

## ***Modernism and Modernisation in German Films from the 1930s***<sup>1</sup>

### **The Modernism of the Avantgarde**

Writing about modernism in Third Reich films is in many ways a hazardous undertaking, full of pitfalls. Not least because of the slippery nature of the concept itself, I shall confine myself to films made during the 1930s, in particular, the years 1930 to 1936, which in any event seem to me among the most interesting years of European cinema in general.

There are broadly speaking, three kinds of modernism at issue: 'modernism' in the sense of an artistic avantgarde; 'modernism' as it affects labour and work, when machines replace humans (which I shall call 'modernisation'); and modernism as a particular attitude to life, in Western countries normally associated with increased leisure time and consumerism (what one might call 'life-style modernity' or the modern *Lebensgefühl*). What makes the topic treacherous is that in the domain of cinema, it is especially difficult to play off 'modernism,' (in the sense of an artistic avantgarde) against the different forms of 'modernisation' (in technology, industry and science), seeing how the filmic avantgarde (whose splinters did indeed reach into the 1930s, as I shall try and show) meshes with the forced modernisation which the new industrial power Nazi Germany undertook in the mid-1930s as it geared up to arm itself for another war of conquest.

These waves of modernisation did not leave the German film industry untouched, without however, condemning it to becoming a mere executive organ of the regime's military and propagandist aims. On the contrary, I shall argue that an altogether different, and as the post-war period was to show, in some respects countervailing modernisation took hold in the cinema: whether deliberately encouraged or merely tolerated is a moot point, which is why, after my initial hesitation, it nevertheless seemed an important subject, precisely because it obliges one to look once more, and to look closely at the films and that which inspired them or made them possible. This is not to whitewash or exonerate a regime that disqualified itself in word and deed, but in order to understand more fully the fault-lines which so fatally run through the German filmic heritage.

The literary and artistic modernism of the 1910s and 1920s in the cinema usually means German Expressionism, French impressionism, Dada and surrealist films, and the Soviet avantgarde. None of these filmic avantgardes really survived into the 1930s, but this has as much to do with the coming of sound as with the different political regimes' repressive -but also populist-cultural policies, foremost those of fascism in Germany and Stalinism in the Soviet Union. What did survive in Germany of the 1930s were some important impulses from 'Die Neue Sachlichkeit' and the so-called New Photography (Albert Renger-Patsch, *Die Welt ist schön*, [1928]; Karl Blossfeldt, *Urformen der Kunst*, [1928]; August Sander, *Antlitz der Zeit*, [1929]; Mellor, 1978). One only has to look at

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is a revised version of a lecture given on the occasion of the retrospective 'Cinema Tedesco dalle origine al Terzo Reich' on 23.10.93 in Pesaro, Italy. It was translated into German in *montage/av*, vol 3, no 2, 1994.

the Photography Annual *Das deutsche Lichtbild* from 1930 to 1936 to realize how modernist abstraction and the Leica look gradually turned from pictures of machinery, close-ups of plants and urban street scenes shot from high-angle diagonals, to landscape, people in folk costumes and rural scenes to realize that there was never a simple cut-off point, nor a complete rejection of modernist photography.

### **Modern Photography in the Cinema: Arnold Fanck and Willy Zielke**

A good example of the continuing influence of the avant-garde, partly thanks to the Nazi's greater tolerance for modern photography, are the films of Arnold Fanck in which nature becomes spectacle, and the celebration of the sublime. At least this is how it might appear at first sight, in the many mountain films that have made Fanck's reputation. However, Fanck discovered the photogenic side of mountains and mountaineering almost as a by-product of his interest in photographic technique. Son of a wealthy factory owner, his asthmatic condition as a child led to him being sent to Arosa and Davos for clean air and fortifying exercise. But Fanck used his Alpine stays also to indulge his early passion as amateur photographer and dedicated engineer of cameras and lenses. Fascinated by rushing mountain streams and waterfalls, Fanck was intrigued by the problem of how to render movement and typically kinetic experiences in photography. It is a tension still visible in his films.

Fanck's films are trapped in the still photograph, attempting to freeze movement in the image and dynamize the image, often at the expense of either narrative, dramatic build-up or timing. His plots, as dramatic as they may seem, would be at home in a pulp magazine. Very rarely is there any real building up of a story; instead he uses a dramatic/melodramatic frame, which he develops only to put something else up front in the scene.

