Nazism in Hollywood – A Historiographical Comparative Analysis of Two Accounts

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Immanuel Kant explains in “The Critique of Judgement” that concepts of nature are revealed to human consciousness through the operations of ‘understanding’ while concepts of freedom are revealed through the operations of ‘reason’ (Kant, 62). These operations divide the concerns of philosophy into the theoretical and practical, but for Kant between reason and understanding is judgment. If permitted the liberty to import this theorization on the epistemology of philosophy to film history, an interesting correlative structure can be formulated. If historical facts (i.e. textual documents, film texts, etc.) are taken as ‘natural’ concepts and their construction into a history is determined by concepts of ‘freedom’, then the work of the historian can be posited as a mediation enacted, regulated and operating through judgment. This claim ‘warps’ an important element of Kant’s theory (hence, my request to enact a liberal reformulation of it), because in film history the operations of reason that constitute a judgment by which understanding is brought about, is certainly not a process that renders understanding as a synthetic *a priori* category. In “Principles of Art History,” Heinrich Wolfflin states - that “people not only see differently, they see different things,” suggesting that a historical account is a ‘representational form’ of the particular to the universal whereby judgment can often have the reason and understanding that borders its domain subsumed by an equally universal element of historical discourse – taste (Wofflin, 124). I would suggest that for the purposes of this paper, film history is to be understood as plural (i.e. film histories) through its construction involving the dynamic interplay between the judgment and taste of the historian. Whether this interplay constitutes a dialectic relationship will have to remain outside the purview of this paper, while determining the nature of the relationship of judgment and taste may ultimately radically reformulate my own conclusions. Charlie Keil notes that this relationship operates in film history to “invite constant redivision” of historical definitions (Keil, 3). From this position, it is logical to imply ever-shifting methodological models by which historical accounts are constructed, but as Keil suggests these ‘chosen paths’ (i.e. methodological models) can intersect between film histories (Keil, 14). A telling demonstration of this plurality and intersection in methodological models of film history can be achieved through a comparative analysis of two historical accounts on the ‘collusion’ between Hollywood and the Nazi regime in the 1930s. These accounts are Ben Urwand’s *The Collaboration: Hollywood’s Pact with Hitler* and Thomas Doherty’s *Hollywood and Hitler: 1933-1939*.

These two historical accounts provide compelling insight into the operations of the film industry of the United States in the 1930s and 40s. The separate accounts share an understanding of how particular historiographical explanatory arguments structure history, but each account puts a different emphasis on these arguments. That is to say, both Urwand and Doherty demonstrate that the agencies of industry (MPPDA, Hollywood studios) regulate the industry, but also claim that these agencies exist to serve the social and culture lifestyles of American citizens. For Urwand and Doherty, film operates as an entertainment form that finds its production practices predominately determined by economic concerns, but where aesthetic considerations can appeal to the social/cultural context and trump those economic concerns. The technological explanatory arguments of film historiography play a less critical role in both Urwand and Doherty’s accounts whereby technology is posited as mitigating aspects of the struggle between economic and aesthetic priorities in the film industry. Despite Urwand and Doherty sharing an understanding of the mechanisms and structure of the film industry, each historian differs in how he views this industrial ‘machinery’ to operate with regard to the proposed Hollywood-Nazi ‘collusion’. I would suggest, ironically, that the primary difference between their methodological models is the structure of their biographical explanatory arguments. Neither Urwand nor Doherty construct “Great Man” historical accounts per se, but I suggest that both seek to base their accounts on biographically-based ‘influential persons’ explanatory arguments. Historical figures are prominent in both historical accounts and are portrayed as the ‘engineers’ of the machinery of the film industry during the period observed.

