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**Mann, Klaus**

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# WHAT'S WRONG WITH ANTI-NAZI FILMS?

by KLAUS MANN

THE totalitarian challenge calls for a total defense program. The intellectual vanguard has long recognized its obligation in the face of a universal emergency. Culture has mobilized voluntarily. Even the film. . . .

No doubt, the film is primarily and admittedly a business enterprise—big business, ruthless and tasteless business. We have to accept the fact that among hundreds of moving pictures there are hardly two or three worth any serious consideration. The rest—the overwhelming majority—is glaring trash: pretty legs and idiotic faces, Ziegfeld girls in technicolor, tough guys and Merry Melodies, angels with dirty faces, Marlene Dietrich with sunken cheeks and no talent, Mickey Rooney as Romeo, Mickey Mouse as Hamlet, Shirley Temple as Polonius, Stokowsky as prima ballerina, Silly Symphonies by Bach and Beethoven, the board of directors in their fascinating act as Last Gangsters, the writers' department as Dead End Kids, Mae West and Norma Shearer as Blossoms in the Dust. Dust . . . dust . . . Gone with the Wind . . . box-office dust. . . .

So far so good. The trick works all right. People in Shanghai, Rio and Kansas City get a kick out of it, Sammy runs and Hollywood makes money. Everybody is pleased. But then comes Hitler.

In the beginning, Hollywood just ignored the disturbing incident. *Business as usual*: upon this device L. B. Mayer agreed with his colleagues of the other heavy industries. As recently as 1939, when the war had already started, those spirited warriors of democracy between Hollywood Boulevard and Santa Monica assured everybody who cared to listen that they wholeheartedly disapproved of Hitler's ugly anti-Semitism but definitely felt it would be a mistake to make pictures against him: "Controversial subject, if you know what I mean. . . . People fed up with politics don't want to be bothered with serious stuff. . . . German minorities, think of the Middle West, boycott, don't want to get into trouble, menacing letters, if you could see my mail: blackmail, that's what it is; phony war, appeasement, why should *we* stick our necks out? . . ."

Unfortunately, they are not powerful enough, for all their wealth and public influence, to give orders to history as they do to those lazy guys in their writers' department: "*Hitler box office poison. Revise story.*"

But the "story" developed like a prairie fire—blissfully ignoring the desires of a stupefied main office; frightful and erratic, sweeping away all the familiar clichés and slogans cherished since the days of Valentino and Mary Pickford. When Buckingham Palace was bombed and Roose-



veld was re-elected, the Hollywood strategists at last felt the moment ripe; something had to be done. Something besides waltzes. Something more than pretty legs! Those dopes in the story department—don't they realize this is a terrific crisis? Let's launch a *Blitz* of anti-Nazi stuff!



FRITZ LANG by B. F. Dolbin

There is something wrong with the anti-Nazi films. I don't say that all of them are lousy. But not one of them is really good enough.

The absence of really first-rate achievement in the field of anti-Nazi literature is no excuse for the low standard of anti-Nazi pictures. None of these films can measure up to a play like "There Shall Be No Night," nor to the authentic insight and eloquent indignation of the manifestos by German, Czech and Austrian exiles, the realistic vision of H. G. Wells, the moving exactness of William L. Shirer's report, the fervent lucidity of some columns by Dorothy Thompson. All these indictments of Nazism are more effective than anything Hollywood has to offer.

The general decline of the movies may be an explanation, although it is hardly an excuse—and not quite cogent even as an explanation. True, the average norm of the film has been going down since the far-away days when Richard Oswald made "The Captain of Köpenick"—a poignant arraignment of German militarism and, incidentally, an infinitely better anti-Nazi film than any of the current *Blitz* thrillers. But the anti-Hitler output falls short, even of more recent performances: pictures like "Grand Illusion," "Zola," "The Lady Vanishes," and "The Grapes of Wrath," have not been matched as yet by any "underground" fantasy.