Films like [DAS WUNDER DES SCHNEESCHUHS and FUCHSJAGD AUF SKIERN DURCHS ENGADIN] are most closely related to the abstract film: diagonal division of the screen, traces, curves and signs in the snow, Jugendstil ornaments, circular cut-outs of images, little points emerging on the horizon, which rush up to the camera and then disappear out of the picture, in giant close-up. (Brandlmeier, 1984, Lg4 E4)

One can see in his work the continuation of a tension never quite resolved in the history of the cinema, between the desire to break down movement in order to scientifically analyze it (from Muybridge and Marey, to Messter and Ruttmann), and the desire to animate the inanimate, to use technology to simulate and replace nature (to be found in Edison, in the myth of Frankenstein, of electricity, of the vamp and the machine, as one sees it in Rotwang's laboratory in Lang's METROPOLIS.<sup>2</sup>) In Fanck's mountain films, which are therefore quite different from Heimatfilme, it is always the combination of technology (often aviation) and nature, of two kinds of energy - man-made and elemental, through which the individual defines himself and in which the filmic image serves as an erotic-orgiastic cooling-off point in the wake of the initial conflict.<sup>3</sup> The challenge is whether

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<sup>2</sup> It could be argued that the mobilisation of perception and emotions in Hollywood cinema, from Busby Berkeley to Steven Spielberg, belongs to this conception, but a distinction must be made here. See below, in the relationship between Jünger's aristocratic pessimism and the optimism of popular culture.

<sup>3</sup> Gottfried Knapp describes the observatory telescope [in STÜRME ÜBER DEM MONTBLANC] as " a sexual organ peering into the dark". (Brandmeier, 1984, Lg4 E4).

one can use the camera to confer on nature the aesthetics of the machine age, and use the mountains or icebergs in order to infuse the technological apparatus with the sublime and the elemental.

At the same time, Fanck was at the opposite pole of the world of Ufa, if we understand Ufa as standing for man-made environments, studio-reality, total control over environment and nature, recreating it in quasi-laboratory conditions. Even in a film as patently misfiring as Fanck's *DER GROBE SPRUNG* (1927) -an attempt at a German slapstick-comedy in the style of Buster Keaton or Harold Lloyd-, we have a sense of the unresolved contradiction between the spectacle of nature (the picture postcards of the change of seasons, of trees and valleys) and the grossly inflated body, with its toy-town propellers of Hans Schneeberger, the city-slicker and patsy, who thanks to tricks and technology, outwits the locals when it comes to winning the downhill race as well as the brewer's daughter.

With Fanck's filming of nature it is easy to forget the meaning of technology in his films. It is precisely this solid, crafted aspect of his work and the thematisation of technology which is essential to his role of precursor of *Neue Sachlichkeit*. Technical know-how is evident in every image. Fanck's experience as a photographer working with natural light sources, and as an officer in the newsreel service utilizing slow-motion shots, converged in films like *DAS WUNDER DES SCHNEESCHUHS*. His ski books work with single image series, in the style of Muybridge. [...] He was one of the first cameramen to employ the Ernemann slow-motion techniques, and he was the first to work with extremely long focal length. In 1938 he was among the first five purchasers of an Arriflex camera. (Brandlmeier, 1984, Lg 4 E4).

The dialectic of the German film avant-garde is such that Fanck is in some sense closer to the *Neue Sachlichkeit* than the genre of the Bergfilm makes us think, while someone like Walter Ruttmann, with his sentimental pathos, is closer to the mountain film than his pedigree of the 'city symphony' suggests. If this `reversion' is kept in mind, it may be less surprising that elements of Soviet montage kino also resurfaced in the 1930s, and that traces of it can be found not only in many of the Ufa Kulturfilme, but also in such early sound films as *NIE WIEDER LIEBE* (Antatol Litvak, 1931), a good example of how the `revolutionary techniques' of Eisenstein and others were domesticated in feature films. The two chief representatives of the film avant-garde from the 1920s that made the transition from Weimar to the Nazi regime without any break whatsoever were of course Leni Riefenstahl and Walter Ruttmann, whose image and sound compositions sometimes boldly, sometimes vulgarly popularized the achievements of Vertov and Pudovkin, while at the same time fitting their techniques of contrasting and alternating images into the sound film, often they suited, in strikingly bold and innovative ways.

An outstanding and virtually unknown example of German montage kino comes from 1936: *DAS STAHLTIER*, `the Beast of Steel', made by one of Leni Riefenstahl's cameramen, Willy Zielke. Rumour had it that it was banned by the Nazi for being avantgarde, but according to Riefenstahl's memoirs, the real reason was that since it was a film commissioned by the Deutsche Reichsbahn to celebrate its centenary, Zielke's film intensely displeased his clients. The commission he had received was to document the history of the railway, and the development from steam engine to diesel to

electrification: according to Riefenstahl

Zielke had turned this difficult material into a thrilling picture. His locomotive looked like a living monster. The headlights were its eyes, the instruments its brain, the piston its joints, and the oil dripping from the moving pistons looked like blood. The impression was increased by the revolutionary use of sound-mixes. When the railway officials saw the movie, they were so horrified - according to Zielke - that they left the room speechless (Riefenstahl, 1987, 242).

The film was not only not shown, the railway board wanted all copies destroyed. Riefenstahl tried to intercede, and arranged for Goebbels to see a print. He thought Zielke showed talent, but found the film too abstract for the broad public: 'it could be a Bolshevik film' - 'but that's no reason to destroy the film', replied Riefenstahl. 'I'm sorry, but the decision is entirely up to the Reichsbahn, which has financed the film. I would not wish to interfere.'

