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## Popular Cinema of the Third Reich

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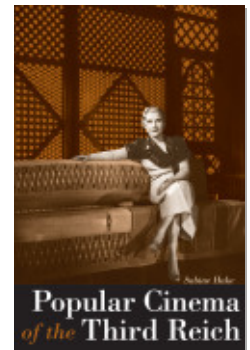
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# I

**POPULAR CINEMA,  
NATIONAL CINEMA,  
NAZI CINEMA**  
A DEFINITION OF TERMS

## I.

Until recently, the cinema of the Third Reich has been treated as the ultimate Other of world cinema. Excluded from standard film historical and theoretical analyses, the more than one thousand feature films produced during the period have remained closely identified with the critical paradigms of propaganda studies and ideology critique. Both have generated the kind of summary treatments, captured in terms like “Nazi cinema” or “Nazi film,” that often include sweeping conclusions about mass manipulation, popular entertainment, and fascist aesthetics but divulge little about the constituent elements of popular cinema: the leading stars and directors, the

popular genres and styles, the favorite studios and theaters, and so forth. Klaus Kanzog has recently concluded that “we have long ago reached consensus over the ideological premises of the films and even feel satisfaction about having more or less closed the chapter on ‘National Socialism and Film.’”<sup>1</sup> Nothing could be further from the truth. The cinema of the Third Reich has never been exposed to the full range of critical perspectives available within film studies. Much of the basic research still needs to be done, and many of the questions have not even been asked.

In this chapter, I want to develop new critical perspectives based on the aesthetic, social, cultural, and economic practices associated with popular cinema. As a way of introducing the larger project, I begin with the definitions of “popular cinema” in the existing scholarship and examine some of the hidden assumptions behind the two main elements, “popular” and “cinema,” that have sustained this seemingly self-evident but also curiously undertheorized term. The second and third parts then consider some of the other terms, including “national cinema,” that contributed to the specific qualities of popular cinema in the German tradition and that, in combination with recent debates on the meaning of the popular in film studies and cultural studies, might be enlisted in a different history and historiography of popular cinema in the Third Reich.<sup>2</sup>

To summarize a prevailing trend in the scholarship from the 1970s to the 1980s: The more that was written about the propaganda films, the less became known—and appeared worth knowing—about those countless genre films categorized as “mere entertainment”; that is to say, films that were considered neither part of art nor propaganda and that often seemed closer to other rituals of mass consumption than to legitimate cultural forms and practices. The more some scholars concentrated on the filmic representation of key concepts in Nazi ideology, the less they paid attention to the vast body of work that presumably only served escapist functions and had no aesthetic value or social significance on its own. And the more other scholars speculated about the fascist aesthetics, the less they were willing to consider the continuities of classical narrative cinema in an international context or to take into account the historical conditions of film production and reception. Even the turn to cultural studies in the last decade has not resulted in radically new approaches that, by moving from textual to contextual models, might be better suited to trace the complicated processes within popular cinema as an economic, social, and cultural practice.

Historically, the conceptualization of entertainment and propaganda as

a kind of figure-ground effect must be traced back to Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, who, in his public talks, always made the distinction between the 20 percent big-budget films with clear propagandistic intentions and “the 80 percent good, decent entertainment films on a high artistic level.”<sup>3</sup> Exile film critics were the first to challenge this division and draw attention to its political function. In a pamphlet written for the “purposes of psychological warfare,” Siegfried Kracauer asserted that “all Nazi films were more or less propaganda films—even the mere entertainment pictures which seem to be remote from politics.”<sup>4</sup> The same argumentation informed Hans Wollenberg’s more tentative conclusion, also from the 1940s, that “even apparently harmless subjects, comedies or even musicals, have somehow a tendency to advance Nazi ideologies.”<sup>5</sup> Relying on an epistemology of suspicion through qualifiers like “more or less” and “somehow,” Kracauer and Wollenberg laid the foundation for the conception of popular cinema as simultaneously separated from, and implicated in, the Nazi propaganda machine. In most subsequent descriptions of this undistinguished, formless mass called “entertainment films,” aesthetic and moral judgment usually takes the place of close analysis, a move that is legitimated with reference to the escapist nature of the films in question. And in all cases, the unquestioned assumptions about the total control of the Propaganda Ministry over the filmic imagination serve to protect against uncomfortable questions about the continuities of popular cinema and the social practices, attitudes, and mentalities that sustain it and, in turn, are sustained by it.

The indifference toward, and ignorance of, the so-called entertainment films fulfill three distinct but related functions, all of which bear witness to the films’ problematic status in German film history and social histories of the Third Reich. On the most obvious level, the argument about apolitical entertainment provides justification for the pervasive presence of these films in today’s culture, whether in the form of television programming, video releases, or film retrospectives. The insistence on a sharp distinction between politics and entertainment allows audiences both young and old to indulge freely in nostalgic celebrations of what has become known as “the golden days of UFA [Universum Film AG].”<sup>6</sup> The countless memoirs by writers, actors, and directors have further contributed to such patterns of reception. To mention only two examples, screenwriter Axel Eggebrecht insists that “to a large degree, films in the Nazi state were not at all Nazi films.”<sup>7</sup> And director Herbert Maisch cites the regular television reruns of one of his films from the early 1940s as proof that the work remained “un-

blemished by the times in which it was produced.”<sup>8</sup> Thus it should not surprise that even an unrepentant fan like Karlheinz Wendtland asserts that “the penetration of every single feature film with Nazi ideology has never been proven.”<sup>9</sup> Yet no matter whether the films are enlisted in acts of ritualistic deconstruction or ironic appropriation (e.g., Zarah Leander as a gay icon) or exposed to redemptive readings that focus only on formal qualities and directorial styles (e.g., Veit Harlan as an unacknowledged auteur), they still remain cultural products of, and historical documents from, the Third Reich. It is precisely for this reason that the historical and contemporary relevance of these films cannot be explained through the false oppositions of art, entertainment, and politics that have accompanied their critical reception from the beginning.

