Introduction

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“Every intellectual in emigration,” writes Theodor W. Adorno in American exile in 1944, “is, without exception, damaged, and does well to acknowledge it of himself... He lives in an environment that must remain incomprehensible to him... Relations between outcasts are even more poisoned than between long-standing residents.”1 Adorno’s reflections epitomize the common understanding of the exilic experience as one of trauma, estrangement, and paranoia. Numerous autobiographical accounts confirm his devastating assessment and testify to the exiles’ frequent sense of pain and loss. Yet we believe there is another way to look at exile. In this special issue we propose to explore exile as productive encounter and active engagement with a new culture. We want to understand displacement and disorientation as (admittedly forced) opportunities for self-examination.


and social critique. And we intend to investigate German cinema in American exile within a larger framework of cross-national traffic and transfer. Our ultimate goal is to shift the ground in exile studies from a predominantly biographical focus to a more dynamic scenario of intercultural tension and negotiation.

Approximately eight hundred members of the Weimar film industry — directors, screenwriters, producers, actors and actresses, cameramen, composers, editors, and film critics — left Germany for Hollywood between 1933 and 1942 to escape Nazi persecution. They followed a small group of German filmmakers that had immigrated in the 1920s at the invitation of Hollywood film studios eager to lure talent from Europe. At first glance it seems that both groups blended easily into the immigrant culture of American cinema. A closer look, however, will reveal that most German filmmakers who suffered forced exile for racial or political reasons formed a group that stood apart: they saw themselves, and were perceived, as outsiders who never fully belonged — even after acquiring


5. This may explain why the influx of German refugees into Hollywood from 1933 to 1942 has not attracted any special attention in American film histories. See Neil Gabler, An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood (New York: Crown, 1990).
American citizenship. Yet their very status as “strangers” enabled them to create films with a double vision that judged the New World against the Old. Some of these filmmakers transformed the experience of exile, usually associated with victimhood and anguish, into a productive interrogation of their American host country. Their sheer presence challenged Hollywood. Proud of their classical Bildung and raised on high culture, they tried to defy profit-driven studio bosses and the film industry’s brazen belief in the bottom line. They introduced, mostly on the level of form, alternative ways of seeing the world. Sensitized by the rise of fascism in Europe, German filmmakers often commented on Nazi Germany while ostensibly dealing with American issues.

No two exiles are alike and neither are their works. Our task at hand is to analyze their films, one by one, as singular events in which biographical, social, and institutional forces intersect in complex and often unpredictable ways. How do films made by “foreigners” relate to the national American culture? How does the host culture react to the exiles’ often biting criticism? How does a film’s narrative and visual language enact and dramatize the exilic experience? How can German exile cinema exist within the studio system and still be subtly subversive? Such questions gesture toward a larger research program that might be outlined as follows:

1. Locating German exile cinema within the Hollywood studio system and American culture at large means examining cinema as a contested space where different traditions collide. Exile cinema is a cinema of the in-between, of creative conflict and cultural mimicry. We emphasize a side of the exilic experience that embraces plural identities, multiple

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6. Many of the filmmakers who suffered forced exile — Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak, Fritz Kortner, Peter Lorre, among others — attempted remigration in the early 1950s, mostly with disastrous results. See Marita Krauss, Heimkehr in ein fremdes Land: Geschichte der Remigration nach 1945 (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2001). Ernst Lubitsch presents a special case. Although he emigrated to Hollywood already in 1922, he became a de-facto exile filmmaker in the 1940s because, being Jewish, he could not have returned to Germany under Hitler. He was also active in helping refugee filmmakers settle in Hollywood and joined them in their active anti-Nazi stance. He did not desire to go back to Germany after 1945. Billy Wilder only returned for location shooting in his “German” films A Foreign Affair (1950) and One, Two, Three (1961).

