

## Before Hollywood: Max Ophüls, Curtis Bernhardt, and Robert Siodmak in Exile in Paris

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Hollywood was just beyond the horizon for the émigrés. There is no doubt that Curtis Bernhardt, Robert Siodmak, and Max Ophüls thought they would settle down in Paris and become a part of the French filmmaking community with its appendage of anti-Nazi exiles working under exile producers who employed émigré film technicians, even if the French wouldn't.

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Before 1933, Germany had the leading movie industry in the world next to Hollywood. There were four major German film companies. Films were mostly made in Berlin at Babelsberg and in Tempelhof, where Ufa and Terra Film, respectively, had their film studios; Tobis, the second-largest film studio after Ufa, also had its studios in Berlin. It was a major patent holder for sound film technology. A secondary film capital was located in Munich, where Bavaria Film, the fourth major film studio, reigned. Only Hollywood could rival the Germans when it came to the universal appeal, creativity, and general quality of their movies. Throughout the 1920s and up until 1933, Berlin had only America to fear as competition.

As early as March 1933, Joseph Goebbels, the just appointed Minister of Propaganda, gave a speech before the assembled Ufa personnel detailing his objectives and ideals, the goals of a National Socialist film project. The Nazis were young, eager, and serious about their cultural policy, as they were about their racism and anti-Semitism. In accordance with a dominant German character trait, they intended to be *consequent* – not a bad thing as such, only so when applied to evil intentions: systematic, ruthless, logical, and thorough, albeit they were psychically encumbered by a form of madness.



Goebbels, 1932. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

“The [Nazi] government is going to concern itself with movies far more than previous governments, primarily with their artistic and intellectual content.” (Goebbels, March 29, 1933, Hotel Kaiserhof speech.)

No one – filmmakers, the Ufa directors and management as well as technical personnel – could misread the speech’s not-so-veiled threat: the Nazis would tolerate no hidden messages or ideological deviations from basic Nazi premises, and the formerly “Jewish-dominated” German film industry would

have to change radically if it expected to function under the new regime. Goebbels made a verbal effort to assure his captive audience that he was not going to uproot the industry “root and branch” but only meant, first, to get rid of the Jews and, second, to rid the cultural cinematic products of “un-German” elements.

Indeed, Goebbels was keenly interested in movies and believed strongly in their usefulness as a propaganda instrument. He certainly intended to co-opt the industry under his auspices and supervision to turn it into a continuing powerhouse in Europe with grand productions so it would maintain its top position to the glory of Germany and the Nazi party.

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Hitler and Goebbels (right) watch a shoot at Ufa, 1935. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

The bloodletting in terms of the shedding of Jews and anti-Nazis did not seem to have a devastating effect on the movie studios in Germany – yet. The initial impact in the movies was not immediately apparent after the rise of Hitler. But it soon made itself felt. In the choice of film subjects alone, it was apparent that Goebbels and his film people were in charge. But Goebbels was not stupid enough to turn now to Nazi themes and a display of parades and uniforms; in fact, he disliked such overt propaganda, preferring to influence his captive film audiences in more subtle ways. He quipped that they didn’t need to show Nazis parading in the movies; they would take care of that on the streets in German cities. Instead, what they needed were entertaining and captivating movies made to appeal to the masses. He admired the lightness of movies coming out of “Jewish” Hollywood and compared it to German clumsiness, “profundity,” and gloominess. His ambition was to achieve that

same light touch in German movie production – without the Jews, naturally. He did not succeed. The subtle, when not overt, propaganda message was always there in the films made from 1933 to 1945. Nothing was untouched if it was put in film; even in a negative sense, in productions like Helmut Käutner's *Unter den Brücken* (1945) or his *Große Freiheit No. 7* (1944) or horror films such as *Fährmann Maria* (1935), the Nazis and their ideology and imagery loomed ever present.



*Fährmann Maria*

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Starting in 1940, the German film industry was the dominant power when it came to film production and distribution in German-occupied continental Europe; *Festung Europa* was truly a captive sales, marketing, and distribution region. The only rival to the Germans, the Americans, had been banned from the continent as the enemy. So when Europeans went to the movie theatre in, say, 1942 or 1943, they very often saw German films, sometimes in the original, sometimes dubbed into their native languages. Or the national film industries had been co-opted by German subsidiaries. An intriguing aspect of German dominance was the concomitant inferiority complex and competitive aspirations with respect to Hollywood. At Hitler's Berghof eyrie in the Bavarian Alps (Berchtesgaden), numerous American films were continually shown to the assembled bigwigs, paladins, and guests. The alpine retreat's film archive was

quite well stocked with Hollywood films, as we learn from various Nazi sources (writings about Hitler's life in Berchtesgaden, memoirs by Hitler's staff and various underlings, Goebbels' diary entries).

Goebbels watched American films before the war and even during the war when he could get his hands on them, including animated Disney productions, Shirley Temple movies, not to speak of epics such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939), which he showed several times – “[The film] has to be seen more often [by us]. We want to learn from its example” (Diary, July 30, 1940) – and formally urged his film people to see so they might learn by its example how to make movies. Goebbels was capable of admiring even explicitly anti-Nazi films such as the Warner Bros. production of *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939) and Alfred Hitchcock's *Foreign Correspondent* (1940), which included Joel McCrea as an American reporter broadcasting to America from the bombing (the “Blitz”) of London and warning the world of Nazi tyranny in the end scene.

