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Art of the Weimar Republic and the Premonitions of Fascism

Leshan Xiao

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Claremont McKenna College

Art of the Weimar Republic and the
Premonitions of Fascism

submitted to
Professor Jonathan Petropoulos
and
Professor Friederike von Schwerin-High

by
Leshan Xiao

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Abstract

Founded in 1918 following the carnage of World War One until the Nazi takeover of 1933, the Weimar Republic is widely renowned as a bastion of freedom and democracy that existed only briefly between the reigns of two authoritarian regimes. The Weimar period witnessed an unprecedented prosperity of art and culture, with tremendous advancements in the fields of literature, the visual arts, and film. However, the remnants of the old Empire persisted within the new Republic, and new fascist factions rose to prominence within German society. Artists that lived through the era, both liberal and conservative, observed and provided their opinions on this phenomenon that would culminate in the advent of Nazi Germany. The purpose of this paper is to examine works of art across genres and by different artists, establish a connection with the fascist trends in Weimar Germany, and understand the attitudes of each respective artist towards the decline of German society into illiberalism and barbarism. I argue that artists anticipated fascist political and cultural developments in the years prior to the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, and look at the various artists in the realms of literature, the visual arts, and film.

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Introduction

The year 1918 was one of chaos and turmoil. World War One eventually come to an end after four long years of continuous combat, claiming the lives of 20 million throughout its course. Although the carnage and destruction did little to change the balance of power during the war itself, the advent of peace completely restructured the nations of Europe and around the world. The political and economic unrest that accompanied the war proved destructive for the Russian Empire, which was overthrown by the Communists under Vladimir Lenin in 1917. Similarly, the end of the Great War also saw the destruction of the Ottoman Empire, the Austria-Hungary Empire, as well as the German Empire. From the ashes of the old regimes, new nations rose to the forefront of interwar era, revitalizing the European socio-political landscape.

Among the ranks of the newly created nations was the new state of Germany. Although it only lasted for a short period of 14 years, the Weimar Republic was one of the most prominent centers of art and culture. Within the realm of literature, Writers like Erich Remarque and Thomas Mann wrote novels pondering on the recent history of Germany, questioning the past and future paths of the German nation. In visual art, the Weimar Republic became a heartland to many modernist styles, attracting artists from Germany and abroad to the urban landscapes of Berlin and Munich. In the new popular media of film, experimental filmmakers like Fritz Lang and Walter Ruttmann took inspiration from contemporary styles of Expressionism and New Objectivity, creating visually unique films that have influenced modern filmmaking to this day.

The art and culture of the Weimar Republic have always been known for being a force of liberalism and progressive movement. Historian Eric Weitz described the Weimar Republic as a

“moment of great political as well as cultural achievement.”¹ Within the chaotic and unrestrained years of the new Republic, liberalism and even communism flourished within both the parliament (*Reichstag*) and on the streets with the general populace. Artists from different fields expressed their criticisms at the previous regime, and at the same time actively sought out their own ideas for a better future. Before the Nazi takeover of 1933, Germany was one of the most liberal nations in Europe, filled with provocative themes of political, social, and even sexual freedom. The Weimar Republic seemed abrupt both in its creation and its downfall, conceived from a regime of tyranny and warfare, and its destruction marked the return to dictatorship and brutality.

Under the guise of this tremendous progress, however, lied an undercurrent of authoritarianism and fascism within the Weimar Republic. It is no coincidence that Eric Weitz chose “Promise and Tragedy”² for the title of his book on this era. The Weimar period was plagued with socio-political conflicts. From the polarization of opinions, to the violent street battles and political assassinations, various events and trends foreshadowed the Nazi movement long before Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany. This premonition for fascism came partially as a continuation of the philosophy of the old German Reich, and partially as a result of the rising trend of extreme nationalism and racism that would lead to the birth of the Nazi party.

These fascist tendencies became commonly depicted by artists that shared similar opinions, who used their artistic medium as a way to propagate their beliefs. Conversely, those that opposed this fascist trend also utilized their own talents in an attempt to warn the public of

¹ Weitz, Eric D. *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, 2

² Weitz

its terrifying potentials. Within the realms of literature, the visual arts, as well as the new medium of film, both sides of the political spectrum provided their own observations and analyses of fascist phenomenons, documenting their time period and at the same time fighting for their ideal future.

Chapter 1: Literature

Art and culture within the Weimar Republic follows a long tradition of German thinkers, writers, and artists. From the land of Goethe and Schiller, German literature continued to prosper under the new democratic system. Playwright Alfred Döblin took inspiration from the history and current events within Germany and other nations,³ and created creative social commentary in favor of political reform;⁴ Hermann Hesse, on the other hand, focused on the internal struggles of mankind, attempting to discover the meanings to human existence;⁵ Finally, and perhaps most renowned of Weimar writers, were the Mann brothers, Heinrich and Thomas. Heinrich Mann observed and recreated the freedom and indulgences of the Weimar society with his novel *Professor Unrat*, which was adapted to film form as one of the most recognizable symbols of its era.⁶ His younger brother Thomas Mann, worked with both traditional German themes as well as thoughts and ideas of the new epoch, becoming one of the most towering figures of 20th Century German literature. However, although Weimar literature was built upon centuries of German tradition, the modern themes and philosophies that arose from the new era also defined Weimar writings. “I am no Goethe; yet a little, distantly related somehow or other, as Adalbert Stifter put it, I ‘belong to his family.’”⁷ Thomas Mann proudly compared himself to the German past in a lecture to college students in 1922, but at the same time admitted their tremendous differences.

³ Döblin, Alfred, and C. D. Godwin. *The Three Leaps of Wang Lun: a Chinese Novel*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2015.

⁴ Döblin, Alfred, and Michael Hofmann. *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. New York: New York Review Books, 2018. And, Döblin, Alfred. *November 1918, a German Revolution: a Novel*. New York: Fromm International, 1983.

⁵ Hesse, Hermann. *Steppenwolf*. New York: Modern Library, 1963.

⁶ Von Sternberg, Josef, director. *The Blue Angel*. UFA. 1930.

⁷ Mann, Thomas. “On the German Republic.” 1922, *German History in Documents and Images*, germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/pdf/eng/ghi_pol_MannRepublic_eng.pdf.

German writers during the interwar era presented their own observations of the German society, and presented their own analyses.

Ernst Jünger: *The Storm of Steel*

The arts of the Weimar Republic were heavily influenced by the political and social events of its era. Many of the works of art and literature stemmed from the social conflicts between various political groups, while others referenced to even earlier events that predate the foundation of the Republic. Perhaps the most important piece of history that shaped Weimar culture was the First World War. And it is appropriate. The First World War not only drastically changed German society and eventually pushed to the end of the German Empire and the formation of the Weimar Republic, but also forever altered the political landscape of Europe and even the entire world.

The response towards World War I within Europe shaped the intellectual and social atmosphere of the interwar era. Many of Europe's most eminent artists and writers criticized the war as wanton waste of lives over nothing. On the Entente side, British wartime poets like Wilfred Owen wrote about the awful experiences in the trenches, rejecting the traditions of blind patriotism. Across the Pacific, American works of literature such as *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) by Ernest Hemingway depicted similar scenes of carnage, as well as themes of cynicism and disillusion. In Germany, Erich Maria Remarque used his own personal experiences during the war as basis for his novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928), one of the most famous novels dealing with themes of warfare. In Germany and all across Europe and the world, liberal and

progressive members of society criticized the war and the political systems that had made it possible.

However, not every member of the intellectual community agreed with this point of view. In fact, many thinkers and writers believed that the war had its merits. In Germany, one of the best-known novelists that went against Remarque's narrative of the First World War was Ernst Jünger. A lieutenant of the Imperial Germany Army and a highly decorated soldier, Jünger's experience was similar to that of Remarque and other soldiers, although he was also unique in many regards. Unlike Remarque who was drafted nearing the end of the war, Jünger joined the army voluntarily during the opening stages of the war in 1914. Having also experienced the same destruction and horrors of war, Jünger nevertheless emerged from his service with a completely different perspective. His World War One memoir *The Storm of Steel* characterized his positive view on the German (and his own) involvement, specifically, the book contains themes of the glorification of warfare; the bond between frontline soldiers; as well as the sense of hyper-nationalism.

Ernst Jünger claimed that the First World War was a transcendent experience. In the forewords to *The Storm of Steel*, he claimed that "Time only strengthens my conviction that it was a good and strenuous life, and that the war, for all its destructiveness, was an incomparable schooling of the heart."⁸ Throughout the memoir, Jünger never shied away from the bloodshed or the destruction of the war, but even then instead believed that the violence and carnage were crucial instruments for the maturity of its participants.

⁸ Jünger, Ernst. *Storm of Steel*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1929, xii

Even before physically arriving on the battlefields, Jünger has had a glorified vision of warfare. He fantasized about the honorable combat, as well as the noble sacrifice for one's country.

The war has entered into us like wine. We had set out in a rain of flowers to seek the death of heroes. The war was our dream of greatness, power, and glory. It was a man's work, a duel on fields whose flowers would be stained with blood. There is no lovelier death in the world... Anything rather than stay at home, anything to make one with the rest...⁹

As an enthusiastic young man that volunteered for the war in search of adventures in the battlefield, Ernst Jünger and many others like him yearned for the ability to prove himself in martial combat. In fact, Jünger's passion for adventure can be seen long before the outbreak of war. He had been a member of the *Wandervogel* youth group that focused on the exploration of nature. Jünger joined the French Foreign Legion at the age of eighteen, and later deserted service in order to travel in Morocco. In *The Storm of Steel*, Jünger described the early actions in World War One with similar passion and enthusiasm. As the soldiers started their assault on an Entente trench, the youngsters followed the orders to get in formation, and "put a clip of live cartridges into the magazine with secret joy."¹⁰

His optimistic expectations were dampened significantly as his dreams of glory became the reality of the frontlines. The awful conditions within the trenches, the constant bombardments of enemy artillery, as well as regular efforts in conducting and countering infantry attacks against the trenches proved to be anything but clean and glorious. Throughout the war Jünger witnessed the death and injury of many of his comrades-in-arms, and he was also scarred fourteen times. What was more significant though were his psychological scars from the

⁹ Jünger, 1

¹⁰ Jünger, 5

horrors of war. Jünger suffered greatly from the Entente bombardments, and the fear of artillery strikes caused considerable fear towards any loud noises. “I seldom heard the rumble of a passing lorry without mistaking it for the sound of that deadly shell.”¹¹

The incredible destructiveness of the First World War was even more shocking to young Ernst Jünger, who had not yet seen a dead body during the peacetimes of his youth. On one hand, he would insist that the war was a transcendent experience, that he found it to be most educational. However, he also did not shy away from the terrible sights of warfare that might dissuade others from being a part of it.

And now at our first glance of horror we had a feeling that is difficult to describe. Seeing and recognizing are matters, really, of habit. In the case of something quite unknown the eye alone can make nothing of it. So it was that we had to stare again and again at these things that we had never seen before, without being able to give them any meaning. It was too entirely unfamiliar. We looked at all these dead with dislocated limbs, distorted faces, and the hideous colours of decay, as though we walked in a dream through a garden full of strange plants, and we could not realize at first what we had all round us. But finally we were so accustomed to the horrible that if we came on a dead body anywhere on a fire-step or in a ditch we gave it no more than a passing thought and recognized it as we would a stone or a tree.¹²

Jünger very much addressed the destruction and carnage during wartime, although he also admitted to the reduction of emotional response to the terrors of war. And even though he recognized the physical damage experienced by soldiers during warfare, he was convinced that war in itself is an educational process that ultimately provides benefit to those who survive.

The glorification of war as demonstrated by *The Storm of Steel* was not a new concept created by Ernst Jünger. However, in an era of Erich Remarque, Ernest Hemingway, and Wilfred Owen, it is fascinating to see a frontline soldier who seemed to have actually seen his military service as valuable, both for his own nation as well as for himself. His writings, *The Storm of*

¹¹ Jünger, 3

¹² Jünger, 23

Steel in particular, were highly coveted by the Nazi regime after 1933. As Adolf Hitler's vision of the new German empire depended on wars of conquest, the propaganda machine in Nazi Germany focused heavily on themes related to war. Soldiers and martial prowess were commonly featured in national propaganda, such as Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 film *Day of Freedom: Our Armed Forces*, which presented a heavily fictionalized version of warfare with a staged battle in Nuremberg, mythicizing and glorifying warfare in order to attract more young men into service.¹³ Ernst Jünger went against the mainstream perceptions of war during the interwar era, and at the same time initiated the new attitudes towards warfare that will become the new standard within Hitler's Germany.

Other than the educational value of war, Jünger also gained the gift of friendship with his fellow soldiers serving on the frontlines. Human connection was an important aspect when dealing with such hardships, and while his friends were instrumental in both preserving his physical body¹⁴ and his mind, they were also causes for great emotional distraught. Jünger cherished his friendships, especially making note of when they stuck by him in times of need. "The last of my long series of batmen, too, was no exception to the rest. He struck by me, though the hospital allowed no provisions to be made for him and he had to beg what he could in the kitchen."¹⁵ His friends and fellow soldiers served by his side, and gave him comfort enough to survive the long years of war. However, the affinity towards his comrades-in-arms also caused Jünger great pain, and even led to his troops committing great atrocities in order to avenge their fallen friends. Jünger as an individual believed firmly in the old chivalrous ideas of warfare as a contest between gentlemen loyal to their respective nations. During a mostly amicable

¹³ Riefenstahl, Leni, director. *Tag der Freiheit: Unsere Wehrmacht*. Universum Film AG, 1935.