In a similar way, both Doherty and Urwand’s historical accounts organize the facts to explain the workings of the American film industry in the 1930s. Doherty explains the MPPDA (both Hays and Breen offices) as having a laissez-faire attitude toward the studio’s dealings with the Nazi regime (Doherty, 44). In Urwand’s account of the resistance to the proposed film, *The Mad Dog of Europe*, it is made clear through a letter written by the head of the PCA, Joseph Breen, that the film was officially deemed propagandistic, and not entertainment (Urwand, 69). Al Rosen, an agent who owned the property then sued the MPPDA and not individual studios in order to have the film produced (Urwand, 74). The two historical accounts both reveal the MPPDA to be an agency acting as a ‘buffer’ for the studios, allowing the studios to operate under an ‘entertainment ethic’. Although both historians seek to demonstrate collusion between Hollywood studios and the Nazi regime, they also both provide evidence that the relationship of the studios to the Nazi regime was largely determined by social/cultural factors related to film maintaining its role as an entertainment form. Don Crafton asserts that this ‘entertainment ethic’ (a term coined by Richard Maltby) was an ‘apology’ by the studios, but was also an ethic governed by the idea that films should please the most and offend the fewest in order to divorce the industry from any particular social message that might be independently decoded by the audience (Crafton, 70). A crisis of representation in the film industry in the 1930s is noted by both historians and arguably has its roots in social/cultural concerns of the moment. Doherty writes, “nearly as conspicuous as the absence of the Nazis was the disappearance of the Jews”, but he also admits that the PCA was instituting a general mandate of softening stereotypes (Doherty, 45). Urwand notes of the film, The House of Rothschild (1934), that it was produced and distributed despite having a double-edged portrayal of Jews (Urwand, 89). The case of this film might be suggested as the enactment of the ‘softening’ of stereotypes through ambiguous and ambivalent representational forms. The MPPDA supported the distribution of The House of Rothschild as its ambiguous representation of Jews (as evidenced by the Nazi’s extraction of excerpts from it for their own anti-semitic film of 1940, Der Ewige Jude) rendered the film acceptable within the social/cultural context of American society at the time. The historians frame Rothschild in terms of ‘racial’ politics, however through a personal examination of one of the primary sources – an article from *Variety* in 1934, cited by Doherty – the film was construed as playing on “religious angles” and not racial ones. This closer examination of the sources begs many questions regarding the historians spuriously importing a contemporary rhetoric into their historical framework in such a way that runs counter to the values and ethics that determined policy and action in the period in question.

Undeniably, something has to turn the crank of machinery – a lever, if you will - for the ‘engineers’ to make the machine work. Urwand and Doherty demonstrate that the social/cultural context of audience reception largely determined the actions taken by the major agencies of the American film industry, but they also reveal that economics and aesthetics ‘competed’ to determine the form of those actions. Doherty seeks to trace the significance of the ‘poaching’ of Jewish film personnel in Germany during the Nazi regime (Doherty, 17 & 22). Urwand notes that personnel were “sacrificed”, which allowed business to continue to operate; the studios simply replaced Jewish employees with less ‘offensive’ individuals according to Nazi ideology (Urwand, 57 & 62). Doherty concludes, “Jewish personnel in Germany was a fungible commodity” (Doherty, 40) Urwand provides an important economic consideration for this choice of the American studios – import quotas established in 1925 were loosened during the Nazi regime (Urwand, 60). This economic consideration challenges the historians’ assertions of collusion, or even “codependency” of Hollywood and Nazism. The economics of keeping markets open (consistent with laissez-faire capitalist models universally operating in industry of the United States at this time) would seem to refute that politics, or even morality, determined the actions of the studios to continue doing business in Germany. This claim is further evident through the accounts of some of the Hollywood moguls continuing to do business in Germany through their studios while also personally investing great time, money and heartache into the rescuing of Jews from Germany (Urwand, 32-37). Urwand writes, “like other American companies… the Hollywood studios put profit above principle” (Urwand, 8), but arguably profit *was* the dominant principle for the business model of the studios at this time. In addition, within the realm of moral principles, it might be suggested that the studios felt that purveying American culture to the German people would have a positive effect on quelling racial and religious hatred – a possibility precluded by a boycott of the German market. Admittedly, this is conjectural and it is the dominance of economic principles that are clearly revealed through historical documents.