Together, we saw this evening the American color film *Swanee River* [1939]. [...] The situation is the following: the Americans understand how to create something really useful for the current times out of their relatively slight cultural inventory owing to their state of the art cinematic capability. [...] The Americans have only a couple of Negro songs; but they depict them on the screen so vividly that they conquer large sections of the modern world, which, of course, feels itself quite appealed to in this way. We have far more extensive cultural assets but don't have the art and the power at our disposal to modernize them.” (Goebbels Diary, May 3, 1942)

The propaganda minister, according to his diary entries, was a great fan of Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934) and *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936). He admired the Greta Garbo melodramas *Grand Hotel* (1932), *Anna Karenina* (1935), and *Conquest* (1937), as well as the various films of the *Broadway Melody* series during the 1930s, *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935) and John Ford's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939), which he saw in the last months of the war, remarking, “We couldn't film a more anti-American film” in comparison to what he saw in Ford's film about the Okies in California (Diary entry, Nov. 22, 1944). His diaries are full of remarks about films and filmmaking, both German and foreign, especially about Hollywood “rival” productions. Goebbels' feelings of envy and admiration for Hollywood were unmistakable.

He sometimes differed with Hitler in terms of taste. Hitler preferred Westerns, Lubitsch comedies, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy films – and especially Disney animated films such as Mickey Mouse shorts and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937).



*Snow White*

The man in charge of German film production was engaged in a competitive struggle with the American film industry, with the world market as his stage. And he actually did not seem to believe the German – i.e., the Nazi, film production – would eventually win, admitting, if the American competitors were able to re-enter the European markets of German-occupied Europe: “We would really have a difficult time with them [Hollywood’s competition], and they may just possibly get the better of us” (Diary, November 1, 1942).

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When implementing their racist policy, the Nazis depended a great deal on the collaboration of the population. And so, in an act of pre-emptive or “anticipatory” obedience on March 29, 1933, Ufa, the biggest German film studio and the largest film company in Europe, had fired a large number of its Jewish employees: directors, cameramen, writers, technical staff, even *before* Goebbels set the course for the future in his speech – Goebbels had given his Kaiserhof speech the day before, March 28.





Eric Pommer, Carl Zuckmayer, and Emil Jannings at Ufa, 1929.. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Among those who were given the boot was Erich Pommer, the most famous producer at Ufa, responsible for just about everything that counted as classic German silent cinema in the 1920s and early 1930s. He, too, had to seek work and a refuge after he was clearly told he was no longer wanted in Berlin. Ufa, in fact, cancelled his contract. Like so many, he went to Paris, where he headed Fox's European branch. Alongside Pommer, Fritz Lang, cameraman Eugene Schüfftan, script writer Billy Wilder, Emeric Pressburger (who later partnered up with Michael Powell in England), Friedrich ("Frederick" in his later Hollywood career) Kohner, Max Kolpé (or Max Colpet, who later wrote the script for *Germany Year Zero* [1948] for Roberto Rossellini), Curt Siodmak (Robert's brother), Hermann Kosterlitz (Henry Koster later in Hollywood), and many lesser names, film composers like Oscar Straus, Paul Dessau, Franz Wachsmann (later called Waxman in Hollywood) made up the German exile community in Paris.

All these talented people leaving the country! Were they missed? Probably not. There was too much scrambling for positions going on; after all, with all the Jews and anti-Nazis having left, there were some things to go around, and the rushing must have been terrific. People who had intimately worked with their Jewish colleagues prior to January 30, 1933, now knew nothing better than National Socialism and what the new regime promised. Actors such as Emil Jannings, Heinrich George, and many others who had made their fame with

people the regime now spurned became quite convinced Nazis, fiery and passionate for Hitler and his henchman and the glorious future of Nazi Germany.

And, of course, not everyone could flee successfully when the Germans invaded. One example is Kurt Geron, who was caught in Holland, interned at Theresienstadt, and later murdered at Auschwitz. Yet there were many other colleagues who worked with Ophüls and Siodmak who died at the hands of the Nazis, in the concentration camps they conceived, spread, and ran in Europe.

How did the Nazis see the émigrés? You don't have to look any further than the 1941 film *Über Alles in der Welt* (*Above All in the World*), starring Carl Raddatz, who would be featured four

years later in the 1945 late-war "anti-Nazi" film *Unter den Brücken*. In *Above All in the World* (a quote from "Deutschland, Deutschland über alles," the German national anthem), Raddatz plays a German journalist in Paris as the war breaks out. He is a patriot – that is, a loyal German, true to Nazi Germany. The film seeks to chronicle the plight of Germans caught overseas at the outbreak of hostilities in September 1939. "Invincible power," as the blurb for this film goes, is indeed demonstrated in this flick. The film is meant to illustrate the might of the New Germany, and you can see how little power the émigrés had in some key scenes of the film. The exiled anti-Nazis living in Paris are portrayed as Jewish blowhards who hardly recognize how little influence they have, who are at best ludicrous figures to oppose the iron-fisted, mobilized Third Reich. In other words: they are merely illegitimate usurpers of German (and recently annexed Austrian) culture. The film depicts these Jews and anti-Nazis as strangers to the "people" and as foreigners without a country, rabid agitators without support from the German people. At bottom, only "rootless cosmopolitans." From our perspective, it might look like the émigrés