¹⁴ Jünger, 312-313

¹⁵ Jünger, 314

interaction with the French soldiers out in the no-man's-land in the early stages of the war, he described the conversations as "sportsmanlike"¹⁶ and without hatred towards one another. This mutual respect did not last throughout the war, however, as the brutality of the war increased dramatically over the coming months. After losing the 7th Company and its commander Captain von Brixen, Jünger and his soldiers became furious, hoping to avenge their fallen comrades. While Jünger did not actively stop his men from shooting unarmed British troops that had already surrendered, he did in retrospect comment on the tastelessness of the incident, calling it "baseness" and "repulsive."¹⁷ However, for all his insistence on honorable combat, he also somewhat sympathized with his troops committing these atrocities.

On the other hand, the defending force, after driving their bullets into the attacking one at five paces' distance, must take consequences. A man cannot change his feelings again during the last rush with a veil of blood before his eyes. He does not want to take prisoners but to kill. He has no scruples left; only the spell of primeval instinct remains. It is not till blood has flowed that the mist gives way in his soul. He looks round him as though waking from the bondage of a dream. It is only that he becomes once more a soldier of to-day and capable of addressing himself to the next problem of tactics.¹⁸

Even with his understanding of his fellow soldiers' atrocities, Jünger held on to his more idealistic visions of war. "It has always been my ideal in war to eliminate all feelings of hatred and to treat my enemy as an enemy only in battle and to honour him as a man according to his courage."¹⁹ As an individual, he had almost always been able to contain his more primal emotions, and although he indeed glorified the soldier's experience during wartime, with the one exception being the death of his friends and comrades. The existence of human connections between one serviceman and another was both a blessing and a curse, and while comfort came

¹⁶ Jünger, 52

¹⁷ Jünger, 262

¹⁸ Jünger, 263

¹⁹ Jünger, 52

from the presence of friendship, the sudden loss of life could also drive one towards unspeakable crimes.

Comradery and fellowship among soldiers can be traced back thousands of years to Titus Pullo and Lucius Vorenus of the Roman Republic.²⁰ In their case, the bond between them gave them courage and strength in combat, achieving glory for themselves and Rome as well. In the case of Ernst Jünger and his unit, however, it was the cause for senseless murder and atrocities. Similar traits of companionship existed in Germany long after the end of the First World War. Despite being (at least nominally) in peacetime, pockets of World War One veterans continued their fellowship as paramilitary groups known as the *Freikorps*. These right-wing factions banded together due to the alienating experiences of war, and the comradery they found became their only emotional connections to other humans, creating a highly distinct group of people that became akin to a new social class. German sociologist Klaus Theweleit observed this so-called “front socialism” (*Frontsozialismus*), and put it within context of the *Freikorps* as the bridge between the Imperial German Army and the SA, paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party.²¹ The dangers of this comradery continued well into the Second World War and in the context of the Holocaust. When dealing with the atrocities committed by seemingly “ordinary men” of the 101 Reserve Police Battalion, Christopher Browning believed that the mental and emotional need for other soldiers was a main cause for the perpetrators.²² While not as personal nor as emotional as the loss of a dear comrade as experienced by Jünger, the conformity within the ranks of soldiers

²⁰ Caesar, Julius. *Commentaries on the Gallic War*. Nabu Press, 2011. 5.44

²¹ Theweleit, Klaus, and Chris Turner. *Male Fantasies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

²² Browning, Christopher R. *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2017.

also demonstrated the negative impact of front socialism, and the horrors and atrocities that can be brought about by the seemingly innocent need for personal connections during times of war.

Although Jünger confirmed Erich Remarque's experience of pain and suffering during the First World War, he still walked away in 1918 believing that the war was an important aspect of his life and the lives of all young men like him. Jünger was devoted to his military services not only for his own glory, nor just the knowledge and maturity he received from four long years of combat. For Jünger, him and every soldier like him fought for their homeland. "I learned from this very four years' schooling in force and in all the fantastic extravagance of material warfare that life has no depth of meaning except when it is pledged for an ideal, and that there are ideals in comparison with which the life of an individual and even of a people has no weight."²³ What is striking about this statement is the lack of a specific "ideal" ever mentioned in *The Storm of Steel*. Instead, Jünger focused only on a very general sense of patriotism. He did not need any ideology of the nation to be convinced to fight for it, such as religion or a political agenda, which sets him apart from fanatically patriotic Nazis. While this conservative patriotism could be problematic as it reinforced subservience to individual states, it also means that well educated members of society such as Jünger were not more susceptible to extremist narratives.

Despite the glorification Jünger had for World War I, it would be disingenuous to call him a warmonger. He believed in fighting for his nation, but he did not seem to have harbored any animosity towards the other side of the war. Throughout his narrative in *The Storm of Steel*, Jünger gave high praise for the soldiers fighting on the Entente side. In the preface to the English edition (although it might not be completely genuine), he conveyed much respect for his former

²³ Jünger, 316

adversaries. “As any genuine soldier will easily understand, we spoke of him very much more respectfully than was commonly the case with the newspapers of those days. There is no one less likely to disparage the lion than the lion-hunter.”²⁴ While Jünger was able to find himself a clear equilibrium that sustained his personal conservative nationalist values and did not succumb to the deep end of extreme right-wing politics, his writings were definitely provocative, especially without context of his experiences or beliefs. The ending to his memoir, for example, is an especially troubling display of nationalism that simply appealed to patriotism as an end to itself.

We stand in the memory of the dead who are holy to us, and we believe ourselves entrusted with the true and spiritual welfare of our people. We stand for what will be and what has been. Through force without and barbarity within conglomerate in sombre clouds, yet so long as the blade of a sword will strike a spark in the night may it be said: Germany lives and Germany shall never go under!²⁵

Throughout the First World War, Jünger was staunchly loyal to and proud of his nation, but it wasn't without reservation and disagreement with the national leaders, military officers, as well as his fellow soldiers. The rhetoric within his account, however, could undoubtedly lead to blind patriotism without deliberation. With the end of World War I and the establishment of the Weimar Republic, the disillusioned Ernst Jünger nevertheless remained in the army for another four years until 1923. Although he continued to serve the newly founded nation of Germany, Jünger also became an outspoken critic of the Republic. He vehemently disagreed with what he saw as “his having to cast away the heroic mold.”²⁶ He lamented the passing of the German Empire, reminiscenced what he thought of as the perfect environment for the cultivation of loyalty, nobility, and courage.

²⁴ Jünger, x

²⁵ Jünger, 319

²⁶ Nevin, Thomas R. Ernst Jünger and Germany: into the Abyss, 1914-1945. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996, 80

Due to his conservative and nationalistic values, Ernst Jünger has been seen by his detractors as the “John the Baptist of fascism, preparing the way for Hitler.”²⁷ It should be noted, however, that although he came close to the ideologies of the rising National Socialist movement, he never became a member nor even an ally of the Nazi Party. Despite his great patriotism as depicted in *The Storms of Steel*, Jünger did not blindly follow any German leader just to be patriotic, and the ability and willingness to speak out against his unjust government. While Jünger was fascinated by the Nazis’ rhetoric on “blood” and its ability to unite the entire German nation in a fashion akin to the German Empire, he rejected the racial factors of that concept, instead focusing on the cultural and linguistic essence as what makes one German.²⁸ While Ernst Jünger was never a staunch supporter of the Republic nor its democratic values, he rejected the specific brand of totalitarianism as displayed by the Nazis. In 1939 during the reigns of Nazi Germany, Jünger wrote and published his novella *On the Marble Cliffs*. Set in a fantasy agricultural society, the novella criticized the Nazis’ oppressive society through analogy, pointing out their guise of restoring the German traditions, while in fact they merely used the culture in order to have complete control over the nation.²⁹ Jünger preferred a benign monarchy as opposed to the unconstrained democracy of Weimar Germany. But he would rather have freedom than the anti-intellectual blind loyalty expected by the Nazi Party, finding the superfluous showmanship of men like Hitler and Goebbels to be “hysterical” and “unworthy of nationalism’s ‘idea,’”³⁰ which led to him twice rejecting the offer to become a member of the

²⁷ Nevin, 76

²⁸ Nevin, 81

²⁹ Jünger, Ernst. *On the Marble Cliffs*. Norfolk, Conn: New Directions, 1947

³⁰ Nevine, 100

German Parliament as a representative of the Nazi Party.³¹ This political stance continued to even after the end of the Second World War, believing in strict leadership that also combines “worldly wisdom with spiritual fortitude,”³² also exhibited in his novel *Heliopolis* from 1949.

Another important distinction between Ernst Jünger’s brand of nationalism and Hitler’s National Socialism is the lack of racial ideology. Jünger identified anti-Semitism as “misguided negativism, a species of reactionary nationalism,”³³ also rejecting the notion that liberalism was a Jewish invention. Holding patriotism above race and religion, he showed solidarity to his fellow soldiers by publically resigning from the World War I veterans’ organization “Traditionsverein der 73er” alongside his brother when its Jewish members were expelled.³⁴ While he believed that one’s Jewish religious identity and German national identity could not be perfectly in sync³⁵, Jünger still greatly valued the service and patriotism displayed by his compatriots nevertheless.

Ernst Jünger represented the circle of conservative intellectuals that saw merit within the monarchical system of the old German Empire. While his own views on German society came close to fascism and the ideology of the Nazi Party, he was able to stand fast against the fervor of fascism, and remained capable of criticizing the Nazi movement even during its height. His is a case of strong personal belief and intellectualism that forbid him from blindly following upstart leaders and allowed him to look at the world around him with sufficient emotional distance. No matter how enticing was the Nazis’ promise for a strong and united nation of Germany, Jünger

³¹ Buruma, Ian, and Hilary Barr. “An Exchange on Ernst Jünger.” *The New York Review of Books*, 16 Dec. 1993, www.nybooks.com/articles/1993/12/16/an-exchange-on-ernst-junger/?pagination=false.

³² Stern, Joseph Peter. *Ernst Jünger: a Writer of Our Time*. Cambridge England: Bowes & Bowes, 1953. 16

³³ Nevine, 108

³⁴ Buruma

³⁵ Nevine, 109

saw through their false claims to German tradition and unfair treatment to his Jewish compatriots, and he remained true to his convictions throughout his life.

However, one must not only consider the circumstances and the personal beliefs of the author when considering his influence on the society as a whole, as these information were more often than not not accessible to the general public. Instead, it is the work of literature itself that had mass appeal and was readily available to the masses. While Ernst Jünger made a rational decision to be fully devoted to the German Empire and respected what he saw as honorable and courageous, *Storm of Steel* glorified warfare for its destructive education of the body, mind, and spirit. It glorified one of history's most terrifying experiences, and promoted what could have easily been seen as blind loyalty to the state and one's superiors, and even justified atrocities against unarmed prisoners. Precisely because of these sentiments expressed through his novel, Jünger contributed to the rise of extreme right-wing sentiments within interwar Germany, the effects of which could not be overlooked simply from the lack of intention.

Thomas Mann: *Mario and the Magician*

Among the academics that lived through the First World War into the Weimar Republic, there were also many that leaned toward the left of the political spectrum, who believed that the war was fought for the personal interest of the few, instead of ideals or the benefit of the masses. Thomas Mann, arguably the most influential German writer of the twentieth Century, initially was not one of them. Like Ernst Jünger, he believed in the legitimacy of Germany's involvement. In his essay "Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man" in 1918, Thomas Mann provided

a rebuttal against his brother Heinrich Mann and his criticisms of the war, justifying Germany's involvement as a necessary means of preserving its culture and civilization.

The difference between intellect and politics includes that of culture and civilization, of soul and society, of freedom and voting rights, of art and literature; and German tradition is culture, soul, freedom, art, and not civilization, society, voting rights, and literature. The difference between intellect and politics, as a further example, is the difference between cosmopolitan and international. The former concept comes from the cultural sphere and is German; the latter comes from the sphere of civilization and democracy and is – something quite different.³⁶

It should be noted that Thomas Mann's patriotism was very different from that of Ernst Jünger's, despite the fact that they both share the same support for the German Empire and its role during World War One. While Jünger supported Germany because of his personal connections to his homeland, Mann believed in the ideals he saw represented by German culture. His belief that politics and democracy were unsuitable for Germany or its population is also a fascinating opinion, one that would also change with time. Throughout his career, Thomas Mann underwent a significant change in his political views, and would eventually go on exile to the United States and even campaign for war against his own homeland. However, even as his political stance became more and more liberal over time, he had never been a pacifist, as expressed in an address to a group of young students in 1922 urging them to support the Weimar Republic. "I must beg you, young men, not to take this tone. I am no pacifist, of either the unctuous or the ecstatic school. Pacifism is not to my taste, whether as a soporific for the soul or as a middle-class rationalization of the good life."³⁷ However, he also concluded that patriotism and the glorification of war during his lifetime had become problematic for the German society as a

³⁶ Mann, Thomas. "Mann, Thomas. "Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man." 1918, *German History in Documents and Images*, http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=946.