Whether or not we are to give credence to this version depends on how reliable we consider the memoirs of Leni Riefenstahl. Certainly, Goebbels' closing remark that he preferred not to interfere in the issue because it was a film commissioned by an industrial body and should therefore be a private, economic decision, does seem rather plausible. A recent investigation by Martin Loiperdinger, however, indicates that the issue is rather more complicated, and therefore also more interesting. It is true that the German Railway had envisioned a film to celebrate its jubilee, one which would publicize the progress in and comfort of modern train travel. Instead, as Riefenstahl noted, 'the carriages [in Zielke's film] crashed into one another with such force that the audience were thrown out of their seats' (Riefenstahl, 242). The conversation with Goebbels then becomes purely anecdotal. The really interesting factor here is how Zielke came to be commissioned for the film in the first place. It is worth noting here that Zielke had taught at the Munich photographic academy from 1927 to 1934 and had made a name for himself as the representative of 'new photography' (Loiperdinger, 1994, 50). It was his good connections with Albert Gollwitzer, a Munich rail company executive, who recommended him, and ensured that he was commissioned to make an hour-long film to celebrate the centenary of the German railways. Loiperdinger has painted a vivid picture of a fascinating shoot (reminiscent of the appearance of agitprop in the first soviet), as well as of the 'star of the film - a magnificent S 3/6 locomotive, the pride and joy of the German railways at the time' (Loiperdinger, 52). The viewing, as described above, was a disaster. To appreciate this, one has to imagine Euro-Star wanting to show off the London-Paris route, or the French wanting to advertise the TGV and then being presented with a film in which 'in inimitable montages and dissolves of glittering track snakes and hissing steam locomotives, dangerous shunting manoeuvres thunder in [an] optical-acoustic furioso across the screen' (Hans Ertl, quoted by Loiperdinger, 52). Ertl adds, dryly, that 'no person in his right mind would ever travel by train again after experiencing this crushing effect in the interplay of tracks, wheels, buffers and steam sirens on the big screen' (Loiperdinger, 53).

The fact that such a misunderstanding - unimaginable today - was still possible at the time, is particularly symptomatic for the theme of this essay: Here we have the two concepts of the Modern, the avantgarde-ist and the modernising represented as antithetical, without this shedding light upon the political antithesis of Soviet art on the

one hand and Nazi aesthetics on the other. And yet the misunderstanding is neither non-political nor entirely non-aesthetic. It is clear even from the stills that Zielke's aesthetics had less to do with Eisenstein's abstractions than with the new photography (see, in this connection, Páini, 1994), but it is precisely this *Lebensgefühl* that both Zielke and the railways wanted to appeal to, and which is characteristic of the ambivalence of the time, as we have already seen in Fanck's work.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Modernism of Modernisation**

Faint echoes of the European avant-garde such as these remained few and far between in the Germany of the 1930s. As exceptions they merely serve to underline the rule that 'modernism' and 'Third Reich' are terms that are fundamentally antithetical. Nazi ideology was anti-modernist ("entartete Kunst"), racist-populist ("völkisch"), and aesthetically neo-classicist. Argued the other way round, it was a historical pastiche of all the styles regarded as national and German: the Gothic middle-ages, the Northern Renaissance (Dürer), the classicism of Goethe and Schiller, Romanticism and Biedermeier. However, one could also argue this the other way round: given the feeble eclecticism of Speer's and Hitler's showpiece art, with its insensitivity to any history of style, we could talk about a period of (already cynically postmodern?) pastiche, in which everything goes, as long as it has at some point been designated by art history as 'German' and 'national': a conglomeration of Medieval Gothic, Northern European Renaissance, the Classicism of Goethe and Schiller, Romanticism and Biedermeier: the revenge of semi-educated Postmodernism on over-educated International Modernism?

But this conservatism in cultural policy and state-approved art contrasted sharply with the modernizing tendencies in the fields of science and technology which Nazi Germany not only continued from Weimar, but intensified and accelerated. The result was a paradox which has often been commented on. It brought about a society whose official culture was stridently anti-technical, anti-industrial, anti-urban on the one hand, but whose manufacturing practice was to force a frantic pace of industrialization and engineering, because - in the absence of a colonial empire - it needed to develop the productive and industrial potential of its domestic territories. And this not only in order to pursue its re-armament policies within Europe. Equally important was a domestic reason, namely to compensate the civilian population for longer working hours by raising their living standards, and thus to supply them with consumer goods. In his book *Das gespaltene Bewußtsein* (Schäfer, 1982) Dieter Schäfer has examined some of the consequences of these very contradictory aims with regard to popular culture.

If this contradiction has often been noted, it is usually analyzed either as a form of collective schizophrenia, or it is seen as a cynical game of mass-deception by the ruling elite. More recently, however, historians have tried to show that the paradox is in some sense more apparent than real, and that a number of intellectuals, cultural critics, writers and thinkers, from the Weimar Republic onwards (such as Oswald Spengler, Werner Sombart, Carl Schmitt, Hans Freyer, Martin Heidegger) had been preparing the ideological basis for such a formation, which might be called the German 'historical

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<sup>4</sup> There could, though, be a connection with Eisenstein, at least on a rather different level. At the Pesaro Festival Giovanni Spagnoletti commented that *DAS STAHLTIER* was a very interesting film because it was the only homosexual film made in 'the Third Reich'. This could also be one of the reasons why the film met with such vehement rejection, without this rejection being expressed in a directly political manner.

compromise', but which Jeffrey Herf has called *Reactionary Modernism*, in a book with the suggestive subtitle *Technology, Culture, Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*.