Comedy duo Sig Arno and Kurt Geron, 1931. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons



possessed the moral high ground and accomplished great things in Hollywood, particularly in film noir, but, from the look of things in the 1930s and early '40s in Europe, they were the losers and laughably weak. In *Above All in the World*, there is a scene depicting Austrian folk musicians who have been caught by the war's outbreak and are in transit to their homeland; they have been temporarily interned in France. They are country folks, "unsophisticated." Some émigrés approach them to make speeches about anti-fascism. The peasant musicians look at them and mumble among themselves only the phrase, "*Wiener Juden* (Viennese Jews)." In the film, the explanation was enough – and the camera shows their skepticism and antipathy to the émigrés.<sup>1</sup>



To get another taste of what sort of films the Nazis were making and how much they were agitating against the émigrés and the forms of modernism that the émigrés embraced, one needs to see a picture like *Venus vor Gericht* (*Venus On Trial*, 1941). The plot of *Venus On Trial* is explicitly directed against modernist art. The film is about a young German sculptor during the era that the Nazis called the "*Systemzeit*" (years following the First World War and prior to Hitler's rise to power, i.e., 1919-1933). He deliberately buries a statue of a naked young woman, derivative of Greek sculpture. The young artist wants it to be discovered and acclaimed as a lost treasure of ancient classical art. Never mind the implausibility of this ruse; he wants to expose the degeneracy of the modernist art world and its professional critics by contrasting this "naturalness" and freshness he has created with the distorted and perverse creations of modernism. We won't get too involved in the ideology here, but suffice it to say he succeeds, and nobody can guess who created the statue of a nude and nubile young woman. Never assume the Nazis were prudes – not

with nakedness or, as they called it, “naturalness” as opposed to Jewish degeneracy and deformation. They did like their nudes. (See Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia* [1938] for a female’s vision of naked strength and grace in the form of homoerotic imagery. It passed in the Nazi censor’s eyes because it was “Aryan” men who were naked.) In *Venus On Trial*, Siegfried Breuer of *The Third Man* (1949) fame plays the unscrupulous Jewish art dealer Benjamin Hecht, the great manipulator – he can get corrupt art critics to review the works of art he sells in glowing terms in the newspapers of pre-Nazi Germany and then sells the art to museums at exorbitant, inflated prices. That’s the art world against which the young Nazi sculptor – said to be based on Arno Breker (in the film he is called Peter Brake, played by Hannes Stelzer) – struggles in vain in pre-Nazi Germany. Hannes Stelzer, by the way, was a young and promising actor who would abandon the Goebbels-led Ufa film studios to serve in the German army; in this case, he was a real Nazi and didn’t have the chance, after the war, to deny he ever was one. He was killed in action in Hungary in late 1944.



Adolf Hitler and Adolf Ziegler inspect the installation by Willrich and Hansen of the Degenerate Art Show, 1937. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

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Before fleeing to Paris, directors Max Ophüls, Curtis Bernhardt, and Robert Siodmak – who became known as American filmmakers and masters of noir – had significant careers in Germany.

After working for more than a decade as a theater director in various positions in the German provinces, Ophüls first made a short for Ufa in 1931, *Dann schon lieber Lebertran* (*I'd Rather Have Cod Liver Oil*), which is now considered

lost. He followed up with two comedies: *Die verliebte Firma* (*The Company's in Love*, 1931), with the young comedian Heinz Rühmann, and the filmed version of the comic opera *Die verkaufte Braut* (*The Bartered Bride*, 1932). Then came his great success, *Liebelei* (1933), the year he had to leave Germany.



*People on Sunday*

Siodmak did his initial work as a director in *Menschen am Sonntag* (*People on Sunday*, 1930), written by the young Billy (then Billie) Wilder. Fred Zinnemann, Edgar G. Ulmer, and cameraman Eugene Schüfftan also worked on the film. Seymour Nebenzal<sup>2</sup> produced it; Curt Siodmak wrote the story. This film is now seen as a pioneering achievement in many respects, both technically and intellectually, and was a huge hit at the time. It was an independently made movie that showed the daily life of four young Berliners. After that, Siodmak was hired as a director by Ufa. He made *Abschied* (*Farewell*, 1930), a tale set in a boardinghouse, which featured a Russian émigré who would later go to Hollywood: Vladimir Sokoloff. He then made a short called *Der Kampf mit dem Drachen oder: Die Tragödie des Untermieters* (*The Battle with the Dragon or: The Tragedy of the Subtenant*, 1930), starring Felix Bressart, which is now considered lost. That was followed by five films in quick succession for Ufa: *Der Mann, der seinen Mörder sucht* (*The Man in Search of His Murderer*, 1931), which starred Heinz Rühmann. This film was written by Billy Wilder and featured the music of Frederick (then Friedrich) Hollander and Franz Waxman. The plot – the model for many follow-up films such as *The Whistler* (1944), with Richard Dix and J. Carrol Naish – concerns a man who pays to have a hit man kill him and then falls in love and changes his mind. Siodmak's next film,

*Voruntersuchung* (*Inquest*, 1931), was a solid mystery and a proto-noir if there ever was one, starring Albert Bassermann as a district attorney in Berlin who is forced to investigate a murder involving – he suspects – his own son and his best friend (Gustav Fröhlich, one of the main leads in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* [1927], where he played the industrialist's son). He had an assistant at Ufa for the French version of the film. His name was Henri Chomette, the brother of René Clair. Siodmak would later encounter him again in Paris.