The American films against Hitlerism come too late, which is their first, decisive handicap. I don't think that the Russian anti-Nazi films surpass the American in artistic boldness or political profundity. The main attraction of "Professor Mamlock" and "The Oppermanns" was their timeliness: they were released at a moment when it still was daring and original to proclaim openly that the Nazis are beasts. Meanwhile, however, these spectacular indictments have become rather stale. Even Mrs. Lindbergh admits that the Nazis are pretty tough with stubborn preachers and incorrigible Marxists: she just thinks it doesn't really matter. Who minds that little bit of scum on the mighty wave of the future?

The task of an anti-Nazi picture is *not* to present, with emotional dis-



approval and sadistic zest, those sickening, monotonous atrocities: the inhuman chief of the Gestapo personally beating up innocent, bearded Herr Doktor, while the latter's son (in Nazi uniform) watches the repulsive spectacle and thereafter decides to follow the Gestapo chief's pretty secretary into the underground club. All this is a great deal of bunk. A chief of the Gestapo doesn't look like Mr. Kosleck, to begin with. A chief of the Gestapo looks like Himmler or, perhaps, like Erich von Stroheim, who should have played the part. No matter what he looks like, however, he wouldn't do the job himself. And even if we accept the highly improbable supposition that he does the beating himself *and* looks like Mr. Kosleck, there still remains the very unlikely character of the secretary. How can a chief of the Gestapo ignore what sort of a girl she is? Only because of those spectacles she wears—as long as he is around? As soon as he leaves the room she takes off the glasses, and whispers treacherous secrets into the ears of handsome Nazi officers.

The film "Underground," a Warner Bros. sensation, in which these preposterous things occur, is exceedingly poor—not only because of its inadequate cast and the brutal dullness of the whole performance, but mainly because of its political inadequacy.

The Nazis might do precisely the kind of thing we see them doing in "Underground," and still could actually be what Mr. and Mrs. Lindbergh think they are. The primary task of an anti-Nazi film is to reveal and to dramatize the *real* atrocity of the Nazis, the misery and boredom of daily life in the Third Reich, the martyrdom and the stupidity of the German masses, the alarming scope and thoroughness of Nazi organization. The political function of an anti-Nazi picture is to enlighten the American public as to the terrific Nazi threat to this country, its economic interests and its way of life; to deepen and to intensify the knowledge and the horror of everything Hitler is and stands for.

I submit that none of the recent anti-Nazi films has lived up to this task. None of them has clarified the general awareness of what is going on in Germany or strengthened the general will to resistance. The effect these pictures produce is, if any, a confusing one. Undoubtedly, some of the others are better than "Underground." "Confessions of a Nazi Spy" struck me as an exciting promise, mainly because it was the first straightforward demonstration of anti-Hitler feeling coming from Hollywood. Another definite advantage of the "Confessions" is the American scenery in which the Nazi intrigue takes place. The director of the film, Mr. Litvak, was very successful in presenting the lurid coziness of those Yorkville *Bierkellers* where the evil whisper of Hitler agents mixes with the hilarity of a noisy Austrian band. No Hollywood director seems able to stage a locale in Germany proper with the same suggestive plasticity.

Besides, the German-American milieu relieves Mr. Litvak of the disturbing problem of how to employ the various idioms—English, Ameri-



can, German, German with an American accent, English with a German intonation. Directors usually handle this rather delicate issue in the most arbitrary fashion. In many cases we hear the Nazi villains chatting in fluent English among themselves, while in other versions the "nasty" Germans are conspicuous for their heavy accent, while the "good" ones, particularly the ladies, seem to be perfectly at ease in the foreign tongue. One of the most effective anti-Nazi hits, the British production "Night Train," was almost spoiled by this sort of awkward confusion. However, if the story takes place in East 86th Street, New York City, everybody has a perfect right to revel in that gibberish which the German-Americans in Chicago have praised as "*die schönste langevitch*."

Yet even the "Confessions"—a promising first attempt at attacking the Nazi gang with the camera—fails to create a pertinent style for so daring an enterprise. At certain moments one is under the impression of seeing a documentary picture: the plot sticks very closely to the well-known facts of a sensational trial of a ring of professional Nazi agents. This non-fiction element undoubtedly adds to the authenticity and suspense of the film. Unfortunately, it is connected in a clumsy way with a private plot of minor significance. The fictitious and the documentary episodes overlap but fail to integrate, producing a somewhat muddled effect.