³⁷ Mann, Thomas. "On the German Republic." 1922, *German History in Documents and Images*, germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/pdf/eng/ghi_pol_MannRepublic_eng.pdf.

whole, a sense of “debased romanticism.”³⁸ Mann’s most pivotal change of political opinion came during the latter years of the Weimar Republic, as political conflicts gradually became irreconcilable both within Germany and abroad. In 1929, Thomas Mann published one of his most political novellas, *Mario and the Magician*, both ridiculing and denouncing the emerging fascist trends in Europe. In this novella, Mann described the showmanship of the charismatic fascist leader; his unifying power across all social classes; and the individual acts of resistance that eventually ends his reign.

It is with good reason that Cavaliere Cipolla, the fascist figurehead in the novella, was written by Thomas Mann as a magician. Cipolla’s trade is illusions, deceptions with a flare of the theatrical. And as such, he both looks and acts the part, having elaborate and striking clothing, and moving with the appropriate flourish that greatly assists in the charm that captures the minds and hearts of his audience. In the first performance in the novel, Cipolla purposefully does not show up on time to elicit suspense within the audience. The attendees are forced to wait anxiously for his eventual arrival, giving him a mysterious allure which Cipolla uses to his advantage.

He made us wait. That is probably the way to put it. He heightened the suspense by his delay in appearing. And we could see the point of this, too—only not when it was carried to extremes. Towards half past nine the audience began to clap—an amiable way of expressing justifiable impatience, evincing as it does an eagerness to applaud.³⁹

When Cipolla eventually shows up, he behaves as if he is in a great hurry to come upstage, and does so without dimming the lights as it was customarily done, dramatizing what is supposed to be a mundane and routine part of the performance. His premeditated lateness acts as an integral

³⁸ Mann, “On the German Republic”

³⁹ Mann, Thomas, and H. T. Lowe-Porter. *Stories of Three Decades; Translated from the German*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1938, 540

part of his performance, drawing attention and curiosity from the attendees, which Cipolla uses to attain their fascination and approval. In conjunction with his dramatic entrance, Cipolla also has a select wardrobe which he uses to augment his appeal. He is dressed in a eighteenth Century style, which dazzles his audience. “He was dressed for the street with a sort of complicated evening elegance, in a wide black pelerine with velvet collar and satin lining; which, in the hampered state of his arms, he held together in front with his white-gloved hands. He had a white scarf round his neck; a top hat with a curving brim sat far back on his head.”⁴⁰ His demeanor matches his appearances in its careful curation and the amount of attention it draws in, and his quick wits almost immediately draw the audience closer and more infatuated with him. He understands the differences between the myriad social groups within his audience, and appeals to them in various fashions different from one another. The distinct approaches he has with the wealthy and the working class, as well as with adults and children, shows a clear intention to be accepted by the entirety of those that attend his performance. His seeming chaotic but in fact carefully chosen tactic, alongside his flamboyant appearance, becomes instrumental to his success within the town of Torre di Venere.

Although the magician Cipolla is a fictional character without any historical basis, there is little doubt that he represents the charismatic fascist leaders that began to dominate the European political sphere during Thomas Mann’s lifetime. In Spain, Francisco Franco was well on his way in the accumulation of support for his eventual takeover of the Spanish government.⁴¹ In Italy, where the story of *Mario and the Magician* takes place, Benito Mussolini had already

⁴⁰ Mann, *Stories of Three Decades*, 540-541

⁴¹ Preston, Paul. *Spain in Crisis: the Evolution and Decline of the Franco Regime*. New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1976.

been in complete control of the nation for seven years.⁴² And in Mann's home country of Germany, Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party had gained tremendous momentum among the populace as a result of the Great Depression. The appeal of these fascist leaders is reflected in Cipolla's showmanship as depicted in the novella, as each of the rising dictators put careful consideration into their public appearances and personas. The magician's tendency of being late to his performances resembles Hitler's tactic of also being late to party rallies, which created the sense of anticipation and anxiety amongst his followers. His preference for grand entrances with the use of private aircrafts and vehicles also created a grandeur style, which made him almost divine in the minds of the attendees.⁴³ Furthermore, the careful selection of uniforms for the members of the Nazi party's various groups and the sense of uniformity demonstrated through these uniforms as well as highly organized formations exhibits notions of strength and unity, which was instrumental to the appeal of the Nazi party, and as integral to their success as Cipolla's flamboyant style of clothing. Adolf Hitler was also notable for his almost performance-like speeches during Nazi gatherings such as the Nuremberg Rally, and his thoroughly orchestrated combination of the ideological content as well as its dramatic execution added to the allure of Hitler himself as well as the entire Nazi movement.⁴⁴ In the hope of garnering more fervent support amongst the German populace, Hitler would rehearse his speeches over and over again in front of the mirror. He focused not only on his words or their delivery, but also on his body language and exaggerated gestures, as evident in this set of photos

⁴² Lyttelton, Adrian. *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy, 1919-1929*. Routledge, 2009. 75

⁴³ Riefenstahl, Leni, director. *Triumph of the Will*. Universum Film. 1935.

⁴⁴ Riefenstahl, *Triumph of the Will*

of him during this process.⁴⁵ The ways Hitler carefully constructed his public appearances and actions were integral parts of his great showmanship, and it was with this highly prepared methodology that he was able to charm the citizens of Germany into his service. His demonstration of horrifying ideology shared many similarities with the acts of Cipolla the magician, and they both personally benefited greatly from their performances.

Cipolla's carefully curated stagecraft leads to almost universal acclaim among his audience, who quickly become not only infatuated by him but also fervently support him and his performances. An extraordinary aspect of his success is his ability to charm different members of the attendees no matter their sociopolitical standing, or any other differences in demographics. From children to the elderly, and from the poor working class to nobility (the prince and principessa), Cipolla enjoys universal acclaim and even loyalty across all strata. "Cipolla took care not to molest the more select portion of his audience,"⁴⁶ knowing that he could not treat the nobles like the rest. With the lower class as well as the youth (*giovanotto*), however, he is much less reverent, not afraid to mock them as part of his performance. The most striking indication of Cipolla's success with his audience is the effect he has on the children. *Mario and the Magician* focuses a lot of attention on the children and their reactions to the charismatic performer, and their innocence and lack of concern shows the terrifyingly contagious charms of Cipolla. At the beginning of the story, the children do not understand the situation surrounding the performances like the adults, and they are quickly bored due to Cipolla's delay of arrival. However, they are easily swayed by the magician's flamboyant display, and soon appreciating the performance with

⁴⁵ Jeltsen, Melissa. "These Photos Of Adolf Hitler After Prison Release Are Unbelievable." *The Huffington Post*, TheHuffingtonPost.com, 7 Dec. 2017, www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/11/hitler-photos_n_3579507.html.

⁴⁶ Mann, *Stories of Three Decades*, 546

great enthusiasm. “The children laughed with all their hearts. They had understood practically nothing of what had been said, but it pleased them hugely that something so funny should happen, straight away, between that queer man up there and somebody out of the audience.”⁴⁷ Their amusement quickly turns into fervor, and the youth within the crowd become mesmerized by the Cavaliere’s performance. “Astonishment, and loud applause. The children were overwhelmed. How had he done that, they wanted to know.”⁴⁸ On the other hand, Cipolla is also astute when dealing with those he disagrees with, being unrelentingly aggressive under the guise of wit and humor. “One might have assumed that the *giovanotto* was merely the chosen butt of Cipolla’s customary professional sallies, had not the very pointed witticisms betrayed a genuine antagonism.”⁴⁹ Cipolla is able to use his role as a magician and a performer to his advantage, which give him the freedom of insulting those that he disagrees with under the appearance of public entertainment for the masses. In attacking his opponents, he appeals heavily to the nationalism of his audience, and turns public opinions of those in attendance against those he does not like by defending Italy and the town of Torre di Venere in nationalistic terms. Cipolla’s acute judgment of the various groups in his audience, as well as his knowledge in dealing with those he wants to impress and want to target, provides remarkable assistance to his popularity.

The early days of the Nazi Party consisted of a quick rise into the national political stage, and part of the strategy included appealing to the various demographics of the Weimar German population. Considering the Nazi Party’s official name, the National-Socialist German Workers’ Party, the original goal of the political party was to appeal to the working class of Germany. And although nationalism and anti-Semitism were already prominent themes during its foundation,

⁴⁷ Mann, *Stories of Three Decades*, 543

⁴⁸ Mann, *Stories of Three Decades*, 550

⁴⁹ Mann, *Stories of Three Decades*, 544

didn't always have grand ambitions of being on the national stage, or being supported by members from all walks of life. During the early expansions (*Kampfzeit*), the small Bavarian party gradually became a powerful player on the national level, and the goals of the Nazi Party also began to gravitate towards appealing to more social classes for maximum effectiveness. In the 1930 *Reichstag* elections, the Nazi Party received 36.8% of the total votes, with the most amount of supports being of the low-middle class. The Nazi Party, however, also created ties with the landowning aristocrats of the old German Empire, and used their influence in the rural regions to recruit more followers.⁵⁰ Leading members of the industrial sector also had an amicable relationship with the Nazi movement; and established corporations such as Krupp, Messerschmitt, and BMW all assisted with the civil and military productions during the Nazi regime. The similarity between the widespread appeal of Cipolla and the Nazi Party is also found in the ways they treat their opponents. Just like the Italian magician, the Nazi Party played off the national pride of the population against their political and ideological detractors, calling many "un-German." Thomas Mann himself was under such attacks, and he was forced into exile with his family after the Nazi takeover of Germany.

While the rest of the audience becomes engrossed with Cavaliere Cipolla's performance, the narrator of the story gradually sees through the magician's true intentions. He understands Cipolla's tactics and tricks, and actively tries to dissuade others from being drawn towards Cipolla's tyranny. However, he is also fascinated by the performance, and does not leave or protest the event against his better judgement. In comparison, the young man Mario takes a much more direct stance against Cipolla's dangerous fascist tendencies. He dares to openly defy the

⁵⁰ Petropoulos, Jonathan. *Royals and the Reich: the Princes Von Hessen in Nazi Germany*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

magician, and eventually decides to take Cipolla's life. Although both characters' ideals go against Cipolla's actions, their actions differ greatly from one another.

It should be no surprise that the narrator understands the story almost perfectly, as he is the one retelling it to the readers of the novella. Cipolla's trick with his unpunctuality, his general appearance and demeanor, as well as his different approach with different social groups are all accurately observed and analyzed by the narrator. Even as the narrator sees through his performance and fears its effects on the audience, however, he is also fascinated by it, and chooses to stay with his family in order to see how it plays out. "We yielded, but only for the moment, of course-so far as we I knew-only for a little while, just a few minutes longer. I cannot excuse our staying, scarcely can I even understand it."⁵¹ He manages to keep himself safe from the magician's influence through his independent critical thinking, and works against Cipolla through the education of others. The influence of the narrator is limited to the children with whom he is travelling, who are also eager to understand Cipolla's seemingly unnatural abilities during the act. "We told them it was a trick, not easily explainable offhand. In short, the man was a conjuror."⁵² Cipolla is exposed by the narrator as being a fraud and trickster as opposed to an actual man with supernatural abilities, however not in public and only for a very small number of audience members. In comparison, Mario's defiance is much more direct and confrontational, and his resistance in fact causes substantial change in the lives of the magician, as well as the entire audience. The narrator considers Mario to be one with a mild temperament, that "obedience was his calling in life."⁵³ Cipolla calls Mario to the stage, and continuously teases him, commenting on his apparent infatuation with a woman. Unlike the other members of the

⁵¹ Mann, *Stories of Three Decades*, 555

⁵² Mann, *Stories of Three Decades*, 550

⁵³ Mann, *Stories of Three Decades*, 562

audience who either stomach Cipolla's insulting jokes or do not care about the ones mercilessly teased by him, Mario finally takes action by shooting the magician, killing him in the process. Even though the narrator himself never participates in any active resistance against Cipolla, he agrees with the young man's actions, finding the assassination to be psychologically liberating.