Secondly, the unwillingness of scholars to deal with popular cinema masks an elitist contempt for mass cultural productions and their presumably passive consumers; hence the derogatory tone in many discussions of escapism and illusionism. In the same way that moral indignation about the Propaganda Ministry’s insidious manipulations is predicated on the model of a liberal public sphere, the aesthetic dismissal of “mass entertainment” betrays two equally bourgeois notions, the aesthetic superiority of autonomous art and the affirmative character of the culture industry. Thirdly, the tendency to see popular cinema only in the context of hegemonic practices distracts from the differences and contradictions within popular culture and often ends up supporting reactionary views on modern mass culture as an insidious form of controlling private fantasies and desires—of course, not those of educated individuals but only of “the masses.” Similar patterns of argumentation can even be found in early Marxist studies on popular cinema that treat its mass-produced fantasies as a manifestation of false consciousness and the kind of petit bourgeois culture that allegedly poses a serious threat to the authentic culture of the working class.

Within these argumentative patterns, the forms and functions of popular cinema tend to be examined either through the notion of political propaganda or in the context of ideology critique. To begin with the early studies on film and propaganda, most analyses assume an institutionalized relationship between propaganda and entertainment (i.e., Goebbels’s 20 percent–80 percent model) that can be studied through conceptual oppositions such as overt vs. covert, latent vs. manifest, textual vs. contextual, and so forth.<sup>10</sup> In the earliest and still most extensive quantitative study

published to this day, Gerhard Albrecht relies on such a conceptual model in distinguishing between the few infamous films with a manifest political-propagandistic function and the overwhelming majority of entertainment films with a latent political-propagandistic function. According to Albrecht, the latent meanings in what he categorized as serious, humorous, and action-oriented films can be uncovered through a combination of textual and contextual factors, including narrative content, production history, and critical reception.<sup>11</sup>

Most studies on film and propaganda determine the propagandistic function of the so-called entertainment film by looking either at the work itself, the conditions of production, or the conditions of reception. Sometimes the distinction between political propaganda and apolitical entertainment is based on essential textual differences that manifest themselves in the thematic concerns of individual films. This approach is exemplified by David Stuart Hull, who cites the Allied Control Commission's findings that as few as 141 of a total of 700 suspect feature films were "politically objectionable" to conclude that "only a small number of films made during the Third Reich contained propaganda."<sup>12</sup> Dissolving the meaning of propaganda entirely into the conditions of production, Richard Taylor offers a radically different definition, namely that if the "conscious purpose is to lull the audience in order to manipulate its opinions for political ends, then we are concerned with film propaganda: if not, then we are concerned with entertainment pure and simple."<sup>13</sup> At first, David Welch's observations on "the majority of 'escapist' films that were produced . . . principally for entertainment purposes"<sup>14</sup> sounds surprisingly like Taylor's, given the same reference to "purposes" (i.e., intentionality). Yet Welch ultimately places greater weight on the actualization of these intended meanings by different audiences. Accordingly, he dismisses the official distinction between entertainment and propaganda as yet another attempt by the Propaganda Ministry to achieve full control over the cinema, its fantasies, and, perhaps even more important, its discourses as well. Where Hull relies on manifest content and thematic classifications in order to defend the majority of films against accusations of ideological contamination, Welch turns to the rituals of movie-going to assess the contribution of the division between the "political" and the "apolitical" to the preservation of the status quo. In his view, the mass appeal of the so-called entertainment films hinged on a carefully constructed illusion about everyday life, for "by visiting the cinema, people

could pretend that fascist ideology or principles, as disseminated in films, did not meaningfully impinge on everyday life or force them to restructure their system of values radically.”<sup>15</sup>

The most radical challenge to the propaganda model and its conceptual binaries has been developed in the context of ideology critique. Here the contribution by Stephen Neale is worth quoting at some length. For it identifies the basic contradiction at the core of all those contributions that

constantly hover between conceiving entertainment films as non-ideological and escapist and therefore performing an ideological function in not confronting “reality,” or else as embodying Nazi ideology in a hidden way through particular modes of characterisation or the portrayal of validated narrative actions. The latter are differentiated from propaganda because they are somehow not “overt” or were not produced at Goebbels’s behest. However, if they are not “overt” it is still assumed that they can be read in the covertly inscribed manner . . . that this will always be so, and this because of an intentionality that remains, in essence, in the film, rather than because the nature of the specific conjuncture in which the films were first made and viewed forces that reading.<sup>16</sup>

