

2. The Nazi Modernization of Sex: Romance Melodrama

According to a statistical analysis of the titles of films produced during the Third Reich, *Frau(en)* and *Liebe* were the most common nouns used in naming products of the Nazi cinema.¹ “Women” and “love” were the terms deemed most effective for drawing audiences to the theaters, and presumably they were also considered the most effective for the drawing out of nationalist energies and the erasing of internal conflicts. The erotic drive can be considered the main motor of German fascist cinema, the very basis of spectator pleasure, narrative construction, and the creation of meaning. In this it was entirely consistent with the interests of classical Hollywood. As Mary Ann Doane has pointed out, film narrative and film meaning in American cinema also depend on romance: “the couple is a constant figure of Hollywood’s rhetoric and some kind of heterosexual pact constitutes its privileged mode of closure.”² The cinema of the Third Reich, following Hollywood, placed the heterosexual couple at the rhetorical and narrative center of almost all of its films.

Romance, one could say, formed the very basis of Third Reich cinema, the scaffolding onto which all other genres built their specific architecture; comedies, musicals, and even war and crime films were built upon the core of coupling, their generic patterns inserted over the basic structure of romantic relations. Not all romance was melodramatic, of course. Romance was more often taken lightly in Nazi cinema than seriously; in fact, the majority of films with “*Frau*” (woman) or “*Liebe*” (love) in their titles were comedies.³ But the focus and ideological task of each romantic mode varied. Whereas romantic relations in comedy were most often the vehicle for elaborating problems of the social order, such as class conflicts, the romance melodrama took

coupling seriously and privileged it over other thematic concerns, investing its energies into the production and management of sexual desire.

The romance melodrama, although somewhat less extensive than the romantic comedy in terms of production numbers, was nonetheless a privileged genre in the Third Reich, receiving far more screen time than war films. The Nazis' cinematic obsession with the mechanics of desire was surprisingly central for a society that specialized in technologies of death. Far more feature film footage was used for defining sex roles and suggesting sex acts than for defining concepts of national character, generating hatred of enemies, or fabricating notions of race—ideological tasks that were more commonly left to the press and cinema's paratextual discourses.⁴ Whereas the Nazis needed little internal negotiation to carry out their genocidal "final solution" to racist paranoia, gender and sexuality were issues that film melodrama had to continually readdress. As Goebbels stated in 1937, "The issue of women's rights [*die Frauenfrage*] is our most difficult problem."⁵

For the fascist man the problem lay in the question of how to maximize women's productivity and reproductivity while minimizing the costs arising from her own demands for fulfillment and recognition. Evidently, even if the vast majority of Nazi film narratives circled around sexual concerns, romance films still had military implications. Women were to be made serviceable for the Nazi regime's massive project of imperial expansion, and the cinema helped to articulate what role they would play in an expanding Reich and ultimately in colonial territories abroad. The shifting borders of the regime's dominion over both foreign and domestic populations necessitated recalibrations in its gender ideology. One of the most problematic issues concerned women's participation in paid labor, which was considered undesirable at the beginning of the regime due to high unemployment rates but ultimately became indispensable as the Reich moved closer to war. Love stories in Nazi cinema often took up the issue of women's place in the public sphere and addressed the issue of the relative values of professional and private life. Contrary to common assumption, most Nazi romance films did not advocate a return to traditional feminine roles or oppose the Weimar era's advances into sexual modernity. Instead, Nazi romance melodramas often supported a turn away from domesticity while arguing for the maintenance of hierarchical structures and self-sacrificial positions in the workplace. This was true of prewar as well as wartime films.

Nazi romance melodramas also spoke to men and aimed to condition male desire as well. As noted in the last chapter, melodramatic spectatorship in the Third Reich was not assumed to be primarily female. The melodra-

matic love story appealed to male viewers via lead actresses and supporting dancers who were explicitly selected for their erotic charms. As the present chapter shows, the choice of male romantic heroes followed a primarily racial-eugenic logic, while the choice of romantic heroines supported Nazi cinema's imperial ambitions. These ambitions included the annexation of new audiences abroad. The sexual content of Nazi films was calculated to exceed that of Hollywood in an attempt to make Nazi rule appear more attractive to German, occupied, and neutral audiences. The romance melodrama supported an image of Nazi culture as revolutionary; rather than forcing a return to tradition, Nazi love stories often promised to liberate spectators from the constraints of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sexual mores, which were denounced in Nazi media under the heading of "bourgeois morality." Contrary to the assumptions of scholars who have argued that the Nazis attempted to desexualize the cinema, historical evidence shows that Goebbels and his subordinates explicitly recruited the erotic attractions of female performers in order to suppress political critique.⁶ Yet the "woman question" continually threatened to interfere with the propaganda minister's instrumentalization of the female body. Nazi cinema's deployment of the erotic sometimes backfired, resulting in excessive film texts and resistant spectators. There is evidence that some female spectators declined to embrace the Nazi vision of romance—a fascist love that was, at its heart, the romance of war.

