

Film in Germany and the Soviet Union during the interwar years

Questions to consider:

- What can historical films tell us about the society in which they were created?
- Can Propaganda be Art?
- How important is freedom of expression for artistic freedom?
- Can Entertainment be propaganda?
- What makes art 'revolutionary'?

Director Profiles:

Fritz Lang:

Early life:

- Fritz Lang was born in Vienna on December 5th 1890.
- After leaving secondary school Lang studied Civil Engineering at University before switching to art.
- Lang's time at University was cut short by the outbreak of the First World War, when he volunteered to fight for the Austrian army.
- Lang distinguished himself with great bravery during the conflict, although he was wounded four times in the course of the war and lost sight in one eye.
- After the war Lang moved from Vienna to Berlin and took up a job in Film directing under the German film studio UFA in early 1919.

German Directing Career:

- Lang achieved early success in his film career, achieving commercial breakthrough with his feature film *Dr. Mabuse, the Player* in 1922
- IN 1927, Lang directed a science fiction feature film known as *Metropolis* 1927.:
 - *Metropolis* was set in a futuristic urban dystopia and followed the attempts of the wealthy son of the city master to bring together the downtrodden working classes with the city elite.
 - The film's message is encompassed by the final intertitle: "the mediator between the head and hands must be the heart"
 - Unfortunately the film was a commercial and critical failure. It's cost nearly brought down the German film studio UFA.
 - Today *Metropolis* is regarded as one of the greatest and most influential films ever made for its audacious vision.
 - It's considered one of the great classics of the silent era.
- In 1931 Lang directed his first sound film *M*:
 - *M* centres on the manhunt for a serial killer of children by both the police and the criminal underworld.

- o During the story, the serial killer is marked out with a chalk M on his back, before being captured by beggars and tried before a kangaroo court.
- o *M* is considered a timeless classic and is also considered to be one of the greatest films of all time for its indispensable influence on modern crime fiction.
- o The film is strangely prophetic of the Nazis later use of people's courts to try political cases after they came to power in 1933.

Lang's "escape" from Nazi Germany and his later life:

- At the end of 1932 Lang started filming *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* although its distribution was later banned by the Nazis in 1933 as an incitement to public disorder.
- According to Lang, after Goebbels asked him to be director the UFA in July 1933 he declined and fled Germany the very next day.
 - o This account is not backed up with evidence. Lang's passport shows that he made multiple trips between Berlin and Paris in 1933 before finally emigrating to France in 1934.
 - o Still Lang had considerable political disagreements with the Nazis.
 - o Moreover, although Lang had been raised a catholic he had Jewish heritage on his mother's side and so may have faced racial discrimination had he remained in Nazi Germany.
- In 1935 Lang moved to America, where he took up a directing job in Hollywood and directed his first American Crime drama film *Fury* in 1936.
 - o In *Fury* Lang initially sought to portray a black victim being falsely accused of a crime and being murdered by a lynch mob.
 - o However, this was disallowed by the production company who did not want to cast black cast members in the role due to prevailing American racism.
- In Hollywood Lang founded the Anti-Nazi league of German democracy and critiqued racism and fascism.
- Lang lived the rest of his life in Hollywood, although his directing career languished as he struggled to find backers for his films in America.
- Lang died from a stroke in 1974 and was immortalised on the Hollywood walk of fame.

Lev Kuleshov:

Early Life:

- Lev Kuleshov was born in 1899 to a Russian intellectual family with noble heritage.
- Kuleshov followed in the footsteps of his father and entered the Moscow School of Painting, although he did not finish it and ended up working in film instead.
- Kuleshov directed his first film *Twilight* in 1917, at the age of just 17 and his career only took off with the Bolshevik seizure of power.

- From 1918-1920 Kuleshov covered the Russian Civil war with a documentary school.
- Kuleshov also began teaching courses at the Russia National Film School, the first national film school of its kind and began developing film theory.