*Voruntersuchung*

*Stürme der Leidenschaft* (*Storms of Passion*, 1932), another proto-noir that was long considered lost (a copy may have been found in Japan), starred Emil Jannings. It was set in the Berlin criminal milieu. *Quick* (1932) was a film comedy and starred Hans Albers as a music hall clown.

*Brennendes Geheimnis* (*The Burning Secret*, 1933) was based on a novella by Stefan Zweig, a German-Austrian co-production, starring Willi Forst. It premiered in March 1933, but was shortly thereafter banned by Goebbels because of its theme of adultery and, allegedly, because the propaganda minister believed the title of the movie was an ironic allusion to the Reichstag fire, which occurred on Feb. 27, 1933.

Kurt Bernhardt made his debut with a short film, *Namenlose Helden* (*Nameless Heroes*, 1925), for a Communist-controlled film company. The feature-length silent films he produced next – *Qualen der Nacht* (*Torments of the Night*, 1926); *Die Waise von Lowood* (*Orphan of Lowood*, 1926), based on *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë; *Kinderseelen klagen euch an* (*Children's Souls Accuse You*

(1927), an anti-abortion topical film made for a Catholic organization – were made with smaller film companies, as was *Das Mädchen mit den fünf Nullen* (*The Girl with the Five Zeros*, 1927), a film comedy. *Schinderhannes* (*The Prince of Rogues*, 1927) was based on a play by Carl Zuckmayer, made for a Russian-German film studio. *Das letzte Fort* (*The Last Fort* (1929) was a war film. *Die Frau, nach der man sich sehnt* (*The Woman One Longs For* aka *The Woman Men Yearn For*, 1929) was a drama starring the young Marlene Dietrich as well as Fritz Kortner; it was based on a novel by Max Brod. The crime film *Der Mann, der den Mord beging* (*The Man Who Murdered*, 1931) featured Conrad

Veidt, with Heinrich George. In this film, George played such a caricature of an English snob and nobleman that one can see that, prior to the Nazis, the Germans did indeed have a complex about the English and parodied them in their movies well before Hitler came to power.

Before Bernhardt left Germany, he made two very famous films, which were quite nationalist in spirit: *The Rebel* (1932), with Luis Trenker, a film that was paradoxically revered by Goebbels as a quintessentially German film in his speech in 1933 addressing the assembled film workers at Ufa; and *Die letzte Kompanie* (*The Last Company*, 1931), a war film with Conrad Veidt, about the sacrifice of a Prussian infantry company in the war against Napoleon. Both films were exaltingly patriotic. It's ironic that Bernhardt should have been kicked out of Germany for being un-German, that is, Jewish.

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Paris was by no means a friendly environment for German émigré film directors. To begin with, they constituted competition for the native filmmakers. The newspapers and the film people in France were on the defensive when it came to the new competitors, and many media organs did not shy away from anti-Semitic invectives against them. Robert Siodmak seemed to have particularly bad luck. In 1933, just as he arrived in the French capital, he was interviewed by the writer Lucien Rebatet (who later would become a noted contributor to the main newspaper of the French fascists, *Je*



*Brennendes Geheimnis*



*Suis Partout* [I Am Everywhere]). Rebatet managed during the article to insinuate that the film set on which Siodmak was working (for the film *Le Sexe Faible*) was filled with German émigrés (read: Jews). Siodmak's next film, *La crise est finie*, was picketed by the National Federation of French Cinema at the Joinville studio, where he was shooting. The organization's proxy, namely Henri Chomette, lobbied the French Ministry of Justice for the director to be removed from the film. Chomette, who in April 1935 would participate in the Berlin International Film Congress organized by Joseph Goebbels, arranged for a banner to be displayed, reading: "SIODMAK, GO HOME!" at the doors of the Joinville studio. Of course, the fear of competition had a very real economic aspect: "Most of the [French] studios weren't working at much more than half their capacity, and the cinematic trade unions had unemployment rosters of 50 percent."<sup>3</sup>



*La Sexe Faible*: Pierre Brasseur and Mireille Balin

Another negative factor was that the French film industry was not advanced – in fact, it was comparatively backward, more provincial and technically inferior to the high-powered, globally respected German movie industry next door.

Robert Siodmak was forced to flee Berlin in 1933, after having been attacked by the Nazis in the German press as a moral degenerate and a Jew, most particularly in *Der Angriff* (*The Attack*), the newspaper set up as a Nazi party organ in the Berlin *Gau* (district) in 1927. The vicious polemic against him was part of a concerted campaign directed against Jews in the German film industry by Goebbels.





