Hollywood and Nazi Germany: Reflections on What Might Have Been¹

By Joel Rosenberg

I think we three² are basically in agreement on at least two things: one is that Ben Urwand’s study is riddled with exaggerations, especially in his provocative use of the word “collaboration.” The other is that, as both Doherty and Urwand argue, the major Hollywood studio heads did in fact manifest failures of moral and civic courage in squelching or censoring Hollywood films critical of fascism, totalitarianism, Nazi Germany, or anti-Semitism. We also might agree that this resulted in references to Jews and Jewish experience being excised from most American films made in the 1930s following Hitler’s accession, a situation with potentially grave historical consequences.

It is by no means a new idea that the efforts of Hollywood studios to preserve the lucrative German market for American cinema, where American films were very much in demand, led them to bend over backward to accommodate almost every demand by Nazi censors over the content and crediting of Hollywood films (Rosenberg, “Jewish Experience on Film,” 19–20). Hollywood bowed as well to the American Catholic and Protestant communities on the moral content of films, and to the Jewish community on films feared likely to arouse domestic anti-Semitism. Such censorship, often for ideologically contrasting motives, had, at any rate, two main historical consequences for relations abroad: Films even implicitly critical of Germany, National Socialism, or Nazi anti-Semitism and violence were strictly forbidden at a time when focusing public concern on the systematic destruction of democracy in Germany and its neighboring nations might have done some good; and second, perhaps
equally important, portrayals of Jews in American films (a thriving custom up until the rise of Hitler) almost completely vanished, to the detriment of their claim on the public imagination and thus their visibility as a people now in the grip of a profound humanitarian plight. In Urwand’s appealing formulation, tales of Jewish ways had been “part of the American curriculum” (76), but were so no longer.

Urwand’s book almost coincided with the earlier release of Thomas Doherty’s study, *Hollywood and Hitler: 1933–1939*. Doherty, an accomplished historian working at the top of his craft, provides, in many ways, a better-rounded and historically more variegated account of his subject. His interest is in the broader social tableau that made up Hollywood culture in those years, and he thus provides whole chapters on subjects Urwand treats only in passing, if at all, including the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, the screen representation of the Spanish Civil War, the important subject of screen newsreels of both high and low quality, and the courageous role of Warner Brothers in the anti-Nazi cause, a studio which Groucho Marx, without cigar or bouncing eyebrows, dubbed “the only studio with any guts” (*Hollywood and Hitler* 311).

Urwand’s study, by contrast, is more focused on week-by-week, and sometimes day-by-day, negotiations over individual films. But he pursues his subject with an obsessive energy that is, in its way, quite impressive, and advances an argument seemingly more radical than Doherty’s: that Hollywood’s cooperation with Hitler amounted to nothing less than full-scale “collaboration,” a volatile and provocative concept that can mean equally well a business, artistic, or political relation. If Urwand’s thesis is correct, such a relationship was the moral equivalent of other forms of political collaboration between Germany and surrounding nations in those years. It is precisely this issue that has already provoked a sharp retort from Doherty: “I consider Urwand’s charges slanderous and ahistorical—slanderous because they smear an industry that struggled to alert America to the menace brewing in Germany and ahistorical because they read the past through the eyes of the present” (“Does ‘Collaboration’ Overstate”).

We shall return to this assessment in its proper place; but, for now, suffice it to say that Urwand quite problematically raises the question of whether equivalences can be drawn between the activity of the Hollywood studio moguls and the full-state cooperation with Germany by Pierre Laval, who headed the pro-Nazi Vichy regime in France, or that of Norway’s Vidkun Quisling, whose surname has become synonymous with a collaborationist individual or head of state. I find Urwand’s contention less troubling than does Doherty because
it will at least promote thinking about the nexus of cooperation between any Western power (or business) and Germany in that era, and, more pertinently, about degrees of conceptual separation between Nazi and non-Nazi, between totalitarian and democratic culture, between fascist Europe and the democratic nations that surrounded it, including the politically imperiled democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. (I explore these issues more fully in my recently completed book, presently in manuscript: *The Era of Catastrophe—A Judeo-Cinematic Trajectory: Five Studies in Mass Media and Mass Destruction.*)