According to Neale, an expanded notion of ideology avoids such impasses in the theorizing of popular cinema, especially if its products and practices are conceived not in the sense of deceptions and illusions but as part of a fully developed theory of filmic representation and social reality. Defined in that sense, ideology establishes symbolic systems that take the form of cultural institutions, aesthetic practices, and critical discourses. Popular cinema represents one of the most important sites of negotiation for the conflicting forces that define the relationship between individual and society. In its infinite capacity for creating, circulating, and controlling private and public fantasies, classic narrative relies on specific patterns of identification in order to establish subject positions that actualize and integrate these conflicting forces. The resultant subject effects, as it were, give rise to the fantasy of a coherent, unified self and, in so doing, contribute to the production of social consensus and political hegemony. Yet it should always be remembered that, to quote Fredric Jameson, “the production of aesthetic or narrative forms is to be seen as an ideological act in its own

right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal ‘solutions’ to unresolvable social contradictions.”<sup>17</sup>

Stephen Lowry has been one of the first to utilize such an extended notion of ideology in a thorough analysis of what he, somewhat surprisingly, still describes as “shallow, seemingly apolitical entertainment films.”<sup>18</sup> Following Jameson, Lowry approaches ideology in Nazi cinema not through particular contents, but through the mobilization of emotions and desires and their imaginary reconciliation in accordance with the changing demands of culture and society; hence his conclusion that “we need to shift our perspective from a narrowly political definition of ideology which asks what ‘message’ films might have had, and instead scrutinize how films actually negotiated cultural and ideological conflicts.”<sup>19</sup> According to Lowry, the question about the specifically fascist nature of these films can only be answered through historical contextualization, including greater attention to the close connections between new mass cultural forms and established cultural practices within the fascist public sphere.

Such affinities undoubtedly confirm popular cinema as an integral part of the process of modernization and the experience of modernity, but only if cinema is fundamentally redefined as a practice and event. The proposals by Lowry and others for what is alternately referred to as historical contextualization, interdisciplinary approaches, or cultural-studies readings remain incomplete as long as they fail to achieve the conceptual shift from Ideology to ideologies. Above all, this requires greater attention to the complicated relationship of popular cinema to high and low culture, as well as to regional, national, and international culture in the context of institutional practices, aesthetic forms, and cultural traditions. Otherwise the study of cinema and ideology will end up with new conceptual impasses caused by, on the one hand, the radical expansion of the fascist imaginary into popular culture and everyday life and, on the other hand, the equally problematic identification of cinema under fascism with the ideology of classical narrative cinema.

Resisting such temptations, Karsten Witte has perhaps gone furthest in opening up the field of inquiry to a variety of popular genres, especially the revue films and the romantic comedies; he also has been most willing to defy the conventions that have made research in this area such a difficult and often inhibiting endeavor. His intellectual commitments are captured in the surprisingly simple and, for that reason, all the more provocative proposi-



tion that, “Instead of determining which features constitute a fascist film, we need to examine how films functioned under fascism or rather, in the context of fascism.”<sup>20</sup> Continuing along similar lines, though in very different theoretical contexts, Linda Schulte-Sasse has recently suggested that “rather than taking ideology as the starting point and looking at how movies show ideology, we can perhaps take movies as the starting point and examine how they harbor, transform, exceed, and undermine political ideology.”<sup>21</sup> Her focus on fantasy as a framework in which desire becomes possible, even if it remains an impossible desire, has shed new light on the affective structures that dissolve the political into the experiential and, for that reason, can only be understood through a similar conceptual shift from the “management of ideas” to the “management of desire.”<sup>22</sup>

The growing attention to the formal aspects of classical narrative cinema has contributed significantly to the long overdue mapping of popular cinema and its hidden attractions. However, the continuous privileging of the filmic text in the conceptual trajectory from “manipulation” (i.e., in the propaganda model) to “interpellation” (i.e., in ideology critique) and “fantasy production” (i.e., through psychoanalytic readings) also raises new questions. For instance, it might be argued that these contributions have only updated the terms of analysis by enlisting the symptomatic nature of “Nazi cinema” in the new constellations of mass culture, modernity, and postmodernity. A thus expanded notion of fascist fantasy production, which finds its ideal manifestation in the Hollywood dream factory, is bound to distract from, if not act against, the historical specificity in the filmic articulation of power and pleasure. Accordingly, Schulte-Sasse’s emphasis on the close affinities between the subject effects of fascism and classical narrative cinema culminates in a typical postmodern reading of “National Socialism as virtually *synonymous* with illusion, theater, or spectacle.”<sup>23</sup> But behind the theories of subjectivity, her study on fantasies and subject effects also perpetuates the vilification of classic narrative found in more familiar arguments against film propaganda as well as Hollywood cinema. Following a similar pattern of argumentation, Eric Rentschler uses a series of individual readings to conjure up the image of a cinema of illusions that, in his view, must be described less as the culmination of the dialectics of modernity than as “a preview of postmodern attractions.”<sup>24</sup> Yet this new theoretical alliance does not prevent him from denouncing Nazi cinema as “a culture industry in the service of mass deception” where the films “offered only an illusion of escape from the Nazi status quo.”<sup>25</sup>

Based on the groundbreaking work of Witte, Rentschler, and Schulte-Sasse, a younger generation of American scholars interested in cultural studies has begun to study aspects of popular cinema in the context of other cultural practices, discourses, and traditions, including the persistent appeal of American mass culture, the phantasmagoria of German colonialism, and the predominance of the star system.<sup>26</sup> All contributions are informed by the desire to move beyond the conceptual divides that have limited much early scholarship to totalizing models of explanation, whether they are called propaganda, ideology, or the fascist imaginary. My study hopes to contribute to this trend by presenting a number of critical concepts and models for thinking about popular cinema along social, cultural, political, and economic lines. While open to interdisciplinary approaches, I rely primarily on film studies as a discipline perfectly suited to provide the basic terms of analysis in what must be regarded as a crucial moment of historical and theoretical reassessment. And while I am not denying the attractiveness of a delineation of the postmodern that begins with Hitler's appropriation of Hollywood, as it were, I also take seriously the historical legacies of modernization and modernity after 1933 and pay close attention to their changing interpretations in the aesthetic, economic, political, and social practices that constituted popular cinema in the Third Reich.

