

Chapter 3

IN THE RUINS OF BERLIN: A FOREIGN AFFAIR (1948)

“We wondered where we should go now that the war was over. None of us—I mean the émigrés—really knew where we stood. Should we go home? Where was home?”

—Billy Wilder¹

Sightseeing in Berlin

Early into *A Foreign Affair*, the delegates of the US Congress in Berlin on a fact-finding mission are treated to a tour of the city by Colonel Plummer (Millard Mitchell). In an open sedan, the Colonel takes them by landmarks such as the Brandenburg Gate, the Reichstag, Pariser Platz, Unter den Linden, and the Tiergarten. While documentary footage of heavily damaged buildings rolls by in rear-projection, the Colonel explains to the visitors—and the viewers—what they are seeing, combining brief factual accounts with his own ironic commentary about the ruins. Thus, a pile of rubble is identified as the Adlon Hotel, “just after the 8th Air Force checked in for the weekend,” while the Reich’s Chancellery is labeled Hitler’s “duplex.” “As it turned out,” Plummer explains, “one part got to be a great big padded cell, and the other a mortuary. Underneath it is a concrete basement. That’s where he married Eva Braun and that’s where they killed themselves. A lot of people say it was the perfect honeymoon. And there’s the balcony where he promised that his Reich would last a thousand years—that’s the one that broke the bookies’ hearts.”

On a narrative level, the sequence is marked by factual snippets infused with the snide remarks of victorious Army personnel, making the film waver between an educational program, an overwrought history lesson, and a comedy of very dark humor. This generic ambiguity is underscored on the visual level: documentary footage is spliced into the studio photography of the Congress delegation in a limousine obviously kept in motion by the illusion of an outside passing by, and by invisible studio hands gently rocking the vehicle. To these contrasts in genre and tone, soon a

political tension is added. Just as Plummer is telling the group about the Zoo bunkers in the Tiergarten, the only female member of the delegation, Miss Frost (Jean Arthur), begins to detect signs of American fraternization with the German women, and non-diegetic, upbeat music sets in. Soon thereafter, while Plummer lectures the Congressmen about the SS, a flabbergasted Frost records in her little book the consequences of such rapprochement—a German woman pushing a baby carriage with two American flags attached to it while upbeat music flares up. If Frost is shocked by such miscegenation, for Plummer the close tie that has evolved between Germans and Americans is a positive sign for the future. Baseball, Plummer believes, will help the youth unlearn blind obedience and turn them into true democrats (“If they steal now, it’ll be second base”), and the fact that a German baby has been christened DiMaggio Schulz is for him a clear sign that reeducation is working.

The political and aesthetic tensions that mark this sequence are not only indicative of the overall structure of *A Foreign Affair* but are also reflective of the historical factors and discursive strategies that shaped the making and reception of the film. Conceived in 1945, set in the spring of 1946, filmed in 1947 (with some documentary footage from 1945), and released in 1948, *A Foreign Affair* is both a taking stock of, and an intervention into, the role of the United States in immediate postwar Germany. The film’s central concern is the future of Germany and what America has to do with it. This task includes assessing the legacy of the Third Reich and the question of collective guilt; searching for native traditions untainted by Nazi rule; and outlining the scope and purpose of the US occupation, de-Nazification, and reeducation. To make matters even more complicated, the film chooses to address these political concerns by way of a sexual comedy (which makes for the double entendre of the title). Made by an erstwhile refugee from Hitler at the precise point as he is contemplating a return to Germany, it is informed by multiple and contradictory perspectives that defy easy political categorization, its mixed messages a clear indication of the conflicted and overdetermined position of exile cinema.

In what follows, I want to explore the political questions the film raises and their translation on the visual and narrative level along three distinct axes of inquiry: the political function of film in postwar Germany and Wilder’s role in it; the film’s curious mix of styles and genres which shows an indebtedness to various Hollywood traditions as well as a search for German cinematic traditions appropriate for post-Nazi filmmaking; and Wilder’s use of stars as gendered allegories of nation.

Selling a Few Ideological Items

Commenting on the issue of remigration, Wilder’s fellow exile Theodor W. Adorno wrote: “It is an ancient tradition that those who are arbitrarily

and blindly driven out of their homeland by tyranny return after its down-fall."² For the anti-assimilationist Adorno it was a foregone conclusion that he would return to Germany as soon as possible, but the defeat of Nazi Germany also occasioned many successful film professionals to consider a return to Europe. Thus Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak, Douglas Sirk, William Dieterle, and Peter Lorre would return to Germany for shorter or extended stays where they met with very mixed professional success. Among the very few emigrants to actually set foot in Berlin in 1945 were the German-Jewish writer Curt Riess, who arrived in the capital in July; the actress Marlene Dietrich, who was reunited with her mother in Tempelhof airfield in September; and Billy Wilder, who arrived there in August, after already having flown over the city with a cameraman earlier that summer. All three were naturalized Americans returning to Germany in uniform and with various assignments. Riess was reporting for the American press, Dietrich was performing for the American troops at the Titania Palast, and Wilder had an appointment as colonel in the US Army's Division of Psychological Warfare. While Wilder and Dietrich would end up collaborating on *A Foreign Affair*, Riess's vignettes and portraits of the city, which he collected in *Berlin Berlin*, capture much of the immediate postwar reality that also informs the film.³

As a former employee in the pre-Nazi German film industry and now an acclaimed writer-director in Hollywood, Wilder was to assist the military in its task to reconstruct the film industry in occupied Germany. The US military government considered film instrumental for confronting Germans with the atrocities they had committed, but also for providing Germans relief from the horrible conditions in postwar Germany. Film was thus to serve an educational, democratizing, and an escapist purpose. As Wilder recalled, Germans would receive ration cards only if they were willing to sit through documentaries that detailed the atrocities of the Nazis and that challenged viewers to face moral and political responsibilities many were eager to forget.⁴ At the same time, American-produced feature films were to provide German viewers with a diversion from the wretched conditions under which they lived while subtly instilling them with the democratic virtues the heroes of these films embodied. As it turned out, Wilder became involved in both tasks.