The documentary angle, to which the "Confessions" owe their most successful features, has been almost completely dropped in all later productions. Only the English film, "Pastor Hall," contains obvious allusions to a specific event—namely the famous affair of Pastor Niemöller. It is partly on this account, and partly thanks to the artistic validity of Ernst Toller's play on which the screen-script is based, that "Pastor Hall" surpasses the American output in intellectual seriousness and moral authority.

In "Escape" the anti-Nazi angle is nothing but an obvious contrivance for a mystery story, which is, by the way, fairly well presented. The plot as such has nothing to do with the German background which seems arbitrarily chosen. Nothing would be changed if Mr. Taylor had to liberate his beloved mother from the toils of an Indian chieftain or a Chicago gangster. Even Conrad Veidt's fascinating portrayal of a morbid German officer adds nothing in the nature of a political message to this well-done, conventional thriller. One would like to see Mr. Veidt as the leading villain in a *real* anti-Nazi picture. But will there ever be such a thing?

There is one unforgettable moment in "The Man I Married": the turbulent mass meeting where the American-born girl witnesses for the first time the frightening ecstasy of the Germans in the presence of their Fuehrer. Here we are really confronted with the alarming size of the danger—the profoundly irrational impact of the Nazi challenge. No other scene in the film can cope with this one breathtaking sequence. Francis Lederer does a remarkably decent job, both in "Confessions" and in "The Man I Married." Anna Sten has a certain sloppy intensity that I rather



like. She, as well as Mr. Lederer, rate another anti-Nazi chance—a better script and a more inspired director.

It's not the actors who are mostly to blame for the general failure. Only in the dreary case of "Underground," the cast is as responsible for the fiasco as are the author, the director and the producer. But it is not the fault of Margaret Sullavan and James Stewart that "Mortal Storm" falls so deplorably short of the sturdy novel from which the film borrows the title and elements of the plot. The actors certainly try their best. There is something wrong with the essential approach. What we see is the misfortune of a family; not the terrific drama of a people and a continent. Everything is too idyllic, too private, too sentimental, too conventional. The film makes us feel very sorry for a little group of decent and cultured folks; but it doesn't give us the shivers. We don't hear the tremendous cry of the martyred millions behind the moderate sighs of these suffering individuals. The sweeping implications of their tragedy are concealed or not made impressive: the whole affair is depressing but not frightening; we don't grasp its bearing on our own lives.

The mortal storm has become pretty tame on its voyage from the Bavarian Alps to Beverly Hills. When it finally arrives at the studios, it isn't mortal any more—though still somewhat paralyzing! In fact, it has ceased to be a real, vigorous storm. I'd rather call it a sickening blight which seems to confuse even the truly gifted ones among the Hollywood mag-nates.

The two most tragic and most interesting cases are those of Chaplin and Lang. The greatest comedian of our time and one of the most gifted director's venture on one crucial subject, and both conspicuously fail. This is something to wonder about.

There can be no doubt that "The Great Dictator" is the most problematic, if not the poorest picture Charlie Chaplin has ever made. It has no style, no continuity, no convincing power. It is neither funny nor serious, while it attempts to combine both elements. It is a ludicrous farce adorned with turgid editorials. Mr. Chaplin's concluding harangue is almost unbearably trite. In his more brilliant moments he repeats some of his oft-tested gags: I am not quite sure if they are immortal or a bit worn-out. It may be highly amusing to watch the master-clown as he swallows coins or dreamily shaves the smooth face of a girl. But what is the bearing of these delightful improvisations on our fight against Hitler?