The narrator and Mario represent two very different methods of resistance against Cipolla's actions, and the two characters are mirrored in real life by those that worked against the Nazi regime. The author of the novella, Thomas Mann, represents the non-violent intellectual method similar to the persona of his own writing. He was able to accurately foresee the fascist tendencies in his homeland, as well as across the continent of Europe. His political stance transitions gradually towards the liberal side in support of the democratic system provided by the Weimar Republic, and he wrote in quick succession a number of pieces that spoke out against the dangers of the Nazi movement. The speech for university students in 1922, as well as *Mario and the Magician*, examined the social changes in Weimar Germany, and warned the populace against these charismatic but dangerous fascist leaders. While Mann and other intellectuals chose to combat authoritarianism through logic and education, others took the route of violence and force. Throughout Hitler's career as the leader of the Nazi Party, there had been no lack of attempts made on his life, and there had been small pockets of underground resistance within Nazi Germany, both among the civilian population and within the military. Even though many of the cultural icons of the Weimar Republic did not personally participate in the Second World War, they supported the war efforts against fascism. They offered assistance through lobbying the United States to enter the war, consolidating the groups of German intellectuals in exile, and writing pamphlets and manifestos to be distributed within occupied territory. The

intellectuals-in-exile provided the theoretical foundation for a new nation that rose from the ruins, and the legacy of their works continues to influence the culture and literature of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Chapter 2: The Visual Arts

As the luminous writers of the Weimar Republic observed the contemporary society and painstakingly analyzed the glory and downfall of their epoch, debating over the merits of democracy versus authoritarianism, another field of art also flourished in Germany as a new form of political commentary. Although painters had already been working with various modernist styles during the German art community during the waning years of the Empire, the establishment of the democratic regime provided these formerly marginalized groups of artists a place under the spotlight.⁵⁴ The visual artists of Germany practiced numerous modernist styles during the Weimar Republic. Many prominent painters worked in the Expressionist discipline in the early days of the new republic, portraying the Great War - as well as the destruction and chaos it left in its wake - not through realistic depictions but emotional reactions. A style spearheaded by those who disagreed with the Expressionists also formed in the style of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), observing and recreating the world through heightened reality. Oftentimes, these paintings are not simply works of art, but also reflections of the political and social views of their creators. While perhaps not as overtly political as the works of the Jüngers and Manns of its times, the visual arts remains an important lens through which to understand the premonitions of fascism during the Weimar Republic.

George Grosz, *Republican Automatons*

Born in 1893 in Berlin as Georg Groß, the young artist decided to change his name to a less “German” variant after his service during World War I, as a protest against the rampant

⁵⁴ Gay, Peter. *Weimar Culture: the Outsider as Insider*. New York and Evanston: W.W. Norton, 2001.

German nationalism of his time. While George Grosz was inducted to the world of art as a Dadaist, he eventually found his place as one of the most luminous masters of the New Objectivity style. Unlike the purposefully unrealistic and sensationalized paintings of the prevailing Expressionist and Post-Expressionist styles, artists of the New Objectivity movement instead chose to depict everyday life with a hyper-realistic approach. Grosz and his fellow painters portrayed the various aspects of Weimar society, often exaggerating their shortcomings for the purpose of satire and social change. A staunch anti-nationalist as evident from his name change, George Grosz joined the ranks of the Marxist political faction Spartacus League and later, the German Communist Party, as early as 1918.⁵⁵ As an artist as well as as a communist, Grosz frequently commented on the fascist tendencies quickly on the rise during the Weimar Republic in his artworks. One of such works, *Republikanische Automaten (Republican Automats)* from 1920, satirised and criticized the dangers of fascism of his time, reflecting on the destructive nature of the First World War; the renewed threat of militarism and nationalism; and lastly, the dangers of the fascist elements within the upper echelons of Weimar society.

Before the Nazi German Army began its invasion of Poland in September, 1939, World War One was by far the most devastating war that had ever been experienced by anyone in Europe and the entire world. It involved more than 70 million combatants, and led to the death of almost 20 million soldiers and civilians. Its legacy continued well into the interwar era, and many of the contentions that started with First World War became crucial aspects of the Second World War. The writers of the Weimar era, such as Erich Maria Remarque and Ernst Jünger, as previously mentioned, painstakingly described the terror and carnage of the battlefields in great

⁵⁵ McCloskey, Barbara. *George Grosz and the Communist Party: Art and Radicalism in Crisis, 1918 to 1936*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, 3

detail, while their contemporary artists utilized the paint brush to visualize this legacy of death and destruction.

In *Republican Automatons*, both of the anthropomorphic machines resemble men that are missing parts of their limbs, representing soldiers that have been gravely injured and made disabled by the intense fightings during World War One. The man on the right no longer has his right hand, and the man to the left is missing part of his right leg from the knee down. Both of them have instead wooden prosthetics in place of their actual limbs, a common sight for discharged veterans after the end of the war not just in Germany, but within all nations involved in the war.⁵⁶ Soldier also suffered from the usage of poisoned gas, as well as tremendous psychological and emotional trauma, although both of these conditions are significantly harder to be depicted in an easily identifiable manner. In artistic portrayals of the Weimar society, the abundance of disabled soldiers was also a common theme, both as a factual reference to previous and current events, as well as metaphorically as a pointed criticism against the wanton war that caused great harm to ordinary men for something they had neither interest nor control over. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, a prominent German artist who worked primarily with the Expressionist style, portrayed himself in his self-portrait in 1917 as a young man dressed in a military uniform, with his right hand missing and replaced with a bloody stump. Eberhard Grisebach, German philosopher close friend of Kirchner's, commented on the relationship behind his works of art and the mental state of artist. "Everywhere a search for style, for psychological understanding of his figures. The most moving was a self- portrait in uniform with his right hand cut off."⁵⁷ Even

⁵⁶ Schlich, Thomas. "Opinion: The 'Bionic Men' of World War I." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 27 June 2014, www.cnn.com/2014/06/26/opinion/schlich-world-war-i-prosthetics/index.html.

⁵⁷ Kornfeld, E. W., and Christine E. Stauffer. "Biography Ernst Ludwig Kirchner." *Kirchner Museum Davos*, 1992,

though he did not actually sustain injuries in the same manner, the lack of hand symbolizes the physical and emotional trauma experienced by Kirchner and his fellow soldiers, and commemorates the losses suffered by these men throughout the long years of war. In the same vein, the prosthetic limbs of the automatons in Grosz's painting reflect the legacy of the Great War during the Weimar Republic, and the constant reminders of the terrible cost of war in the form of injured veterans. The mechanical nature of the prosthetic limbs conveys George Grosz's discontent with the war, as well as the nationalism it entails, and this attitude continued to be a central aspect of his career as an artist.

The aftermath of the First World War was an instrumental aspect of the Weimar Republic, and the experiences of the soldiers during the war shaped the culture and art of the era that followed, as well as contributed to the polarization of political opinions. Veterans like Remarque and Grosz took from the war the futility and cruelty of warfare, and advocated against the blind patriotism and the authoritarian system that allowed World War One to happen in the first place. Other soldiers that had served for the German Empire, became more convinced at their nationalistic beliefs, as well as the use of violence and war to achieve their goals. Jünger, alongside the likes of Hitler and Göring, believed that the war was justified, and that those that served for their homeland should be proud of their glory. They represented the right-wing factions of the Weimar Republic, and their nationalistic ideals became an essential aspect of the ideology of the *Freikorps* as well as the Nazi Party. The legacy of the First World War, especially the physical and psychological trauma experienced by individual soldiers, was

instrumental in the ever radical political atmosphere, and the eventual end of this great divide also came at the cost of the Weimar Republic itself.

Even though the German state was (at least partially and alongside the other governments involved in the war) responsible for the physical mutilation of the soldiers, the political right of Germany refused to put the blame on the German Empire nor its leaders. Nationalist individuals and organizations remained prominent during the Weimar Republic, and were central to violent street warfare and terrorist assassinations. The unwavering blind nationalism among the German populace became a potent threat to the Weimar Republic and the freedom it represented. George Grosz covered this fervent trend of patriotism, and criticized those that blindly followed their nation into the abyss.

While the automatons presented in *Republic Automatons* have lost a great deal to the Great War, they are still portrayed as being thoroughly loyal towards the German state. The man on the left is holding a flag of the Weimar Republic, exhibiting his pride in the German nation. While his support of the Weimar state could stem from his agreement with the Weimar ideals of freedom and democracy, the other man in the painting shows a mechanical and mindless form of patriotism. Just as the title suggests, these men are robotic in their support of Germany, without true understanding of what it actually represents. The automaton on the right has his insides showing, a meticulous set of clockwork that governs his thought and actions. They are autonomous in their loyalty, without question, to the extent that they will continue their support to Germany despite being led to near destruction and fewer than two decades ago. The two veterans remain loyal to their regimes, and while it can be seen as honorable, their unquestioning clockwork commitment to the German nation is simultaneously a threat to the democracy and

freedom of the Weimar Republic. In *Fürs Vaterland - zum Schlachthaus* (*For the Fatherland - to the Slaughterhaus*), another painting depicting similar themes, George Grosz portrayed the mindless followers of the German nation as being blindfolded.⁵⁸ While the man at the front of the line is being dragged (to his doom, presumably, based on the title of the painting), the ones behind them do not show any signs of being forced to follow. Instead, they follow their fellow countrymen without hesitation, mindless and blinded, while the industrialists and military leaders (as seen in the panel above) profit from their demise.

During the tumultuous years of the Weimar Republic, blind patriotism and nationalism proved to be one of the main causes of social unrest and political violence. The *Freikorps* paramilitary organization, consisting mostly of patriotic veteran soldiers, waged war in the streets of Germany, protecting their own vision of the ideal German national against Soviet Bolshevism. They were unable to let go of the former German Empire or adapt to their times, and their loyalty towards Germany became increasingly problematic for the social and political stability of the Weimar Republic. Members of the militant right-wing not only fought violently against socialist paramilitary groups such as the Spartacus League, but also performed political assassinations against national leaders. Finance minister Matthias Erzberger and foreign minister Walther Rathenau were killed by radical nationalists less than one year apart, who hoped to provoke the German populace enough to the point of starting a civil war.⁵⁹ Chancellor Joseph Wirth recognized the dangers posed by these ultranationalists, and in a speech in memorial of these assassinations, denounced the brutality and lack of honor among them. “There is the enemy

⁵⁸ McCloskey, *George Grosz and the Communist Party*, 114

⁵⁹ Weitz, 127, 133

- and there is no doubt about it: This enemy is on the right!”⁶⁰ Despite these atrocities, the Weimar Republic was extremely lenient on the violent right-wing groups, which gave way to even more drastic radicalization. Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party relied on this leniency to become a recognized movement nationwide, which was unhampered even after staging a *coup d'état* in 1923. The blind nationalism and loyalty towards the preconceived idea of Germany and “German-ness” caused tremendous damage to the new nation, and eventually led to the end of democracy in Germany with the advent of the tyrannical Nazi Empire.

Nationalism and militarism were a substantial part of the Weimar culture, not only within the civilian population in the form of urban warfare on the streets as well as political assassinations, but also enjoying a prominent presence within the governing body. The Weimar Republic failed to diminish the power of the aristocracy and the plutocracy, and the remnants of the old German Empire remained as a potent political force within the new regime, undermining its process of liberalization and paving the way for the return to authoritarianism.

Patriotism and militarism as depicted in George Grosz’s paintings were not merely an attribute of everyday citizens within the interwar German society, but also very much present among the upper echelons of Weimar social and political life. In the aforementioned *For the Fatherland*, the rank-and-file citizens are not the fount of patriotism, but merely followers of the German rulers. Physically large, well dressed, and literally sitting over the people, is one capitalist industrialist and a military officer.⁶¹ In accordance to Grosz’s communist beliefs, these two figures represent the elite of German society, who exploited the people for their own benefit. Through indoctrination of nationalist values, those in power were able to keep the masses under

⁶⁰ Küppers, Heinrich. *Joseph Wirth: Parlamentarier, Minister und Kanzler der Weimarer Republik*. Stuttgart: Steiner, 1997, 189

⁶¹ McCloskey, *George Grosz and the Communist Party*, 114

control with relative ease. Similarly, the two figures within *Republican Automatons*, although disabled by their war services, are very well dressed. Both men are wearing full suits, with the man on the left also wearing a tie and a hat. They seem to be a part of the economic upper class, wealthy enough to be dressed formally for everyday life. The man on the right is also wearing a bow tie that generally signifies a high social standing, and the prominent display of the iron cross service medal reflects his pride in his homeland of Germany. The leading members of German society, both in the business and political world, were also susceptible to the nationalism that stemmed from the old German Empire. These national figures were not staunch supporters of the new democratic regime, but instead represents the remnants of the previous generation, and influenced the German society in the direction of authoritarianism from the top down.

Even though Kaiser Wilhelm II was forced to abdicate and go into exile after the end of World War One, many leaders of the German Empire continued their careers into the Weimar Republic, with some even retaining their previous influence in the new regime. The World War One field marshal Paul von Hindenburg was still renowned all over Germany as a national hero for his victory at the Battle of Tannenberg, and handedly won the Weimar presidential election in 1925.⁶² Despite being the president of a supposedly peaceful and democratic regime, Hindenburg demonstrated the militarism and nationalism that were more commonly associated with the German Empire. Even in his everyday demeanor, Hindenburg often dressed in full military uniforms, which Eric Weitz commented as evidence for him being “not the ideal president for a republic.”⁶³ While Hindenburg was the best-known figure for this phenomenon, he was far from being the only one. Similar to him, many generals and civil officials continued their careers

⁶² Weitz, 118

⁶³ Weitz, 119

without any change in their philosophy, and served the democratic government the same way they served under the monarchy. Erich Ludendorff, Hindenburg's right hand man during the final years of the war, became a member of the *Reichstag* in 1924, despite having been directly involved in armed rebellions twice at that point, with the Beer Hall Putsch merely months before being elected into office. The Weimar government was heavily tainted by the remainders of the totalitarian German Empire, whose ideology granted right-wing groups great leniency, and allowed them to gain traction unmolested. It was due to this top-down acceptance of nationalistic right-wing factions that Adolf Hitler, another critic of the Weimar democracy and leader of an armed *Coup d'état*, was able to be appointed Chancellor in 1933, beginning his reign of terror in Germany and across the European Continent.