Since cinema had been a central propagandistic tool in the Nazi State, the film industry was the last among the German media to reenter the public sphere after the Allies' occupation, and the most heavily scrutinized. Through his work at Ufa, Wilder knew the industry well before it was taken over by Goebbels, and he was therefore enlisted for many so-called de-Nazification interviews that were to establish who would be allowed to work again. Wilder also worked on editing *Die Todesmühlen/Death Mills*, a documentary about concentration camps directed by Hanuš Burger and using footage taken by the Allies when they liberated the camps.⁵ This was a particularly demanding task for Wilder since at that point he was



Figure 3.1. Poster of *Todesmühlen*

still searching for clues as to whether his mother and grandmother had survived the Holocaust. At any moment, the images in front of him could be of his family, but Wilder did not see them. Only later a letter from the Red Cross confirmed their deaths in Auschwitz.⁶

While Wilder was eager to have *Todesmühlen* screened in front of German audiences, he also realized that the long-lasting educational effect of atrocity films was limited.⁷ He was equally skeptical of the apolitical diversion provided by standard US entertainment films that were later to flood the American Zone. Wilder thus postponed his actual task in Germany, which was to write a report on the state of the production facilities and personnel available for use in the industry, and instead pitched his own idea about a film to the Office of Military Government in Germany/United States (OMGUS). The so-called “Wilder Memorandum” contains the director’s credo about the politics of feature films made for postwar German audiences:

Cover Girl [1944, starring Gene Kelly and Rita Hayworth] is a fine film... It has a love story, it has music and it is in Technicolor. However, it does not particularly help us in our program of re-educating the German people. Now if there was an entertainment film with Rita Hayworth or Ingrid Bergman or Gary Cooper, in Technicolor if you wish, and with a love story—only with a very special love story, cleverly devised to sell us a few ideological items—such a film would provide us with a superior piece of propaganda; they would stand in long lines to buy, and once they bought it, it would stick. Unfortunately, no such film exists yet. It must be made. I want to make it.⁸

Wilder then goes on to outline central elements of the plot, the characters, and the location of the film that would later become *A Foreign Affair*. Yet in this outline, the real protagonist is clearly the city of Berlin, “a mad, depraved, starving, fascinating” town, whose atmosphere Wilder had soaked up for two weeks, and of which he photographed “every corner.” He even boasts to have already secured the rights to the famous song “Berlin kommt wieder” (“Berlin Will Be Back”).⁹

What the “Memorandum” does not state is that Wilder’s original role as observer and consultant for OMGUS was actually in conflict with his professional interest as director and writer at Paramount. His evaluation in the memo that “no production of German pictures is possible in the near future” clearly served his argument that Americans needed to make movies for Germans, but it neglects to consider the feasibility of a German film industry. Thus Wilder made no mention of the fact that the film studios at Geiseltal near Munich had survived the war in good condition, or that in the Soviet sector the centralized DEFA film studios were already beginning to produce German films. In contrast to the Americans who favored an acceptance of history as told by the victors, the Soviets were promoting film as a tool of self discovery through which Germans were to reeducate themselves about their history. The Americans were also initially far more reluctant than the Soviets to issue licenses to professionals employed in the film industry of the Third Reich. Since many German directors, actors, cameramen, and technicians had been more or less active members of the NSDAP there were few who could boast moral integrity *and* professional

credentials. Strict measures of de-Nazification meant limiting the rebuilding of the German film industry and thus supporting Wilder's argument about producing film for Germans in the US. An oft-quoted anecdote underscores Wilder's tough stand on former Nazis. When approached by actor Anton Lang, a former member of the SS, who asked if he could play the role of Christ in the Oberammergau Passion Play, Wilder famously quipped: "Yes, provided they use real nails in the Crucifixion scene."¹⁰ But in reality, US de-Nazification procedures relaxed quickly with the onset of the Cold War and the blockade of Berlin in 1948, and rapid reconstruction of the film industry took precedence over thorough de-Nazification, ultimately leading to an uncanny continuity between the German film industry of the Third Reich and that of the 1950s.

Wilder's memorandum exudes the commercialism typical of the US film industry, which after 1945 was looking to be rewarded for its wartime support of Washington, even though that support had already spelled revenue at the home box office. With Germany no longer sealed off from the outside and its film industry in shambles, a substantial new foreign market was opening up, even if that market would not yet yield any significant revenue.¹¹ Wilder's pitch for a love story with high production values promotes a product for which there would not only be high demand but one which Germany's rudimentary film industry could not yet provide.¹²

A Foreign Affair would be Wilder's most daring attempt yet to use entertainment in order to "sell a few ideological items," yet what precisely



Figure 3.2. Wilder shooting on location in Berlin

those items were was far from predictable. If one compares Wilder's brief story outline from 1945 with the 1947 script and the actual film, one notices that in the latter the moral ambiguity of his characters has been dramatically increased, an indication that in the two-year span Wilder had become doubtful about the mission of the Allied occupation. Originally, the film was to focus on a German "Trümmerfrau" who sees no meaning in living in a defeated country and is ready to commit suicide as soon as the Americans have turned on the gas again. Through her encounter with Occupation forces, she will slowly regain a modicum of hope and a certain degree of self esteem. As for the GI, he was not to be "a flag waving hero," but a man not "too sure of what the hell this [i.e., the war and occupation] was all about." The character as played by John Lund, however, has no quarrel with enjoying the spoils of the victor, bartering on the black market, and even hiding the incriminating file of his German mistress for sexual favors. The Marlene Dietrich character is even further away from Wilder's original figure. While she may live in a bombed-out apartment, she is no brick-shoveling rubble woman, but a glamorous nightclub singer who knows how to survive in a starving city. She defies being a victim and defends her opportunism by pointing to the moral corruption of those empowered to judge her. Through the introduction of the delegation from Congress, the focus shifts from an assessment of the German state of mind around 1946 to one of America's position on Germany, ultimately questioning American hypocrisy more than the legacy of Nazism. Nevertheless, the film does defend the merits of reeducation through the pragmatic Colonel Plummer, who can be seen as a mouthpiece of the discourse of the Occupation force:

"There is still a lot of hunger—but there is a new will to live. We had to build schools and find teachers and then teach the teachers. We have helped them start a free press and institute a parliamentary government. They've just had their first free elections in fourteen years... It was like handing the village drunk a glass of water. What I want to point out is that it's a tough, thankless, lonely job. We're trying to lick it as well as we can."

Certainly, the film raises more questions than it answers, and the very different political perspectives are only seemingly reconciled in the hastily arranged happy ending that sees the American Congresswoman return to America with a converted Captain Pringle.

As in his prior work, Wilder's commitment to commercially viable filmmaking did not compromise his penchant for challenging both the industry and the audience. Indeed, this would be truer for *A Foreign Affair* than for any of his previous films. Made by an émigré who returns as ranking officer in the occupying army to the city that he loved and from which he had to flee, the film is saturated with ambiguity—with a nostalgia seeking to recover a better past so as to forge a better future, but also with the urge to take the Germans to task for the atrocities of Nazi rule,

thereby disallowing historical amnesia and a simple plea for innocence. Americans, in turn, are being confronted with a less than flattering image of their occupying force, and with a portrayal of Berlin that celebrates the city's resilience, wit, and irreverence. Planned as a glossy studio production suitable for export to Germany, the film's main predicament was that it needed to communicate certain "ideological items" to very different audiences. As it turned out, *A Foreign Affair* was a commercial success, but American critics had mixed reactions, Congress attacked it, and OMGUS considered the film inappropriate for the German public.¹³ Ironically, it was Wilder's successor as film officer, veteran producer Erich Pommer, who would eventually approve the film for distribution in Germany, but it would not be premiered until May 1977, when the state-run television station ARD showed it.

Screening the Rubble

The multiple perspectives of *A Foreign Affair* not only stem from the contradictory conception of the film. They also inform the way in which it consciously situates itself vis-à-vis two distinct though interrelated film histories, namely the styles and genres of 1930s and 1940s Hollywood as well as German film of the Weimar, Nazi, and postwar eras. *A Foreign Affair* could indeed be seen as a synthesis of Wilder's American sexual comedies such as *Ninotchka* (which actually premiered in Germany in December of 1948), *Midnight*, and *The Major and the Minor*, as well as 1930s classic Weimar cinema, stressing its affinities to the latter to such an extent that one reviewer wondered where the Ufa trademark was.¹⁴ At the same time, it alludes to 1920s expressionism and early 40s *noir* at the very moment when these styles get rearticulated by various American, German, and Italian films of the immediate postwar years.

To unravel the generic layering of *A Foreign Affair*, let us consider its stunning opening. If Billy Wilder's 1945 trip to Berlin provides the biographical seed for *A Foreign Affair*, a visit also sets its plot in motion. The first shot of the film, over which the opening credits roll, shows us a plane traversing the clouds while the soundtrack plays a medley of Erika von Schlütow's songs. Suddenly the music turns from upbeat to ominous as we glimpse the ruins of Berlin from high above. Inside the plane, a delegation from the US Congress is on its way to inspect the troops in Berlin, and the view of bombed-out Berlin prompts the various congressmen to debate what to do with the destroyed city and its inhabitants. While the representative from Texas suggests planting grass and "moving in the longhorns," echoing the Morgenthau plan to turn defeated Germany into an agrarian society, his colleague from the Midwest urges to "get the industry going" and "feed the people." "But let 'em know where it's coming from," the Texan adds, a clear indication of the importance to implant in

the Germans a sense of gratitude to their American liberators for future political developments. This approach is quickly criticized by the only Leftist in the group (presumably a New Deal democrat), representing the Bronx, who earlier lauded the Soviet efforts in the sacking of Berlin and now comments: "If you send a hungry man a loaf of bread it's democracy; if you leave the wrapper on it's imperialism."

The witty oneliners the congressmen shoot at each other quickly identify the film as a comedy, establishing from the outset a fundamental ambiguity about the appropriateness of humor in light of the seriousness of the topic, namely the laborious replacement of one regime by another. Even though Congresswoman Frost is quick to point out to her colleagues that the charge of the committee is merely to investigate the morale of American occupation troops, the opening exchange also indicates that an underlying concern of the film will be what to do with the Germans now that the war is over.