Director and Film Theorist in the Golden Age:

- Kuleshov may be considered one of the first film theorists.
- Kuleshov was an early leader of Soviet Montage theory, pioneering new techniques of editing even before those of Sergei Eisenstein.
- Kuleshov saw the essence of cinema as editing, and to demonstrate the power of editing he came up with what would come to be known as the Kuleshov Effect:
 - This now famous editing exercise involved shots of an actor intercut with various meaningful images to show how editing changed the interpretations of those images.
 - The audience interpretation of the actor's feelings changed depending on what image was cut afterwards.
 - For example, when the image of the actor was cut with the image of a bowl of soup, the actor was interpreted with an expression of hunger.
- Alongside film theory, Kuleshov also directed several feature length films.
- Among his most notable was the action-comedy *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* in 1924 which is considered to have kickstarted the Soviet Golden Age of Film 1924-1929.
- In 1926 he directed arguably the best film of his career, *By The Law*:
 - *By the Law* was a psychological thriller about two people restraining a killer and being forced to wait out a long thaw trapped in a cabin to reach a public court and administer justice.
 - Initially the film script was rejected by the film studio so Kuleshov was forced to direct it on a shoestring budget.
 - In the Soviet Union the film was attacked for its apoliticism, although abroad it was well received.

End of Kuleshov's career with the death of the Golden age:

- With the cultural revolution in cinema, critics demanded a greater artistic alignment with the goals of socialist realism.
- None of the artists of the silent era were denounced and attacked as bitterly as Kuleshov:
- Kuleshov's name came to stand for everything the critics hated: Formalism and Apoliticism 'vulgar desire to give the audiences what the audiences wanted'
- Kuleshov initially tried to appeal to Soviet critics by making more Revolutionary films including *The Gay Canary* in 1929 which showed the reds carrying out underground work
- Kuleshov made his last film *The Great Consoler* in 1933 which was a profoundly anti soviet piece, so anti soviet that his critics didn't risk claiming they understood it.
- For the rest of his life Kuleshov didn't make another film, who lived until 1970 - his art was destroyed by the cultural revolution.

Suggested extra material:

Great videos that explore topics we touched on in more detail:

Triumph of the Will and the Cinematic Language of Propaganda

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJ1Qm1Z_D7w

The Kuleshov effect

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vy2Vhnqtu8I>

From Caligari to Hitler: Imagining the tyrant- between the lines

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ndFysO2JunE>

Man with a movie camera and the truth in the movie-eye- Brows Held High

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9cQZ9gKMjxU>

Further reading:

Stephen Brockmann "A Critical History of German Film":

https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/_/hz1I0Ty9AUYC?hl=en&gbpv=0

Richard J Evans "The Coming of the Third Reich"

Richard J Evans "The Third Reich in Power"

Orlando Figes "Revolutionary Russia 1891-1991"

Richard Taylor "Film Propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany"

Peter Kenez "Cinema and Soviet Society, From the revolution to the Death of Stalin"

Transcript:

Hello and welcome to the History News podcast. We are the history nerds and we are second year students at the university of York. We are each pursuing different degrees and have different academic interests but ultimately... We are the history nerds, a group of students who are passionate about history and want to share our knowledge about different historical periods to a wider audience. Especially, areas and resources outside of traditional historical academia. We love sharing our passion with others; our purpose is to inspire the next generation of history nerds to pursue their passions for history in whatever way they choose. Each episode of our podcast focuses on a different period and topic from history. Some of which you may have already encountered in the classroom. Yet, we seek to go beyond the school specification to show the past as diverse as the present. We hope you enjoy listening to the podcast.

I'm Niamh. I'm James. And what will we be discussing this episode, James? In this episode will be going to be taking a look at the development of cinema in Germany, the Soviet Union during the interwar years.

The early history of cinema in these two countries is closely intertwined with the rise of Nazism and communism. During this period, we'll be exploring the subject from lines of two noteworthy directors from the time Fritz Lang and Lev Kuleshov.

During this episode, we tried to get to the bottom of how have historical events and processes shaped the film industry? Should we consider propaganda art? How important is freedom of expression for artistic freedom and artistic quality? And can entertainment be political?

We begin in the 1920s and the beginning of the German expressionist movement.

