

The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies

Films are the mirror of the prevailing society. They are financed by corporations, which must pinpoint the tastes of the audience at all costs in order to make a profit. Since this audience is composed largely of workers and ordinary people who gripe about the conditions in the upper circles, business considerations require the producer to satisfy the need for social critique among the consumers. A producer, however, will never allow himself to be driven to present material that in any way attacks the foundations of society, for to do so would destroy his own existence as a capitalist entrepreneur. Indeed, the films made for the lower classes are even more bourgeois than those aimed at the finer audiences, precisely because they hint at subversive points of view without exploring them. Instead, they smuggle in a respectable way of thinking. The fact that films as a whole reaffirm the ruling system was demonstrated by the excitement over *Potemkin*. It was perceived to be different and was aesthetically endorsed, but only for its meaning to be repressed. In comparison with that film, the differences among the various types of films produced in Germany or the United States evaporated, providing conclusive evidence that the cinematic productions of the latter countries are the homogeneous expression of one and the same society. The attempts by some directors and authors to distance themselves from this homogeneity are doomed from the start. Either such rebels are simply tools of society, unwittingly manipulated yet all the while believing they are voices of protest, or they are forced to make compromises in their drive to survive.

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(Even Chaplin ends up as a millionaire in *The Gold Rush*, without having achieved any real goals.) Society is much too powerful for it to tolerate any movies except those with which it is comfortable. Film must reflect society whether it wants to or not.

But is it really society that manifests itself in sensationalist film hits? The breathtaking rescues, the impossible noble-mindedness, the smooth young gents, the monstrous swindlers, the criminals and heroes, the moral nights of passion and the immoral marriages—do they really exist? They really do exist: one need only read the *Generalanzeiger* newspapers.¹ There is no kitsch one could invent that life itself could not outdo. Servant girls do not imitate professional love-letter writers; rather, the opposite is true—the latter model their letters on those of servant girls. Virgins still drown themselves if they believe their bridegrooms have been unfaithful. Sensational film hits and life usually correspond to each other because the Little Miss Typists model themselves after the examples they see on the screen. It may be, however, that the most hypocritical instances are stolen from life.

Still, this is not to deny that, in the majority of contemporary films, things are pretty unrealistic. They give the blackest settings a pink tinge, and smear reds liberally everywhere. But the films do not therefore cease to reflect society. On the contrary: the more incorrectly they present the surface of things, the more correct they become and the more clearly they mirror the secret mechanism of society. In reality it may not often happen that a scullery maid marries the owner of a Rolls Royce. But doesn't every Rolls Royce owner dream that scullery maids dream of rising to his stature? Stupid and unreal film fantasies are the *daydreams of society*, in which its actual reality comes to the fore and its otherwise repressed wishes take on form. (The fact that major issues do get expressed—albeit in a distorted way—in both sensational film hits and in literary bestsellers does not detract from this claim.) Members of the higher and next-to-highest classes may not recognize their portraits in these films, but this does not mean there is no photographic resemblance. They have good reasons not to know what they themselves look like, and if they describe something as untrue, then it is all the more true.

Today's world can be recognized even in those films that are set in

the *past*. It cannot examine itself all the time, because it may not examine itself from all sides; the possibilities for inoffensive self-portraits are limited, whereas the demand for material is insatiable. The numerous historical films that merely illustrate the past (rather than showing the present in historical guise, as in *Potemkin*) are attempts at deception according to their own terms. Since one always runs the danger, when picturing current events, of turning easily excitable masses against powerful institutions that are in fact often not appealing, one prefers to direct the camera toward a Middle Ages that the audience will find harmlessly edifying. The further back the story is situated historically, the more audacious filmmakers become. They will risk depicting a successful revolution in historical costumes in order to induce people to forget modern revolutions, and they are happy to satisfy the theoretical sense of justice by filming struggles for freedom that are long past. Douglas Fairbanks, the gallant champion of the oppressed, goes to battle in a previous century against a despotic power whose survival is of no consequence to any American today.³ The courage of these films declines in direct proportion to their proximity to the present. The most popular scenes from World War I are not a flight to the far reaches of history but the immediate expression of society's will.

The reason this expression of societal will is reflected more directly in films than in theatrical works can already be explained simply by the greater number of elements that intervene between the dramatist and capital. It may seem to both the dramatist and the theater director as if they were independent of capital and thus able to produce timeless and classless works of art. Of course, this is impossible, but nevertheless shows are staged whose social determinants are harder to perceive than (those in films, where the head of the corporation stands guard in person. This is particularly true of the social determinants of comedies, tragic dramas, high-class revues, and products of directorial artistry produced for the intellectual (Berlin) bourgeoisie—determinants that remain only partly unrefracted in society. In the end, the audiences for such works lead a radical magazine and pursue their bourgeois profession with a bad conscience, in order to have a good conscience. The artistic qualities of a (theater) piece may also shift it outside the social sphere. Writers are

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often stupid, however, and if they renounce one aspect of traditional society, they are all the more taken in by another. (In the *Literarische Welt*, Bert Brecht called bourgeois lyricism suspicious and devoted himself instead to sports.⁴ Sports as a nonbourgeois phenomenon: Samson-Korner's biographer is not to be envied for making this discovery.)⁵ Apart from such exceptions, which consciously extricate themselves from some of the constraints, the majority of the remaining second-rate works for the stage are a precise response to the feelings of the theater crowds. They're just as indebted to the existing order of things as films, only they're more boring.