*Liebelei*

Max Ophüls didn't leave Germany until after his film *Liebelei* – starring Willy Eichberger (who would later become “Carl Esmond” in Hollywood after he fled the Nazis in 1938), Wolfgang Liebeneiner (who became a very prolific “quality” Nazi film director, maker of the notorious pro-euthanasia film *Ich klage an* [*I Accuse*, 1941]), and Magda Schneider (Romy Schneider's mother) – had premiered in Berlin on March 16, 1933. On that same day, the director even went on stage with the main actors to acknowledge the accolades from the cheering audience. Ophüls had the great luck of being a native of the Saar. He did not have a German passport and was not a citizen of the German Reich. In European countries, it is customary for their citizens to register their residence address with the police. Ophüls was officially registered as residing in Saarbrücken, the largest city in the Saar, which greatly aided him when it came to reestablishing residence in Paris. He was seen as a resident of a region that, in 1935, was set to vote on a plebiscite on whether to remain a part of France or Germany. In 1933, this plebiscite was two years away. Owing to this affiliation with the Saar and since he was a holder of a Saar passport when he crossed the border to Paris, he was in a sense privileged and had no trouble getting a work permit. It also eased the approval of legal residency for him and his wife and small son Marcel.

By contrast, Robert Siodmak never got a French work permit during his residence in Paris, even though he actively filmed there until 1939. Hence Siodmak always lived and worked on the edge of legality during his entire time

there.



*Carrefour*

The émigré directors were not “at home” in Paris as filmmakers. They took along with them the film mannerisms characteristic of German filmmaking – and that we connote as synonymous with film noir: themes of confused identity, unusual camera angles, chiaroscuro lighting, urban/criminal underworld settings, the world of night club entertainment. Their films were deliberately international or felt so because the producers, cameramen, set designers, writers – for Curtis Bernhardt’s *Carrefour*, Hans Kafka, an émigré, penned the script, for instance – were neither French nor Parisians but often hailed from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Russia. The films of these exiles reflected a made-up Paris but one that has stood the test of time. In essence, the émigrés were producing film noirs before there was any notion of film noir. Prime examples of this are *Carrefour* and Siodmak’s *Pièges*. They happened to be made in the late 1930s in France but led visually, thematically, psychologically directly to the classic film noirs they would make in America.<sup>4</sup>

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Hollywood was just beyond the horizon for the émigrés. There is no doubt that Curtis Bernhardt, Robert Siodmak, and Max Ophüls thought they would settle down in Paris and become a part of the French filmmaking community with its appendage of anti-Nazi exiles working under exile producers who employed émigré film technicians, even if the French wouldn’t. The Germans invaded in June 1940. France, situated right next to the *Reich*, made a military invasion

relatively easy to implement. The famed Maginot Line, an idea whose effectiveness would have been great if the Second World War had been just a repeat of the First World War, didn't prevent the numerous German tanks – which, by the way, were technically inferior to their French counterparts – from going around the fortifications. The trouble was that the French didn't fight like they should have, and the Germans were easily supplied in their back areas, nothing like the stretched supply lines, for instance, that plagued their armies in Russia.

The three émigré directors were very lucky to escape, but tens of thousands of others were caught in the invasion's iron vise. They were sitting ducks for the secret police and SS, which followed up after the army. All three would have been prime catches for the Nazi hunters, certainly, and might not have survived.

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*The Tunnel: Jean Gabin (left)*

Curtis Bernhardt – or Kurt Bernhardt, as he was known then – technically speaking, made only two feature films in France in the 1930s: *Gold in the Street* (*L'Or dans le rue*, 1934), script by Henry Koster (then Hermann Kosterlitz), music by Paul Dessau; and *Carrefour* (1938). He actually made a French version of *The Tunnel* (1933), with Jean Gabin and Gustaf Gründgens (with the famous German actor speaking French) in the starring roles. The film was shot in the Bavaria Film studios in Munich-Geiseltal. Officially, Jews like Bernhardt were no longer allowed to work in the German film industry. But Bernhardt received special permission to finish directing the film, since it was a joint

German-French production; officially, he had been hired by the French producers, so technically his employers were Frenchmen. He had literally to be smuggled across the border from France to work in Munich; even though he was seen as an enemy of the new Hitler government, Berlin allowed him to finish the film in both its German and French versions. The French version is arguably the better one. *The Tunnel* was a capitalist adventure, a half-science fiction, half-utopian fantasy about “American” engineers and financiers undertaking the colossal project of building a transatlantic tunnel 13,000 feet beneath the ocean, connecting the continental United States and Europe. The tunnel building is supported by and later sabotaged by a speculative financier. The speculator in question is played by Gustaf Gründgens. The German creative and political imagination always works best in projecting wild capitalist excesses onto the United States and England, hence the story was set in the United States. Playing the master engineer and tunnel builder in the German version is Paul Hartmann, who about half a decade later took the main roles in two important Nazi films.<sup>5</sup> Jean Gabin plays the master engineer role in the French version of *The Tunnel*.

Bernhardt also shot a French version of *The Beloved Vagabond* (in French, *Le Vagabond bien-aimé*, 1936), the original of which he made in England, with Maurice Chevalier in the title role. Franz Planer was cameraman; music was provided by Darius Milhaud. Another émigré named Walter von Molo was assistant director.