This was like the artistic movement and art, theatre and film. The German Expressionism film movement, it was a film movement that highlighted the *mise en scene* the film and used it to create an unnatural environment at a more home with people's inside people's heads. The main person that we're going to talk about in relation to German expressionism is Fritz Lang. To give you a little bit background on Fritz he fought in the Austrian army in World War One and was wounded four times, he was discharged from combat in the spring of 1918 because he was suffering from a nervous condition, which is more than likely what we call today, post-traumatic stress disorder. Like many veterans of World War One, Lang rarely spoke about his

experience in the conflict. And there's actually not a lot of period films from this time that talk about World War One. Although the suggestion has been that a lot of the troubled minds of the protagonists of the German expressionist film movement are actually representative of people's experiences in the war, that they were approaching it, some sort of a non-representational war after the war Lang moved from Vienna to Berlin.

And you really can't understand the history of cinema in Germany in the 1920s without understanding the broader context of Weimar republic during this period. So following the end of the First World War and the abdication of the Kaiser. Germany was left in the state of political turmoil. Gun battles, assassinations, riots, massacres and civil unrest, were commonplace as far right and far left birth control which denied Germany the foundations to build a stable democratic order. In Berlin in the aftermath of the war the German capital was considered so unsafe that during this period in 1919, the German parliament was forced to meet the small town of Weimar instead, christening the name of the New German Democracy, the Weimar Republic.

The Weimar Republic did not remain so unstable for the rest of its life in fact from 1923 the Weimar republic had settled down to a new period of economic and social stability and extremist violence abated and the economy began to recover.

Ironically, it was during this period of great stability that the German film industry began to suffer. Because, before in the period of turmoil, a weak currency had largely insulated the Weimar cinema from foreign competition and artistic influences in the years following world war one. Now the German film industry however, struggled to compete with Hollywood and imported films from America.

So it's around this time that Fritz Lang directs one of his more iconic films, Metropolis. Metropolis depicts a dystopian futuristic city, where the working class are oppressed and literally underground; whilst the higher ups are higher up in a more utopian state.

Metropolis is now considered one of the greatest films of all time because of its, sci fi elements, its strong themes of allegory and its place in German expressionist cinema, however, it was a bit of a critical failure and most importantly, a financial failure. Science fiction films even today are not cheap and it was actually responsible for the bankruptcy of one of the biggest studios in Germany at the time in which is the UFA.

And that is not just the biggest studio in Germany at the time, I believe today, it is also still one of the biggest studios.

Many consider this to be one of the golden ages of the German film industry. And it was the largest film industry in Europe and can produce such classics such as Metropolis or the Cabinet. Dr. Caligari, which today are often held up as examples of brilliant filmmaking.

But now we move on to another country that experienced a Golden Age in film during this period, and that was actually Soviet Russia in the 1920s. And again, that we cannot understand the developments in film in Soviet Russia with not without

understanding the broader political and social context of the period. So on the 19th October 1917, 1917, the Bolsheviks took power following a revolution. Following the revolution, however, the territories of the former Russian empire quickly descended into civil war with a number of factions vying for the control, pitting the Red Army against the anti-Bolshevik coalition known as the White Army. The Russian film industry however, suffered greatly during the harsh economic conditions of the civil war. Many film studios followed the retreating white armies and took everything movable with them, including raw film and cameras.

This left the Soviets film industry in quite a state by, 1921.

After the civil war had ended, the Bolsheviks needed to very quickly rebuild Russia from the economic ground zero it had reached after the consequences of the first world war and the civil war. As a temporary measure to rebuild the economy, Lenin introduced a new economic policy, or NEP for short, to Russia in 1921, which introduced a degree of market systems and private enterprise back into Russia.

Films attracted a lot of attention from contemporaries not just in Russia but internationally. And even today, the work of these directors studied for their contribution to the film industry, and to film theory. There's a lot of questions about what made these artists so daring and innovative and a lot of it comes down to a lot of them started remarkably young, many in their 20s and some even in their late teens. And I'm just going to talk briefly now about the Kuleshov effect and Lev Kuleshov himself. So the Kuleshov effect is one of the main tenants of film editing. It posits that two shots together have more meaning than one shot apart, and this means that you can take a blank reaction shot of someone and intercut that between with many other things, and it will generate different meanings. So you could have a man staring blankly and you cut that in between the man, something else, and then back to the man, and it will create meaning depending on what that something else is and Kuleshov began his career in the film industry as a teen. He directed his first film in 1917 when he was just 17. He was filming the Russian Civil War as part of a documentary crew and then progressed onto the National Film School in 1919. But what does it mean for film to be revolutionary?