The shots of an airplane descending through the clouds recall the opening of another film intended to "sell a few ideological items," Leni Riefenstahl's famous 1935 documentary *Triumph of the Will*. In that film it was Adolf Hitler who, to Wagner's music, swooped down God-like from high above onto the medieval town of Nuremberg, to be greeted by its enthusiastic burghers and NSDAP party members gathering for the annual Reichsparteitag. Wilder's comic reworking of the scene replaces the Führer's dogmatic message with the pluralistic vision of the six quarreling US representatives, and the welcoming committee—comprised of a half-size military band and a weary Colonel Plummer reminding his troops to behave—is a far cry from the jubilant Nazi supporters of Nuremberg. For the Berliners, however, the power descending from the sky is just another version of political rule to which one needs to adapt, as is made poignantly clear when Erika von Schlütow salutes Captain John Pringle as her *new Führer*: "Heil Johnny."¹⁵

Spoofing Riefenstahl's film certainly indicates which traditions will *not* serve as a model for postwar German filmmaking (and by implication liberal democracy). *Triumph of the Will* was billed as a documentary but in fact was created for and through the camera. With the latest equipment and most skilled film professionals at her command, Riefenstahl's fluid cameras caught images from numerous angles, which she carefully edited into a stream of constant movement. Combined with a score of predominantly classical music, the film turned a monotonous political event comprised of endless speeches and parades into an awe-inspiring aesthetic experience, overwhelming viewers with its sights and sounds. Taken to task after the war for having invented a fascist aesthetics, Riefenstahl defended her film as a realist documentary in which she merely pointed the camera at what was in front of her. *A Foreign Affair* is clearly aware of the complexity of the notion of realism and addresses it in several ways. As stated above, the scene of Plummer's guided tour integrates documentary footage into



Figure 3.3. Dietrich and the Hitler salute

a fictional narrative. As images fade by in the background, Plummer gives his spiel about German history, suggesting a disconnect between documentary footage and the reality of Berlin. In the opening credits we are informed that “A large part of this picture was photographed in Berlin,” when actually 85 per cent of it was filmed in the studio, and none of the major stars came to Berlin for location shooting.¹⁶

The film thus exposes realism as a cinematic convention that creates veracity by adhering to certain codes and modes of representation, of which the self-reflexive use of documentary footage is one important aspect. Thus, in the opening scene and again later, the congressman from Illinois is shown to be filming the devastated Berlin. “Good stuff around election time. ‘The Incumbent Overseas,’” he explains, thereby revealing his true motives for recording life in the ruins of Berlin. Yet if this sequence shows documentary footage to be a somewhat dubious tool for public relation purposes, the newsreel footage that proves how deeply Erika von Schlütow (with a Dietrich made up to look like Riefenstahl) was involved with Nazi brass serves as reliable evidence for the Allies’ de-Nazification efforts, even though there is good reason to doubt the truthfulness of images captured by Nazi cameras.

While *Triumph of the Will* and Riefenstahl's aesthetics are certainly an important subtext of *A Foreign Affair*, there are other, more contemporaneous film styles that raise the question of realism with even more urgency. Notably all of them do so by combining studio sets and location photography of the devastated Germany. The American films of this period which use extensive location photography include Jacques Tourneur's *Berlin Express* (1948), a noirish espionage thriller written by Curt Siodmak and shot mostly in Frankfurt; Fred Zinnemann's neorealist influenced *The Search* (1948), about a young Czech boy, a survivor of Auschwitz, and his mother's search for him in refugee camps all over Germany; and George Seaton's *The Big Lift* (1950) about two Air Force soldiers during the 1948 Berlin airlift. These films share *A Foreign Affair's* ambition to ground and authenticate the narratives by situating them in a clearly defined historical and geographical space, but they differ significantly in how they employ the ruins for aesthetic and moral purposes.¹⁷

The first—and ultimately only—new film genre to emerge in Germany after the war was the rubble film (*Trümmerfilm*), for which the ruins became more than just a location. While they would often provide a dramatic backdrop for the storyline, they are more importantly a metaphor for the traumatized German psyche in the immediate aftermath of the war. The narratives of films in this genre usually revolve around building a new country or community amid the physical destruction and the shadows of the past. They also often portray the hardship of Germans who returned from the front trying to recover—often without success—a sense of home amid the debris. Focusing on German suffering, these films often evade the question to what degree Germans themselves were responsible for the destruction of their cities, and very few of them address the Holocaust.

The very first German film to be shot and premiered after the war became also one of the most significant of the genre—Wolfgang Staudte's 1946 *Die Mörder sind unter uns/The Murderers Are Among Us*, produced by the newly founded DEFA film studios in the Soviet Occupation zone. Together with Roberto Rossellini's neorealist *Germania Anno Zero/Germany, Year Zero* from 1947 (though not released in Germany until 1952), it became the most widely acknowledged portrait of immediate postwar Berlin. Made within one year of each other and produced by the same studio, the two films make remarkably different use of Berlin's ruins, even though both actually mix studio photography with location shooting. Rossellini's film, cowritten by Wilder's longtime friend Max Colpet and much admired by Wilder and Dietrich, is a filmic testimony to Berlin and the Germans of 1945 that revolves around a destitute family, among them a boy who prefers death to life.¹⁸ For Rossellini, the purpose of realism was, in its most reduced definition, finding images that convey the experience of suffering so as to avoid its perpetuation or repetition. *Germania Anno Zero's* sights of a dead, ghostly city with its disconnected streets, piles of detritus, and a landscape of ruins resemble an abstract portrait, turning it into a symbol

not only of Germany's fall but also of a world destroyed by ambition. A cruel and unsentimental film that avoids any optimism, it resonates with *A Foreign Affair's* sober look at Berlin two years later.¹⁹

Die Mörder sind unter uns taps into different traditions of (anti-)realism to convey its sense of postwar Berlin, most strongly German expressionist cinema, itself a reaction to the aftermath of World War I (in contrast to Expressionist poetry, drama, and art which had warned of the coming of the war). Staudte's use of chiaroscuro lighting, distorted camerawork, shadows, and dramatic backdrops that look like cutouts visually capture the inner torment of the film's male protagonist much like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* had done two-and-a-half decades earlier. Relying on ruins rebuilt in the studio for heightened dramatic effect, the film uses location shots to render interiority visible, while the narrative (in somewhat inconsistent ways) mixes expressionism with melodrama. Compared to Rossellini's aesthetic break with tradition, Staudte's film already points to infelicitous continuities between the German cinema of the 1930s and the 1950s.²⁰