Put briefly, Herf's thesis is as follows: subsequent to the first world war, and in an effort to explain and rationalize the German defeat, many writers who were by inclination and temperament conservative, tried to come up with an explanation which incorporated the arguments of the left (especially of the communist left), while nevertheless retaining the crucial elements of German nationalism and the feudal class structure in their vision of the nation's future, and in the lessons they drew from recent history. After the First World War, in an effort to explain and to rationalize the German defeat, various writers who were by inclination and temperament conservative tried to come up with an explanation which incorporated the arguments of the left (especially of the communist left), while at the same time retaining the crucial elements of German nationalism and the feudal class structure in their vision of the nation's future, and in the lessons they drew from recent history. So much for Herf, to whose detailed arguments and rich historical source material such a summary obviously cannot do justice.

Reactionary Modernism's perhaps most interesting proponent from a media-historical perspective was the novelist and essay-writer Ernst Jünger. Despite being virulently anti-democratic and nationalist, he realized that Germany had to modernize and industrialize, in order to achieve national identity. Jünger was therefore anti-agrarian, anti-völkisch, anti-regionalist, praising the life of the metropolis, of industry, steel mills and shipbuilding in metaphoric language borrowed from volcanoes and fire, blood and lightening. His project had to do with finding an intellectually halfway coherent but also emotionally satisfying synthesis between the belief in the German soul and German destiny on the one hand, and a belief in technology, industrialization, investment in research and development. We can recognize the strategies in Ruttmann's *METALL DES HIMMELS* (1935) when ploughshares grow out of blast-furnaces, and wheat grows out of ploughshares. But whereas Ruttmann's metaphoric transformations of objects is not without tongue-in-cheek playfulness, reminiscent of Hans Richter's dada films (*VORMITTAGSSPUK* [1927/28], *ALLES DREHT SICH, ALLES BEWEGT SICH* [1929]): as when airplane formations made up of writing pens pass over a flotilla of paper-clips -- there is no trace of humour or sudden switch of perspective in Jünger's writing.

More briefly put, Jünger's modernism was concerned with a synthesis between nature and technology, or rather a reinterpretation of romanticism which combined the industrial exploitation of nature with a pagan worship of its beauty and grandeur, and which saw no contradiction between an industry of heavy goods manufacture, of research into synthetic fibres or nuclear fission on the one hand, and a belief in nature as sacred, elemental and sublime. There was no sense of disjuncture, because Jünger also found the grandiose and the sublime in man-made structures, especially when they were being destroyed: his famous baptisms of fire, or his storms of steel are ways of intensifying and accelerating processes of violent rebirth and renewal. One might say, that Jünger tried to achieve a compromise between Caspar David Friedrich and Marinetti, but while his books and essays are full of the most dramatic descriptions of fighter planes going down in flames, or battleships sunk by a torpedo -- typical boys' fiction material dignified with philosophical ruminations which now seem little short of bombastic -- Herf quotes passages from a 1934 book celebrating Jünger that underline his significance for the Nazi movement:

German youth owes a debt above all to Ernst Jünger for the fact that technology

is no longer a problem for them. They have made his beautiful hymns to technology born from fire and blood their own. They live in harmony with it. They require no more ideologies to 'overcome' technology. Rather, they grasp it as the arm of the [movement's] idea. This was something new for us, this incorporation of matter into the meaning of events. Jünger has liberated us from a nightmare. (Herf, p. 80)<sup>5</sup>

If the passage refers mainly to Jünger's idea of the soldier-worker, a figure in whom the military ideals of discipline and subordination are merged with the communist ideal of the proletariat as the motive force of history, then the really crucial move which made this concoction both plausible and emotionally satisfying was that Jünger viewed both nature and technology from the perspective of the observer, the onlooker, that is from the gratifying subject positions which powerful spectacles could give. Thus, more interesting for the film historian is Jünger's use of the concept of 'total mobilisation'. For one of his retrospectively most pregnant thoughts was the role he assigned to spectacle and to the mass-media in this process of mobilization. Not only was he in many ways the only media theorist the right produced in the 1930s, - as Karl-Heinz Bohrer has shown - he also drew on much the same insights as had Walter Benjamin. Jünger predicted a society of the spectacle, in which he saw the political use of the audio-visual media not so much in their capacity to realistically represent a simulacrum of the world, but in the peculiar kind of appeal and presence which the technology of radio and the cinema contributed to political life and the public sphere. As early as 1934 Jünger was referring to the 'Great War' as the first war in world history which would enter history in the form of moving pictures, noting that events increasingly take place only to be captured in sound, word and image (Jünger, 1934).

