

The Wilder Memorandum

HEADQUARTERS BW/aoc
 UNITED STATES FORCES, EUROPEAN THEATER
 Information Control Division
 APO 757, U.S. ARMY

SUBJECT: Propaganda through Entertainment. 16 August 1945
 TO: Mr Davidson Taylor

1. So now we are slowly opening up the movie houses in Germany. We are showing them our documentaries, some facts we want them to know and to remember well. We are showing them newsreels which carry along with the news a lesson, a reminder, and a warning. A good job has been done, no doubt. Germans on the whole are receptive and the overall reaction is favorable. Attendance ranges from capacity to satisfactory. And yet we all realize that once this novelty has worn off (in Berlin it has worn off already) we shall find it increasingly difficult to deliver our lessons straight. Will the Germans come in week after week to play the guilty pupil? Sure enough we will be showing them our feature films, pure entertainment along with the documentaries. They will come in alright. Only we may find them dozing apathetically through these documentaries and educational newsreels – to be bright and ready for Rita Hayworth in COVER GIRL. COVER GIRL is a fine film, mind you. It has a love story, it has music and it is in technicolor. However, it does not particularly help us in our program of re-educating the German people. Now *if* there was an entertainment film with Rita Hayworth or Ingrid Bergman or Gary Cooper, in Technicolor if you wish, and with a love story – only with a very special love story, cleverly devised to help us sell a few ideological items – such a film would provide us with a superior piece of propaganda: they would stand in long lines to buy and once they bought it, it would stick. Unfortunately, no such film exists yet. It must be made. I want to make it.

2. In 1940 you remember – during the London blitz – people in the States had to be told that there was a real war on, that England was hanging in the ropes and that she was desperately in need of our help. Newsreels did their share and we were quite impressed by such English documentaries as TARGET FOR TONIGHT. But I think it took a Hollywood film – an 'entertainment film'

based on a fictitious story – to really tell us what was going on. And that what was happening to the Minniver [*sic*] family in England could easily happen to the Jones family in Iowa. As a matter of fact, President Roosevelt having seen the first print of MRS. MINIVER urged Metro to put the film on the market as quickly as possible. They rushed it out. It did a job no documentary, no 50 newsreels could have done.

3. Films like MRS. MINIVER or the one I am suggesting can only be made by a professional motion picture company. They must be made on the highest possible level as far as technique, writing, casting, etc., are concerned. Such a film would cost around 1½ million dollars. We have approached the group of touring motion picture executives during their stay in Bad Homburg with this idea, and they showed interest. There were further discussions on this subject with the Hollywood people in Paris. Paramount's Mr. Balaban and Mr. Holman felt that Paramount should be the one to do the film since I am on a long term contract to them and only 'on a temporary loan to the U.S. Government'. They would consider it unfair if I went out and made the film for another commercial company. I myself am all for it – I have worked at Paramount for nine straight years and have written and directed a string of pictures. I know the staff and the crews and I don't think that any other Hollywood company could possibly give me more freedom of action. They will be willing to give me top stars, the best staff and a budget of 1½ million to do the film.

4. As you know, it is a very simple story of an American G.I. stationed here with the occupational troops and a German Fraulein, or I should say, a German Frau, because her husband, an Oberleutnant in the Luftwaffe, has been killed in action over Tunisia. I have met such a Frau in Berlin – she was working in a bucket brigade cleaning up the rubble on Kurfurstendamm. I had thrown away a cigarette and she had picked up the butt. We started a conversation. Here it is: 'I am so glad you Americans have finally come because . . . ' 'Because what?' 'Because now you will help us repair the gas.' 'Sure we will.' 'That's all we are waiting for, my mother and I . . . ' 'I suppose it will be nice to get a warm meal again.' 'It is not to cook . . . ' There was a long pause. I kind of felt what she meant, and I wished she would not say it. She did. 'We will turn it on, but we won't light it. Don't you see! It is just to

breathe it in. deep.' 'Why do you say that?' 'Why? Because we Germans have nothing to live for any more.' 'If you call living for Hitler a life, I guess you are right.' I held out a brand new Lucky Strike to her. She did not take it. She just picked up the bucket and went back to the rubble.