*Carrefour*: Charles Vanel

The last film Bernhardt made in France, *Carrefour*, is a full-fledged noir. It resembles a film Bernhardt would make ten years later, *High Wall* (1947), in that the main plot device is amnesia on the part of the protagonist caused by wounds and trauma during war. *Carrefour* stars a younger Charles Vanel – if one only knows the actor from *Wages of Fear* (1953), Vanel is a revelation; he was a leading man in French film during the 1930s. He plays an amnesiac, tortured by the search for his identity. He must battle in court the claim that he is an impostor who has slipped into the identity of a business tycoon named Roger de Vétheuil. “Vétheuil” – or an impostor – had returned twenty years before with a severe head wound from the Battle of the Somme without remembering his past.

Bernhardt was a master of cinematic timing. It is a subtle art. It is indeed the reason – cited memorably as a lesson learned the hard way by the frustrated producer-turned-director Jonathan Shields (Kirk Douglas) in *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952) – why a film cannot consist only of climaxes but must feature transitions, slow parts, asides, diversions in order to render the full force of the narrative on the audience.

This sense of pace is something Bernhardt perfected; it would remain a part of his filmmaking arsenal during a career that stretched from his early German silents in the 1920s all the way to his swan song as a director, the “make-believe” movie about the first woman U.S. president. *Kisses for My President* (1964) starred Polly Bergen as the President, with stalwart assistance from Fred MacMurray as the “First Lady,” her husband. Bernhardt’s skill at pacing added something to even the poorest material.

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When Max Ophüls finished his 1933 film *Liebelei*, he was still being celebrated for it in Berlin. He left soon thereafter. His first film in France, produced by Erich Pommer, *On a volé un homme* (*Man Stolen*, 1934), is considered lost. He then went to fascist Italy for his next production: *La signora di tutti* (*Everybody’s Woman*, 1934).



*On a volé un homme: Lila Damita*

Ophüls confessed he always fell in love with his leading actresses and felt compelled to have affairs with them; otherwise, he admitted, he couldn't be completely engaged in the directing of the play or film. This was his *modus operandi*, even though he was married, with a wife and son. Starting with *Signora* and extending through his films in France (with perhaps a hiatus during his American years but probably continuing after he returned to Europe), Ophüls began what he called a series of portraits of very attractive young women who were "victimized" by society, especially by certain predatory men. It appears the director Ophüls liked to think of himself as a man in sympathy with women. Some have even called him an early feminist, but his apparent taking advantage of starlets in his productions puts him closer to the predators of some of his films.





*Divine*

In 1935, Ophüls directed the first of the “sympathetic” portrayals of a young woman caught in the vise grip of aggressive males’ sexual attentions: in *Divine* (1935), the “natural” country maiden Ludivine (Simone Berriau) has gone to Paris to be what amounts to nothing but a stripper. It employs one of Ophüls’ favorite dramatic devices of revealing the mechanism behind the scenes of a movie or a play. In *Divine*, he shows a popular Paris music hall production and all the inherent drama between the protagonists in real life. Ludivine is wise beyond her years and is not taken in by the tinsel fame and glamor of life in show business; we’re supposed to believe that a girl her age is not completely enamored of this type of life and whose only sacrifice to it is taking off her clothes on stage for men to ogle at.

*La Tendre Ennemie* (1936), shot by master cinematographer Eugene Schüfftan – he was able to use special effects to his heart’s content, such as working with double exposures throughout the film – was followed by *Komedie om Geld* (*Comedy about Money*, 1936), made in Holland. It is a Brechtian didactic comedy, not very original in its message of telling its audience that money is bad as well as corrupting and that capitalists are scheming evil people.



*La Tendre Ennemie*

*Yoshiwara* (1937) was set in Tokyo's prostitute quarter, reminiscent in theme of the sad fate of the female protagonist in *Madame Butterfly*. The Japanese disliked the film heartily when it came out. It starred Pierre Richard-Willm, a popular French "heartthrob" and star, with Sessue Hayakawa playing a coolie who is in love with Kohana (Michiko Tanaka). The actress Michiko Tanaka lived in Nazi Germany in the late 1930s and in 1941 married the German actor Viktor de Kowa, a star of numerous light comedies produced under Goebbels' auspices.

Ophüls collaborated again with Seymour Nebenzal as producer and with Richard-Willm in *Werther* (1938), a melodramatic retelling of Goethe's tragic novella. How Ophüls, despite the situation he was in, could find it in himself to dedicate his work to German literature and culture is a question worth asking. It is a strange phenomenon when somebody like Ophüls identifies so strongly with the *Kultur* that is seeking to annihilate him – perverse? Masochistic? For some perspective, this is the dichotomy portrayed in Fritz Kortner's *The Last Illusion* (1949), where arguments ensue among the émigrés as to whether Germany is a hotbed of unforgivable barbarism or still is a major source of humanistic culture for mankind. *Werther* is a well-done depiction of the novella on screen. The film is rather lugubrious yet retains its effect as tragedy, for there is seemingly no way out for its late-eighteenth-century protagonist. Richard-Willm was perfectly cast here as the suffering, romantic Werther, and it's still capable of moving an audience.