### **Modernism and the Imagination of Disaster**

As a theorist of the media Jünger is perhaps more relevant in the age of television and camera-guided missiles than for understanding the cinema of the Third Reich. He followed closely the developments in photo-journalism and radio in the 1920s, drawing conclusions which could be quotations from Paul Virilio. When we think of Nazi cinema, on the other hand, relatively few films of the 1930s are concerned with such spectacles of destruction or the new ice age as he describes them. At most, one could cite the very few science fiction films made in the 1930s, above all films like *FP1 ANTWORDET NICHT* (1932, Karl Hartl), *DER TUNNEL* (1933, Kurt Bernhardt) and *GOLD* (1934, Karl Hartl), which in many respects seem more like late additions to Lang's Ufa special effects extravaganzas such as *METROPOLIS* (1927) and *DIE FRAU IM MOND* (1929) than new developments. However, in one or two respects they do offer an interesting perspective on the ideological project of *Reactionary Modernism*. This has less to do with creating an emotional acceptance of technology - although in *GOLD* it seems that the main reason for the high-voltage generator to be situated in an underground shaft beneath the sea is to amplify the spectacle- value of the final explosion, which not only blows up a mine, and engulfs it in water, but also churns up the sea like a torpedo hitting a battleship. No - what is more interesting is the contradiction that opens up between the ideological

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<sup>5</sup> In the original: Wolf Dieter Mueller, *Ernst Jünger*, 1934, p. 42; quoted in Karl Prümm, *Die Literatur des Soldatischen Nationalismus* (Kronberg/Ts) vol 2, p. 375.

solution which the film offers and the real economy in which it is purportedly situated. This contradiction crystallizes in these films around the key figure of the engineer, positioned ambiguously between both the workers and the boss, but also between the inventor and those that commercialize an invention. The reason the engineer seems so crucial is because he has to mediate between two sets of binary oppositions, that of the class-discourse (already familiar from *METROPOLIS*, as the social utopia of mediator between head and hand), but also of the discourse of science and technology. In this latter respect, the films of the 1930s have as their ideological aim to totally separate science from technology: on the side of science is the figure of the professor or inventor - selfless, absent-minded, beneficial in his quest for pure knowledge. On the other side is the businessman: unscrupulous and megalomaniac, who stops at nothing in order to steal, sabotage or keep for himself the work that by right belongs to others. The business man or financier is thus the one who applies science, who makes technological progress and productivity possible, but he is invariably seen as the villain. Here we have, in some sense, the romantic anti-capitalist, anti-technology vision intact, except that both sides need the engineer: the inventor in order to rescue him from himself, and the businessman because only the engineer can make the invention 'work': his job is therefore to help materialize the immaterial (pure disembodied thought) and to moralize the material (pure inert matter). These binary oppositions and the mediating function of the engineer stand in glaring contrast to the actual relations affecting the processes of technology and invention.

Ever since Edison, invention had been 'industrialized', which meant that application, diffusion and acceptance had to be ever more closely tied to the process of invention itself; where this is not the case, and products cannot be exploited through the market, private industry likes to pass the cost of invention (or research and development, as it is known today) on to the state. Especially in the 1930s, the question of who would bear the cost of industrial development was acute, and we can see behind the romantic figure of the engineer in *GOLD* the massive absence which the film never names, that is the State, called upon to manage overproduction either by building up a war economy or by helping industry conquer new markets. The engineer thus becomes a stand-in, the inadequate human figure called upon to 'explain' the mysterious workings of capitalism and the market economy.<sup>6</sup> Failing to understand it himself, he can only become a saboteur himself, by blowing the whole thing up. *GOLD* appeals not only to anti-capitalist anxieties, but also attempts to neutralize the social processes which make gold an economic value in the first place, namely scarcity. Thus, by destroying the machine that can make gold out of lead, the engineer reinstates the principle of scarcity over abundance, and thus safeguards not only the value of gold, but economic protectionism. It is therefore a pre- or anti-Keynsian vision of capitalist crisis-management.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> A similarly overtaxed mediator, this time between medicine and metaphysics, is found in the figure of the doctor in various bio-pics from the 1930s, particularly *ROBERT KOCH, DER BEKÄMPFER DES TODES* (1939, Hans Steinhoff).

<sup>7</sup> This was also demonstrated in the figure of the engineer in *FP1 ANTWORDET NICHT* (1932). Highly recommended in this context is the chapter in Herf on the role of the German engineer as the active, if often naive ideologues in Weimar and afterwards (Herf, 152ff).

## **The Modernity of International Competition: Film Europa**

In actual life, on the other hand, neither the conservative forces of the Weimar Republic nor the Nazi regime were that ignorant of the real economy. And this brings me to the third kind of modernism in the cinema of the 1930s that I want to talk about. It starts from the slightly different premise that it is perhaps no accident that the cinema did not become the primary site of popularized versions of this reactionary modernism, and instead, knew its own kind of conservative revolution, which cannot be directly conflated either with the political calendar of Germany in the 1930s nor identified with the ideological project of reconciling technology with nature or modernizing an agrarian society into an industrialized super-power. Which is perhaps also the reason why a reading of this cinema in terms of progressive/utopian vs reactionary/conservative does not always illuminate the inner dynamics of the German cinema of that time.