## II.

After this overview of the existing scholarship, my goal is to outline an alternative model that locates the specificity of cinema in the Third Reich not in some stable ideological system or institutional structure but in actual filmic practices. In order to define these practices in a larger social and cultural context, I want to use the second part of this chapter to consider some of the historical conditions that made popular cinema such an important medium, both of conflict and compromise, in the articulation of modern lifestyles and contemporary sensibilities after 1933. Three factors, I believe, are central to its undisputed ascendancy: the complicated relationship to the project of mass culture and modernity, including the progressive legacies from the Weimar years; the heavy reliance on the conventions of classical narrative cinema both in its Germanized and Americanized versions; and the inherent tension between a market-driven economy and a dictatorial political regime.

Throughout the period in question, the cinema's direct appeal to petit bourgeois consciousness, including its social insecurities and rigid moral

codes, and the heavy loans from bourgeois culture, especially its intellectual pretensions, helped to gloss over the strains and ruptures in what essentially remained a class-based organization of culture. Popular cinema developed further its affinities with modern consumer culture and a homogeneous white-collar society; references to questions of race and ethnicity remained largely absent. Participating in increasingly elaborate marketing campaigns, films cultivated their close ties with the recording industry, book publishing, and the illustrated press, and they contributed actively to the consumerist celebration of modern life by influencing fashion and design trends, definitions of female beauty and sex appeal, young and urban lifestyles, and recreational activities like sports and traveling; even the war years did not significantly change these tendencies.

To phrase it differently, popular cinema continued to participate in developments typical of any advanced industrial nation, urbanized white-collar society, and modern mass culture. However, the cinema's privileged position at the forefront of modernization must not be confused with a continuous commitment to the project of modernity and the aesthetics of modernism. The means of standardization and homogenization were in fact often used to mask more problematic divisions within culture and society as a whole. Reflecting on this contradiction, Leonardo Quaresima describes the "depoliticization of the entertainment film" after 1933 as the necessary outcome of a process "in which leisure time and the organization of leisure time constituted a fundamental part of the regime's social modernization program."<sup>27</sup> Participating in the public culture of accommodation and pretense, the cinema provided both a refuge *from* the pressures of modernization in the workplace and the organization of social life, and a refuge *for* the progressive tendencies associated with Weimar modernism and its dreams of a democratic society. This paradoxical quality has been described by Witte as "the removal of modernity from public life and its simultaneous reintroduction by means of film and other mass media."<sup>28</sup>

What are some of the implications of the debates on modernization, modernism, and modernity for my earlier definition of popular cinema as a social fantasy, a cultural event, and an aesthetic experience? Did genre films cultivate modern sensibilities as a protection against the "aestheticization of politics" and the rituals of the "mass ornament"?<sup>29</sup> And did such a retreat to the private sphere, with the public sphere reserved for the cult of the national community, contribute to the kind of "split consciousness"<sup>30</sup> that has been considered essential to the functioning of the Third Reich as an elab-

orate system based on consensus as well as coercion? Must we think of popular cinema as one of the many heterogeneous forces and practices that sustained everyday life precisely through toleration of inconsistencies and openness toward compromises, including those between the reality of an Americanized urban culture and the fantasy of a Germanized folk culture?<sup>31</sup> Or would it be more productive to speak of popular cinema in terms of a partial public sphere that, based on the functional division between politics and entertainment, absorbed some of the traditions associated with the public/private divide into older cultural practices and other social contexts, for instance through the consumerist celebration of individualism in the highly circumscribed terms of escapism?

Popular cinema after 1933, it might be argued, contributed to the undoing of the progressive/reactionary and modern/conservative divide that had constituted Weimar culture and society in the terms of cultural experimentation and innovation as well as political crisis and controversy. Continuing in this tradition, the new films did much less, and much more, than create antimodern fantasies through modern means or use international styles in nationalist mythmaking. Likewise, the cinema's various new incarnations involved much more, and much less, than the replacement of a market-driven industry committed to mass entertainment with a powerful and highly effective propaganda machine under state ownership. Examining these continuities, Thomas Elsaesser has spoken of a "third form of modernity"<sup>32</sup> that enlisted popular tastes and practices in a profoundly modern derealization of space and time that remained limited to the celebration of personal lifestyles and excluded questions of labor and technology. Participating in this momentous reconfiguration of cinema and modernity, even the divisions that informed the cinema's contribution to the rise of modern mass culture—namely as a critique of high culture—could finally be utilized in the creation of a very different public sphere under the conditions of fascism.

