

WEIMAR CINEMA

The directors, actors, and films of Weimar-era Germany are among the most famous in cinema history. The new expressionist style they perfected “revolutionized the emerging language of film and established German cinema in the 1920s as a major force of high art in world cinema.”¹ Weimar directors wanted to distinguish their work from that which was coming out of Hollywood. Their goal was to harness the artistic potential of film and “to prove to the educated middle class that cinema could indeed be art.”²

Rather than adhere to the Hollywood method, which emphasized narrative, suspense, montage, and action, Weimar-era directors opted for atmosphere, scene composition, camera movement, and character gaze.³ The effect was the supremacy of the visual: fantastical sets, dramatic lighting, and theatrical gestures. When it worked, such as in Fritz Lang’s *M*, the results were haunting.

The social and political atmosphere of Weimar influenced much of the films’ content. Many followed the attitude of what they called the New Objectivity and directors “ventured out into the streets to capture social reality.”⁴ They represented the “decadent nightlife, a previously unseen eroticism and unfettered sexuality.”⁵ These films dealt with the questions and anxieties of a tumultuous post-war era, in which social and cultural life was nursing wounds and breaking new ground, while political life was on the verge of a breakdown.

Many of the great names of Weimar cinema – Fritz Lang, F.W. Murnau, Billy Wilder, Ernst Lubitsch, and Josef von Sternberg (to name a few) – fled Nazi Germany. The Paul Kohner Talent Agency, set up in 1938 in Hollywood, became critically important in providing affidavits and other important pieces of official documentation to bring German directors and actors to the United States. By the late 1930s, the greatness of Weimar cinema had vanished. In Germany itself, films were all about propaganda and Nazi kitsch. But in Hollywood, none of these directors, save Wilder and to a certain degree, Lang, achieved the heights they reached in their Weimar days.

We will discuss three films: *M* and *The Blue Angel* are among the best films produced in Weimar Germany, and we will then discuss a film made in Berlin three decades after Weimar’s demise—*One, Two, Three*.

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M

Premiered: 1931

Director: Fritz Lang (b.Vienna 1932, d. Los Angeles, 1976)

Starring: Peter Lorre, Otto Wernicke, Gustaf Gründgens, Ellen Widmann

M, the first feature with sound by Austrian-born Fritz Lang (1931), tells the story of a Düsseldorf child murderer, played by Peter Lorre. Decade after decade, this film has placed among the best films ever made, and it is still riveting today (it can be found on YouTube, in high definition).

M is very much a police procedural film, with Chief Inspector Lohmann (Otto Wernicke) slowly piecing together the identity of the child murderer. But he has competition: because little girls are being murdered, the police have literally shut down Düsseldorf's criminal underworld. Pickpockets can't lift wallets, burglars are arrested on sight, prostitutes are forbidden to ply their trade. With the underworld frozen out of business, it's the criminals who search for the murderer, find him (his name is Beckert) and then try him.

Aside from its dramatic camera angles and very Bauhaus interiors, M is one of the first films to delve into psychology. When Peter Lorre, brilliantly playing the murderer, is brought before the underworld judge and jury, he shrieks at them, "You *know* why you do what you do. I don't know why I do what I do." As monstrous as he is, Lorre turns Beckert human, which was no small task.

Lang wrote the film script with his wife, Thea von Harbou, and the film was a success from its outset, although the New York Times complained that all that expense and fine filmmaking should not have been devoted to the story of a murderer.

Although Lang's mother had converted from Judaism to Catholicism when her son was ten-years-old, once the Nazis came to power, Lang realized that conversion would count for nothing. His wife, however, was drawn to the Nazis, became a member of the party, and the two divorced before Lang fled first to Paris, then to Hollywood. There he would go on to make more than 20 films, many of which defined film noir. Most of them were forgettable B pictures, and he never reached the peaks he had scaled in his Weimar years. Lang died, like many Weimar giants, in Los Angeles, in 1976.