What can be argued is that Ufa itself experienced a struggle over modernism which split along the lines of inventor vs businessman, and only in the late 1920s and early 1930s did it undergo the kinds of modernisation programmes which closed the rift, and which - had they not happened - might have torpedoed or sabotaged the Ufa enterprise. This modernisation of Ufa happened in two phases, one in 1927-28, and the other between 1929-32. The first one I shall call Ludwig Klitzsch' managerial modernisation programme. Since I have written about it at length elsewhere (Elsaesser, 1992), I shall keep my remarks brief, and simply indicate that it involved the move from the director-unit system of production to the producer-unit system (the Produktionsleiter - System, headed by men like Günther Stapenhorst, Max Pfeiffer and Alfred Zeisler). It brought greater division of labour within production and between production and distribution, with stricter budget management under each spending unit, and an intensified effort of promotion and advertising. Klitzsch's strategy made Ufa financially sound within two years, and it was this management structure that remained in place at least until 1937, ensuring that Ufa remained market-driven and run along profit oriented principles.<sup>8</sup>

There is no question that with Klitsch in charge, and Pommer back from the United States, the modernism of Hollywood entered into Ufa, and indeed seems to have created the economic and institutional basis, ie. the finance and management structure which decisively modernized the German film industry, and allowed it to be -relatively speaking- very successful in Europe and other markets (like Latin America) during the 1930s.

It also meant that because Ufa was an export earner and in many ways a multinational company, the films it made and distributed were not only intended for and determined by the domestic audiences. Ufa knew that it supplied markets other than the German one, and this goes some way towards explaining its choice of subjects, its styles and the kinds of stars it promoted: for these markets were not the American one (a territory in which the German film, unlike the French, could only ever gain a very precarious foothold) but primarily those of other European countries, Latin America, Eastern Europe and the Balkans formed the international audience for German films.

The importance of European audiences is crucial when one wants to understand the second kind of modernisation, which was in principle a technological one - the

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<sup>8</sup> See also Saunders (1994) on the tensions within Ufa in the 1920s and the internal as well as external strategies the German studio system pursued in order to compete with Hollywood.

conversion to sound - but whose consequences affected marketing, and through marketing the product itself, namely genres and film styles. A much underrated element in this process were the multi-language versions which today strike us as such anachronistic and unsatisfactory remnants of those early years of cross-licensing agreements and patent exchange. An example might be the film *DIE LETZTE KOMPAGNIE* (1930), a rather strained effort when we consider the use of sound and dialogue. But given its generic identity between melodrama and 'Prussian film', one has to admire the thoroughly 'balanced' view it gives of the Napoleonic troops (a far from the anti-French caricatures of earlier propaganda films). Yet this balance may not only be due to the liberal -and Francophile- views of the film's director, Kurt Bernhardt, but also be the result of strategic marketing, considering the international popularity of its star, Conrad Veidt, especially popular in France. In this case it is a matter of understanding this transitional phenomenon of the multi-language film in the context of the socio-political function of the cinema at that time in Europe.

Yet if films like *DIE LETZTE KOMPAGNIE* or *DER TUNNEL* (1933)<sup>9</sup> refer to the link between France and Germany which was so vital to the economic side of the cinema of the time, then the connections between the film industry and the record industry, the newspaper and publishing world are even more far-reaching. For what the multi-language versions prepared - among which the musical comedies predominated - was the build-up of a very lucrative trade in sheet music and recorded music, where for the first time the kinds of tie-ins and merchandising deals were practised, on the back of which a star-system developed which survived the multi-language versions. It is for instance noticeable that almost all the early sound musicals which are remembered as classics today are also the ones that contain hit tunes that were sold in millions separately from the films: *DIE DREI VON DER TANKSTELLE* (1930, Wilhelm Thiele), *DER KONGRESS TANZT* (1931, Eric Charell), *DER BLAUE ENGEL* (1930, Josef von Sternberg).

However, the sound comedies and musicals are important for another reason as well: they are aimed at international audiences by the very fact that they so often deal in national stereotypes which they play off against each other (e.g. the Lillian Harvey films *LIEBESWALZER* [1930, Wilhelm Thiele], *DER KONGRESS TANZT*, *EIN BLONDER TRAUM* [1932, Paul Martin]). The films invariably dramatize two worlds (Europe/America in *GLÜCKSKINDER*, Berlin/Hollywood in *EIN BLONDER TRAUM*, an automobile factory and a rural principality in *LIEBESWALZER*) which relativize each other in a spirit which levels differences rather than reinforcing them. More important still, these films often make propaganda (partly they propagate a modernising process that was to outlast the "Third Reich". They made propaganda first and foremost for the cinema itself, dramatizing it as a world not only more real than the real world, but also the guarantee that the other worlds are real and meaningful: thus in *ICH BEI TAG UND DU BEI NACHT* (1932, Ludwig Berger), Käte von Nagy, when seeing *Schloß Sanssouci* can say 'wie im Kino' ("just like in the movies"). She is referring, of course, to the luxury of the movies, but also to a certain lifestyle for which these films serve as propaganda. This 'modern' lifestyle is composed of very familiar elements - tourism, consumer and luxury goods and a redefinition of gender roles, at least as far as eroticism is concerned.