Aesthetic considerations were able to trump economic ones in some cases – and only in ways that related to the social/cultural context of audience reception of films. All Quiet on the Western Front (1930), is a film that figures in both Urwand and Doherty’s historical accounts of the period. All Quiet had a high production value and was hotly contested by German officials and the Nazi party (yet to be in power) in its original form (Urwand, 26-28). The German officials demanded edits to the film for exhibition in the German market as the original print was deemed a ‘dishonest representation’ (Urwand, 29-30). The studios acquiesced to the demands (Urwand, 33). Urwand documents that the MPPDA (and likely the studios as well) considered film a commodity as opposed to the Nazis who considered it a cultural product (Urwand, 61). The special agent of the German Foreign Office, Martin Freudenthal, dealt directly with the studios on questions of German representation in American films and he determined that economics was the driving force behind the films and that objectionable German representation was largely unintentional (Urwand, 51-53). All Quiet was contested because of its high-production value – aesthetically produced at a higher level – which typically determined that a film would become more popular and thus influential. Doherty verifies this claim through the account of the Nazi ban on 42nd Street (1933) – a film with high production value, but not obvious anti-German rhetoric within its narrative (Doherty, 26). These aesthetically well-constructed films were deemed a threat as opposed to films with lower production values such as King Kong (1933) or The House of Rothschild (1934) which after ‘edits & angles’ were apt for viewing by German audiences. Arguably, ‘ambiguity’ is radically reduced when reading a film that is aesthetically-rich – the affective dimension of the film guides audiences to more uniformed readings of the film text. Again, through investigating the primary sources of these two historical accounts, the case of The Wandering Jew (1933) supports my argument. Doherty cites a *Variety* review on the film leading his readers to believe that the film was railroaded by official agencies from getting the reception that it deserved. Doherty excerpts the following line from the review, “there ought to be a market for [this film]” (Doherty, 53). ‘Ought’ is the operative word here given that the rhetoric of the review is revealed to take an outsider’s position on a ‘Yiddish’ film. The next line of the review, left out by Doherty, reads, “but there won’t because it is so badly done. From every standpoint a cheap effort”. This review appears to support my claim that aesthetics was an important determinant in the production and distribution of films regardless of their ‘political’ content. That being said, Charlie Keil, in his examination of the transitional period of early cinema notes, “the trade press formulated an aesthetic wherein it specified the attributes of a well-made film” and that the trade press was concerned with ‘quality’ filmmaking (Keil, 30). Therefore, film reviews in the trade press have to be treated carefully as they cannot be seen as fully reliable to confirm that aesthetic concerns trumped economic ones.

The case of documentary films during this time may help corroborate my argument about aesthetics trumping economic concerns. Doherty takes up the case of plutocrat, Cornelius Vanderbilt Jr.’s documentary film, Hitler’s Reign of Terror (1934). The public relations head of the MPPDA, Ray Norr, felt that documentary was different than fiction film (although the MPPDA’s European representative, George R. Canty, disagreed and put economics first)(Doherty, 65). Ultimately, it was state censors that interceded and attempted to block Vanderbilt’s film. Evidence suggests that the trade press objected to the film based on its low production value while the state censors felt that the ‘documentary’ value of the film was lacking and was therefore misleading to audiences (Doherty, 65). Later, Isobel Steele’s autobiographical dramatized film, I Was a Captive of Nazi Germany (1936), suggests that although the studios remained uninterested (perhaps privileging economics over aesthetics at this time) the MPPDA still issued the film a Production Code seal (Doherty, 70). Arguably, the film received seal-approval because it was a valid documentary of the experience of an American in Nazi Germany, but as an orphan film was susceptible to narrow distribution networks and ultimately found criticism in the trade press for having little documentary value within the medium of film itself (admittedly, an odd criterion that would require greater investigation)(Doherty, 77).