George Grosz had long been a target of the more conservative factions of the Weimar society. His sharp critiques and mockeries of the military and the Christian church earned him the ire of two of the most established and most powerful groups in Germany. While the *Republican Automatons* was sufficiently subtle and non-controversial, many of Grosz's works had been sued for defamation. *The Faces of the Ruling Class*, which shared the theme of exposing the corrupt and incompetent German elite, was put on trial and eventually confiscated in 1921.⁶⁴ Despite these setbacks, however, George Grosz and his fellow communists were not swayed from their political activism, and even continued to create prints for *The Face of the Ruling Class*. With all the faults and shortcomings of the Weimar Republic, its constitution and protection of the freedom of speech were able to protect Grosz from any substantial harm. He was usually only fined small amounts of payment for lost lawsuits, and he was never arrested in

⁶⁴ McCloskey, *George Grosz and the Communist Party*, 91

Germany for his expressions of political opinions. The Nazis, however, were not beholden to the same laws and ideals of the Weimar government. His ties to the Communist movement, as well as his involvement in the modernist art world, made him a prime target of the Nazi cultural ideology. George Grosz was fortunate enough to have already left Germany in 1932 before the Nazi takeover, but his status as a cultural enemy of the newly established regime did not diminish.⁶⁵ Many of his paintings were put on display in the Degenerate Arts Exhibition of 1937, and stood in sharp comparison to the realistic academic paintings hailed by the Nazi regime as “German.”⁶⁶ The remainders of the old Empire did eventually take control of the Weimar Republic as George Grosz had observed and satirized, and the violence he saw among the populace came to fruition as one of the most destructive and brutal wars the whole world has ever witnessed. He saw through the troubling German social developments thinly veiled by the culture and decadence of the Weimar Republic, but his voice was not strong enough to stop them in their tracks.

Emil Nolde: *Farmhouse in the Marsh Landscape*

Among the numerous modernist artists that made an appearance in the Degenerate Art Exhibition was Emil Nolde, one of the founders of the prominent German art group *Die Brücke* (The Bridge). His works were removed from museums across Germany for being “un-German” according to the Nazis, and he was completely proscribed during the Third Reich from producing art in any capacity-public or private. Despite his heavy involvement with the German modernist

⁶⁵ McCloskey, Barbara. *The Exile of George Grosz : Modernism, America, and the One World Order*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015.

⁶⁶ Barron, Stephanie, and Peter Güther. *"Degenerate Art": the Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*. Los Angeles County Museum, 1991.

movement, as well as the persecution he suffered during Nazi Germany, Emil Nolde was vastly different from George Grosz and other contemporary artists.

Emil Nolde was born in 1867 in the Schleswig-Holstein region on the border between the German Empire and Denmark, and gradually became an important member of the German art community from the times of the German Empire. Even though his work would later be denounced by the fascist German government, Emil Nolde was an early supporter of the rising Nazi movement, and joined its Danish chapter as early as 1920.⁶⁷ He would continue to paint during the Third Reich in secret despite the ban, and is now renowned as one of the great masters of German Expressionism, although his reputation is certainly complicated by his support of the Nazi Party. The ideological affinity between Emil Nolde and the Nazi movement can be seen from his works during the Weimar Republic, for instance the *Bauernhaus in der Marschlandschaft* (*Farmhouse in the Marsh Landscape*) created between 1920 and 1925. Within the oil painting, Nolde explored German nationalist ideals of the pristine German landscape; the purity of the rural populace; as well as the style of Expressionism as a German trait.

Although born and raised in the outskirts of Germany, Emil Nolde was fascinated by the natural landscape of the nation. His landscapes aimed to capture the innate beauty of the countryside in both Germany and the Nordic nations, which he believed to be culturally and racially similar to each other. His political career with the Nazi Party centered on his conviction of uniting the two regions ideologically, and his appreciation of nordic and Germanic scenery is often reflected within his art. His landscape works make prominent use of vibrant colors, creating epic sceneries that glorify the land as well as the people that inhabit the regions.

⁶⁷ Petropoulos, Jonathan. *Artists under Hitler: Collaboration and Survival in Nazi Germany*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2014, 155

Bauerhaus in der Marschlandschaft depicts the scenic German marshlands with a strong Expressionist style that seems fantastic and otherworldly. The color used in the painting are obviously an exaggeration of the actual colors, with vibrant green for the marshes, and a combination of blue, red, and gold for the sky. With the marshes, the deep green with its uneven shades exhibit a serene and pristine presence, beautiful but at the same time also mysterious and foreboding. The marshes symbolize the world of men, and the juxtaposition of beauty and danger within nature characterizes the German and nordic landscape as seen by Nolde. On the other hand, the sky is lit with wondrous colors that resembles nordic lights, and visually similar to imageries of old Norse epics, representing the divine and cosmic wonders of the universe beyond the knowledge and control of mortals. The usage of unrealistic colors contributed greatly to the striking visuals of the painting, and is instrumental to the establishment of the Germanic and nordic lands as fantastic and mystical.

Mysticism in nature is an important theme for German nationalism, and a common part of Nazi ideology. As an early supporter of Nazism, Emil Nolde also subscribed heavily to this ideal. When later questioned about whether his art is sufficiently “German” or another example of “degenerate” modern art, Nolde claimed that his inspiration came greatly from German and nordic landscapes. “I myself am of the opinion that, in spite of the traveling far and wide, my art is rooted deeply in the soil of the homeland [*Heimatboden*], in which I paint the land here between the two seas. Could there be a connecting link between Germany and the Nordic countries, perhaps?”⁶⁸ Nolde’s dual identity as both German and Danish due to the geopolitical changes that occurred during his lifetime led to this conviction, and his landscapes like

⁶⁸ Petropoulos, *Artists under Hitler*, 164

Marschlandschaft utilized the spirituality of nature to deliver these messages. The sacredness of natural scenery, while not a centerpiece of fascist ideology, usually is an important aspect of nationalistic thinking, used to unite the various members of a single nation, and to make them believe in their own cultural and racial superiority.

Pristine natural landscapes do not always remain uninhabited and unmolested, and in pushing the borders of living space, the humanity created unique biospheres that are rooted in the balance between the natural and the artificial. From city skylines to frontier settlements, human ingenuity and tenacity is integral to these communities, and also often used by political propaganda of authoritarian regimes. For Emil Nolde, these aspects of human existence were utilized to differentiate between the different peoples in support of the racial views of himself and the Nazi Party, and prominently displayed through the rural settlements in the German countryside.

Two farm houses (*Bauernhaus*) are visible within the painting *Bauernhaus in der Marschlandschaft*, one in the middleground and the other in the background. The existence of these dwellings is in itself an impressive feat, considering its location within the marshes. While the heavens convey a sense of majesty and otherworldliness, the surface terrain is no less daunting. Nolde depicted the swamps with multiple shades of green, combining similar colors in order to create the depth of field, with a strong focus on the light and the shadows of the wet, uneven swamp. The wetlands in the painting shows, on one hand, reflections of the buildings and vegetation, and on the other hand, a suggestion of more things hidden under the surface. The mysterious and perilous nature of the marshes come to life under Nolde's brushes, and in turn becomes an indication of those that reside in such an environment. Nolde had an unmistakable

fascination with the rural population, claiming that “primitive man lives with and in nature, he is one with it and part of a single whole.”⁶⁹ The settlers in *Marschlandschaft*, although unseen in this painting, exhibits traits of ingenuity, tenacity, and fearlessness, but also very much humble. Even though the farmhouses stand firm in the marshes, they are small and unornamented, lacking in any vibrant color other than a faint red light from the windows, especially when compared to the brilliant sky and the ground. They exist as a testament of human strength, but also as a sign of respect to nature’s great beauty and power.

Emil Nolde’s high praise of the German people is in accordance with his political opinions on race and culture, which in turn supports the racial ideology of National Socialism., albeit with a more complicated approach to the matter. In 1913 Nolde became a member of a New Guinea expedition under the Reich Colonial Office in the last years of the German Empire, and depicted heavily the various racial traits of the local population. His racial views that started with the portrayal of these indigenous people reflect an undoubtedly problematic, yet perhaps harmless mindset. As he had claimed in his autobiography, “Seen from a broader perspective, no race is worse or better than the other—before God they are all equal—but they are different, very different.”⁷⁰ On the other hand, his anti-semitism corresponds highly with Nazi racial ideology, and his views become more radicalized and vocal especially after their seizure of power in 1933. Of course, Nolde’s new found racial zealot is at least partially done for opportunist reasons, as he was then actively fighting to be a part of the national community. However, his overt racism and anti-semitism, as reflected in his autobiography, and in his denunciation to the Propaganda Ministry of a fellow artist Max Pechstein of being Jewish,⁷¹ are all evidence of Emil Nolde going

⁶⁹ Urban, Martin. *Emil Nolde - Landscapes: Watercolours and Drawings*. New York: Pall Mall, 1970, 29

⁷⁰ Petropoulos, *Artists under Hitler*, 160

⁷¹ Petropoulos, *Artists under Hitler*, 160

above and beyond conforming to the political climate, that his affiliation with the Nazi Party is based heavily upon its racial ideology.

The uneasy relationship between Emil Nolde and the Nazi Party revolves around a duality between ideology and artistic style. Although Nolde was politically aligned with the rising Nazi movement, his art became a point of contention for the Nazi cultural officials. In fact, the entire modernist art school, especially the Expressionism style was under constant fire from certain subfactions of the Nazi Party for being unconventional and “un-German,” while others defended them as the preeminent German art schools of their time. Caught between this ideological debate, Nolde struggled to be accepted by the social mainstream, appealing to nationalism to achieve his goals.

Emil Nolde was a quintessential German Expressionist artist. His artistic career spun across the German Empire to postwar West Germany, and had been affiliated with modern Expressionist groups including *Die Brücke*, the Berlin Secession movement, and *Der Blaue Reiter*. Like other Expressionist artists around during his time, Nolde boldly experimented with vibrant colors that mythicize the German world. German art theorist Martin Urban, describes Nolde’s early painting *Sunrise*, as an extraordinary example of his mastery over color. “This picture stands isolated among his other works of the period: the glowing red ball of the sun rises out of white veils of mist, against a greenish and sulphurous-yellow background, below which the dark tips of fir-trees are seen, while overhead broods a heavy, brownish-purple wall of cloud, the edges of which reflect the red colour of the sun.”⁷² Urban’s analysis of *Sunrise* shows the distinct usage of color, and Nolde’s portrayal of the sun as majestic and otherworldly, and the

⁷² Urban, 10

earthbound landscape as intimate yet mysterious. Even though this painting was made early in Nolde's career in 1895, the striking colors remained a staple in his landscape paintings such as *Marschlandschaft*. "Each colour has a soul of its own," declared Nolde in his autobiography, "either bringing me joy or repelling and exciting me."⁷³ Other than color, Nolde also experimented with the contortion of proportion, the abstraction of the subject, and the multitude of perspectives, techniques central to many modernist artists of his time. Urban noted that Nolde had throughout his life "no fitness for the conventions and habits of society,"⁷⁴ and it is certainly reflected in his unconventional art style. Throughout his career, Emil Nolde went against the established artistic traditions, and remained a staunch supporter of the modernist style and the Expressionist school.

It is precisely this dedication to modernism that became so problematic for Emil Nolde within Nazi Germany. Despite his support of the party, many prominent Nazis believed that him and his art to be "degenerate," tainted by the "inferior races" and "un-German elements." During the reign of the Third Reich, Nolde fought to be accepted by the national mainstream, and was eventually turned down by the regime. He published a new volume of his autobiography in 1934, titled *Years of the Struggles (Jahre der Kämpfe)*, this time with much more overt racist and anti-Semitic messages in order to appeal to Nazi rhetoric. The title itself, while on one hand reflects Nolde's struggles as an experimental modernist artist, on the other hand is possibly a reference to Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.⁷⁵ Nolde also attempted to solicit assistance from Joseph Goebbels, the Reich Propaganda Minister as well as the president of the Reich Chamber of Culture, who at the early stage of the Nazi movement was openly supportive of modernist art. In

⁷³ Urban, 16

⁷⁴ Urban, 34

⁷⁵ Petropoulos, *Artists under Hitler*, 161

a letter to Goebbels, Nolde proudly claimed that his art is “German, powerful, austere, and profound,”⁷⁶ again asserting the nationalist elements within himself and his art. However, while Nolde was able to find some support within Nazi German society, enough for him to continue painting in secret throughout the Second World War,⁷⁷ he was officially prohibited from painting even in private. In the end, despite his ideological devotion to the Nazi Party, Emil Nolde couldn’t save himself from proscription and banishment, and his artistic career shared the same fate as all German modernists of his day.

⁷⁶ Petropoulos, *Artists under Hitler*, 162

⁷⁷ Nolde, Emil, Manfred Reuther, and Stiftung Seebüll Ada Und Emil Nolde. *Emil Nolde : "Ungemalte Bilder" : Unpainted Pictures*. Köln: DuMont Buchverlag, 2009.