Mr. Chaplin's approach is emotional and one-sided. Nothing could be more fallacious than to present the Nazi ordeal as an unpleasant experience exclusively for the Jews. Hitler's heinous anti-Semitism has already played too predominant a part in our propaganda. I have always considered it a dangerous mistake to overemphasize this one particular angle. Hitler is evil, not only because he has outlawed the Jewish race: he persecutes the Jews because of his inherent wickedness. What the Fuehrer has



done to the Poles or Greeks is at least as bad as what he does to the Jews. True, these appalling events had not yet taken place when "The Great Dictator" was released. But no portrait of Hitler, no matter if it is an eccentric caricature or an elaborate study, has any validity unless it presents a man mad enough to commit such colossal crimes—shrewd enough to get away with them, if only for a while. The main disappointment is that Chaplin, whose genius is not without its truly demonic side, fails to display it where it is required more urgently than ever before.

I felt a similar sort of disappointment over Fritz Lang's production, "Man Hunt." The artist who has commanded so much uncanny imagination in unforgettable films like "Doctor Mabuse," "M," and "Fury" might be expected to surpass himself when confronted with so vast and exciting a subject. The beginning of the film seems to justify such hopes: the first shots are magnificent. The jungle-like landscape—alarmingly primitive; the impenetrable wilderness of the underbrush; the shoe-tracks in the muddy ground; all this photographed from a very low angle as if seen by a man ambushing in the thicket—a savage hunter who is hunted, persecuted himself. The whole set-up suggests the terrible nearness of danger, the relapse of human life into pre-civilized forms. The atmosphere seems heavy with apprehension, dense with all sorts of atavistic fears and desires. Then the hunter appears, and we also catch a glimpse of the victim: a strangely cubistic view of Mr. Hitler gesticulating in the mirror of a telescope that belongs to Mr. Pidgeon's hunting equipment.

It is one of the most effective opening scenes I have ever seen. But with Mr. Pidgeon's arrest the anti-climax begins. The conversations between the British hunter and the Fuehrer's monocled lieutenant are futile and tiresome. Mr. Pidgeon's escape from Berchtesgaden to a port in northern Germany is unlikely and unoriginal: the same kind of adventure has been presented dozens of times with much more ingenuity. The episode on the Danish boat, with a little cabin-boy as an efficient guardian-angel, is rather cute but far from being new. And with the hero's arrival in London the plot degenerates into fatuity. Mr. Pidgeon, who is supposed to be a British nobleman of high standing and considerable wealth, behaves in London as if that city were openly ruled by the Nazis. Obviously, the real Nazis (I don't mean those who are Nazi by nature, but those Mr. Lang has shown us in Berchtesgaden) have succeeded in scaring poor Mr. Pidgeon out of his wits. He suffers from a virulent persecution mania. Instead of doing the only sensible thing: namely, calling on the Foreign Office and talking over the situation with some of his cronies there, he rushes about like mad, sees Gestapo agents wherever he goes, has senseless fights in pitch-dark subway tunnels, irritates his brother, surprises his banker, and finally brings his girl friend into serious trouble. She is a tough and sweet little thing, talks cockney English (although experts tell



me Miss Bennett's cockney isn't quite right), and promptly falls in love with the insane Mr. Pidgeon. He acts, of course, precisely as is to be expected of a mentally unbalanced hunter: for he introduces the unfortunate kid (I am afraid she is a prostitute) to his sister-in-law who is exceedingly snooty; (the scene in which Miss Bennett makes an ass of herself by eating too many candies in the aristocratic drawing-room is the cheapest, most unpleasant episode in the film); he gives her too much money, spends the nights in her squalid dwelling but stubbornly refuses to go to bed with her (partly because of the Hays Office, partly out of sheer insanity); finally he bids her farewell at night on Waterloo Bridge (which is, incidentally, the prettiest scene of the film) and then withdraws into a cave, as behooves all foolhardy noblemen who want to shoot the Fuehrer and cannot take the consequences. While he leads a primitive life à la Robinson Crusoe, the Nazis liquidate Joan Bennett: Hitler's monocled lieutenant shows up to break the unpleasant news himself. Mr. Pidgeon won't believe a word (you must imagine him wearing a savage beard at this stage of his cerebral decay); but the monocled one convinces him as he produces, with a wry Nazi grin, a little arrow which Mr. Pidgeon once presented to Miss Bennett. (This was *her* whim, not his. It has nothing to do with his pathological state.) Now the relic comes in handy. Pidgeon uses it to kill that arrogant messenger from the Brown House (who is, by the way, embodied by George Sanders with almost too much sovereign intelligence).