The Functions of Romance: Gender Coding and Imperialism

In the classic melodramatic structure elaborated by nineteenth-century theater and early twentieth-century silent cinema, conflicts are simplified in dualistic forms and embodied as a clash of characters who represent either preferred forms of identification or prohibited desires. In the most simplified melodramatic form, excessive desire is located in the villain, and it threatens a heroine who is innocent and thus without illegitimate desire. Film melodrama of the 1930s and 1940s, however, alters this model; instead of a struggle of innocents against villains, conflicts of desire are generally internal, based in an overabundance within the heroine herself. Her desires are multiple and mutually exclusive and thus impossible within the economy of the classical film narrative, or they are forbidden by some generally accepted moral code. The melodramatic narrative thus attempts either to limit her desire and focus it on one object or to purge her of illicit desires. In this way

such narratives may serve a pedagogical or ideological function by warning of the consequences of illicit acts or by training desire to attach itself to the “correct” object.

Romance can thus be recruited for political service; even if it does not name an external enemy, as does the most original form of the melodrama, it can form desire in ideologically useful ways. On the most primary level, romance melodrama serves to define erotic objects. Usually it does so by a process of elimination of excess desire—of desire for what is politically or socially undesirable, usually embodied in personal or sexual terms by conflicting characters. Alternatively, the elimination of excess desire follows a pedagogical process of surrender and self-correction. In Molly Haskell’s taxonomy of the classical Hollywood woman’s film, love stories are generally either “choice” films, in which the female protagonist must choose between potential lovers, or “competition” narratives, in which she must struggle against a rival. Or they are “sacrifice” films, in which a choice has to be made between love and another life goal, usually work.⁷

Nazi romance melodramas largely conform to this scheme as well. The triangle was one of the most common shapes for romance narratives in the Third Reich. In innumerable melodramas and comedies, a woman finds herself in competition with another for the affections of a man, or she must choose between potential mates. The choice of mates was often also a choice between marital fidelity or infidelity. The ideological advantages of such a narrative pattern are clear: through the eventual elimination of one of the participants in the triangle, romance films could demonstrate preferred forms of identification while reinforcing the traits and values connoted by the “successful” partners. Likewise, “sacrifice” narratives provided lessons in accommodation to social norms. However, the forms of identification promoted by Nazi melodramas and the desires they elicited did not always conform to the most familiar fascist pronouncements about the restoration of woman to her “natural” position as housewife and mother.

Romances instruct audiences in partner choice, an issue that was of no small concern to a state obsessed with eugenics. As Reichsfilmintendant (Reich General Director of Film) Fritz Hippler asserted, the Nazis were very aware of how cinema conditioned male desire in particular: “the right woman, chosen for her external appearance as well as her internal qualities and characteristics, if used repeatedly and successfully in the cinema, can unconsciously but significantly influence the general level of taste and the ideal of beauty in a great number of men to very advantageous results.”⁸ It may not be immediately clear how the actresses who were cast the most often in Third Reich films were advantageous to the racist Nazi state. As has often

been noted before, the feminine beauty ideal offered by stars of Third Reich films was not always consistent with the racial ideal promoted elsewhere in Nazi media.⁹ While the press repeatedly insisted on the inbred superiority of blondes and asserted that German-ness itself was synonymous with beauty, some of the most privileged stars of the Third Reich were dark-haired foreign-born women, such as Hitler's favorite actress, Lil Dagover, and Goebbels's favorite mistress, Lida Baarova. Blood-and-soil ideologues praised the purity of the farm woman and railed against the urban, androgynous styling of both genders in the Weimar cinema, yet most Nazi female film stars were clearly cosmopolitan in origin as well.¹⁰ And although other forms of visual culture in the Third Reich sometimes idealized maternal and hyper-feminine figures in retrograde imitations of nineteenth-century styles, in the cinema such thoroughly domestic types were generally considered unappealing.

Indeed, the chaste, housewifely model of femininity was rarely romanticized in Nazi cinema, a fact that was long overlooked by film scholars who took the blood-and-soil Nazis at their word.¹¹ Romantic heroines were generally energetic and boyish in the manner of Marianne Hoppe, Brigitte Horney, and Ilse Werner, the latter of whom a postwar star study described as "the German pin-up girl" and who influenced the tastes of the World War II generation by being "energetic, quick-witted and independent."¹² Other lead actresses of romance melodramas, such as Zarah Leander and Olga Tschechowa, exuded an air of worldly sophistication that made them unsuitable for roles as contented, provincial German wives. However, the choice of actresses in the Third Reich was not made primarily according to the values of middle-class domesticity or the perverse logic of racial engineering. The cinema supported an image of Nazism as a modern, revolutionary movement, and its star system had psychological occupation in mind. The foreign and masculinized female faces of Nazi cinema promoted the imperialistic aims of both the militarist state and of the film industry itself. Goebbels justified the continuing reliance on foreign-born stars by pointing to the coming extension of the German film industry's empire: "We have to expand our [actress] types, since we will have to provide films to many more peoples after the war," he wrote in 1941.¹³