Chapter 3: Film

Before the legendary American director Orson Welles created *Citizen Kane*, a film often ranked as the greatest film ever made in polls and by film critics,⁷⁸ he had in fact never worked on a film production. Already renowned in the fields of theater and radio,⁷⁹ he nevertheless needed to learn the technique for a brand new medium. In order to understand the visual language of film, Welles studied numerous works from American and European filmmakers. In particular, he ordered a copy of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* by the German director Robert Wiene from the Museum of Modern Art. He studied the German Expressionist masterpiece, and matched the visual vocabulary of *Citizen Kane* with that of *Caligari*,⁸⁰ the effect of which is evident in the finished product. With its unconventional non-linear editing, exaggerated visual styles, as well as long takes coupled with complex camera movements, the influence of *Caligari* on *Citizen Kane* can hardly be missed.

Orson Welles and *Citizen Kane* were hardly the only legacy of German cinema, which was at its all-time high during the Weimar Republic. In the aftermath of World War One, Berlin quickly became one of the most influential film capitals of the world, and the greatest competitor of the Hollywood studio system. German films during the Weimar Republic were heavily influenced the trends in other art forms of its times. Filmmakers such as F. W. Murnau (director of *Nosferatu*, 1922) and the Fritz Lang affiliated themselves with the Expressionist style, utilizing jagged lines and other unrealistic visuals to bring out a variety of emotions from its

⁷⁸ Ebert, Robert. "What's Your Favorite Movie?" *Chicago Sun Times*, 4 Sept. 2008, web.archive.org/web/20091208071230/http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2008/09/whats_your_favorite_movie.html.

⁷⁹ Naremore, James. *The Magic World of Orson Welles*. Urbana: U. Of Illinois P., 2015.

⁸⁰ Leaming, Barbara. *Orson Welles: a Biography*. New York: Viking, 1985. 173

viewers. Other filmmakers like Walter Ruttmann, director of *Berlin, Symphony of a Metropolis* of 1927, sided with the New Objectivity, the leading artistic style in direct competition with Expressionism during the latter phase of the Weimar Republic. Making use of exaggerated realism, these filmmakers followed themes over narratives, portraying the atmosphere and feelings of the time through seemingly mundane events.

Through the use of the various modernist art styles, Weimar filmmakers not only created diverse and fascinating pieces of motion picture, but also pointed socio-political criticisms against the status-quo of German society. *Berlin*, for example, depicted the capitalistic society within the metropolitan landscape, critiquing its lack of intimacy as well as the exploitation of individual members of the city. In his book *From Caligari to Hitler*, German film theorist Siegfried described the media of the motion picture as the art form most all-encompassing of its contemporary political atmosphere. Due to the large number of people working on a single film project, according to Kracauer, each film becomes the combined voice of hundreds, instead of the highly individualized art form of literature or the visual arts.⁸¹ In the same vein, Weimar films also predicted the future of Germany, depicting the tense atmosphere as well as the brutality that would become the reality of Germany within a few decades..

Fritz Lang: *M - A City Searches for a Murderer*

One of the most prominent and internationally influential members of the Weimar cinema scene throughout its existence was Fritz Lang.⁸² Although born in Vienna, Austria, he became a part of the German film industry in 1916 as a writer for the renowned producer Erich Pommer in

⁸¹ Kracauer, Siegfried, and Leonardo Quaresima. *From Caligari to Hitler: a Psychological History of the German Film*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004, 5

⁸² Armour, Robert A. *Fritz Lang*. Boston: Twayne, 1978.

Berlin. Having directed feature-length films in the Weimar Republic from 1918 until his departure from Nazi Germany in 1934, Lang portrayed the intricate aspects of Weimar society in his various Expressionist films during his career. *Metropolis*, released in 1927 and one of his most famous works, depicted the unprecedented bipolarization of the Weimar social-political atmosphere. The film explored the conflicts between the conservative capitalistic status-quo and the revolutionary members of the communist movement, who had fought over for the future of the Weimar Republic both in the *Reichstag*, as well as in street battles across the nation. Fritz Lang and his wife, Thea von Harbou, with whom he co-wrote the film, not only examined the contemporary issues of their times, but also offered their own solution to this dilemma: communication.

While *Metropolis* ended on an optimistic note with a new united city of both social classes, Fritz Lang's film *M - A City Searches for a Murderer* released in 1931 was much less optimistic. Instead of finding a solution and eventually live in harmony, the various social groups in the city of Berlin as portrayed in *M* were quick to overlook the basic rights of the city's inhabitants in the pursuit of their own individual and class interests. The events that take place within the film exhibit the social anxiety during the final years of the Weimar Republic, and the sentimentality that continued into Nazi Germany. Namely, the film showcased the mob mentality of the population; the effects of the police state during a period of crisis; and the scapegoating of those with less social power.

M - A City Searches for a Murderer takes place in Berlin as the city sinks into fear and chaos from an unknown serial killer of young girls. The city quickly sinks into a state of fear and chaos due to the murders, and the government officials are not making enough headway with the

seemingly impossible investigations. In response to this unprecedented threat to public safety, the individual citizens of Berlin descended into mob mentality, which in turn added to the anxiety of the population.

The news of the killer's letters to the police and newspapers quickly create a wave of chaos and fear throughout the city, and the population of Berlin become paranoid during the crisis. The announcement of the news is followed immediately by the sequence of a small party of friends talking about the murders, and one of the men begins to accuse another of being the killer. Even though it is clear to the audience that the accusation is completely unfounded, the tension within the city and the scarcity of information on the investigation lead to the man's apartment being raided by the police as a suspect in the killings.⁸³ Even though the police could not find any incriminating materials, and it is clear during the course of the film that he is not the real murderer, his reputation is still tarnished because of the association with the crimes. The denunciations made by those with no more evidence than pure suspicion transform into another layer of fear within Berlin, in addition to the stress of having a serial killer at large. These accusations also extended beyond those that one knows and interacts with regularly, and the fears of the killer metamorphose into mob mentality and vigilante justice. After finishing up the search of the previously mentioned man's apartment, the police encounter a mob forming around a man who is caught talking to a little girl. Before the arrival of the police, these civilians have confronted him, preventing him from leaving, as well as beginning the process of interrogating him regarding his intentions with the girl. Even though it is the girl who first approaches the man asking for the time, the citizens of Berlin do not have the facts to support

⁸³ Lang, Fritz, director. *M. Nero-Film*, 1931. 11:30

their suspicions, but they also do not care about it due to their paranoia and fear.⁸⁴ The general panic caused by the series of murders in Berlin, as well as the mysterious and unpredictable nature of the killings, means that the entire populace of the city is constantly under fear and suspicion of the rest of the city.

The emergence of mass media also contributed greatly to the crises of Berlin, as well as the involvement of all members of society across all strata. Within the context of the film, the printed press is the primary source of news for all citizens of the city, and makes its first appearance at the beginning of the film soon after the disappearance of Elsie Beckmann. As the balloon associated with Elsie and her murder fades out into a screen of black, the voices of people selling paper down the streets can be heard before the civilians appear on screen. The newspaper is not merely a plot device to inform the audience of Elsie's death without displaying it visually (as the imagery would be considered overly graphic for a general audience), but also the conduit through which the whole city learns of the event.⁸⁵ The lower socio-economic strata learn of the murder through public notice boards with the newspapers, listening as one of them reads the article out loud, and talked about the events in large crowds. The rich, on the other hand, discuss the murder over tea and cigarettes.⁸⁶ The rise of popular media is responsible for a wider portion of the population knowing of the crimes, and the population in turn becomes more involved with the hunt for the killer, and the sensationalized reports also give rise to the mob mentality that caused normal citizens to irrational and illegal activities of restraining other civilians. On the other hand, the media also contributed to the murderer Hans Beckert, as he is

⁸⁴ Lang, *M*, 12:18

⁸⁵ Tatar, Maria. *Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, 156

⁸⁶ Lang, *M*, 9:40

enticed by the popularity of his murders to write to the police and later the newspapers. The advent of modern mass media created the unique opportunity to educate a much larger audience than traditional means, but its wide appeal also led to conformity within the citizens, and eventually to a tyranny of the masses.

The use of modern media to alter public perception and action became prominent in the history of the Nazi Party. Joseph Goebbels, as the head of the propaganda ministry, made use of all mediums possible during his time to propagate Nazi ideology. Using his alternative identity as the president of the Reich Chamber of Culture (*Reichskulturkammer*), he was given access to the vast array of different media. This myriad of expressions included the traditional genre of visual art that spawned propaganda posters and majestic-looking portraits of Nazi officials. These paintings take inspiration from both traditional academic art, as well as modern styles that became considered as “degenerate” by official Party policy, best illustrated in the state-sponsored “Degenerate Art” exhibition of 1937.⁸⁷ Also under his command was the cutting-edge film industry of Germany handed down from the Weimar Republic, which during the reign of the Third Reich produced copious amounts of movies for the benefit of the Nazi regime. Some expressed the prevalent anti-Semitic sentiment of the Nazi Party, like *The Eternal Jew* in 1940, while others exalted the achievements of ethnic Germans and the glory of the Nazi Party, most famous of them perhaps being Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* of 1935. The use of media and art as political tools for the Nazis contributed greatly to the amount of control the state had on the civilian population, altering the public perception of the various elements of daily and political lives to align with the interest of the Nazi Party and the Third Reich. The

⁸⁷ Barron

significance of media on the citizens of Berlin as portrayed in *M* is reflected in the state propaganda used during Nazi Germany, both in its far-reaching effectiveness, as well as the dangers it presented to a democratic society.

Even as the citizens of Berlin decide to take law into their own hands, the city authorities are also intensifying their own investigations of the serial murders. Their unprecedented devotion is a combination of doing their duty, and also as a response to the accusations from the public that the police is inept in dealing with the crimes. The police force, as represented by the inspector Karl Lohmann, utilizes many conventional methods in the hunt for the killer Hans Beckert. They increase their hours repeatedly, work at their maximum capacity, and cross-reference the records of recently-released mental patients.⁸⁸ However, they are also initiating measures that restrict personal freedom, and gradually transforming the city of Berlin into a police state that is feared by its inhabitants.

Among the three major groups portrayed within the film, the citizens, the police, and the criminals, the police was depicted as the most benevolent. With the citizens being paranoid and the criminals cruel and unsympathetic, the city officials do their very best to keep the laws and to protect the peace within the city. But even though inspector Lohmann and his policemen are merely trying to do their jobs at finding a serial child killer and bringing him to justice, the difficulties surrounding the search eventually lead to the police making drastic measures. They go about the process by establishing a curfew that restricts citizens' access during evenings, and by conducting regular raids on parts of town generally seen as unsavory and crime-ridden. One of the scenes that focuses on the authorities is a surprise raid on a shady bar at night, and the

⁸⁸ Lang, *M*, 14:30

policemen ask the patrons to provide forms of identification, without which they will be taken to the police station for further questioning. This is an obvious breach of personal freedom, without any evidence of guilt or warrant. In their zeal of trying to uncover the truth, the police have made the decision of sacrificing the strict legality of their work in the name of security. Throughout the investigation, the police is generally highly professional, to the extent of acting as a protection between Beckert and the mob of criminals at the end of the film.⁸⁹ However, their actions in violating the basic rights of its citizens in times of crisis establish a precedent of unchecked emergency powers, providing a precedent for the establishment of a police state.

The interactions between the police and the citizens of Berlin as portrayed in *M* also provides insight into both groups, as well as the danger posed by both parties to a free and safe society. The previously mentioned scenes of the indignant man and the wrongly accused passerby were not simply the actions of individual citizens, and while the police force is not complicit in these accusations, it also participates in these witch hunts and reinforces the behaviors. The paranoid citizen in the restaurant reports the friend he found suspicious to the police, which promptly investigates the denunciation; and later when the mob corner the man they believe could be the killer, they turn him to the police for further questioning. The police's tolerance and even involvement with these unsubstantiated charges and mob-like behavior are one of desperation from the lack of leads, but their willingness to accept a violent population and work with it have tainted their professionalism, and creates a symbiotic system between the vigilante society and the police state.

