (artistically especially worthwhile) prize, blurred the line that Goebbels drew between overt and subversive propaganda: on one hand, the prizes would have appeared to be meritorious commendations; but on the other, the same ministry that examined and green-lit films awarded these prizes.

Because modern audiences have considerable differences of opinion regarding whether a director during the Third Reich had enough creative control to remain an artist, a director's decision to remain in Germany is not a sufficient indictment of collusion. Modern audiences' opinions range from the total condemnation of all works produced during the Third Reich to revisionist arguments for dissident themes in works, taken to represent artistic defiance on the part of the directors. Whatever the opinion regarding the whole of the works produced under censorship, rationally, a film awarded a prize from the Ministry of Film is a strong indicator that the film fulfills some political objective, and that the film's director has a more obvious relationship with National Socialism than those directors who complied with the censorship

regime only to the extent they were required. Audiences may thus react more strongly to prize-winning directors' works.

Analysis

Variable names and definitions appear in Table 1. Sample statistics for these variables appear in Table 2.

Linear regression (Table 3), proportional logistic regression (Table 4), and Tobit regression (Table 5) were employed to estimate the relationship between the aforementioned independent variables and the dependent variable. Tobit regression takes into account the zero bias of the sum of the binary variable Available on Amazon (1/0) (per movie in director's post-1933 filmography) that was used to calculate the above proportion on a director-by-director basis. Regression results appear in the appendix below.

Looking at the Linear Regression and Tobit regression results, it is apparent that leaving or staying in Germany is not significantly associated with changes in a director's creative durability metric. The metrics that we would expect to have a positive impact on creative durability—Years After Exile, Proportional of Additional Premieres, and Proportion of International Prizes—are significant.

Interestingly, the number of Reich prizes a director has is not significantly associated with creative durability. This is qualified by the question of whether this is due to audiences' short memory of the political context of the film, or lack of information regarding the prizes' awarding to specific directors.

Conclusion

While the lack of significance for the Left Germany variable is not too surprising when taking into account the unmeasured effects of cultural change that emigres faced, the lack of significance for the Reich prizes variable is. Audiences do not respond differently to Reich prize-winning non-emigre directors, who in a sense knowingly produced propaganda under the Third Reich, than they do to those directors who did not win Reich prizes.

The implications of this result are broad, if they are generalizable. An artist may not damage the long-term viability of his or her works by actively supporting a censorship regime. While this disconnect might be expected for artists who have earned significant notoriety for their abuse of art for propagandistic purposes—such as Leni Riefenstahl, a case study of artist-turned-propagandist—and whose works would be alive today as warnings of how art can be warped, it signifies that artists can sacrifice creative freedom without sacrificing the longevity of their works in the public consciousness. Notionally, governments may feel less reticent about drafting artists into the employ of churning out propaganda, as might the artists themselves.

Ultimately, this places a significant responsibility on the shoulders of artists. In times of curtailed creative freedoms, artists have a choice to make that is not black nor white, but rather gray. They can refuse to comply with the government's demands and flee, deeming their creative freedom to be sacred, or comply with the government, knowing that audiences will not respond to an artist's submission to censorship in the future.

Returning to this specific case, since audiences do not appear to respond to compliant directors negatively, are these directors' works art? These works certainly influenced a populace, as art tends to do. Moreover, some directors may have sincerely believed in the separation of their artistry from politics, as many would claim after the war.

In principle, the answer is no. These directors’ membership in the Reich film ministry and their submission of works to the government resulted in the directors producing weapons, not art. Goebbels, through his Ministry of Film, sought to use art subversively, to influence Germans without their consciousness of the fact. As Goebbels understood in 1933, “the Ministry’s task is to bring about a spiritual mobilization in Germany. It seeks to do for the German spirit what the Ministry of Defense does for German weaponry”²⁷. Artists who complied did not produce art with political subtexts, but weapons with artistic subtexts.