In the last scene, which is definitely better than the preceding absurdities, but falls short of the striking beginning, the hunter has transformed himself into a valiant member of the RAF. But what he is *really* fond of is hunting: it's an obsession with him. The last thing we see is his parachute gliding down, ominously and slowly, somewhere near Berchtesgaden. Let's hope he is more successful this time. We may even forgive him for his ludicrous conduct in London, if he actually manages to kill that ugly but precious deer. However, this production will certainly not kill the Fuehrer; in fact, it will scarcely hurt his prestige. It is *our* prestige, if any, that may be damaged by such melodramatic nonsense. An intelligent audience might be inclined to wonder if *these* are the spiritual weapons of democracy. . . .

I don't overrate the audiences. I don't underrate the picture. Audiences as a rule don't think. The picture has thrilling moments—Mr. Pidgeon chased by blood-thirsty hounds, several murders, a pretty girl, a cave: why shouldn't it be a success? But not a success against Hitler! As political propaganda, it is worthless.

Audiences are accustomed to a lot of incredible stuff in the movies. They don't protest—even enjoy it, perhaps. But they don't allow such irresponsible extravaganzas to influence their political views. Their reaction to this "anti-Hitler" film will be: "It's all right. Just a movie."



That's what is wrong with the anti-Nazi films—that they are “just movies.” The same lack of creative initiative that first delayed the production of anti-Nazi films, now prevents Hollywood from finding, or even seeking, a new style of expression to handle a subject so completely novel. Hollywood clings, sterile and cowardly, to its too-familiar patterns and oft-tested devices. They venture on the most appalling topic of human history with the shabby tricks of Wild West and gangster thrillers. Don't they feel that a new idiom is needed to communicate those tremendous experiences.

The documentary style, which proves so successful in those exceptional episodes where it has been employed, may well be compatible with a bold artistic approach. I believe that not only the classics of the Russian film could serve as stimulating models, but that certain German experiments of the post-war period might be useful as well. For the European reality of 1941 is so utterly unbelievable, so macabre, that the appropriate method of mirroring it is either the direct, realistic report (most impressively developed in March of Time productions); or the daring transformation of this unbalanced reality into artistic images. Undoubtedly, there are many features foreshadowing the nightmarish actuality of Nazism in such dream-like fantasies as “Doctor Mabuse” or “The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari.” Surrealistic means may be sometimes more pertinent to reveal the essence of truth than a pedantic naturalism which, even at its best, embraces only certain aspects of a complex and almost infinite drama. You don't unmask the essential insanity of Hitler's world-conquering dream by presenting a third-rate mime in an SS uniform fumbling about with a stick in front of a map or a globe. It may be realistic but it doesn't make much impression. Chaplin's dance with the balloon—to mention the best thing the last—certainly is “unlikely”; but it possesses what we may call poetic validity—the force that creates a symbol. In the same scene another moment occurs, less conspicuous and less applauded than the pantomime with the globe, but, in my opinion, even more profoundly inspired. The moment I refer to is when the great dictator—winged and nimble with madness—climbs up the wall, hiding coquettishly behind the draperies of the window, all in raptures about the beautiful rhetoric of his adjutant who promises him he will conquer the world. There is something frightening and enthralling about the insane elegance of his gesture. The absurd triumph over the laws of gravity strikingly symbolizes the great dictator's sacrilegious folly and also his certain doom. It is an astounding scene, not only by far the best one in a problematic film, but the most startling *trouvaille* in the entire output of anti-Nazi pictures.

Scenes of this calibre ought to mark the norm of Hollywood's anti-Hitler offensive. It has to be a spirited attack—witty, ruthless, well-prepared, bold, savage and thoroughly calculated—or else they'd better drop it. Compromises must fail, artistically as well as politically, and even from