⁸⁹ Lang, *M*, 1:47:41

The city authorities and the police system as depicted in *M* foreshadowed the state of Germany after the Nazis' coming to power. The aftermath of the Reichstag Fire of 1933 saw the advent of emergency powers granted to Adolf Hitler as the chancellor, and the Weimar Republic was rapidly transformed into the fascist police state. The *Sturmabteilung* as the paramilitary arm of the Nazi Party (and not part of the state government) was deputized with the authority of police officers, and arrested socio-political opponents of the Nazi movement with impunity. One year later, Hermann Göring created the *Gestapo* in the state of Prussia, a secret police organization that investigated dissent among the German population. Germany under the full control of the Nazi Party quickly transformed into a police state, and its efficiency was in no small part due to the involvement of the civilian population. The strength of the *SA* in numbers and authority soon came to an end in 1934 during the "Night of the the Long Knives," and even during its height of power in 1944 the *Gestapo* had no more than 32,000 members.⁹⁰ They managed to keep the entire population of Germany under scrutiny through the constant stream of reports from the people that were both oppressed by and benefitted from the Nazi reign, and not from constantly having agents among the civilian population. According to William Sheridan Allen, the *Gestapo* was particularly effective from the "rumours and fears,"⁹¹ which resulted from the very real threat of being denounced by other civilians. The German playwright Bertolt Brecht described this constant fear in his play "The Informer," in which two parents feared that their livelihood would be in danger from the regime, due to their son's involvement with the Hitler Youth, as well as their babysitter's devotion to the Nazi cause.⁹² And although their fear

⁹⁰ Gellately, Robert. *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy, 1933-1945*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008. 44

⁹¹ Allen, William Sheridan. *Nazi Seizure of Power: the Experience of a Single German Town, 1922-1945, Revised Edition*. Brattleboro: Echo Point Books & Media, 2014. 189

⁹² Brecht, Bertolt, and Glenn Jordan. *The Informer*. New York Television Theater.

turned out to be for naught in the context of the play, the reality was not far from their worst nightmares. According to a study on the causes for the initiation of a Gestapo investigation, “reports from the population” was by far the highest option at 213 cases out of 825, while the second highest was “information from other control organizations” at 139.⁹³ The police state of Nazi Germany, similar to the city of Berlin as portrayed in Fritz Lang’s *M*, was not merely a product of top-down oppression, but also of the cooperation of the civilian population. The population of Germany as a whole living under the reign of the Nazi Party contributed to its own subjugation through the denunciation of one another.

The third and last group within *M* is the criminal element of the city of Berlin. Between the gangs, the police, and the civilian population, the criminals could be described as the most sinister. While the citizens were concerned for the wellbeing of themselves and the children among them, and the police needed to track down the killer for the safety of the city, the criminals became part of the manhunt purely for material concerns. However, the gangs as represented by the character of the “Safecracker” (portrayed by Gustaf Gründgens), quickly found ways to justify their actions to appear more noble and honorable. They accused Hans Beckert of being subhuman for his actions, and used him as a scapegoat for their own crimes, and were convinced that they were far better human beings than Hans Beckert.

The criminal element of Berlin first appeared in the film during the surprise raid on the shady bar. As police activity is dramatically on the rise to deal with the serial killer, the criminals find their own dealings made harder day by day. Concerned that regular by-the-books police investigation would not yield results fast enough, the Safecracker convinces his fellow crime

⁹³ Gellately, 662

bosses to hunt down the killer on their own so their operations can return to normal as soon as possible.⁹⁴ For the criminals, the safety of the general population is of no concern, and they have to real qualms with Beckert's actions, other than the fact that he is attracting too much attention for them to keep operating in the shadows. Their methods have proved to be far more effective than that of the police, as they have criminals and beggars throughout the city in a vast network of information. Hans Beckert is marked by an old blind man with chalk as "M," as in murderer (Mörder), ironic considering that the Safecracker himself have also been responsible for quite a few murders himself.⁹⁵ The hypocrisy of the criminal elements become much more transparent during the trial scene, a watershed moment that marks a change of sympathy from the audience's point of view. Before the capture of Beckert, the audience identifies briefly with the gangs, as the police proves to be inefficient during their manhunt, and the civilians even more helpless against the unseen assailant. As this sequence progresses, however, the brutality and sadism of the criminals become apparent. Even though they themselves are fugitives of the law, the criminals of Berlin construct their own court, complete with attorneys, judge, and jury. This imitation of justice itself is the epitome of Han Beckert's identity as the scapegoat within the film, as at this point the criminals do not need to keep him in further captivity or to condemn him to death, but they choose to do so, in order to feel morally superior to the serial killer of children. The Safecracker leads the prosecution of Beckert, and he argues that only with Beckert's death can the city of Berlin be safe, which is why simply handing him to the police would not be sufficient. In the most emotionally charged moment of the film, Beckert desperately begs for sympathy, decrying the criminals for their hypocrisy.

⁹⁴ Lang, *M*, 29:18

⁹⁵ Lang, *M*, 31:37

What do you know about it? Who are you anyway? Who are you? Criminals? Are you proud of yourselves? Proud of breaking safes or cheating at cards? Things you could just as well keep your fingers off. You wouldn't need to do all that if you'd learn a proper trade or if you'd work. If you weren't a bunch of lazy bastards. But I... I can't help myself! I have no control over this, this evil thing inside of me, the fire, the voices, the torment!⁹⁶

In his desperation, Hans Beckert comments on the most important distinction between him and the other criminals. While they all commit crimes, one does it out of psychological necessity, while the other out of economic convenience. The criminals see this as a sign of Beckert's lack of humanity, that he is akin to a mad animal. For Beckert, however, it is a display of hypocrisy, that those who willingly choose to commit crimes are now the first to cast stones to him who has no agency in the matter. Even with Beckert's plea, the criminals are unmoved and sentence him to death. To them the man that had no choice but to commit murders is almost a beast, while they could justify their actions of thievery and murder as acceptable behavior. The criminals need Beckert in order to feel morally superior, and by condemning him for his crimes they are able to have the illusion of upholding justice. It is with this hypocrisy in the guise of justice that the criminals hate Beckert with a passion more so than the citizen or the police, even though (or perhaps precisely because) he is not that much different from the criminals in action but very dissimilar in motives.

The concept of a scapegoat is also another central point of the Nazi ideology. The Jews in particular, were a prominent example of such during the Nazi regime. From the conception of the party, Hitler and other Nazi leaders blamed all of Germany's problems on the Jewish population, which had already faced unimaginable discrimination from the rest of the nation and the entire European continent. The aftermath of World War I left Germany in a state of economic and

⁹⁶ Lang, M, 1:40:20

social unrest, and radical factions such as the Nazi Party used Jews as the scapegoat for the predicament. One of the most pointed example of such blatant antagonism is from the Nazi propaganda film *Der Ewige Jude* (The Eternal Jew), in which the Jews were blamed for being both capitalist and communist, and responsible for all the plight that plagued Germany.⁹⁷

Propaganda materials such as *Der Ewige Jude* shows the same kind of hypocrisy as the criminals in *M*, with their accusations stemming from pure racial hatred instead of reason. According to Nazi rhetoric, all Jews are capitalists, and at the same time all Jews are Marxists. The absurdity of this gross generalization was not detected by the Nazis, as both groups were marked as enemies of Germany, as well as the Jewish population. The feeling of superiority of the Nazis and the general German population came in no small part from the deliberately tainted image of the Jewish population, and the Germans, like the criminals in *M*, blamed all of their problems with an underprivileged individual or group, and used that perceived superiority to absolve themselves of their own guilt.

As a product of the very last few years of the Weimar Republic, *M - A City Searches for a Murderer* illustrated the early stages of the Nazi takeover. The general unrest and fear within German society, the mob mentality of the population, the gradual centralization of power into a police state, and the scapegoating of marginalized groups, were all prominent features of the Nazis' coming to power. *M* exists as a remarkable reflection of the waning Weimar society, but it was also more than a mirror image to be observed. It was also a statement, a criticism against a society like the city of Berlin as portrayed in the film, and against the real-life process that was taking place during his final years in Germany. German film theorist Siegfried Kracauer saw

⁹⁷ Hippler, Fritz, director. *Der Ewige Jude*. Terra. 1940.

many Weimar films as the filmmakers' attempt to dissuade the population from authoritarian tendencies that emerged during the chaos.⁹⁸ Fritz Lang did much in *M* to warn the viewers from succumbing to the promises of effectiveness under a dictatorship, and to be compassionate and sympathetic towards those that are portrayed as enemies and monsters by the cultural mainstream. Of course, in retrospect it wasn't enough to convince the nation to a different course, but the atmosphere within the film still captured the sentiments of the late Weimar Republic, and the filmmakers' own political views. The director Fritz Lang and his wife Thea von Harbou, who wrote the story for *M*, eventually parted ways after the Nazi takeover, with Lang leaving for Hollywood after being offered by Joseph Goebbels the control of the new film industry of Nazi Germany - although Goebbels disliked many of Lang's works for political reasons, he was able to see the uniqueness of his works and their potential for propaganda films. Von Harbou, on the other hand, remained in Nazi Germany, and continued to write and direct motion pictures under the new regime.⁹⁹ Many of the actors that worked in *M* left for the United States and other parts of the world, while others stayed and continued to work under the new regime. Just like the plot of *M*, the real life story of those that worked on the film represented the watershed moment of the Nazis' coming to power, and the end of the Weimar Republic and the short-lived democracy that it represented.

Leni Riefenstahl: *The Blue Light*

Fritz Lang was arguably the best known and most respected filmmaker of the Weimar Republic, but his influence on modern cinema is rivaled by another figure. Perhaps equally

⁹⁸ Kracauer, 77

⁹⁹ McGilligan, Patrick. *Fritz Lang: the Nature of the Beast*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997, 185

talented but much more infamous was Leni Riefenstahl, whose career spanned from the Weimar Republic to the Nazi Germany, and even continued all the way to the postwar era. Best known for her propaganda films for the Nazi regime, Riefenstahl was the product of the same Weimar cinema culture that gave prominence to the likes of Lang and Murnau, but her body of work was drastically different from theirs. During Nazi Germany, Riefenstahl directed and produced numerous films that glorified the power of the new order. Her career also included a brief period of making newsreel footage for the German campaign in Poland. Although the subject of her films had always been under fire for its portrayal of Nazism, her ingenuity with the technical aspects of film influenced generations of filmmakers. Even blockbuster fantasy films such as *Star Wars*, released forty years after the height of her career, included references to her propaganda films,¹⁰⁰ serving as a reminder of her importance to film as an art form.

As most of the attention to her story was focused on her relationship with the Third Reich, her career before the rise of Nazism often was little more than an afterthought in most descriptions of the life Leni Riefenstahl. And while her Nazi films are no doubt fascinating documents that provide great insight to the sociopolitical culture of its era, her single directorial work during the Weimar Republic is also a crucial means to better understand the political atmosphere in which it was created. *The Blue Light* was released in theaters in 1932, following a relatively successful dancing and acting career. Riefenstahl wrote the script with Jewish-Hungarian filmmaker Béla Balázs and Jewish-Austrian writer Carl Mayer, directed the film alongside Béla Balázs, and also starred in the film as its protagonist, Junta. The plot of *The Blue Light* revolves around the antagonism of the inhabitants of a small Italian village towards

¹⁰⁰ Petropoulos, *Artists under Hitler*, 260

the young “Gypsy” woman Junta, and a doomed relationship that devastated Junta both emotionally and physically. Although Riefenstahl herself wrote the story and portrayed the ostracized and ethnically different Junta, the film as a whole still contained various messages pertaining to the expression of fascism in Germany: The fascination with nature; the persecution of the “other;” as well as the indifference towards racial violence all proved to be integral to Nazism that swept the nation merely one year later.

The Blue Light followed the tradition of mountain films (*Bergfilme*) that were popular during the Weimar Republic, that shows the magnificence of nature and its ability to grant wisdom or enlightenment, along with providing a challenge to the human characters. The genre of mountain films focuses on the pristine nature of the wilderness, promoting a style of human existence more in tune with the world. Leni Riefenstahl’s involvement with Weimar cinema follows the path of the famous mountain film director Arnold Fanck, and had her acting debut in Fanck’s *The Holy Mountain*. In a similar light, *The Blue Lights* strongly emphasises on Junta’s closeness to nature in contrast to the inhabitants of the local village.

Primarily filmed in the Italian Alps, *The Blue Light* explores and actively promotes the image of peaceful coexistence with the majestic beauty of nature. Riefenstahl’s character Junta lives in complete seclusion high up in the mountains, and has no human companion other than occasional interactions with the young local shephard, who acts as a middle ground between Junta and the villagers. The filmmaker’s affinity with nature can be seen not only from the long continuous establishing shots of the Alps, but also with the character of Junta, who acts as a personification of the mountains and fields. Unlike the villagers living within the human civilization that are materialistic, spiteful, and violent, Junta represents the innocence and purity

of nature, and she remains this way despite a general lack of contact with the other human characters. Her safe haven, the source of the “blue light,” lies on the very top of the mountains with a spectacular cove of crystals.¹⁰¹ The proximity of the location to the sky suggests a closeness to the heavens, and the beauty of the crystal light also appears to be almost divine. Just like many of the other German mountain films of its era, *The Blue Light* emphasises on the sacredness of nature, and the transcending effect it can have on those that are truly in harmony with it.