Within these constraints, the art film, given its heavy debts to the Weimar cinema of quality, remained obliged to middle-class artistic traditions and cultural ambitions, but also made them more available to the ideological constellations of race and nation. By contrast, the popular film relied increasingly on the conventions of classical narrative cinema and the kind of stable identifications and reality effects that could respond best to various ideologies, including the bourgeois project of aesthetic education. The codification of generic formulas and stylistic conventions after 1933 cannot be

separated from the almost programmatic abandonment of formal innovation for technical perfection and the emergence of a standardized model of mass entertainment without any artistic ambitions or critical agendas. Yet even under these conditions, films managed to project a wide range of moods and mentalities, from the serious reflections on fate and destiny in the melodramas to the celebration of contemporary, cosmopolitan, and hedonistic lifestyles in the sophisticated comedies. Filmmakers paid equal attention to the latest trends in popular music and dance and the great classics of the literary and musical canon. Their highly pragmatic approaches provided a false sense of continuity that confirmed popular cinema as both a regional, national, and international phenomenon and an important mediator between high and low, popular and political, culture. Making the unavoidable comparison with the classical Hollywood cinema, Patrice Petro has therefore asked: “Was Nazi cinema merely a version of the classical Hollywood cinema?” and, if that is the case, “to what extent did the popularity of Nazi film promote distinctly national preferences and designs?”<sup>33</sup>

Defying speculation about the nature of fascist aesthetics, the many genre films produced during the Third Reich have given rise neither to a discernible filmic style nor to a particular ideological agenda. In accordance with Petro, they might be described as an impoverished, derivative version of the Hollywood original, which means: without the carefully written scripts, skilled direction, elaborate set designs, brilliant cinematography, glamorous stars, and, most importantly, generous budgets. From such a perspective, the products of forced aesthetic coordination bring into relief the pervasive lack of imagination in a popular cinema concerned above all with the systematic elimination of formal innovation and social critique. Of course, the industry’s full embrace of the Hollywood model should not distract from the many continuities with Weimar cinema, especially of the early sound period, and the repeated efforts to “Germanize” successful American formulas through the introduction of different characters, settings, and atmospheres. After all, the cinematic articulation in what Witte, in a compelling phrase, calls “Germanized Americanism”<sup>34</sup> took place on the level of texts and contexts, and was part of many other, more subtle forms of appropriation and incorporation within the tradition of the European art film and in relation to Central European theatrical and musical culture. Referring to the predatory nature of this process, Klaus Kreimeier has claimed that “under Hitler’s fascism, the German film came into its own: not by becoming fascist but by becoming thoroughly German.”<sup>35</sup>

Yet what he describes as German melodrama and German comedy was in fact characterized less by a particular form or style than by the systematic avoidance of local and regional cultures, social and ethnic characters, and political and economic processes, except of course in the form of the most hackneyed clichés. As a result, derivative styles and eclectic tendencies prevailed in all areas of cinema, from the heavy reliance on musical culture—including a strong commitment to the operetta—to the many loans from the theatrical tradition in the acting styles and dramatic conventions. Indirectly confirming this point, the celebration of German literature (e.g., in literary adaptations) and of German history (e.g., in the historical dramas) remained limited to the state-commissioned films and to prestige productions with artistic ambitions. The designation “German,” in other words, functioned above all as a system of reductions and absences that, at best, realized its populist ambitions in the established forms of petit bourgeois and bourgeois culture. At worst, it betrayed its underlying contempt for popular traditions in the shocking banality, triviality, and conventionality of its products. The high level of craftsmanship and professionalism only confirmed the pervasive pragmatism and utilitarianism in a national cinema interested primarily in its own efficiency and effectiveness.

What was the main purpose of such formal conventionality? Almost all genres were structured around a persistent anxiety over questions of identity in the form of petit bourgeois consciousness, bourgeois notions of true character, and conflicting definitions of gender and class; hence the many compensatory fantasies about rural, small-town, and upper-class life and the insistence on national and ethnic stereotyping and on normative sexual identities. However, the intense preoccupation with identity rarely remained limited to narrative and visual strategies. It permeated all aspects of cinema culture, from the conditions of film exhibition to the celebrity cult surrounding certain stars. Even the conditions of production and distribution reflected these changing definitions of the “German” as a marker of national identity and a function of product differentiation, whether in the form of casting choices and censorship decisions or through the marketing of German films at home and abroad. On the one hand, this obsession with identity must be examined in relationship to the absent signifier of anti-Semitism and the myth of racial community. On the other hand, the preoccupation with the problem of gender must be assessed through the continuities and ruptures within classical narrative film and the organization of cinema as a social event and public sphere. Only as part of such an extended

definition of popular cinema can the hidden affinities between social and psychic formations be retraced to what was represented and what excluded; the ways in which conflicts were resolved, and values and behaviors affirmed; and, most importantly, the means through which normative assumptions about gender, class, nation, and the absent marker of race had to be negotiated across the full range of cinema culture.

### III.

Instead of arguing that popular cinema is worthy of closer attention because of previously unacknowledged qualities, I want to take advantage of its negligible status in the existing scholarship in order to address more fundamental questions in the study of Third Reich cinema about the relationships among popular cinema, national cinema, and, as the most marginalized term, “art cinema.” This means: Rather than adding to the growing number of symptomatic readings, the following case studies are designed to challenge preconceived notions about the power of the Propaganda Ministry and the pervasiveness of Nazi ideology. And rather than investing the popular with new or different meanings, including those linked to the possibility of aesthetic resistance, I propose to consider the overdetermined function of popular cinema in relation to other, equally difficult categories, including that of national cinema.