The tourism theme comes up, for example, in films of the early thirties with

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<sup>9</sup> Kurt (later: Curtis) Bernhardt made the latter in France, before embarking on a very successful career in Hollywood.

sports cars (LIEBESWALZER) and romantic adventures in twin-bed sleeping car compartments (ADIEU MASCOTTE, 1930), holidays are taken on the French Riviera (BOMBEN AUF MONTE CARLO, 1931), trips are made by luxury yacht through the Mediterranean (NIE WIEDER LIEBE) or the North Sea (GOLD), one dreams of sailing boats and skiing vacations, or takes trips to Rio and makes tough business deals in Hollywood (GLÜCKSKINDER, EIN BLONDER TRAUM). These moments pave the way for what, in the narrow sense of the Third Reich propagandist film, would be represented as the new, the modern life-style, where the cinema would convey the whiff of luxury and the habits of consumerism to the average German *Kleinbürger* (petit-bourgeois), seamlessly tying in the latest fashion trends with the great outdoors, or novel electric household appliances with Germanic nature worship.

More specifically, this life-style had to do with motorways and cars, with technological consumer goods and the armament industry, with justifying propaganda for tourism and *Kraft-durch-Freude* holidays, while at the same time imitating the Americans and their admiration for the machine and for technical gadgets. Here the most perfect synthesis is the Volkswagen and the motorway project which, as filmmaker Hartmut Bitomsky have shown very well in his REICHAUTOBAHN (1985) and DER VW-KOMPLEX (1987). Hitler's famous motorways were built, according to Bitomsky (who uses contemporary material, such as newsreel footage, coffee-table picture books and feature films) in order to be advertised, and advertised in order to be consumed, which is to say, in order to provide particular kinds of kinetic spectacles, including nature as spectacle.

At the same time, subliminal advertising and product placement were already fully exploited in these films. In NIE WIEDER LIEBE, for example, Lilian Harvey has great difficulty seducing Harry Liedtke - until she offers him the agonizing choice: 'Hennessy or Martell?', while in GLÜCKSKINDER (Paul Martin, 1936) Coca Cola and Mickey Mouse are unashamedly mentioned. In ICH BEI TAG UND DU BEI NACHT a giant bottle of Chanel No. 5 plays an integral part in the plot, and most films of the mid-thirties are teeming with expensive watches (in close-up) and extravagant accessories, with the latest in designer furniture, like cushion covers and curtains, the last word in ladies hats and double-breasted suits. All this is accompanied by 'swing' (the German version of jazz music) on the record player, or perhaps a score of one of the latest hits opened casually on the piano.

Germany's greatest female star, Lilian Harvey, was as if to the manner born for this new life-style, for she was Germany's expert in matters erotic. Nothing was too much trouble for this young lady when it came to getting a look-in in the man's world: singing, dancing, driving cars and competitive swimming, modelling for painters and acting real-life royalty, cracking safes and getting the better of international criminal organisations. No challenge was too daunting, for 'la Harvey' could whip up a stunning evening gown from a shower curtain, transforming herself from good pal to *femme fatale* in a matter of minutes (NIE WIEDER LIEBE). And what is more, she had to perform all these metamorphoses with perfect timing, knowing exactly when to keep her superior knowledge of the 'real' situation to herself (and to the audience) and when to play it out to best effect. As she puts it so ironically NIE WIEDER LIEBE, 'hier scheint *man* nicht, hier ist *Mann*' (literally: 'here things are not what they seem, they simply are', but wittily playing on the untranslatable pun of 'man=one' and 'Mann=male')

### **Modernism between cultural pessimism and the optimism of consumption**

‘Just like in the movies’, ‘things aren't what they seem, they just are’: one is tempted to contrast this playful appeal to simulated reality with the quite different simulation machine celebrated by Ernst Jünger when he speaks of the society of total mobilisation needing the power of spectacle. The same aspect of the modern leads in one case to Jünger's extreme -and extremely reactionary- cultural pessimism, typical of high culture, and in the case of the films, to a rather more light-hearted - or is it merely irresponsible?- optimism, so much more typical of popular mass culture. While neither is, from our own vantage point, acceptable, I would nevertheless argue that the kinds of self-reference, the kinds of self-advertising and self-irony which we find in the films I have mentioned are very significant aspects of the modernizing tendencies of the cinema as a whole, to which the German cinema of the 1930s is not only no exception, but which it helped to shape, making in this respect, too, indicative of international tendencies, even as it became nationally specific and even nationalistic.

One would not expect this process to happen without internal strains, insofar as some of the component elements of this ideological marriage developed their own momentum among the consumers and recipients. This, too, would be an aspect of the divided consciousness which Schäfer examines. Schäfer distinguished four levels of ideological incoherence, or splits which according to him made Nazi Germany a less monolithic society and a less perfect dictatorship than has often been claimed: Firstly, market-criteria prevailed in many areas of production, including in the entertainment sector. Secondly, the state safeguarded an a-political sphere to strengthen its powers elsewhere; thirdly, 'personalized censorship', ie the implementation of censorship was regionally and locally very diverse, not least because of divergent interest and rivalries among Nazi organizations and bureaucracies. Finally, where there were majority interests, bureaucratic controls often failed (Schäfer, p 171).