The affinity with nature as expressed in *The Blue Light* corresponds to a central theme of the mountain film genre, and also part of the German cultural canon that was also reflected in the popular youth groups of the early Twentieth Century, such as the *Wandervogel* movement that was founded in 1901. It also saw continuation after the end of the Weimar Republic, as an important facet of the Nazi ideology. While the admiration for nature in the context of mountain films was no more than a simple call for the return to the roots of humanity, the Nazi variant of this tradition became heavily racialized, as can be seen by the commonly used phrase “blood and soil.” The saying signifies the affinity between the natural landscape (soil) and the racially pure German people (blood), and was visually represented during specific rallies by the Nazi eagle above the phrase “*Blut und Boden*,” and a sword and wheat sheaf over the swastika.¹⁰² The mountain film genre was considered by Kracauer as a spiritual precursor of the Nazi racial view on nature, and while it is up in the air if the Arnold Fanck and Luis Trenkers intended for the

¹⁰¹ Riefenstahl, Leni, director. *The Blue Light*. 1932. 1:02:24

¹⁰² Unknown. “Walther Darré Bei Einer Kundgebung.” *Walther Darré Bei Einer Kundgebung*, Bundesarchiv, Koblenz, 13 Dec. 1937, [www.bild.bundesarchiv.de/archives/barchpic/search/_1522378700/?search\[view\]=detail&search\[focus\]=1](http://www.bild.bundesarchiv.de/archives/barchpic/search/_1522378700/?search[view]=detail&search[focus]=1).

genre to have any racial undertones, the preference of pristine nature over technology and human civilization ended up as a common theme within the Nazi narrative.¹⁰³

Racial violence was not an invention of the Nazis, and had been common place in Europe since the Middle Ages. Across the continent, minority groups such as Jews, Sinti and Roma (“Gypsies”) were targeted regularly by the rest of the population, especially during times of crises such as the Black Plague of the Fourteenth Century. The Dreyfus Affair in France that took place only a few decades before the Weimar Republic exposed the prejudices that still existed in all strata of European society, despite the Enlightenment and the Emancipation movements that attempted to remove them. In the east, Jews had become targets in the Czarian Russian Empire , with both the authorities as well as non-Jewish civilians. *The Blue Light* portrays this racial and ethnic prejudice that was prevalent during its time, as well as foreshadows the systematic persecution from an entire population that would come later.

The character Junta was different from the other human characters in the film not only because of her seclusion and closeness to nature, but also because of her race and ethnicity. The inhabitants of the small village in the Italian Alps are ethnically and culturally homogeneous, and very different from the “Gypsy” woman Junta, who they see as not only an outsider, but also as a witch and a threat to their way of life. To the villagers, Junta is the cause of all their problems, and they treat her as such. When Junta goes to the town, the civilians there chase her out, violently striking at her with rocks. Even though there is no evidence that Junta previously had any ill will towards them, or that she had been trying to harm the villagers in anyway, the idea that the plight of the small town can all be traced to a single entity which they see as alien and

¹⁰³ Kracauer, 251

evil is comforting. To the other human characters in the film, Junta represents the “other” that encroaches on their peaceful way of life, and they seek to harm her purely for being different.

The only human character that shows some measure of kindness to Junta is the young German painter Vigo, and their interactions lead to the destruction of all that Junta held dear, and eventually to her death. As the painter is not from the village, he lacks the prejudices against the mysterious woman, and he becomes quickly infatuated with her. However, their relationship quickly proves to be harmful to Junta, as Vigo betrays her and tells the village of her secret grotto of crystals, thus destroying her haven and treasures. Devastated, Junta commits suicide by throwing herself into the abyss. Before their interaction, many young men in the village felt compelled to climb Junta’s mountain, and then too subsequently fell to their deaths.¹⁰⁴ It seems that any interaction between Junta and the outside world would only lead to death and tragedy, and the film suggests that members of different cultures should be left to their own devices without outside contact.

The racially motivated violence seen perpetrated against Junta in *The Blue Light* became a common occurrence within Hitler’s Germany. While it had always been a significant part of the history of Western Europe, the scale and proportions increased dramatically during Nazi Germany. Before, the Dreyfus Affair split the French society into two, with many calling for Alfred Dreyfus’s guilt and others decrying the lack of justice for Dreyfus and the Jewish population he represented. However, the kind of hatred towards the “other” of an entire population, as seen in *The Blue Light*, was quite uncommon before the Nazi takeover. *Kristallnacht* of 1938 — merely six years after the release of the film — saw destruction of

¹⁰⁴ Riefenstahl, *The Blue Light*, 21:30; 1:51:32

Jewish property across Germany by large groups of German civilians alongside the SA paramilitary group, and in many cases, both groups utilized rocks for the attacks. The racial policy in Nazi Germany also forbade the mixing of different races, in accordance to the film's observation that it is a cause for tragedy. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 outlawed intermarriage between Jews and ethnic Germans under the Third Reich, as a means of keeping the German bloodlines pure.¹⁰⁵ The ethnic and racial thinking of the Nazi regime, as well as the abundance of racial violences during its time, can be gleaned in Riefenstahl's film before its establishment.

Although *The Blue Light* focuses on these racial aspects that became prominent during the Third Reich, it is important to remember that the film is told from the perspective of Junta as the victim. Leni Riefenstahl not only stars in the film, she also wrote, directed, and edited the film, and it is a highly personal project for her. When Arnold Fanck, who was responsible for her first breakthrough and then acted as a mentor for Riefenstahl as a first time filmmaker, edited her film without her consent, she was furious and had to go through all the footage to re-edit it herself.¹⁰⁶ With almost complete control over the project, it is not unfair to say that the entirety of the film is her vision. And with that, it represents Riefenstahl as a person, and the fact that she portrays the sympathetic victim from a minority background the more interesting. Even after the war, Riefenstahl frequently referenced *The Blue Light*, as character witness in contrast to her work during the Third Reich.¹⁰⁷ *The Blue Light* shares some similarities with *M*, as both projects exhibits sympathy towards those that are persecuted unjustly by mob mentality. However, while *M* offers a solution to the problem in the court system at the end of the film and gives hope for a

¹⁰⁵ Unknown, "The Nuremberg Race Laws." *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, www.ushmm.org/outreach/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007695.

¹⁰⁶ Riefenstahl, Leni. *Leni Riefenstahl: a Memoir*. New York: Picador, 1995. 99

¹⁰⁷ Rentschler, Eric. *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and its Afterlife*. Cambridge, Mass : Harvard University Press, 1996, 29

just trial, Riefenstahl made no attempt to leave a hopeful or optimistic message in her work. The film ends with Junta's suicide, which was portrayed as sad and tragic, but it lacked "*Erlösung*," or redemption, as Kracauer put it. Kracauer believes that the hopeful message is vital in film as an emotional core, an examination of the deeper significance of the themes and emotions behind the visuals. The superficiality and indifference towards its subject is one of Kracauer's main critique of New Objectivity films such as *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis*,¹⁰⁸ and the same problem is exhibited in *The Blue Light*. Riefenstahl seems to have little personal attachment even to her own characters, and does not seem to care about them beyond an artistic representation. At the end of *The Blue Light*, there is no hope for justice for Junta, no other character exhibits sympathy for her death, and nothing has changed in the villagers' attitude towards Junta. Junta's tragedy, in the end, did not bring forward a change for the better, which speaks for Riefenstahl's lack of concern as the filmmaker.

Apathy continued to be a central theme in Leni Riefenstahl's career throughout the Third Reich. Already in 1934 Riefenstahl started to develop the script for her next feature film project. Titled *Tiefland*, and based on a play by Eugen d'Albert,¹⁰⁹ it once again tells the story of a young "Gypsy" woman, exhibiting Riefenstahl's personal fascination with the "Gypsy" culture and their way of life. Just like in *The Blue Light*, Riefenstahl plays the main character in this new film. Principle shooting did not begin on the project until 1940, well into the Second World War. During production Riefenstahl was responsible for the use of slave labor, as she got thousands of "Gypsy" prisoners from concentration camps to work on the film as extras. After the filming, she left them to their own devices without care or concern, which meant that the majority were

¹⁰⁸ Kracauer, 186

¹⁰⁹ Albert, Eugen d', et al. *Tiefland: The Lowland: Music-Drama in a Prelude and Two Acts*. F. Rullman, 1908

eventually murdered in the camps.¹¹⁰ While the conditions during filming is undoubtedly better than in a concentration camp, and that their fate would probably be unchanged had they not worked on *Tiefland*, Riefenstahl actively sought the use of slave labor with few moral concerns, and her apathy towards them after completing their part in her film speaks volume on her own character. Even after the end of the Second World War Leni Riefenstahl had problems with accepting any responsibility, going as far as claiming that she saw all the extras after war, and that they were even grateful for being in the film.¹¹¹ It was until being confronted by a Roma group in court that she finally acknowledged the Nazi persecution of the European Sinti and Roma population, merely issuing a highly generic apology without taking any blame for her own involvement. “I regret that Sinti & Roma had to suffer during the period of National Socialism. It is known today that many of them were murdered in concentration camps.”¹¹² For all her interest in the “Gypsy” culture and way of life, Riefenstahl had no empathy towards the actual individuals or their lives, but merely the idea of the people.

Leni Riefenstahl’s involvement with *Das Blaue Licht* continued into the Third Reich, which goes on to show her affinity with the regime. A rerelease of the film came out in 1937, this time without Béla Balázs, Carl Mayer, or Harry Sokal (who co-produced the film with Riefenstahl), due to all three being Jewish. While Riefenstahl vehemently claimed that she disagreed with the anti-Semitic sentiments of the Third Reich,¹¹³ her own actions proved that she was still culpable for these charges. Despite her collaboration with Nazi Germany, Riefenstahl nevertheless continued her career even after the end of the Nazi regime, even though her work

¹¹⁰ Petropoulos, *Artists under Hitler*, 256

¹¹¹ Bach, Steven. *Leni: the Life and Work of Leni Riefenstahl*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 2007, 205

¹¹² Bach, 205

¹¹³ Riefenstahl, *Memoir*

was never as well-known or influential as her previous projects. She continued to show great dedication to her works, using all her effort for the creation of art, and lived to the age of 101. However, due to her association with the Nazi regime, as well as her inability to come to terms with her tainted past, she will perhaps always be remembered as the great filmmaker that dealt with the devil.

Fritz Lang and Leni Riefenstahl represented the myriad of filmmakers that owned their success to the booming cultural scene of the Weimar Republic, as well as the the fate of the German film industry following the advent of Nazi Germany. The question of staying and going into exile; the decision between collaboration and resistance, were the choices every filmmaker and artist had to make. While the Nazis did not come to power until 1933, the fascist background had already been set in Europe, which was captured by German films in the last few years of the Weimar Republic. While Lang utilized the medium of film to speak out against the fascist movement within Germany and eventually renounced his homeland for the United States, Riefenstahl observed her surroundings without empathy or compassion, and was more than comfortable to accept the new opportunities presented to her in the new regime.

Conclusion

Despite its relatively short reign, the Weimar Republic is undoubtedly one of the most culturally and artistically significant eras within German history. Rising from the abyss of the destructive First World War, and hampered by the punitive Treaty of Versailles, the newly founded democratic government was nevertheless successful in many respects. The Weimar Republic was constantly under the threat of the Entente nations, who saw Germany as responsible for the First World War and did not want Germany to reclaim its previous power. It also faced considerable hardship domestically, as radical movement on both sides of the political spectrum attempted to tear the nation apart. Leaders of the Weimar Republic also managed to protect the nation from economic disasters, helping the nation limp through more than a decade. Although it faced many obstacles throughout its existence, these fifteen years of the Weimar Republic saw the renaissance of the German art world. In the 1949 noir film *The Third Man*, Orson Welles's character Harry Lime examined the relationship between the plight of society and the artistic accomplishment by the individual artists within said society.

In Italy for 30 years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love - they had 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.¹¹⁴

Like the Renaissance Italian city states, the tumultuous years of the Weimar Republic was also home to great artistic progress. While German modernism had already began during the waning years of the German Empire, it was the Weimar Republic that enabled these artists working with the various modernist styles to occupy a spot under the sun. The new republic saw the rise of the Bauhaus movement, which under the direction of Walter Gropius revolutionized modern

¹¹⁴ Reed, Carol, director. *The Third Man*. British Lion Film Production, 1949.

architecture and design. The scientific breakthrough in the world of physics came as a result of the concerted passion and effort of Albert Einstein, Werner Heisenberg, and many other eminent German scientists. The literary traditions of Goethe and Schiller were passed down to the likes of Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse, who drew on the old as well as the new. Painters of the Weimar era experimented with Expressionism and the New Objectivity, creating visual art both distinctively German and influenced by other artists across national borders. And in the new medium of film, German filmmakers utilized new forms of storytelling that resulted in works of motion pictures both visually stunning and thematically engaging.

Under this facade of prosperity and progress, however, was an unsavory undercurrent of fascism. In this vein, the years of the Weimar Republic served as a bridge between the reigns of the German Empire and Nazi Germany. The Weimar government struggled with the legacy of the old Empire, and was overly receptive of old ideals and former leaders of the previous regime. Leaders of the Weimar Republic also failed to effectively combat the rising threat of the new alt-right, being overly lenient to right-wing violence and allowing the Nazis to gain traction unmolested. The Nazis' coming to power in 1933 was neither sudden nor surprising, and the gradual transition towards a fascist dictatorship had been observed by the German population. Many decided to observe and record Germany's path in their lifetime, and to provide their own opinions on the matter. The complacency of Leni Riefenstahl, pitted against Thomas Mann's pointed criticism against populist leaders like Adolf Hitler, together paint a picture of the complicated yet fascinating political scene of the Weimar Republic. Ernst Jünger's measured patriotism, versus the racial nature of Emil Nolde's beliefs, is also a display of the important distinction between various degrees of nationalism. The Weimar artists' perceptions of their own

socio-political environment provide indispensable subjective commentary on the special path (*Sonderweg*) that would eventually lead to the Third Reich and its heinous crimes. To understand the fascism within their artistic depictions is to understand the hearts and minds of those that had witnessed and lived through the rise of Nazism.

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