Apart from the locations, *Die Mörder sind unter uns* and *A Foreign Affair* have little in common, an indication perhaps how different the outlook was between the exile Wilder and the "Mitläufer" (fellow traveler) Staudte who despite his opposition to Goebbels had to play a small role



Figure 3.4. Incurrigible German Youth

in the anti-Semitic *Jud Süß/Jew Süß* (Veit Harlan, 1940). Where Staudte's film raises the question of how the German nation can heal, only to answer it in humanist rather than political terms, Wilder's film understands de-Nazification as an American, not a German, task, without however putting too much faith in their efforts. *A Foreign Affair* portrays the Germans as having the lessons of Nazism too deeply ingrained in them to promise betterment in the near future. The boy who compulsively draws swastikas is a long, long way from being a good democrat, and his distant cousin, the heal-clicking Schlemmer of Wilder's *One, Two, Three* will still embody authoritarian traits more than a decade later.

Allegories of the Nation

The previous section discusses how different in style and genre Wilder's film is from the many contemporaneous efforts to capture the reality of postwar Germany. Indeed, *A Foreign Affair* is much more indebted to the cinematic traditions that first shaped Wilder's own development as a writer, both at Ufa and Paramount, and it is precisely by consciously alluding to these traditions that the film contributes most to the discourse on postwar German reeducation and cinema. In this section I want to continue my analysis of the dual perspective of Wilder's film by focusing on how these film traditions are embodied by the two female figures in *A Foreign Affair* as well as the stars who played them, Jean Arthur and Marlene Dietrich. Before doing so, however, a few general remarks are in order on how the film anchors itself in both German and American films of the 1930s.

The most direct allusion is of course to *Der blaue Engel/The Blue Angel* (Josef von Sternberg, 1930), which not only launched Marlene Dietrich's international stardom but also underscored Ufa's standings as an artistically innovative and commercially successful studio under the leadership of its star producer Erich Pommer. The look and feel of this film informs virtually every frame of *A Foreign Affair*, whether Dietrich is present or not. The same artist, Friedrich Hollaender, who also happens to play the piano at the Lorelei nightclub, composed the songs for both films.²¹ Performing with him are the Syncopators, whose members were backup musicians on *The Blue Angel*, while the bass drum advertises the Hotel Eden, a famous Berlin establishment of the 1920s. The presence of Hollaender and Dietrich as fellow émigrés recuperates a film culture that has apparently survived the Third Reich unscathed. But unlike the expressionism conjured up by *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, this is a decidedly cosmopolitan (and Jewish) Weimar culture, created partly by foreign talent and celebrating the wit, decadence, and sexual freedom that was soon to become the target of Nazi *völkisch* cultural politics. (Wilder would pay another extended homage to Weimar cabaret culture in *Witness for the Prosecution*, again with Marlene



Figure 3.5. Dietrich with Hollaender at the piano in 1930 and in 1945

Dietrich in the role of a singer.) The sexual barter as a plot device goes back to Wilder's first Ufa scripts, which often revolved around adulterous affairs, temptation, and marital disputes caused by jealousy.

While the references to Weimar cinema are too obvious to be overlooked, it has less often been noted that the brash and witty dialogue of *A Foreign Affair* belongs with Brackett and Wilder's 1930s screwball comedies such as *Ball of Fire* and *Midnight*. The character reversal of Phoebe Frost recalls that of Ninotchka (played by Greta Garbo) in the film of that title. Like Frost, Ninotchka is a political representative sent abroad on her government's mission who experiences her version of a foreign affair as she awakens to consumerism and romance in a Western European capital. And like *A Foreign Affair*, *Ninotchka* satirizes political ideology through what contemporary audiences considered politically incorrect humor. Garbo's pronouncement that "the mass trials [in Moscow] were a great success—there are going to be fewer but better Russians" rivals some of Dietrich's most acerbic lines.

The 1930s are, of course, also the decade that saw both Jean Arthur and Marlene Dietrich rise to stardom in Hollywood, after beginning their careers during the silent era.²² While Dietrich's image as seductress was shaped in a series of highly stylized Paramount productions directed by Josef von Sternberg, Arthur developed a flair for farcical comedy in films by John Ford and Frank Capra, most notably *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), in which she costarred with Gary Cooper and James Stewart, respectively. In the former, she plays a famous journalist who has to cover the doings of a millionaire heir for her paper, while in the latter she is a hard-working, Washington-savvy secretary to freshman senator Smith. In both films she plays an independent, smart, yet down-to-earth woman who rescues a besieged hero and becomes a heroine of sorts herself. Persuaded by Brackett and Wilder to come out of retirement, she was cast against character in *A Foreign Affair* as a prissy, puritanical, and uptight Congresswoman from Iowa who is the butt of many jokes. (Dietrich, for example, comments on her looks by saying: "What a curious way to do your hair—or rather not to do it.") Although one year her senior, Arthur's wide-eyed innocent and somewhat pudgyish Frost comes across as much younger than Dietrich's "used" glamorous-hard appearance. At the beginning of the film, the two women are introduced as direct opposites, with Frost's naïveté emphasized by the film's narration, as the audience finds out about Pringle's corruption long before she does. The alluring and experienced von Schlütow, in contrast, knows about everything, from how to survive in difficult times (be it in Hitler's Germany or the ruins of Berlin) to how to change the line of her eyebrows. (Dietrich herself changed her eye line as part of von Sternberg's makeover of her.) Ironically, Dietrich functions as a role model for Arthur, enlightening her both about men and how to be a woman, in the process corrupting Arthur's moral superiority all the while making her more at-

tractive for Captain Pringle. It is even possible to argue that Frost is more drawn to von Schlütow than Pringle, making Dietrich and not John Lund the center of the love triangle that structures the film. She not only affects Frost's character reversal, but also seems to be the true object of Frost's desire. When von Schlütow's analytically seductive songs melt Frost's defense layers, thereby awakening Frost's own sexuality, Frost's eyes are fixated on her.²³ Building on the Dietrich of the Weimar cabaret and early von Sternberg films at Paramount when the star flaunted her attraction to women, Dietrich's von Schlütow unsettles gender roles, just as she questions the line between what is typically German and what American.