Just as the notion of the popular positions individual films in the larger context of social and cultural practices, the category of the national opens up the debates to the special conditions of film production and reception in a state-controlled industry. In the same way that popular cinema must be conceptualized through the interferences between the political and the popular, including their illusory convergence in the ideology of populism, national cinema has to be defined through the national and international influences that gave rise to a uniquely, and problematically, “German” tradition of popular cinema. Through their highly charged relationship both terms, popular cinema and national cinema, can be enlisted in the creation of a more dynamic model that, at least for the purposes of this study, is fixated less on the manifestations of power than on the difficulties in achieving institutional and ideological dominance.

From a film historical perspective, the double crisis throughout the 1930s in the mutual articulation of popular cinema and national cinema points, first of all, to a serious problem experienced by all European cinemas after the introduction of the sound film: their shared struggle against

Hollywood's economic and cultural dominance and their search for artistic alternatives that would reconcile the growing demand for popular entertainment with national traditions and sensibilities. In trying to solve these problems, the Nazi leadership took a radical organizational approach that began with the forced coordination of the industry and ended with its absorption into the gigantic media empire overseen by the Propaganda Ministry. At least on a rhetorical level, the false reconciliation promised by the populist reawakening of cinema was to be achieved in the heightened terms of Nazi ideology, which meant: a virulent anti-Semitism and an equally aggressive nationalism. Despite all the initial measures and regulations, the populist discourses had to be adjusted constantly to the changing demands on popular cinema in relation both to national and international trends and to political and military developments, especially during the war years.

As a way of delineating this failed project, one might want to think of the popular in German cinema as the expression of a highly unstable compromise between the decline of traditional folk culture and bourgeois high culture and the simultaneous rise of a streamlined consumer culture and a highly politicized media culture. Likewise, national cinema should be thought of as an ongoing struggle among cultural traditions, economic objectives, and political interests. The shifting alliances formed by these heterogeneous influences shed light on the actual or perceived threat of Americanization to German culture and the various available strategies of transformation, from the Germanization of American influences to the Americanization of German practices. Moreover, the fundamental tension between popular cinema and national cinema that finds expression in the reception of foreign films draws attention to the more intangible pleasures and preferences that are usually ignored by totalizing concepts such as the politics of mass deception, the fascist culture industry, the aestheticization of politics, the society of the spectacle, and so forth.

All reflections on the popular must begin with an acknowledgment of its different meanings in modern media culture. In the two meanings identified by Stuart Hall, the first has to be understood in the sense of belonging to the people, and therefore being popular; here the popular always presupposes an oppositional term such as the cultural elite or high culture. The second meaning simply refers to a product consumed by many people; in that sense, "popular" implies being determined by the conditions of mass production and consumption and being fully dependent on new media technologies. According to Hall, the popular in the first sense is often compared to, or con-



fused with, folk culture, which is produced and consumed by the people. By contrast, the popular in the second sense usually refers to cultural products produced by specific industries for the purpose of mass consumption. In the context of German film history and criticism, both meanings of the popular have been used to justify an elitist disregard for genre film as inauthentic and derivative. They have surfaced in mass-psychological theories of escapist entertainment as well as in progressive critiques of the culture industry. Even the most recent debates in cultural studies on popular culture as a potential site of resistance (e.g., in the act of consumption) are bound to remain under the influence of such binary thinking as long as they ignore economic and political factors for the liberating gesture of “reading against the grain.” That is why Hall insists that “there is *no* whole, authentic autonomous ‘popular culture’ which lies outside the field of force of the relations of cultural power and domination.”<sup>36</sup>

In the German language, the double meaning alluded to by Hall finds expression in two terms, *volkstümlich* and *populär*, that attest to the separation of authentic folk culture and industrial mass culture in modern Germany since the late nineteenth century. Given the highly politicized nature of folk and folklore within the celebration of national community, these terms introduce an additional tension after 1933 between an indigenous folk culture nostalgically evoked in various scenarios of national renewal and the kind of mass-produced foreign products, Hollywood style, regularly denounced as a threat to the nation’s cultural identity. To be sure, the popular had already been mobilized in earlier fantasies about a preindustrial, traditional folk culture, and an idealized vision of the nation as community had informed many progressive and reactionary struggles against technological progress and modern mass culture. Yet during the Third Reich, the various meanings of the popular were actively enlisted in achieving the phantasmagoric convergence of folk and mass culture, and of high and low culture, that depended on the most advanced filmic techniques and technologies available at the time.

However, which qualities connected the general relevance of popular cinema to the production of social consensus and the preservation of cultural hegemony to the complicated dynamics, so specific to National Socialism, between retrograde fantasies of *Volk* (folk) and *Gemeinschaft* (community), on the one hand, and the unfinished projects of modernism and modernity, on the other hand? With the popular conceived of as a particular relationship between representation and reality, and between experi-

ence and desire, the individual films offered powerful fictions of the real that were sustained by the conditions of collective production and reception, the conventions of visual spectacle and classical narrative, and the competing tendencies toward realism and illusionism in the medium itself. For that reason, popular cinema produced social fantasies in which illusions and illusionism assumed their most important sociopsychological function not as an escape from, but as a corrective and an alternative to, existing reality; there lay their simultaneously oppressive and liberating quality.