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Lazslo Löwenstein was born in Slovakia in 1904, began working in puppet theaters in Vienna. By the time he arrived in Berlin in the 1920s, he had changed his name to Peter Lorre. Lorre, also a Jew, fled to Hollywood and found himself a niche of playing heavies and neurotics and the wily Japanese detective, Mr. Moto. His best-known roles paired him with the corpulent Sidney Greenstreet (they played in nine films together) and sometimes Humphrey Bogart. Lorre played in both *The Maltese Falcon* and *Casablanca*. At five foot five, bug eyed and with a lisp, Lorre was no one's idea of a leading man, and in later years, he became obese. In the late 1950s he played a series of films with Boris Karloff and Vincent Price, all past their prime, but he worked until the end. Lorre died in 1964.

THE BLUE ANGEL

Premiered: 1930

Director: Josef von Sternberg (b. Vienna, 1894 d. Los Angeles, 1969)

Starring: Marlene Dietrich, Emil Jannings, Kurt Gerron

The Blue Angel is an emotionally unrelenting portrait of a man whose consuming love for a cold, manipulative woman leads to his moral descent and ruin. Dr. Immanuel Rath (Emil Jannings), is a repressed, middle-aged high school professor who decides to confront Lola Lola (Marlene Dietrich), a cabaret singer, about her "bewitching" his students. He is captivated by the sensual, carefree Lola Lola, and continues to return to the Blue Angel to be with her. Soon, he is the object of ridicule, and, in an attempt to protect her honor, marries her. We next see Professor Rath several years later, where unemployment and humiliation have taken their toll on the once dignified teacher. He is disheveled and broken, hypocritically selling provocative pictures of his wife to the cabaret patrons (an act he earlier promised would never happen while he is with her). He is subjected to increasingly degrading circumstances, culminating in a pathetic clown act in front of his former colleagues and students. The Blue Angel is a devastating film about the cruelty of love and fate.

The film was based on Heinrich Mann's novel *Professor Unrat*, which critiques the upper class educational system of Wilhemine Germany and accordingly the mentality of the average German. By 1930 Germany was still in catastrophic debt, growing more unsettled, and on the verge of collapse. Thus, *The Blue Angel* "echoe[d] the cynicism and hopelessness of the times. As a result, the story is extremely caustic and unforgiving: the

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desperate voice of a country in turmoil.”⁶ It also depicts the conflict between order and debauchery. The nightclub atmosphere is in conflict with the rules and demands of society and offers an escape into sexual freedom. It is a liberating but unforgiving atmosphere.

While *The Blue Angel* charts the professor’s downward path, the real life stories behind the credits are just as bleak. Josef von Sternberg (the noble ‘von’ was pure invention) was a Jew from Vienna educated in Austria and the United States. Moving to Germany, he began working with Marlene Dietrich and this is the film that launched her career. Both Sternberg and Dietrich left for Hollywood and made several more films together, their last in 1935. Sternberg’s autocratic, bullying ways earned him few friends; his films failed at the box office and after 1952, his film career was over and he spent years teaching film at UCLA, where he never tired of showing his films to students. He died at the age of seventy-five.

Marlene Dietrich’s career could not have been more different. Her rise to stardom soared for years, and when her film career faded after the 1940s, she turned herself into a singer and cabaret performer. During the Second World War, she tirelessly performed for Allied troops, earning herself the French Legion of Honor and the American Medal of Freedom. Dietrich spent the last eleven years of her life as a recluse in Paris.

Some in Germany called her a traitor, even when, in 1992, she was interred in a Berlin cemetery. Much of her estate was sold to a German foundation, and thousands of photographs and other memorabilia became part of the permanent collection of the Berlin Film Museum.