Well, I'm glad you asked that, Niamh. Revolutionary cinema in the most meaningful sense refers to films which were subversive to the values of the society in which they were created.

Many of the films produced in the Soviet era depicted revolutionary events. So these films depicted socialist revolutions, many of them did, in fact, estimated around 10 percent, at least 10 percent of the films produced in the Soviet Golden Age depicted revolutionary scenarios. However, if we go by the definition that revolutionary cinema is refers to films, which were subversive to the values of the society in which they were created; the films of the Golden Age were hardly revolutionary at all. With few exceptions, these films were created in order to serve the interests of the Soviet state. Moreover, many of the young directors, including Vertov, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, were radicals and enthusiastic to communicate the values of the fledgling Soviet state. The regime provided the myths they want to tell, and the artists provided the

experimental iconography, and this shows the very strange relationship between propaganda and art that developed during this period.

It's worth, again, emphasising the stark limits of artistic freedom that the totalitarian state of the Soviet Union imposed on culture and film.

For example, Kuleshov, was heavily attacked due to his apoliticism after writing and directing arguably his greatest film of his career by the law in 1926. The attacks on Kuleshov would be a harbinger of things to come, as we shall see. That increasing repression and censorship would bring an abrupt end to the Soviet golden age of film.

So now we switch to the rise of Nazis in 1930s and the impact that had on the development of cinema in Germany. So towards the end of the 1920s, we see the gradual collapse of the Weimar republic following the Wall Street crash in the USA in 1929.

The Weimar economy itself collapses. It was very dependent on foreign loans from the United States to sustain its growth and this resulted in massive unemployment, with nearly a third of Germany's workforce being out of work at the height of the Great Depression in 1932. Extremist parties such as the Nazis and the Communists were able to capitalise on this crisis by building up mass of base support by offering an alternative to the Weimar Republic. Under the weight of the economic, social and political instability and the late Weimar period, the fragile foundations of the Weimar republic crumbled, which culminated in the appointment of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor of Germany in January 1933. As a minority party, the Nazis understood the importance of propaganda for consolidating control over Germany. It must be noted that in the last few elections the Nazis held they fell far short of majority, gaining just 33 percent of the vote in November 1932 elections. So this shows the challenge that the Nazis had in consolidating their regime because they had to convince the other two thirds of the population who essentially oppose the new regime to not just passively accept the new regime but to become active participants. Joseph Goebbels, who had masterminded the party's activities in Berlin, was appointed the new Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda in March 1933,

And so under the Third Reich, Germany's cultural power was made into a weapon of propaganda. Hitler had a fundamental political understanding of the arts, and he saw its end as little more than the celebration of power and as an instrument of propaganda. However, normal cultural life was not entirely extinguished under the Nazis. Goebbels saw the value of having dance halls, musics, and films as an escape from the struggles of everyday life, especially in a totalitarian regime. So artists and writers were forced to adapt to the new national socialist regime, doing so with varying levels of compliance. Some were totally silent. Some made minimal compromise to their work, but others fled the country altogether and continued their work in France, Britain or the USA. One of those artists was, as we discussed before, Fritz Lang who emigrated from Germany because of political disagreements with the Nazi state. Fritz Lang made repeated trips from Germany to France 1933 before finally emigrating to Paris and later moving to Hollywood, where he founded the anti Nazi League for American Democracy and Hollywood, continue to be a huge cultural critic of the Nazis well into the Second World War.