The two women are obvious symbols for the state of mind of the respective countries they come from, and were used as such in the advertising campaign for the film. As one Paramount cartoon had it: "Jean Arthur: The People's Choice in IOWA. Marlene Dietrich: The Army's Choice in BERLIN." The German is a femme fatale with a past, only in this tale that past has not only sexual but also political connotations. Dietrich is cast in the mid-1930s Sternbergian glamor *chiaroscuro*, an ironic comment on her old image with an undercurrent of self-parody. Arthur's face, in contrast, is mostly shown from the front and in full light, giving it the scrubbed look Dietrich ridicules. The morally upright but sexually repressed American with the telling name Frost is a symbol for stability and steadfastness, including puritan virtues and political incorruptibility, but also simple-mindedness, provincialism, and naïveté, while the worldly but cynical von Schlütow represents a defeated yet resilient urban culture where, as Brecht knew, food comes before morals. Yet not only does Miss Frost undergo a character change that will make her closer to Dietrich's allure (including bartering on the black market and singing at the Lorelei), but from the outset the line that divides these two distinct representations of national identity is more blurred than the stereotypes suggest.

Contemporary German audiences especially will have seen more in Phoebe Frost than an American, and more in Marlene Dietrich than a former Nazi. Frost's rhetoric about Berlin being "infected by moral malaria" that needs to be "fumigated with all insecticides at our disposal" resonates not only with official political discourse of US wartime and postwar intelligence but also quotes almost verbatim Nazi rhetoric of defending the purity of the German soul. (Incidentally, the Nazis too considered Berlin a decadent city in need of fumigation.) Frost's straw-blond hair in tight braids, her wholesome features, and her upright posture make her look like the girls in the *Bund deutscher Mädchen* (Confederation of German Girls), and Joseph Goebbels would have been pleased with her restrained sexuality and overall concern with duty to the fatherland. Conservative and virtually crime-free Iowa, where 62 per cent of voters support the Republicans, was certainly not that different from life in the German provinces during the Third Reich. And while the Nazis did not favor women in the role of political leadership, they would have approved of Phoebe



Figure 3.6. Two different German types: BDM girl (Frost) and decadent singer (von Schlütow)

Frost's (initial) sense of restraint and incorruptibility. No wonder, then, that when the two women first confront each other in the film, Dietrich expresses her surprise about Arthur's looks. To Pringle's question as to whether Dietrich realizes to whom she is speaking, Dietrich replies: "An American woman. And I'm a little disappointed, to tell you the truth. We apparently have a false idea about the chic American woman. Oh, I suppose that's publicity from Hollywood."

The film further underscores Arthur's resemblance to German women by the fact that Frost is actually able twice to pass for a German woman—first as "Gretchen Gesundheit" with the American GIs, and then with the German police after being picked up during a raid at the Lorelei. Afterwards, at her apartment, von Schlütow comments on Frost's lack of honesty vis-à-vis the German police, "Now you're one of us." When Frost leaves that apartment, in the one moment the film bestows true dignity on her after she finds out about Pringle's feelings for von Schlütow, she walks alone among the dark ruins, the looming shadows of the destroyed buildings now also an appropriate metaphor for the state of mind of an *American*.

Just as Jean Arthur's Phoebe Frost is more than just an American woman, Marlene Dietrich plays a German who for many contemporary viewers must have looked very un-German. A native Berliner, Dietrich had left Germany in 1930 with von Sternberg after her success in *The Blue Angel* and under his direction became a major star at Paramount. Her role as Erika von Schlütow thus goes back not only to *Lola Lola*, but also to her American roles of Amy Jolly, *Blonde Venus*, *Shanghai Lily*, and *Concha Perez*. As Gaylyn Studlar has shown, Dietrich was carefully Americanized by Paramount studios, a process that ironically occurred at the hands of such European directors as von Sternberg and Ernst Lubitsch (and later Wilder). Hers was the kind of image of womanhood the Nazis derided, and one that in the immediate postwar years would be associated with the alleged "decadence" of American society propagated by the Nazis. (Many Germans in fact considered Dietrich a traitor, and her 1960 tour through Germany was picketed with signs that read "Marlene, go home!") Yet even though Goebbels discredited the parts Dietrich played in Hollywood, he repeatedly extended generous offers to her to rejoin the German film industry under his command, which she steadfastly refused. Having become a US citizen in 1939, she entertained American troops during the war for extended periods in North Africa and Italy. By wearing her own dress from the USO shows in the *Lorelei* scenes, Dietrich underscores the continuity between her on-screen and off-screen incarnations. That she now performs in a Berlin nightclub creates the illusion of a permanent return to her native city (even if, as noted earlier, all her scenes were shot on the Paramount lot.) Seen in this light, the title of Wilder's film may have suggested to Berliners that Dietrich's liaison with America, *her* foreign affair, was now over.

There are thus multiple ironies in casting the steadfast opponent to Hitler as the former concubine of a high-ranking Nazi. Because of Dietrich's performances for the USO, a widely publicized and carefully integrated part of her star image, her Erika von Schlütow is a complex and contradictory figure. Dietrich's appearance in the film conjures up the memory not only of all of her previous roles but also her off-screen and public persona, turning the figure of the Nazi sympathizer into a politically much more layered and ultimately sympathetic character. After all, Erika von Schlütow continues what Marlene had been doing during the war, namely "taking care of the boys." When at the end of the film von Schlütow gets sent off to a labor camp under the escort of first two, then four, and finally five GIs (each assigned to watch the others watch von Schlütow) the audience registers with relief that she will in all likelihood avoid harsh punishment. Marlene's exit as an unrepentant and unpunished German provides a strong contrast to the highly conventional (and improbable) melodramatic climax that finds the two Americans united and going home together—a conclusion obviously meant to placate the Production Code Administration that remains too unconvincing to be taken seriously.