Likewise, the Nazi trade press was often concerned with the international success of German cinema and asserted that film actresses had to give a new face to the new state. In a 1937 article titled "Stop 'Gretchen!'" the editors of the *Film-Kurier* suggested that romance films had long given German femininity a bad reputation abroad and had failed to correct the enduring image of women in Germany as passive, suffering housewives. However, the *Film-Kurier* suggested that Nazi culture had actually begun to change this

image. The German actresses and dancers who had taken part in the 1937 “German Art Week” in Paris had given the French another impression, the editors claimed, citing the commentary of French journalists who “realized, with no small amount of surprise, that these German girls were anything but ‘Gretchen-like,’ but rather appeared as slender, athletic Amazons and as beautiful, lively, attractive beings.”¹⁴ German cinema, the editors of *Film-Kurier* insisted, should export an image of German women as erotic and dynamic rather than prudish and homebound: “In this respect, German film, which constantly travels beyond the German borders into foreign countries, can clear up misunderstandings . . . German cinema must also help to overcome the stereotypes with which the German woman and the German girl are still frequently viewed abroad. Our young femininity no longer represents the Gretchen of yesteryear, who was marked by a ‘sour respectability,’ a ‘conceited humorlessness’ and domestic skills that suffocated all life.”¹⁵ And in fact the classic melodrama of feminine innocence threatened by male Faustian drives rarely played on Third Reich screens. The typical heroine of Nazi romances was neither domestic nor entirely chaste; instead, she advertised the joys of international border crossings and the pleasures of seduction. The romantic heroine of Nazi cinema was often a privileged adventuress who did not have to possess household skills, since she had servants to perform the suffocating duties for her. Fixated on upper-class fantasies, German film romances most often narrated the love lives of star stage performers or members of the international moneyed elite, regardless of Nazi ideology’s claim to represent the Germanic masses. Yet the cultivation of this type of gender imagery had a logic. The heroine of the Nazi romance melodrama was a prototype suited to the conquest of new territories, imaginable either as an imperious German mistress of newly seized *Lebensraum*, or as the attractive foreign territory itself, as the spoils of war.

The film *Man spricht über Jacqueline* (*Talking about Jacqueline*, 1937) is one such high-society romance and is about the training of an Amazon of sorts. Premiering the same year as the *Film-Kurier*’s call to end representations of passive German femininity, this mediocre melodrama was a classic competition narrative, pitting a sexually assertive tomboy heiress against her more demure and Gretchen-like younger sister. The Jacqueline of the film’s title is masculine and adventurous enough to be called Jack or Jacky for short and is referred to by her male best friend as “the best guy [*Kerl*] in the world.” She is described both in the dialogue and in the visual iconography of the film as untamed and even impossibly wild. Played by the dark-haired Wera Engels, she is predictably coded as more decadent than her sister, played by the blonde Sabine Peters. While Jacky jets between

3. Breaking Out of the Bourgeois Home: Domestic Melodrama

In 1943 a stenographer in Frankfurt was arrested by the SS for circulating the following satirical poem among colleagues in her office: “The one who rules in the Russian way, / His hair styled according to French fashion, / His mustache cut in the English manner, / And was himself not born in Germany, / The one who taught us the Roman salute, / Who desires many children from our women, / And cannot father any of his own, / That is Germany’s leading man.”¹ As this case demonstrates, Goebbels had carried out his promise to remain fanatically stubborn in eliminating all political humor. The woman’s joke was a particularly threatening one for the regime, since it proved that some people in the Reich could clearly see discrepancies between the propaganda of Nazism and its practices. Germany’s “leading man” Hitler was an obvious example of the hypocrisy of Nazis who pledged allegiance to the large family as the very foundation of the German nation. The most beloved screen star of the Third Reich, Hitler claimed that he could not marry and have children, because it would diminish his erotic appeal for the masses.² Masses of viewers sat in the cinemas and watched *Wochenschau* (*Weekly Review*) newsreels in rapt attention, scanning the surface of Hitler’s face for the minutest expression that would reveal his inner emotional state, just like they had learned to read the emotions of heroes of romance melodramas. Off camera Hitler told his associates that he simply did not like the idea of marriage or family: “I am a completely non-family man with no sense of the clan spirit,” he admitted.³ Hitler was not the only one among the Nazi leadership with this attitude. Although Goebbels appeared in the public lens as the ideal husband and father of many children, he was also notoriously ambivalent about monogamous

marriage. Long before indulging in scandalous affairs with actresses while at the head of the Propaganda Ministry, Goebbels had been opposed to the concept of bourgeois morality because of its demand for marital fidelity. As he noted in his diary in 1926: "Every female excites my blood. I tear around like a hungry wolf . . . And I am supposed to get married and become a good bourgeois! And then hang myself after eight days!"⁴ His ambivalence about marriage, like Hitler's, left its traces on the screens of Third Reich cinemas.