So, What were the Nazis plans for German film then? Well, Goebbels gave a speech to film industry in 1933 where he laid out what the new reich expected of the German film industry. In the speech he said that art is free and art should remain free, but it must get used to certain norms. However, to what extent was really free under the Third Reich, Well, it was actually an incredibly limited as the Nazis, swiftly after taking power, consolidated the control and hold on the German film industry. First, in July 1933, the reich film chamber was created and it became compulsory for all those active in German cinema productions to join the reich film chamber, which meant that the Germans take control, who was active in producing films in Germany and of course, all those of non-aryan stock, which essentially if you were Jewish, you were not allowed to join the reich film chamber. So already the Germans were remodeling the film industry based on their ideas of racial hierarchy. We can say the Nazi domination of film industry and how it performed internationally. So. the industry and even even more stringent period of isolation, the most infamous film produced under the Third Reich was a triumph of the will directed by Leni Riefenstahl. Riefenstahl set out to film a documentary like no other, utilising a crew of 120 and 30 cameras which deployed recent techniques, including wide-angle lenses and telephoto lenses, is to achieve a mesmerising effect. The film includes speeches by the Nazi elite, including Adolf Hitler, deputy furher Rudolf Hess and Nazi gaulieter Julius Streicher, interspersed with footage of mass S.A and SS troops reacting and marching in columns. The film is striking scale and monumentalism presenting a vast discipline mass of Nazi troops, moving in formation as if they are one body.

However, triumph of the will was a massively reality bending documentary and whether it can be even described, the documentary is is a is a source of serious debate.

So what's important to remember is that regardless of whether things are propaganda or not.

Documentaries are always, always there with a sense of bias.

The director is always going to present the events in the way they want you to see them.

That's just how film works in terms of presenting a narrative. So Riefenstahl's defence in her later years, saying that it was just history kind of falls apart in the fact that it was history that she manipulated, especially since a lot of the film was deliberately manipulated to give you a sense of the Nazi's force and power, which isn't necessarily something they had, or in fact, this film is quite dangerous in the fact that it has become one of our cultural touchstones in how we view the Nazis and that's an image that the Nazis themselves created.

So some contemporary today would even say that this film Triumph of the Will, they would consider a great work of art, or at least some have even consider it one of the top 100 films of the 20th century. Where do we draw the line between art and propaganda, especially in this case?

I think in this case, it's very clear cut that it's propaganda and not art. I think you should be very sceptical and be a little bit cautious around people that see this as a triumph of filmmaking, because it isn't. It was simply that because governments have so much money behind them. They could allow to produce a film that has a gargantuan budget, and with that, the effects of being able to, you know, those aerial shots, there's a massive group shots. All of these things were already incorporated into cinema. However, this film just displays a lot of them and therefore it seems impressive when it is a dangerous work of propaganda.

And on that note, it is worth noting that Triumph of the will was not a typical Nazi propaganda film. As we already mentioned, Goebbels, Joseph Goebbels, the Minister for Propaganda and Enlightenment, preferred indirect propaganda for a feature film length and ironically, he actually opposed the commissioning a triumph of the will and it was Hitler who went above his head to commission the film.

Goebbels played that propaganda was most effective when it was indirect, the secret of propaganda, he said, was to permeate the person it aims to grasp without his even noticing that he is even being permeated. Goebbels did not see straightforward propaganda films like Triumph of the will as appropriate in the period especially when the Nazis were weak and just consolidating their rule.

Although, interestingly, this film was released commercially and with its critical acclaim in the Venice Film Festival seems to be presenting itself with an air of respectability. What's interesting about the Venice Film Festival is that throughout. Throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s, 40s, when there was a lot of a lot of unrest in Europe due to the World War, the Venice Film Festival became increasingly fascist and how it selected its films. And that actually led to the creation of the Cannes Film Festival in direct opposition.

Thank you for that interesting piece of film history.

However, just look, the film did not contain an overtly political message, does not mean these films were, in fact apolitical. Goebbels realised that entertainment was an essential part of propaganda organisation. Moreover, many of these films contained implicit Nazi propaganda messaging. Although Goebbels wish to create a Nazi film industry, which he said should be free.

It was obvious that under the strict conditions imposed by the Nazi regime in the cultural sphere, that this was never going to happen and never going to be reality. So essentially, the situation, the German Reich can be best characterised by a culture of dictatorship imposed from above. Russia experienced a cultural revolution during this period which for artists artistic expression, cinema, tightly curtailed.