The two males leads in the film traveled radically different paths. Emil Jannings won fame for being the first actor ever win an Academy Award (1929). His star rose after his role in *The Blue Angel*, and unlike his co-stars, Jannings chose to remain in Germany. He became an enthusiastic supporter of the Nazi party and enjoyed making films that Josef Goebbels especially liked. At war’s end, Jannings went to meet his American interrogators, clutching his Oscar. It didn’t help. He “retired” from acting, dying five years later, in 1950. Jannings’ Oscar lives on, and can be seen in the Berlin Film Museum.

Kurt Gerron, who was Jewish, fled with his family when the Nazis came to

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power: first to Paris, then to Amsterdam. He was imprisoned in Theresienstadt. Ironically, like his former co-leading man, Gerron also got a chance to make a film for the Nazis, not that he had a choice. He was the director for a propaganda film that showed the Jews in Theresienstadt were actually living quite well. The film was never released or seen publicly, and only bits of it have surfaced over the years. Once the film was completed in the summer of 1944, Gerron and his crew and most of those in the film were sent directly to the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

ONE, TWO, THREE

Premiered: 1961

Director: Billy Wilder

Starring: James Cagney, Horst Buchholz, Pamela Tiffin, Arlene Francis

It seems odd for us to recommend a big budget Hollywood film completed three decades after Weimar, but *One, Two, Three* is important for several reasons. By 1961, nearly all (or perhaps all) the other Weimar-trained directors and actors, who had sought refuge in Hollywood, were washed up or forgotten. As stated above, Sternberg was reduced to showing his films to college students; Marlene Dietrich had to take to the stage since she could find no more film work; and even Fritz Lang's B-movie career had dried up.

Back in 1920s – early 1930s Berlin, while these three mega stars burned bright, Billy Wilder, then in his twenties, was just starting to spark. He cut his celluloid teeth by writing screenplays, including a well-received *Emil and the Detectives*. In 1933 he fled to Paris where he directed his first film, then landed—feet first—in Hollywood. He wrote screenplays for Ernst Lubitsch and others, and finally had his directing debut in the early 1940s.

By the late 1940s and through his later career, Wilder wrote (usually with Charles Brackett and/or I.A.L. Diamond) and directed some of the finest films made in Hollywood—and the most cynical: *Double Indemnity*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Witness for the Prosecution*, *Lost Weekend*.

In *Sunset Boulevard*, for instance, the film opens with a corpse being pulled out of a swimming pool, and the corpse (William Holden) narrates the film. In *Lost Weekend*, an alcoholic Ray Milland, about to collapse with delirium tremens, tries to hock his typewriter on the lower East Side of New York—on Yom Kippur. And no one who watched *Some Like It Hot* will forget the

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last scene. When Joe E Brown proposes marriage to Jack Lemmon (who is in drag,) and Lemmon confesses he's actually a man, Brown replies, "Nobody's perfect."

One, Two, Three was shot in Berlin in the summer of 1961, only weeks before the Berlin Wall went up. It's Cold War jokes are embarrassingly stale, but the film works because One, Two, Three was Jimmy Cagney's last starring role (he had a minor and forgettable part in 1981's *Ragtime*), and he brings to this film the snap, delivery, and timing that made him one of America's greatest comedians, actors, and dancers (watch how he moves on the balls of his feet). Having a great script to deliver his lines with made the job that much easier.

The set up is a classic Hollywood pitch, but with a twist: it's boy meets girl; boy knocks up girl; boy goes from working class hero to capitalist pig.

Cagney plays the regional director of Coca Cola in divided Berlin, and the company's president sends his ditzzy daughter to him for vacation. Unfortunately, the daughter, played by Pamela Tiffin, gets impregnated by a hard-line Communist firebrand, played by young German heart-throb Horst Buchholz. Cagney has twenty-four hours to a) convince Buchholz to give up being a revolutionary and become a capitalist, b) find a down-and-out aristocrat to adopt him, and c) pass Buchholz off as a German count and businessman to his new father-in-law.

The film is great chaotic fun, with plenty of swipes at Prussian heel clicking, no one remembering the recent past, and the film does provide a window on how Americans perceived the Soviet Union then.