Of course, most Nazi films that narrate the romances of singles do end in an engagement or some suggestion of a future marriage pact. The planned marriages at the ends of films generally serve to fix the social order after a disturbance, as the proposed solution to conflict is then sealed with the final kiss in close-up. But as we have already seen in the preceding chapter, harmonious marriage is a myth that is clearly strained in Nazi cinema. Most scholars have had difficulty explaining this strain where they have noticed it, while others have disregarded it and have taken Nazi ideologues' pro-family proclamations at their word. For example, Robert C. Reimer, drawing on the work of Boguslaw Drewniak, has claimed, "Love stories in German films of the period are more than personal love affairs. They integrate romance into the family-values rhetoric of the Third Reich. Even simple love stories . . . serve to underscore the joy of marriage and having children."⁵ If love stories in Nazi cinema universally served to sell the nuclear family and the joys of domesticity to their audiences, why then, we must ask, do marriages in these films so often appear joyless, and why are children granted so little screen time? And why do Nazi melodramas invest extramarital relationships with so many suggestions of legitimacy?

We could find an answer in Roland Barthes's inoculation model and speculate that tales of love outside of the bourgeois home only serve to exorcise subversive desires and to finally reinforce the bourgeois nuclear family model all the more.⁶ To some degree this exorcism strategy certainly does apply as much to Nazi cinema as it does to the postwar striptease of Barthes's analysis, since the fear of chaos underlies both. But there is a further, contradictory process at work in Nazi cinema's erotic attractions and its visions of family life. According to Herbert Marcuse's analysis, the Nazis made political use of an ostensible liberation from traditional sexual and family constraints: "The emancipation of sexual life is definitely connected with the population policy of the Third Reich. The sexual relations are perverted into rewarded performances: controlled mating and breeding . . . The traditional taboos served to substitute another end for them by connecting sexual satisfaction with (marital) love. The National Socialist regime, in dissolving this connection, replaces it with a perhaps stronger tie to a political end."⁷ Similarly, Nazi

films, far from universally reinforcing traditional family structures, actually profit from an undermining of sexual taboos, the ultimate goal being an increased level of efficiency of production and reproduction.

Thus, despite the repeated rhetoric of German fascism that the family was the “germ cell” or the main foundation block of the nation and the married mother of many children its most admired citizen, cinema of the Third Reich so often suggested otherwise. There is instead a sense in many Nazi films that the family represented an impediment to the building of a militarist nation rather than its solid foundation. As Klaus Theweleit asserted, the Nazis struggled to hide their true antipathies: “The politics of the family under fascism created a double-bind of profoundly destructive power. [Wilhelm] Reich and others have suggested that Nazism buttressed the family, but this is not unconditionally the case. Nazism also destroyed it . . . But public denunciations of the family remained prohibited; this was the source of the fascist double-bind.”⁸ Leading Nazis propagated the value of the nuclear family as a necessary matter of public strategy, but in private other plans were made. Seemingly prohibited desires actually formed the core of Nazi film melodramas; just as fascist Germany’s “leading man” found the family largely unattractive, so did the imaginary of its cinema. Filmmakers in the Third Reich preferred to offer images of the dissolution of the family rather than images of harmonious familial units, and the domestic melodrama in particular reveals the highly conflicted attitude of Nazi ideology and policy regarding bourgeois morality, marriage, and motherhood.

Detours from Monogamy: Extramarital Romances

There is a curious absence of weddings in Third Reich melodramas. Couples often get engaged at the end of love stories, but Nazi filmmakers rarely invite the viewer to the weddings that supposedly take place after the lovers’ tenuous embraces. Most film marriages already appear at the beginning of the narrative as a *fait accompli*, and often an unfortunate one. When weddings do occur in the middle of a film narrative, they usually take place somewhere in the invisible space of an ellipsis, cut out of the narrative like all banal quotidian events that have little power to produce an emotional effect. In such cases the viewer of Nazi romances must often struggle to determine whether a marriage has indeed occurred off screen or not and what the legal status of the couple on screen might be. Quite often the discourse of “happiness” is the clearest indicator; where there is marriage it is usually absent.

This is quite different from classical Hollywood melodrama, which often treats weddings with intense, fetishistic interest. The tear-jerking end to *Stella*