*Werther*: Annie Vernay



*Werther*: Half-sheet poster

*Sans Lendemain* (*There's No Tomorrow*, 1939), produced by the émigré Gregor Rabinowitsch, shot by Eugene Schüfftan, is a weepie starring the ever competent Edwige Feuillère. It is about a mother working in a burlesque house in Paris, trying to raise her son. She is a kept woman, effectively a prostitute. The mother sacrifices everything so that her boy can be taken away to Canada and happiness – at least that's what the mother hopes. The brooding and

mounting fatalism in the telling of the story of the woman is reminiscent, perhaps, of the general situation in France on the eve of the Second World War, epitomized in other films such as Marcel Carné's *Quai des Brumes* (*Port of Shadows*, 1938). *Sans Lendemain* had its French premiere in March 1940.

Ophüls shot one last film in France, *De Mayerling à Sarajevo* (*Sarajevo*), with a screenplay by Carl Zuckmayer, produced by the Austrian-Slovakian émigré Eugène Tucherer, about the love and marriage between Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and Countess Sophie Chotek, leading up to their assassination and the beginning of the First World War. With her subtly expressive face – the melancholy smile and air of sadness – Edwige Feuillère as the Countess is heart-rending, as always. Feuillère lets her suppressed emotions shimmer beneath a taciturn demeanor.

In the last twenty minutes, a sense of doom lies over the entire sequence of scenes – that the royal couple are going to die and all attempts at reform of the Austro-Hungarian empire, chiefly by this royal couple in order to placate the nationalist fervor among the various peoples of the empire, are for naught. The film was released on May 1, 1940. France was



Max Ophüls

invaded on May 10. *Sarajevo* was banned immediately. Ophüls was a hunted man, well-known as an anti-Nazi émigré. He went into exile again, for a second time, leaving for Zurich, Switzerland, initially to direct a German-language play about Henry VIII as well as *Romeo and Juliet*. The invitation to Zurich was a lifesaver – Ophüls remained in neutral Switzerland well into 1941 – but it had a catch: he was dependent on a Swiss residency permit. After a year, his permit ran out with no chance of renewal; he would be forced to return to German-occupied France with his wife and son. Valerian Fry's Emergency Rescue Committee, active in Vichy France before America's entry in the war, heard of the director's distress and acted to save him. Max Ophüls and family sailed to the safe haven of America. In the words of Ophüls' son Marcel, who was nearly fourteen when the family of three arrived on August 5, 1941: "We reached New York and the Statue of Liberty. I can still remember that morning. We came out of the fog into bright sunshine. There was New York, the skyline of Manhattan. Seeing it, we started crying."

\* \* \*

Robert Siodmak's first Paris film, *Le Sexe Faible* (*The Weaker Sex*, 1933), is an amusing if unimaginative filmed stage play, a farce involving several characters in a hotel. Ironically, the "weaker sex" is, of course, the male one.<sup>6</sup> Siodmak's next production, *La crise est finie* (*The Crisis Is Over*, 1934), was almost a French parody of the type of elaborate Busby Berkeley-choreographed musical that was being made at the same time in Hollywood. It starred Albert Préjean, whom many would know from René Clair's *Sous les Toits de Paris* (*Under the Roofs of Paris*, 1930), as well as the very young Danielle Darrieux. It is intentionally light fare for the Depression, a lively and upbeat movie about the fate of a theatrical troupe and how they manage to put on a big production and win over the hearts of the audience – pretty much exactly the formula of Berkeley and his cohort in America.



*La crise est finie*: Marcel Carpentier and Danielle Darrieux

*La Vie Parisienne* (*The Parisian Life*, 1936) is a take-off on Jacques Offenbach's eponymous operetta, featuring the comic actor Max Dearly as a Brazilian millionaire who returns to the place of his youthful adventures, Paris, after an absence of over forty years. The film features a prolonged can-can scene, a real show-stopper, in what is more or less a comedy farce, featuring the over-the-top performance of the Brazilian millionaire. It is amusing, an apt enough vehicle of Depression-era entertainment. Incidentally, Emeric Pressburger was one of Siodmak's screenwriters for the film, and Michèle Morgan is an extra.





Siodmak's next film, *Mister Flow* (1936), stars Louis Jouvet. He plays the title character, a master burglar who can impersonate various personalities. It is a screwball comedy that definitely has noir elements in it, a hybrid that does not quite work. Jouvet is, as always, impressive as the arch-criminal. It is chiefly in the scenes with Jouvet that the film rises above the level of silliness and reaches the level of what it might have been had Siodmak been allowed to direct a serious crime film. In his double identity, Jouvet's scenes show the more powerful, more sinister story the film could have been. Especially in the extended court scene at the end, Jouvet's craven servant Achille Durin speaks and squirms with a skin-crawling obsequiousness, yet in the next moment, he is the notorious, menacing Mister Flow. Jouvet's eyes, gestures, and demeanor change entirely as his personality goes back and forth.

Siodmak tried all styles and genres while in France, from melodrama and light comedy to dark crime film. He made almost a dozen films during the six years he spent there.

*Cargaison Blanche/Le Chemin de Rio (Traffic in Souls, 1936)* is about "white slavery," another not-so-successful combination of crime and comedy. It stars Jules Berry as the head of a nefarious group of criminals who trick pretty young French women into agreeing to take jobs in Brazil, where they will allegedly make a fortune; the jobs are in reality positions in clubs as call girls, and the racket is prostitution. In the film, Marcel Dalio is cast against type: instead of playing a refined and gentle character, he plays a brutal thug.