Unlike Kracauer's notion of "film as the daydreams of a society," which assumes some degree of unconsciousness, the more recent concept of social fantasy assumes a more open, dynamic structure for engaging with reality, whether in the registers of playfulness, speculation, exploration, visual pleasure, or critical analysis.<sup>37</sup> Even more important, the concept assumes an active relationship between the producers and consumers of social fantasies that finds expression in their respective social, cultural, and political choices. And perhaps most crucial for this study, the conceptualization of fantasy as a function of cinema in the widest sense underscores the pervasiveness of compromise in a political system usually characterized as a hierarchical power structure or totalizing ideological system. From such a perspective of ongoing struggle, the fantasies produced by, for, in, and through popular cinema must be regarded as an integral part of social reality, and as such, they are crucial to any analysis of popular culture and everyday life in the Third Reich.

Under these conditions, even the categories of escapism and illusionism can contribute to the reassessment of popular cinema as a mediator between the fascist public sphere and modern consumer culture. For the concept of popular cinema as a shared production redefines "escapist entertainment" as an active process involving producers and consumers, as well as products and practices. It brings into relief the public and private fantasies that require at least some form of consensus even under the most oppressive conditions. Looking at fantasy as such a productive force, Richard Dyer describes escapism in the cinema as a form of utopian thinking based on the belief "that something other than what is can be imagined and may be realized."<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, he calls the display of abundance on the screen a reaction to scarcity in everyday life, and he links the celebration of energy to the experience of exhaustion, the desire for intensity to the sense of dreariness, and so forth. For Dyer such an emotional dynamic cannot be fully understood through notions of compensation that ignore the active contribu-

tion of the spectator in the realization of these effects. What is needed, in other words, is a theory of popular cinema that neither dismisses the filmic imagination as a mere reflection of social reality nor denounces its wish formations as deceptive and false.

The new approaches to so-called escapist entertainment also draw attention to the popular as compromise formation within the fictions of national culture and identity. During the Third Reich, their influence extended from popular cinema as a cultural institution with competing class alliances and its contested social status as an essential, though often vilified, aspect of national culture to the overdetermined function of popular cinema as a psychological model for the desired convergence of individual and collective fantasies. Here *Volkstümlichkeit* (popularity, but also folksiness) provided the perfect rhetorical device through which the realities of modern consumer culture—not to speak of a media-savvy political regime—could be translated into the fiction of modern folklore and its dreams of essence and truth. However, unlike the forced coordination of the industry, the coordination of filmic fantasies was never fully achieved, and the nostalgic vision of a truly populist cinema was soon abandoned in favor of a more pragmatic division of labor between the popular and the political and their changing investments in the continuities and discontinuities of national cinema. Revealing their initial foundation in racial categories, the discourses of folk and folklore remained limited to the sphere of official culture and political ideology, whereas the modern versions of the popular became confined to the highly circumscribed conditions of what already then was dismissed as mere escapist entertainment. Within these divisions, neither the folkloric nor the popular could really develop its progressive potential. On the contrary, both remained under the influence of the self-legitimizing constructions of difference that permeated all aspects of popular culture from day-to-day decisions in the Propaganda Ministry to the most mundane rituals of cultural consumption.

Through its political function as a discourse of integration, the populist notion of *Volkstümlichkeit* draws attention to the strategic divisions within the institutions of culture and the complete dependence of popular culture on a population or populace, as it were. Here the concept of collective mentality, which informed Kracauer's reflections on an unconscious predisposition toward fascism in Weimar cinema, cannot be applied to the cinema after 1933 without some further qualifications. For in the place of "a cinema

firmly rooted in middle-class mentality,”<sup>39</sup> the new alliances between state and industry established a centralized power structure that, under the motto of *Volkstümlichkeit*, cultivated two very different models of cinema: a small, but highly subsidized, national cinema committed to the idea of race and nation, and a large, market-driven popular cinema designed to satisfy bourgeois and petit bourgeois tastes. Just as Kracauer’s model of embourgeoisement gradually loses significance in the transition, during the 1920s, from the cinema of “Caligari” to that of “Hitler,” the assertion by Julian Petley that “in a significant number of films an ideological position is inscribed which can most usefully be tagged ‘petty bourgeois’”<sup>40</sup> finds little support in the prevailing genres and styles after 1933. On the contrary, these class distinctions were quickly absorbed by the new division between classical genre cinema, whose formal conventions and social rituals had finally been validated as the expression of a streamlined consumer culture, and the kind of self-consciously German art film that realized its cultural ambitions through a heavy reliance on the classical canon of German music and literature in the form of literary adaptations and musical biographies.

The resultant schism within the popular as a manifestation of, and an escape from, political ideology produced the genre of the *Staatsauftragsfilm* (state-commissioned film), which was distinguished above all by its different mode of production and reception; but it also allowed for the continuous integration of international styles into the regional and national traditions represented by more conventional genres. Significantly, it was the consolidation of these two sides of cinema, the new national(istic) film art and traditional genre cinema, that opened up an imaginary space for overcoming the collective traumas (e.g., fear of freedom, ambivalence toward authority, crisis of masculinity) that, according to Kracauer, had already preoccupied filmmakers during the 1920s and that could now be resolved through the institutionalization, in the very terms of cinema as an illusory public sphere, of the widening abyss between individual and social fantasies.