Urwand and Doherty construct their historical accounts in such a way that they confirm each other’s findings about the structure of the American film industry in the 1930s – social/cultural concerns regarding the ‘entertainment ethic’ of film took precedent while economic concerns determined that foreign markets would remain open while aesthetic concerns ultimately could trump the economic ones by virtue of the ‘special distributive needs’ of a film that had high production or documentary value. These economic and aesthetic concerns had a tense interplay as it related to the social/cultural context of film spectatorship. Urwand and Doherty frame this structure in such a way as to ‘play-up’ the perceived political power structure deemed to trump all other structures (attempting to confirm their respective theses). This is primarily achieved through the biographical accounts of high-profile German officials interacting with the American film industry in the 1930s. I would argue that this can mislead the reader and inflect a particular bias on the histories through manipulation of biographical explanatory arguments which act to ‘insulate’ other explanatory arguments. However, Urwand and Doherty differ in *who* they identify as the great movers and shakers – the most ‘influential persons’ of the period. Urwand goes to great lengths to account for Hitler’s relationship with film at the level of spectator and amateur critic, ultimately tracing how this influenced policy- and law-making in Nazi Germany. In fact, Urwand claims that Hitler was, “the most important individual of the twentieth century” underscoring the biographical bias of his methodological model (Urwand, 9)[[1]](#endnote-1). Urwand’s claim that Hitler’s historical imagination was formed by the movies sets up the importance of connecting him with Hollywood and setting him up as the catalyst for action-reaction chain of events that occurred between the American and German film industries in the 1930s (Urwand, 17). In Doherty’s account, Hitler is a less critical figure and is replaced by P.J. Goebbels, who merged politics with art (Doherty 18-20). Both historians focus on the sacrifices of film personalities in trying to effect changes to the collusive relationship existing during the historical period in question. For Urwand, Carl Laemmle’s fight to liberate an anti-Hitler message for consumption by the American people is juxtaposed to the struggles of Vanderbilt and Steele to have genuine expressions of experience with the Nazis made available to the public. For the most part, Urwand and Doherty portray the MPPDA and studios as very independent institutions. For Doherty, these agencies of industry operate in ways that are hard to explain (Doherty, 30) while Urwand finds it difficult to trace the governing philosophy of those agencies that is necessary to fully understand their operations (Urwand, 89). Both historians affirm collusion between Nazi Germany and the American film industry while subsequently admitting to the ‘mystery’ of the American agencies of industry. Perhaps, the ‘quest’ to demonstrate the importance of suspending moral principles fogs the view of what both histories (perhaps inadvertently) recognize - the dominance of economic and aesthetic principles governing the operation of the film industry in the United States in the 1930s. A pair of elusive citations perhaps serve as further support for the claim that both histories construct their accounts through privileging biographical explanatory arguments – Doherty’s throw-away citation of an Albert Einstein letter written in support of Rothschild and Urwand’s substitution of Andre Bazin’s name with “eminent critic” (Doherty, 52 & Urwand, 7). The Einstein citation leads back to an article with no more details about the letter, except that it is claimed to have existed, rendering this citation as biographical ‘fluff’, while rendering Bazin anonymous reflects Urwand’s concern for narrowing the biographical to the realm of politics. Arguably, if the historians were not privileging biographical explanatory arguments in their methodological models, then both these minor citations would have been omitted during the editing stage.

Both Urwand and Doherty construct histories that reveal important details about the relationship between Nazi Germany and Hollywood; however the historians’ claims that this relationship constitutes a ‘cabal of secret parties’ seems to be refuted by the historical facts that both histories provide. As noted by Doherty, the film industry recognized that a powerful segment of the U.S. population was pro-fascist in the 1930s (Doherty, 58) while Urwand’s biographical account of Laemmle reveals through the figure of William Randolph Hearst exactly how powerful and influential this pro-fascist segment was (Urwand, 37). Ultimately, the radical difference in primary sources (Doherty reduces his survey primarily to trade press articles and film reviews while Urwand plumbs international government and studio archives) does not correlate with the primary difference in methodology – emphasis on the influence of particular historical agents through biographical explanations. Also, neither historical account compellingly proves their thesis about collusion, despite both histories intersecting to confirm the overarching structure of the film industry for the historical period examined. There is an irony of fate for the historian as evidenced by the work of Urwand and Doherty. In Walter Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History”, he writes, “for every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (Benjamin, sec.V). This statement on the relationship of historical materialism (objective) and historicism (subjective) belies what is evidenced in the histories of Urwand and Doherty - historical facts that exist can be organized with a particular intent that does not pervade the reading of that history[[2]](#endnote-2). The material facts of history carry and permeate the collective wills and intentions that brought them about in the first place. A historical event does not happen based on how the historian wishes to explain it, but by virtue of its own historical logic from the moment of its happening. In this regard, the historical accounts of Urwand and Doherty are both poor in their historicist measures and rich in their materialist articulation.

1. Hitler is one among many important individuals of the twentieth century – Churchill, F.D.R., Stalin, Mao, Hirohito, Einstein, Foucault… [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Umberto Eco’s work in semiotics on ‘aberrant decoding’ might be useful on the subject of the reading of history

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