7. See also Edward Said’s question: “But if true exile is a condition of terminal loss, why has it been transformed so easily into a potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture?” Reflections on Exile and Other Essays (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000) 172. On the productiveness of dislocation, see also Iain Chambers, Migrancy, Culture, Identity (New York: Routledge, 1994).
affiliations, and the destabilization of established values. We also need to reconceptualize the experience of German exiles in broader terms that involve the long and worldwide history of dislocations and expulsions, expatriations and diasporas — a history that has not come to an end. Reconfiguring exile in this way is useful as long as it respects the specific experience of refugees fleeing from fascism. Instead of essentializing exile as a human condition or as a sine qua non trait of modernity, we seek to examine the exiles’ works in their contingent and concrete historical circumstances.

2. This plea for historical specificity requires us to focus on the conditions of the films’ production, distribution and reception in the United States. We need to know how these exile films position themselves with regard to American politics, society, and artistic traditions. In short, we suggest to reinsert these exile films in the American contexts in which they first appeared. A close analysis of these films’ response to their historical and cultural moment will recharge them with the social and symbolic energy they once possessed. None of these films are exclusively the result of an individual exile’s “creativity,” but are constituted objects arising out of concrete circumstances and serving particular functions that involve intricate relationships to social institutions (especially the studio system) and to filmic styles (both indigenous and imported).

3. Any direct cinematic representation of the exiles’ fate is rare. The highly regulated studio system of the 1930s and 40s as well as the Production Code Administration (PCA) guidelines and restrictions regarding the depiction of sexuality, religion, and politics (including foreign governments) posed major hurdles for exiles engaged in political filmmaking. We therefore need to examine the ways in which political, ideological and institutional constraints are incorporated and translated into formal elements of the film. In addition, we must study the structuring absences and displacements that are characteristic of these films — for example their difficulty in addressing questions of race and religion.


9. Billy Wilder quipped that in the 1930s, exile had simply lost its attractiveness as dramatic plot device: “The tale of a refugee was a sensation when Alexandre Dumas and Victor Hugo told it, but now, when I tell my tale, everybody just yawns.” (Quoted in: Volker Kühn, “Nachwort,” in Friedrich Hollaender, Menschliches Treibgut, trans. Stefan Weidle [Bonn: Weidle, 1995] 348.)
4. We suggest replacing the biographical impact model so prevalent in exile studies with one that is interested in translation, circulation, and mediation. We believe it is important to write (micro-) histories of individual works and view them as singular events in which the specificities of biographical experience, institutional pressures, and the political moment are brought into a unique constellation. The influence model in particular, which stresses stylistic and formal continuities without addressing the radically different historical circumstances, fails to account for key aspects of exile cinema.

5. Exploring exile cinema as a site of reciprocal exchange challenges us to reconsider national cinema in less monolithic and hegemonic terms. Rather than existing in polar opposition, national and exile cinema engage in a dialectic that underscores the inherent heterogeneity of cinema. Since its earliest days American cinema has incorporated various traditions, just as Hollywood, thanks to its international appeal, has always already been part of every Western national cinema. After World War I, a close relationship developed between German and American studio film production, comprising rivalry and competition as well as imitation and collaboration. Hollywood had become part of the “historical imaginary of Weimar cinema,”10 just as, to a lesser degree, German filmmakers — Lubitsch and Murnau, for example — had contributed to American cinema in the 1920s.

6. Germany’s exile cinema differs notably from its exile literature. While many literary authors continued to write in German to uphold and conserve the humanistic tradition of the “Other Germany,”11 German filmmakers had to subject themselves to the progressively ruthless American studio system and its worldwide reach. They had to appeal to large English-speaking audiences and thus unwittingly anticipated the transnational public spheres of contemporary cinema. But there are also differences. While German filmmakers in exile still saw their identity within the confines of the nation, most of today’s filmmakers follow the global flow


of money. As Arjun Appadurai has argued, mass media and mass migration are now converging in a universe where moving images meet ever-more deterritorialized viewers, creating a world in which the nation-state as arbiter of social change has become increasingly less significant.12

7. By reexamining the films of German exiles in Hollywood as contributions to a dynamic dialogue between two cultures, we may open up a new and productive field of inquiry for American German studies. The value of such an inquiry will be threefold: It engages us with American culture as seen through German eyes; it disputes the ideology of a national cinema that claims to be pure; and, most importantly in our global age, it exemplifies the complex nature of cross-national appropriation and creativity.