*Chemin de Rio*

During his final couple of years in France, Siodmak made his two most significant exile films. *Mollenard* (*Hatred*, 1938), starring the veteran French character actor Harry Baur and co-starring Albert Préjean, is a true oddity: a study of the intense hatred of seafaring merchant Captain Mollenard for his wife Mathilde, his two grown children, and all they represent in bourgeois domesticity and, presumably, as landlubbers. Mollenard, the captain of a cargo ship, works for a company that sells arms to various combatants in China; we are left in the dark as to the identity of the recipients of these various weapons. Warlords? Kuomintang? The Japanese? Mollenard sails off with his crew to Asia, where he is suspected of selling arms on his own account to rogue French middlemen. He has a quarrel with them; his ship is eventually sabotaged by the gangsters; Mollenard must return to Dunkirk. There he is celebrated as a hero, and his shipping company must keep quiet about the matter in order to collect the insurance. Perhaps Siodmak's misogynist tendencies contributed to Mollenard's hatred of his wife, family, and the bourgeois life in France; the character's attitude seems exaggerated and makes him less than sympathetic. The film was heavily supported by the Popular Front in France at the time of its release for its simmering hatred of the bourgeoisie. On its release in America in 1941, it was not as well received.



*Mollenard*: Harry Baur, Marcel Dalio

Siodmak's final film in France, though, is a masterpiece: *Pièges* (*Personal Column*, 1939). It stars Maurice Chevalier, cast against type, as Robert Fleury, falsely accused of being a serial killer of young women. Fleury is a well-known nightclub owner and entertainer in Paris. The film's plot resembles that of *The Wrong Man* (later directed by Alfred Hitchcock, 1956). In his last film in France, Siodmak develops his mature American style as perhaps the premier director of film noir. He masterfully handles the element leading to the capture of the killer: an attractive young woman who had worked in the chorus line agrees with the stymied police to pose as a decoy in order to ensnare the mysterious killer, who writes cryptic messages to the police describing his murderous intentions (a bit like the San Francisco serial killer Scorpio in *Dirty Harry* [1971]). Marie Déa plays the tough, street-wise young lady in question.<sup>7</sup> Pierre Renoir is Fleury's business partner. Erich von Stroheim does a cameo as an aging fashion designer, a couturier who turns out to be mad; his encounter with the young police decoy is hilarious and pathetic, inspired in its sad lunacy, providing a detour in the search for the murderer. In fact, in *Personal Column*, all the minor characters are well realized and limned with intensity, so the viewer never loses interest in what might otherwise have been a simple and routine crime film. Far from routine, the film offers a strikingly realistic view of police procedures, the painstaking efforts and frustrations of searching for an unknown killer, and life in a chorus line at seedy nightclubs. Siodmak shows life as it's lived in a big city, and this is the underbelly of an urban hell we recognize as the world of film noir. The cruel-edged life in the city that had a heart beneath its surface bleakness is what Siodmak seems to want to show us: a tough world but one where you could still find kindness, albeit in the unlikeliest of places – perhaps among the hardened policemen, perhaps among the chorus girls, even in the patient forbearance and loyalty of the housekeeper to a ruined former couturier. This was the world Siodmak knew –

a modern urban atmosphere of dark streets and dark visions of the human soul that would be his own true territory – and not only Robert Siodmak's but that of many other European exile directors as well.



*Pièges*: Marie Dea, Siodmak, Erich Stroheim on the set

Siodmak plays with the image of the well-known entertainer Chevalier, in a serious role this time. Chevalier gives what is perhaps one of the best performances of his career. *Personal Column* harkens back to Siodmak's early Berlin films, with its murky atmospherics and meticulous portrayals of a demimonde in which the losers in society, the criminals, outcasts, con men, lowlifes, and even the rich and powerful are joined together to create a milieu without patronizing or condemning the people who live within it. The upper class is as dark in this world as the lower classes are. And the serial killer is still loose in the city.

The years of precarious exile in France were over for the three directors by the early 1940s. Ophüls would not direct a Hollywood film until 1946. Preston Sturges had championed him initially, taking him under his wing during the war, but did not help him get him into directing. Ophüls eventually did *Caught* and *The Reckless Moment* (both 1949), but remained bitter about Sturges. Siodmak, on the other hand, had his brother, the screenwriter Curt Siodmak, as helper in the studios, and he quickly directed several forgettable B-films before he got his real shot at the type of crime film for which they as yet had no name: *Phantom Lady* in 1944, followed a few months later by the campy B-spectacle Maria Montez vehicle *Cobra Woman* (1944). Curtis Bernhardt got started in Hollywood with the help of Henry Koster. He later worked with Hal

Wallis at Warner Bros. to direct *Conflict* (1943) with Humphrey Bogart; *Possessed* (1946) with Joan Crawford and Van Heflin; and then *High Wall*, featuring Robert Taylor and Herbert Marshall, at MGM. The three émigré directors survived their wartime challenges and eventually thrived in America, making major contributions to the style of filmmaking that reflected their German roots and that we today call film noir.

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*Images from the films are screenshots from the DVDs or YouTube.*