As long as Ufa was both nationally and internationally was in some sense the goose that laid the golden eggs, as long as it was profitable and a currency earner, while also an important promotional tool for German goods and the German way of life (which -it should not be forgotten- enjoyed at first a great deal of sympathy and even popularity: think of the Mitfords, or Christopher Isherwood: the whole 'Cabaret' mystique), it also provided spaces which directors like Renhold Schünzel and Detlev Sierck/ Douglas Sirk knew how to use. A good example from a related area is the German record industry which supplied most of Europe with records, and had complicated cross-licensing agreements which meant that even records which were officially banned in Germany were nonetheless produced in Germany, and via a flourishing black market were also available in Germany (Schäfer, 176). This was evidently less true of the cinema, except insofar as the regime allowed older American films to be shown right into the late 1930s, and current American films - even those that never made it into the cinemas - were of course shown to both the Nazi elite and to Ufa directors and personnel, which means that Hollywood continued to exert a not inconsiderable influence on the production of Nazi Germany's entertainment films.

The question this raises is whether it was possible that an economy which is centrally planned and state controlled can actually provide for the modernization along these lines, or whether it required a 'market' and so-called market forces to generate both the investment and the spending power to finance a consumer society. Seen in a historical perspective, it seems that this internationalisation and modernisation of life-styles in the Germany of the thirties increasingly disappeared with the build-up and the

onset of war, so that, from 1939/40 onwards, the play with different worlds so typical of the German cinema - not only one of the main characteristics of the popular modern but also a contributing factor in the German emigration to Hollywood (Elsaesser, 1993) - had to make way for a different *Lebensgefühl* ('world of feeling'), which also found its ideal form in film, namely the willingness to sacrifice, in which physical labour was idealised and made subjectively 'consumable' in the form of melodrama (from OPFERGANG to KOLBERG).

The *Volksgemeinschaft* - the collective - existed only thanks to technology and spectacle (radio, parades, spectacles), and yet, it constantly had to be represented and denied, it constituted itself and undid itself: invoked and repressed, hence its different aggregate forms: mob, workers, spectators, chorus- films of the 1930s 'work' on this notion incessantly but never produce a stable representation. Siegfried Kracauer's 'mass ornament' only captures one side of the equation, even though it is deliberately conceived as ambivalent, because of its 'taylorisation' vs 'regimentation' (Kracauer, 1963). Ideologically, the demand addressed to the individual to sacrifice himself for the collectivity stands in contradiction to the consumerist vision of individual domestic pleasures away from the mass. It is as if, once part of the collective, you are lost, already sacrificed, as you are in a situation of war, the army or in work and concentration camps. No mediation possible, and yet at the level of the popular, one does find spontaneous collectivities such as the fan or the youthful gang (see Schäfer, 1984).

However, in order to make this argument a little clearer one has to see in a wider context what exactly made the cinema 'modern'. We too often think of film history moving closer and closer to realism, be this outer or inner reality. This is a historical teleology which we clearly owe to neo-realism and its aesthetics - and ethics - whose aim after 1945 had to be, among others, to immunise film history against the 'propaganda' bacillus.

Yet the cinema's modernity, its historical function, might just as much be sought in the exact opposite of realism: in the way it de-realizes the dimensions of time and space, and de-materializes physical objects, in order to make them available for a different order of value, whether we call it exhibition value, or commodity fetishism. The musical comedies are among the most modern in this respect, because they give the viewer the most heightened sense and most sensual experience of the dematerialisation of the world: processes already referred to by Walter Benjamin as belonging to the specific aspects of modernity.

It should therefore not come as a total surprise that the films of the 1930s whether they explicitly addressed the issues of technology and nature, or dealt with the sublime in nature, proved in some sense ideologically incoherent, showing the stresses and strains that entered into some of the formations I have been talking about, while also staying within the kind of consensus which popular modernism and modernisation required. This consensus - or common denominator - I have called the modernizing life-style or *Lebensgefühl* that responded to travel and sports, speed, technological gadgets, means of communication and transport, engineering feats and spectacle. The tensions therefore, are such that they cannot be explained by a mere juxtaposition of 'modernism' und 'modernisation', nor is it captured in a conceptual pair such as 'realistic versus escapist'.

Thus, the ideological project that has been observed in the films of this period

remained complex and ambivalent. While it would be comforting to see them as symptomatic of a (coherent) Nazi ideology, or judge them according to the opposition conservative-reactionary versus progressive-utopian, neither really can account for their enduring popularity, reinforced by television (which shows them with unfailing regularity to unfailing acclaim). Perhaps it is because these films still have too much in common with the Americanism popular during the Weimar Republic, whilst also anticipating a consumerism that did not take hold until the 1950s that they stay with us, as traces of a troubled modernity, always already overshadowed by a playful but also fateful 'post'-modernity.

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