This new revolution of culture was integral to Stalin's broader economic and social revolution from above, and it meant a break from past, but more specifically, a break from the culturally pluralist years of the 1920s. All the arts were cordoned by the state to create Stalin's new society, and this certainly included cinema. So Soviet politicians were actually very frustrated with the cinema of the 1920s. For them, it did not live up to their expectations, despite the brilliant experimental work of the directors of the Golden Era. They were annoyed that some directors produced

stories that were apolitical and did not maintain the socialist realist message, however, they were angry at the Golden Age directors, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Vertov who were ideologically motivated, but their films they produced were of a style that was too experimental and they believed alienated audiences and was not accessible to the millions of Russians lower classes. However, the reputation, the reputation, reputation of this film experimentation was actually very bad to popular cinema because choice of audiences suddenly became drastically limited. In fact, as artistic freedom was curtailed, the quality of films went down and the quantity of films went the number of films produced dropped from one hundred and forty eight in 1928 to just thirty five in 1933. And none of these artists was denounced more, or attacked as bitterly as Kuleshov. Kuleshov's name came to stand for everything that critics hated.

So we've seen some really, really clear parallels between these two eras is and how they link to the questions that we had at the top of the podcast, so that was how have historical events and processes shaped the film industry? And we've really shown in that we've that the film industry has been shaped by historical events both quite explicitly and how changes of power has affected how the organisation of film and industries in these two eras and countries, was, you know, who there's no way that German expressionism could have been allowed to flourish if the currency in Weimar Germany, was so weak.

In the Soviet Union, there's no way that often at the montage era of the golden age, so the work of Eisenstein would have been commissioned under a

Sort of capitalist system, it was the unique relationship formed between the regime which needed propaganda and the artist who were willing to sacrifice some of the political messaging, of their work to produce, to experiment and innovate in the art form. Implicitly image was also shaped by historical processes.

And we've also seen how artistic expression is often at odds with an authoritarian and totalitarian regime.

And this is just due to the nature of how our art and artists are often individualistic and will, Will try to get messages that messages out that perhaps authoritarian and totalitarian regimes don't want, and you can see this with the fact that a lot of German expressionist filmmakers fled when they saw that the Nazis were coming into prominence in Germany. And we can also see that in the increasing frustration that Kuleshov experienced and how that sort of drove him out of the film industry.

Absolutely. And I think example, the Kuleshov is especially sad given he was he started off so young, but yet his talents remained unused for the rest of his life. And in fact. We saw how the the early artistic, relative cultural plurality, the artistic expression of the Soviet golden era, was merely a sort of a blip in the longer history of Soviet film, which is more characterised by increasing repression and censorship.

We've also discussed how propoganda was used by these regimes and we raised some really interesting questions about to what extent can propoganda be art? We've seen in the Soviet golden era from 1925 to 1929, a lot of the art being produced, such as the Eisenstein's Potemkin, was very typical Soviet propoganda.

We have to see look at the broader context, the propaganda being produced. And in fact, as Niamh discussed, we should take issue with people who try and claim films such as triumph of the will were a step forward in filmmaking.

Yeah, James, we really need to look at how harmful these pieces of propaganda are and whether the harm can be weighed up against what artistic merit we may get from watching these films. Absolutely.

And lastly, we've looked at how seemingly apolitical films can be used to serve a political purpose, of course, and that was best shown by the way that film was used under Nazi Germany, directed by Minister for Propaganda and Public Enlightenment, Joseph Goebbels.

Goebbels realised that to keep people coming to the cinema and keep feeding them propaganda, he still needs to create entertainment so people would be lured into a set of false security or as Goebbels says, caught with their trousers down and then exposed to this Nazi propaganda.

It was, as we discussed, a cultural dictatorship opposed from above. Which is absolutely odds with the essence of art which is a very much about individualistic works of expression, and that's why more broadly totalitarian regimes and artistic expression as well as artists are closely related.

And that's about all that we've got time for. So thank you for listening to this episode of the history nerds podcast. If you'd like to know more, please check out the additional materials available on the history nerd's website; the link to which will be in the supplementary documents form and podcast description. These supplemental materials have been designed to supplement each podcast and help you explore these topics further. We really hope you've enjoyed listening to this podcast and feel inspired to pursue your own passion for history. So, have fun studying history both within and beyond the classroom