It is hard to assess whether an American film in this period suffered more from being butchered into incoherence by censors and studio executives or from being squelched altogether. Sometimes a canceled film is as much a cultural product as one stripped of its principal message step-by-step. One of the most interesting cases of a canceled film was the effort to provide a screen version of literary Nobelist Sinclair Lewis’s 1935 novel *It Can’t Happen Here*, which imagined the possibility of fascism in America. Lewis’s search for this subject coincided with the meteoric career of Huey Long, a Louisiana governor from 1928 to 1932, and senator until 1935. Long’s tactics as a politician resembled fascism, albeit in a more homespun way. He ruthlessly took away jobs from those who opposed him, and treated legislation as a mere formality. By 1935, the year Long was assassinated, Lewis was inspired by his example (and probably by his own 1920s sojourn in Mussolini’s Italy) to write *It Can’t Happen Here*, which Urwand calls “the most important anti-fascist work to appear in the United States in the 1930s” (161). It recounted the rise of a fictional Democratic senator named Buzz Windrip, who is shown stealing the 1936 presidential nomination from Franklin D. Roosevelt. Windrip recruited uniformed followers to terrorize opponents, took over the press, and created an official salute. The studio engaged accomplished screenwriter Sidney Howard. Both he and Lewis were pleased with the result. Had this work reached the cameras, America would have had, as Urwand later describes it, “Hollywood’s first great anti-fascist picture” (177). Then it went to the censors.

Any role of Georg Gyssling or Nazi Germany in suppressing the film was never documented. And Joseph Breen, head of the Production Code Administration (PCA), found nothing objectionable according to his main jurisdiction, moral standards. But certain Jewish community leaders, most notably a Reform rabbi named William H. Fineschriber, wrote letters to heads of MGM with the following complaint: “[W]e ought not to thrust the Jew and his problems too much into the limelight . . . now is the time for us [Jews] to be silent” (Urwand 173).
Letters from Fineshriber and others finally forced Will Hays to pressure MGM into canceling the production. Sinclair Lewis’s full-throated protest to this is memorable:

“The world is full today of Fascist propaganda. The Germans are making one pro-Fascist film after another, designed to show that Fascism is superior to liberal democracy. . . . But Mr. Hays actually says that a film cannot be made showing the horrors of fascism and extolling the advantages of liberal democracy because Hitler and Mussolini might ban other [American] films. . . . Democracy is certainly on the defensive when two European dictators, without opening their mouths or knowing anything about the issue, can shut down an American film. . . . I wrote ‘It Can't Happen Here,' but I begin to think it certainly can.” (Urwand 174–75)

Urwand’s summary of the matter deserves to be quoted here as well: “[T]he most powerful men in Hollywood had decided in a closed meeting that they could not film a purely imaginary portrait of fascism in America. . . . Lewis [as quoted above] was saying that while his book was hypothetical at best, the decision to cancel the movie had actually happened. The authorities had chosen not to screen a warning about the fragility of the democratic system of government to the American people” (176).

Whatever other ways Urwand’s book might be taken as overstating Hollywood’s relationship to European fascism as one of “collaboration,” this assessment is, I think, basically correct. In whatever other ways Hollywood’s pliability was purely a business decision, fascism’s tactic of intimidation had long led to anticipatory self-censorship in Hollywood, and it severely limited what could be said onscreen, thus cramping the public mood and forestalling much-needed debate and self-examination among the American populace. “Business-as-usual” is intimately tied to larger historical, political, and cultural forces whose history goes back centuries. None of these larger considerations can fit easily into Urwand’s decidedly limited purview. But, one way or another, popular culture had let Americans down, and Urwand is right to suggest it. Cinema, in a sense, remained in a bubble. As the graveyard of promising projects and butchered first-drafts, Hollywood, even amidst this otherwise glorious age of American cinema, was a culture we should comprehend by its failures as much as its triumphs. This was less a matter of challenging or offensive words and ideas: it was a problem that went to the heart of thought itself, to a culture’s candid assessment of its own situation. Americans were arguably being deprived of a roughly five-year head start on coming to terms with fascism.
Whether such a start would have made a difference is unclear. But one cannot help asking about the difference in national self-understanding that such a head start might have meant.

To return to Doherty’s dispute with Urwand: in fairness to the latter, Doherty’s charge that this book “smear[s] an industry that struggled to alert America to the menace brewing in Germany” (“Does ‘Collaboration’ Overstate”) is questionable even by Doherty’s own book’s account—that is, both authors show an industry where this struggle was engaged only with varying degrees of sincerity and fervor, and far more at middle echelons than at the highest. Courageous authors, screenwriters, directors, and performers (many of them involved in the truly heroic activism of the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League) carried the brunt of it, took the greatest risks, and were often neutralized from the top. I am not inclined to reject outright, as does Doherty, “read[ing] the past through the eyes of the present.” But I do agree that false coherences can easily be drawn. Doherty’s words here (but for one reservation I shall raise shortly) are eminently well-considered:

In the 1930s, the Nazis were not yet the Nazis of our history, our imagination. They had not yet started World War II, they had not yet implemented the Holocaust and they had not yet become what they are now: a universal emblem for absolute evil. From our perspective, the rise of Nazism looks like a linear trajectory, a series of accelerating events terminating inevitably at the gates of Auschwitz. . . . Most Americans, including the Hollywood moguls, had no inkling of the horrors to come, no understanding that dealing with the new regime in Germany was not business as usual. . . . I saw [in my research] some greed and cupidity, to be sure, but mainly I saw confusion, wishful thinking, and disbelief. How did a nation Hollywood had long considered sane and rational become so pathological? Was this a permanent affliction or would the fever break? (“Does ‘Collaboration’ Overstate”)

I view skeptically only three words from this assessment: “had no inkling.” There were inklings aplenty during the period covered by both authors, even before Kristallnacht. Fascism, including Nazism, had been around since the century’s teens; genocidal violence and ethnic cleansing, at least since World War I and indeed far longer. Anti-Semitism was a phenomenon with deep roots going back centuries; the radical anti-Semitism of Hitler a murderous fantasy amply advertised by Hitler himself. Political anti-Semitism and the beginnings of fascism go back more or less to the era of the Dreyfus case.
in France (Arendt esp. 89–120, 267–302). Totalitarian control of culture existed at least since the rise of Fascist Italy and the Soviet Union, and cutthroat battles for shaping mass media raged throughout the same period. Mass media and mass violence are twin siblings born of the modern era, and while the Hollywood moguls were not historians or deep thinkers, they surely sensed the stakes were high. And so, “had no inkling” rings a bit hollow, at least to me. It is these muddled boundaries and improvised responses, and, above all, the ever-present hum of commerce, that makes the situation a shared one among all parties. The intricate interconnectedness of all these factors is what makes the period (or rather the whole era of catastrophe dating back to 1914) so worth studying.

All this, for me, encourages a conclusion that, I would like to think, accords with both authors’ approaches but which neither author might be inclined to accept wholeheartedly: that the realities of the era of catastrophe from 1914 to 1945 were the collective product of both fascist and democratic nations and must be seen as a continuous and systemic unity. This situation needs to be understood without resentment or indignation, though also without perceptual mercy toward any quarter—East or West; democratic or fascist; communist, socialist, or capitalist—yet also (if we are to progress beyond its hold on us) with forgiveness, lucid and self-critical awareness, and persistent memory. Such an approach does not obliterate the absolute evils of fascism and genocide: on the contrary, it strives to keep them in sharp focus. It honors the memory of Holocaust victims but recognizes the universal potential for genocide’s contagion (already realized again and again, arguably countless times, since 1945). It requires firm standards of human rights and international justice. It recognizes the reality of war crimes, and does not relativize evil by declaring (as evildoers often do) that good and evil are only determined by the victors.

Urwand’s book suffers from a surfeit of crucial “turning points” that seem to blend into one another after a while, and he seems a bit too fond of saying that had this or that movie been allowed to proceed to production, or survived butcherings by censors, or attacks by Gyssling, or the pressures of Jewish civic groups, or the failures of nerve by studio heads, or the Breen office, or the Hays Office, then Hollywood would have had a cinema creation addressing the menace of Nazism in a more timely and forceful way. There is a hidden utopianism in such assessments, one that repeatedly holds “what might have been” over Hollywood culture the way one might suspend a mountain over it. And yet, as I suggested earlier, we deprive ourselves of something valuable by refusing to ask what might have been. The answer, to be sure, might be silence,
or confusion, or fruitless speculation, but to ask it is to think about the inner resources of a society and about its capacity to change. Urwand, in retelling a film story, as he occasionally does, begins a journey that has a chance to lead deeper into the public dialogue these films, at their hypothetically most timely and most incisive, were supposed to have provoked. But the inquiry entails more than plot summaries—it requires close reading, and ambitious and adventurous interpretation. “What might have been” should not be measured in terms of its effect on a foreign adversary but its effect on the body-politic at home. The result is not a better anti-Nazi movie then, but better resources for dealing with barbarism since then, including now. The dialogue those suppressed or ideologically sanitized movies might have created must be measured by what is on our lips today.

Notes

1. This presentation summarizes a longer review article by the author, “The Good, the Bad, and the Fatal,” listed below under Works Cited. [Ed.]

2. The third person Rosenberg is referring to here is Vincent Brook, who participated in the panel along with Lawrence Baron, but whose full presentation is not included here because it was felt its anti-Urwand take, on top of Baron’s, would unduly upset the balance of the debate. Brook has supplied a brief Coda below. [Ed.]
Works Cited