Right here in this piece of dialogue is the theme of the picture, and here is the simple ending I want to arrive at: when the gas finally is turned on our German Frau strikes a match to cook her dinner, a few measly potatoes I grant you – but now that a few facts have dawned on her she has 'something new to live for'. This is what the film should state (in Eisenhower's words): 'That we are not here to degrade the German people but to make it impossible to wage war' – and in the end 'let us give them a little hope to redeem themselves in the eyes of the world'.

As for the G.I., I shall not make him a flag waving hero or a theorizing apostle of democracy. As a matter of fact, in the beginning of the picture I want him not to be too sure of what the hell this was all about. I want to touch on fraternization, on homesickness, on black market. Furthermore, (although, it is a 'love story') boy does *not* get girl. He goes back home with his division while the girl he leaves behind 'sees the light'. There shall be no pompous messages. Let me quote you another piece of dialogue I ran into in Berlin. I had a German driver and this is the kind of dialogue that would develop between us: 'About this British election – now that this Atlee has defeated Churchill, what is Churchill going to do?' 'I guess he will stay in politics. Or he will write a book, or paint.' 'Maybe he is going to make a Putsch, nicht wahr?' 'I don't think so.' 'You mean he is not even going to shoot Atlee?' 'No, he is not.' 'Are you sure?' 'Look man, Wilkie did not make a Putsch against Roosevelt and Dewey did not shoot Truman.' 'That's funny.' 'It's hilarious, it's democratic!' I want to put such stuff into the film because I think it has just the right texture to say things without preaching.

5. I have spent two weeks in Berlin (working on a report about future German film production). I found the town mad, depraved, starving, fascinating as a background for a movie. My notebooks are filled with hot research stuff. I have photographed every corner I need for atmosphere. I have talked to General Gavin, the Commanding General of the 82nd Airborne Division, now the

main occupying U.S. troops in Berlin: he assured me of every cooperation. I have lived with some of his G.I.'s and put down their lingo. I have talked to Russian WACs and British M.P.'s. I have fraternized with Germans, from bombed out university professors to three cigarette-chippies at the Femina. I have almost sold my wristwatch at the black market under the Reichstag. I have secured the copyrights to the famous song '*Berlin kommt wieder*'. I think I am quite ready now to sit down with my collaborator and start writing the script.

6. The film should be made in just *one* version, the Americans speaking English and broken German, the Germans speaking German and broken English, the Russians speaking Russian, etc. If necessary, we can put in occasional titles, but I shall try making it all as natural as possible. Once the script is finished it shall be submitted to the War Department in Washington. I also want to send a copy to this Division for its approval. The film shall be shot in Hollywood, that is the interiors which will comprise about 85% of the film. The exteriors will be shot in Berlin, they will be silent and only a skeleton crew of some 8 men and the 2 stars will be needed here. I figure we will have to spend some 3 weeks in Berlin to get these shots. If transportation in Europe cannot be obtained through the Army, I could also do the exteriors in Hollywood by using process shots.

7. Together with this memorandum, I am handing in a report on future German picture production. In my opinion, no production of German pictures is possible in the near future. It will take some time to vet prospective producers, to assemble stars, writers, directors and crews. As for the equipment, most of it has been stolen or destroyed. I should think that there will be no new German films made for the next eight or ten months. As we are not here to produce films ourselves, but only to *control* the ones the Germans will be producing, I am suggesting in my report that we shall find a man who will be sitting in Berlin, together with the British and Russians, and whose job it will be to read all proposed scripts, to check on policy and to watch out that no Fascist thought or Nazi propaganda gets on their celluloid. I don't think that the Division will need me for this kind of passive job. As for the distribution end, we have now with us Mr. Schwartz and Mr. Joseph, two extremely able men who can handle that sort of stuff

very much better than I (having never very much bothered about anything but the actual making of films). I frankly feel that my further stay in Bad Homburg would be stealing money from the Government.

8. If I should be given a quickly go ahead signal on my film project, I think I could place the finished product sometime early next year into General McClure's hands to show it to the German people. I am conceited enough to say that you will find this 'entertainment' film the best propaganda yet.

BILLY WILDER

The Americanization of Germany,
1945–1949

Ralph Willett