Before the Curtain Fell

Nine months before the capitulation of the German Wehrmacht, Theodor W. Adorno reflected in Los Angeles on the issue of justice in a future Germany. "To the question what is to be done with the defeated Germany, I could say only two things in reply. Firstly: at no price, on no conditions, would I wish to be an executioner or to supply legitimations for executioners. Secondly: I should not wish, least of all with legal machinery, to stay the hand of anyone who was avenging past misdeeds. This is a thoroughly unsatisfactory, contradictory answer, one that makes a mockery of both principle and practice. But perhaps the fault lies in the question and not only in me."²⁴ Billy Wilder's *A Foreign Affair* offers a similarly unsatisfactory answer to the question Adorno raises. His mixed messages about good and bad Germans, about sincere reeducation and American simple mindedness, cultural hypocrisy, and sexual repression, embody the paradoxical situation of the exile contemplating a possible return to the land that had chased him out.

As Wilder told Cameron Crowe, *A Foreign Affair* is (in hindsight) his most personal film (he originally even intended to make the Pringle character a Jew). It is indeed an extended homage to a culture and a city that served as his training ground before abruptly forcing him out. The film suggests that the period before 1933 becomes for Germans the only possible orientation for rebuilding, a time warp Wilder deftly captures in the shots of Hollaender at the Lorelei which create the impression that he has been sitting at that same piano for the last fifteen years. Dietrich's lack of sentimentalism, her worldliness, and her resilience are the guarantee that, as she sings, "they won't return/the phantoms of the past." Unlike in any other film of that period, the Germans are portrayed not only as perpetrators but also victims. Von Schlütow is allowed to tell her story of bomb raids and the threat of being raped by the conquering Russians, which clearly makes an impression on Congresswoman Frost. (Dietrich would play similar ambassador roles in Wilder's *Witness for the Prosecution* and Stanley Kramer's *Judgment at Nuremberg* where as the widow of a high ranking German officer she explains to the judge of a war tribunal [Spencer Tracy]: "I have a mission with the Americans—to convince you that we're not all monsters.") The Berlin of 1945/1947 is indeed a city where the return to the time before the descent into barbarism seems possible, a site of unprecedented exchange, openness, and experimentation. A truly international city that united not only the four victorious powers but also German Jews coming out of hiding as well as refugees and displaced people from all over Eastern Europe, there was much life in the ruins of Berlin.

Yet there is also something profoundly nostalgic in Wilder's defense of a culture irrevocably lost, for it overlooks the fact that this culture not only had run its course *prior* to Hitler's inauguration but that it also offered

little to stand in his way. Accessing it now in 1945/47, as if it had been preserved in a “time capsule left untouched all those years,” as the historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch calls it, is certainly more naïve than Miss Frost’s unawareness of what occupation is all about.²⁵ But perhaps Wilder’s real audience are not the people in the ruins of Berlin but in the American heartland to whom he wants to tell a tale about a culture which shaped him, which disappeared, only to reappear for a brief moment before the Berlin airlift and the onset of the Cold War put Berlin into a forty-year deep freeze. And perhaps it is an appropriate gesture that at Postdamer Platz, the one-time wasteland that separated East and West Berlin until 1989, today a bistro called “Billy Wilder’s” celebrates the director’s faith in the city’s aptitude for rejuvenation and rebirth.

Notes

1. Quoted in Ed Sikov, *On Sunset Boulevard: The Life and Times of Billy Wilder* (New York: Hyperion, 1998), 236.
2. Theodor W. Adorno, “On the Question: ‘What is German?’” trans Thomas Y. Levin, *New German Critique* 36 (1985): 125.
3. See Curt Riess, *Berlin Berlin: 1945–1953* (Berlin: Mittag & Co, 1953).
4. In a very detailed account of the production history of *Todesmühlen*, Brewster S. Chamberlin has shown that the US Information Control Division did not want to force Germans to watch atrocity films, but rather hoped that Germans would want to see them on their own accord. However, certain local military governments did make it a policy to stamp food ration cards of those who had sat through a screening of *Todesmühlen*. See Brewster S. Chamberlin, “*Todesmühlen*: Ein früher Versuch zur Massen-‘Umerziehung’ im besetzten Deutschland 1945–1946,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 3 (1981): 420–436.
5. In interviews, Wilder has given conflicting accounts as to the degree of his involvement in the editing of this film. According to Chamberlin, it is rather unclear what Wilder’s role really was. Chamberlin concludes that the reception of *Todesmühlen* by German audiences showed the Americans that documentary film was not successful as tool of reeducation, which is also what Wilder states in his memorandum (discussed below) to the Information Control Division.
6. On *Todesmühlen* see also: Jeanpaul Goergen, “Aufnahmen beglaubigter Kameralente: *Die Todesmühlen*” *Filmblatt* 7.19–20 (2002): 25–31.
7. In his memoirs, Czech director Hanus Burger claims that from the beginning Wilder disliked the concept of hitting the audience over the head with something they were unwilling to see. Wilder also claimed to have been instructed by Washington officials “not to antagonize our logical allies of tomorrow.” Quoted in Thomas Brandlmeier, “Von Hitler zu Adenauer: Deutsche Trümmerfilme,” *Zwischen Gestern und Morgen: Westdeutscher Nachkriegsfilm 1946–1962*, eds. Hilmar Hoffmann and Walter Schobert (Frankfurt/Main: Deutsches Filmmuseum Frankfurt/Main, 1989), 32–59; here 44. Wilder trimmed *Todesmühlen* from 86 to 22 minutes. The film was released in 1946 and widely shown, but pulled from distribution before the end of the year.
8. “The Wilder Memorandum,” reprinted in Ralph Willett, *The Americanization of Germany, 1945–1949* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 40–44; here 40.
9. “The Wilder Memorandum,” 42. Wilder did not use the song in his film. The lyrics are reprinted in Riess’s book: “Mir ist um das Herz so weh,/ wenn ich durch die Straßen geh,/ brauchst Berliner nicht zu sein,/ um zu wissen, was ich mein’!/ Doch was nützt die Grübele/, was geschehn ist, ist vorbei./ Und trotz allem tief hier drin,/ glaube ich an