In the same way that the notion of the popular offers privileged access to the divisions within cinema culture as a social practice, the concept of national cinema sheds light on the considerable tensions between economic and political forces. For that reason, the reconceptualization of popular must include its difficult relationship to the nation and to nationalism. National perspectives in film history usually become relevant whenever films are discussed in economic terms, most frequently in the interests of a do-

mestic industry and its need for protective measures (e.g., quotas, tariffs) against foreign imports. In a state-controlled film industry, political considerations often interfere with, and take precedence over, economic necessities, especially under conditions of war. Last but not least, national traditions take on additional symbolic meanings whenever the cinema's contribution to the preservation or promotion of national culture is at stake; hence the heated debates in most European cinemas since the 1910s about film as a new art form with a cultural mission and social purpose. Contemplating the heterogeneous forces harnessed by such a homogenizing concept as nation, Andrew Higson rightly insists that the boundaries of national cinema always be examined in relation to specific production, distribution, and exhibition practices and through the concrete terms of cinema culture, from the films in circulation, including old classics and foreign films, to the various audiences and cultural settings and the competing filmic discourses and institutions.<sup>41</sup>

In light of the close connection between film and politics since the consolidation of the German film industry during World War I, it should not be surprising that the struggle over the meaning of the national has always been a struggle over audiences and, by extension, definitions of gender and class. Following in the nineteenth-century tradition of the theater as the founding site of German national identity, the cinema came to be identified with competing initiatives to create a new public sphere, first in the form of white-collar society and, after 1933, as an extension of the racial community. At the same time that silent cinema was discovered by various artistic, social, and political movements, all of which promised to overcome the deep divisions within culture and society, the new medium and its precarious position within the established hierarchies of high and low culture acquired heightened relevance in the project of national culture, namely as an instrument of social and political stabilization.

It is in the tradition of such initiatives and debates that the category of the national was repeatedly evoked after 1933 to channel the perceived double threat to traditional folk culture and established elite culture into presumably more stable constellations capable of controlling the cinema's disruptive energies while harnessing its contemporary sensibilities. For that reason, the advocates of national cinema continued to fortify its boundaries through heavy loans from the other arts, especially theater and music; the selective incorporation of regional culture and ethnic tradition; and the

careful negotiation of two very different forms of the national in the old and new discourses of Germanness (e.g., Germany as “the country of poets and thinkers”) and the highly politicized context of National Socialism (e.g., in the ideology of anti-Semitism).

Of course, most national cinemas during the 1930s and 1940s defined their boundaries in relation to others, and that typically in the form of economic competition; this explains why Hollywood is rarely thought of as a national cinema. No matter whether these unequal relationships were described in terms of friendly or hostile exchanges, national traditions were always evoked as an alternative to international developments and, in that, bore witness to larger political power struggles. No matter to what degree collaboration with others was encouraged or discouraged, the resultant alliances were always formed in full awareness of the cultural fantasies subsumed under the notion of “national cinema.” However, it would be misleading to think of the national and the international only through the dichotomy of self and other, or only in unambiguous and uncontested terms. In this particular case, the underlying economic and political constellations also involved the expanding binaries of regional vs. national, Germany vs. other German-speaking countries, Germany vs. Europe, and Europe vs. Hollywood that, more often than not, connected the selective incorporation of other filmic styles and traditions to more aggressive nationalist agendas.<sup>42</sup>

During the Third Reich, the program of national cinema and the ideology of National Socialism created an illusion of ideological and institutional unity through various mechanisms of exclusion that began with the forced coordination of the industry and culminated in the strategic division between a self-consciously national cinema with political ambitions and a popular cinema committed to private pleasures and fantasies. The heterogeneous qualities and homogenizing tendencies of popular cinema were enlisted in the hypocritical celebration of social, cultural, and regional differences under the heading of an all-encompassing *Volkstümlichkeit*. According to Neale, the dissolution of the boundaries between “entertainment” and “politics”—in other words, the very process denied by the official pronouncements by the Propaganda Ministry—was to be achieved through the ideology of nationalism. In his words,

there was a constant stress upon, and fostering of, the film industry as a *national* industry and its production as a *national* product.

Hence its audience was constantly addressed as a *German* audience watching a *German* film. If the industry's dominant product was entertainment, it was above all *German* entertainment.<sup>43</sup>

Despite such rhetorical efforts, the integrative power of nationalism could be fully realized only outside the cinema, namely through a retrograde mythology of *Volk*, which promised social and cultural harmony in the ideal of the national community, and through the aggressive force of anti-Semitism, which came to be identified with a defensive battle against the destructive effects of modernization and urbanization. The vision of a strong national cinema provided the ideological framework in which the popular was to be redefined in relation both to the projects of mass culture and modernity and to folk culture as the original model of nation in the new sense of race.<sup>44</sup>

Nonetheless, in everyday life, the popular remained the primary site of struggle for the rearticulation of the national in its changing social, cultural, and political manifestations. Identified with the continuities of mass culture, including its strong consumerist orientation, popular cinema continued to play its most important institutional and ideological functions by sustaining the illusion of a public sphere free of politics and a form of popular entertainment concerned only with individual desires and fantasies. Sustained by these powerful investments, popular cinema contributed to the conditions under which the official culture of mass spectacles, party celebrations, art events, and, of course, propaganda campaigns sought, unsuccessfully, to realize the project of ideological dominance but then quickly settled for more pragmatic solutions. Yet popular cinema also provided a social and cultural context in which audiences could partake in the ongoing transformation of mass culture and modernity, including in an international context, and engage with the social fantasies that addressed persistent social anxieties over questions of identity in the registers of classical narrative cinema. That is why the study of popular cinema is so important both to a better understanding of the Third Reich and the ruptures and continuities that define German cinema to this very day.