By this logic, non-emigre directors were as responsible for inflicting harm as an armament factory line worker—perhaps not a full-throated supporter of the war, but a participant nonetheless. Goebbels’ machinations do not absolve these directors of the responsibility they had as artists. By submitting to the censorship regime in Germany, these non-emigre directors produced works that betrayed the basic conventions of artistry—far from art, these works are anti-art.

Appendix

Table 1: Variable names and definitions

Variable	Definition
PropAmaz –Dependent variable	Number of films directed after 1933 available on Amazon or Amazon.de as a proportion of all movies directed.

²⁷ Rentschler, Eric. *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and Its Afterlife*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002. Print. p. 228

Variable	Obs	Mean	Min	Max
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YearsAfterEx				Years after Exile—productive time remaining
LeftGer				Whether a director left Germany (LeftGer=1) or not
PropBef1933				Proportion of films directed before 1933—experience metric
PropAddtlPrem				Additional international premieres per movie post-1933
PropIntPrizes				International prizes per movie post-1933
AcadAwardWinNom				Academy Award wins and nominations
ReichPrizes				Number of Reich Prizes won by director

Table 2: Summary Statistics

PropAmaz- Dependent Variable	31	.2772	0	1
YearsAfterEx	31	13.42	0	48
LeftGer	31	.4516	0	1
PropBef1933	31	.5389	0.1250	.9412
PropAddtlPrem	31	2.939	0	10
PropIntPrizes	31	.04982	0	.42857
AcadAwardWinNom	31	2.194	0	38
ReichPrizes	31	3.161	0	26

Table 3: Linear Regression:

Coefficients:

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t)
(Intercept)	-0.265242	0.164387	-1.614	0.1203
YearsAfterEX	0.011890	0.006548	1.816	0.0825 .
LeftGER	-0.115593	0.217129	-0.532	0.5996
PropBef1933	0.394371	0.252740	1.560	0.1323
PropAddtlPrem	0.049160	0.024764	1.985	0.0592 .
PropIntPrizes	1.196489	0.562651	2.127	0.0444 *
AcadAwardWinNom	-0.001805	0.007314	-0.247	0.8072
ReichPrizes	0.007095	0.006937	1.023	0.3170

Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 0.2232 on 23 degrees of freedom

Multiple R-squared: 0.5798, Adjusted R-squared: 0.4519

F-statistic: 4.533 on 7 and 23 DF, p-value: 0.002656

Table 4: Proportional Logistic Regression

Coefficients:

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t)	
(Intercept)	-5.002761	1.443856	-3.465	0.0021	**
YearsAfterEX	0.067833	0.042744	1.587	0.1262	
LeftGER	-0.420162	1.545599	-0.272	0.7882	
PropBef1933	2.939197	1.857405	1.582	0.1272	
PropAddtlPrem	0.282906	0.184889	1.530	0.1396	
PropIntPrizes	7.718536	3.893923	1.982	0.0595	.
AcadAwardWinNom	-0.006547	0.041966	-0.156	0.8774	
ReichPrizes	0.061730	0.047694	1.294	0.2084	

Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

(Dispersion parameter for quasibinomial family taken to be 0.3622419)

Null deviance: 15.8349 on 30 degrees of freedom
Residual deviance: 7.2769 on 23 degrees of freedom
AIC: NA

Number of Fisher Scoring iterations: 5

Table 5: Tobit Regression:

Coefficients:

	Estimate	Std. error	t value	Pr(> t)
(Intercept)	-0.541558	0.222744	-2.431	0.0150 *
YearsAfterEX	0.016270	0.008025	2.028	0.0426 *
LeftGER	-0.121085	0.276370	-0.438	0.6613
PropBef1933	0.497615	0.316680	1.571	0.1161
PropAddtlPrem	0.065178	0.030823	2.115	0.0345 *
PropIntPrizes	1.454546	0.670417	2.170	0.0300 *
AcadAwardWinNom	-0.003247	0.008444	-0.385	0.7006
ReichPrizes	0.014139	0.008668	1.631	0.1028
logSigma	-1.364393	0.166609	-8.189	2.63e-16 ***

Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Newton-Raphson maximisation, 8 iterations

Return code 1: gradient close to zero

Log-likelihood: -7.803354 on 9 Df