- Berlin! / Berlin kommt wieder, / das ist ein Lied, das jeder singt, / und das jetzt wieder / so schön in Berlin erklingt." ("My heart hurts / when I walk through the streets / you don't need to be a Berliner / to know what I mean! / But there's no use in pondering / what happened is over. / And despite everything, deep inside / I do believe in Berlin! / Berlin is coming back / that's a song everyone sings / and which now again resounds / so beautifully all over Berlin." (*Berlin Berlin* 29.)
- 10 Cf. Max Colpet, *Sag' mir wo die Jahre sind: Erinnerungen eines unverbesserlichen Optimisten* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1978), 187.
 - 11 In 1945, a ticket for the movie theaters cost one Reichsmark, while a stick of butter on the black market cost 250 Reichsmark. There were also limitations as to how much box office revenue the film studios could take out of Germany. See Helmut Regel, "Der Film als Instrument alliierter Besatzungspolitik in Westdeutschland," in *Deutschland in Trümmern: Filmdokumente der Jahre 1945–1949*, ed. Klaus Jaeger and Helmut Regel (Oberhausen: Verlag Karl Maria Laufen, 1976), 49.
 - 12 It is important to note here that Wilder's successor in Germany, the producer Erich Pommer, was caught in the same conflict between serving OMGUS, the reconstruction of the German film industry, and the American film industry. Unlike Wilder, Pommer advocated a strengthening of German film production, but the decartelization imposed by OMGUS severely handicapped Pommer's reconstruction efforts. The Germans suspected him therefore of selling out to the Americans, while Hollywood accused him of revitalizing the German industry too fast, and foreclosing a lucrative market.
 - 13 This was also true for *Hold Back the Dawn*, which was not approved for German audiences because it showed the nation of immigrants denying entry to refugees.
 - 14 Stuart Schulberg, "A Communication: A Letter about Billy Wilder," *The Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television* 7.1 (1952): 434–436; here 435.
 - 15 *Todesmühlen* uses scenes of jubilant Nazi supporters from *Triumph of the Will* intercut with shots of German civilians forcibly marched through liberated concentration camps by the Allies, a contrast set up to question the lack of knowledge Germans claimed to have had about the evil of Nazism and the dimensions of the Holocaust.
 - 16 Already in his "Memorandum," Wilder had pitched his Berlin film as 85 per cent to be shot in the Hollywood studios, with only a skeleton crew and the two stars working on location. As it turned out, however, neither John Lund, Jean Arthur, nor Marlene Dietrich did any shooting in the actual Berlin.
 - 17 Max Colpet, Wilder's longtime friend, remarks in his memoirs that Rossellini would mark with chalk the ruins he used for location photography so as not to use the same location shots taken by Paramount for *A Foreign Affair* and RKO for *Berlin Express*. (*Sag mir, wo die Jahre sind*, 186.)
 - 18 Dietrich was so impressed with Rossellini's *Roma, Città Aperta* (1945) and *Paisà* (1946) that she offered to translate his treatment of *Germania Anno Zero* into English. See Werner Sudendorf, *Marlene Dietrich* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2001), 143.
 - 19 Reviewing *A Foreign Affair*, *Le Nouvel Observateur* wrote: "C'est Rossellini en version ironique."
 - 20 For a perceptive analysis of this film and the genre of the *Trümmerfilm* in general see Robert Shandley, *Rubble Films: German Cinema in the Shadow of the Third Reich* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001). Commenting on the postwar cinema of West Germany, Enno Patalas contends that the currency reform of 1948 brought with it a period of economic stability that ended a brief period of genuine artistic innovation, much like 1924 marked a caesura of post-World War artistic independence and creativity. After 1948, he claims, the German film industry reverted to the tried formulas, and often directors, of Ufa. See Enno Patalas, "The German Waste Land," *Sight and Sound* 23–25 (1953–56): 24–27.
 - 21 According to Dietrich's biographer Steven Bach, Hollaender wrote the songs not for the film but for his failed Hollywood cabaret, "Tingeltangel." "They are dark, corrosive, mockingly romantic. Their voice is that of a survivor not sure survival is all it's cracked

- up to be." See Steven Bach, *Marlene Dietrich: Life and Legend* (New York: Morrow, 1992), 332.
22. The careers of Jean Arthur (1900–1991) and Marlene Dietrich (1901–1992) offer some striking parallels. Both had their beginnings in the silent age, but did not find success until the sound era. Both actresses tried to hide their age, and both were often paired with younger men, as they are in *A Foreign Affair*.
 23. See Alice Kuzniar, "It's not often that I want a Man: Reading for a Queer Marlene," in *Dietrich Icon*, ed. Gerd Gemünden and Mary Desjardins, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 239–256.
 24. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections From Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London and New York: Verso, 1978), 56.
 25. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *In a Cold Crater: Cultural and Intellectual Life in Berlin, 1945–48*, trans. Kelly Barry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 14.