In order to investigate today's society, one must listen to the confessions of the products of its film industries. They are all blabbing a rude secret, without really wanting to. In the endless sequence of films, a limited number of typical themes recur again and again", they reveal how society wants to see itself. The quintessence of these film themes is at the same time the sum of the society's ideologies, whose spell is broken by means of the interpretation of the themes. The series "The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies" is conceived as a small collection of samples whose textbook cases are subjected to moral casuistry.

Clear Road

A prison inmate who has seen better days is released and lands in a Zille-type milieu⁶ full of little shopowners, whores, proletarians, and shady characters.⁷ He had been wrongly convicted. In vain the fallen man looks for respectable work; only a whore takes pity on him. One day, he rescues a woman in a carriage whose horses have gone out of control in the Tiergarten park; she's the sister of a manufacturer, who expresses his thanks by giving the former inmate a job in his business. Now the road is clear for the diligent man: his achievements are recognized, his innocence considered proven. Following the timely death of the whore, who succumbs to consumption, the fellow—now dressed in a business suit—becomes engaged to the woman he rescued. A typical situation on screen, which attests to the social mentality of today's world. Using true-to-nature studio images of back-alley interiors, it

depicts the impoverished conditions that give rise to transgressions which are not the real social crimes. It wanders without prejudice among the underprivileged classes, which provide gripping material for the film. The themes, however, have been carefully screened. All mention of class difference is avoided, since society is far too convinced of its first-class status to want to become conscious of the real conditions of its classes. Also avoided is any mention of the working class, which is attempting through political means to escape from the misery that the directors present so movingly. In films based on real-life situations, the workers are respectable lower-level railroad functionaries and patriarchal foremen; or, if they are supposed to be discontented, they have suffered a personal tragedy, so that the public misfortune can be all the more easily forgotten. One prefers the *Lumpenproletariat* as emotionally moving subject matter, because it is politically helpless and contains dubious elements who seem to deserve their fate. Society disguises the sites of misery in romantic garb so as to perpetuate them, and lavishes pity on them because here it doesn't cost a cent. It is full of pity, this society, and wants to express its emotional excess so as to soothe its conscience—assuming, of course, that everything can remain the way it is. Out of pity, it extends a hand to one or two of the foundering people and rescues them by pulling them back up to its level, which it really considers to be quite a height. This is how it assures itself moral support, while at the same time maintaining the underling as underling and society as society. On the contrary: saving individual people is a convenient way to prevent the rescue of the entire class; one proletarian who has been promoted to the drawing room ensures the perpetuation of many a beer joint. The manufacturer's sister will later go with her husband to visit his beer joint. Maybe these two will once again save another person. One need not fear that this is why the proletarians are dying out. The little shopgirls gain unexpected insights into the misery of mankind and the goodness from above.

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Sex and Character

A young and pretty girl has made up her mind to win the heart of her cousin, who owns the adjacent property.' She puts on pants, gets him to hire her as his domestic servant, and from then on appears as an ambiguous figure in the most unambiguous situations. The word "gay" is also ambiguous, its meaning depending on the context of its utterance.¹⁰ In order to establish the boy's true identity, the owner of the estate breaks into the servant's room. The half-undressed girl—from the waist up in livery, below the waist in lace panties—has crawled under the covers. The thorough master grabs her by the feet and, slowly and systematically, pulls her out. All out of love. The outcome: an engagement. The owner of the estate is rich. Before his domestic servant's hips began to arouse his suspicion, he had had an affair that began in a dance club. Dance clubs are no less numerous and no less important today than churches were in previous centuries. No film without a dance club; no tuxedo without money. Otherwise women would not put on and take off their pants. The business is called eroticism, and the preoccupation with it is called life. Life is an invention of the haves, which the have-nots try to imitate to the best of their inability. Since it is in the interest of the propertied classes to maintain society as it is, they must prevent others from thinking about that society. With the help of their money, they are able in their free time to forget the existence for which they slave during the day. They live. They buy themselves an amusement which allows the brain to take time off because it keeps the other organs so completely busy. If the dance clubs were not already fun in themselves, the state would have to subsidize them. Girls who disguise themselves as domestic servants and gentlemen whose ultimate goal can be grasped under bedcovers do not have evil thoughts—that are good thoughts. They might stumble upon such thoughts out of boredom. In order to alleviate the boredom that leads to the amusement that produces the boredom, the amusement is supplemented with love. Why did the girl do it? Because she loves the owner of the estate. Any objections to love are destroyed by the judgment of a society that has lost love. Out of the earthly realm of the club, society

allows oaths of fidelity to blossom between lives that do not exist, and out of the revue environment it conjures up engagement apotheoses whose luster should not be dismissed as trivial. The light such apotheoses radiate is so festive that people no longer wish for society to conceive of things in a different light. Particularly if love is financially secure. In the dark movie theaters, the poor little shopgirls grope for their date's hand and think of the coming Sunday.

Nation in Arms

An impoverished hotel in eastern Austria during World War I has just been occupied by the Russians.¹¹ Here, a servant lass hides an Austrian officer who has stayed behind. The Russian general who has taken up residence in the hotel harasses the patriotic lass with lascivious propositions. She resists, out of patriotism. Shortly thereafter the Austrians march back in and the officer and the woman who rescued him are honored by the entire company, to the tune of the Radetzky March. (A wartime wedding is in the offing.)—On another occasion, an intrepid East Prussian woman rescues her son (likewise an officer) during an enemy occupation. He wins his hardy cousin as his wife. The battle scenes are edited more decently than the uniformed acts of heroism.—These military and war films, which resemble each other down to the last detail, are a striking refutation of the claim that today's world is fundamentally materialistic. At the very least they prove that certain influential circles are very interested in having others adopt a heroic attitude instead of the materialism which these influential circles themselves support. In fact, those circles can achieve their aims—which may lead to new wars—only when the masses, which are still slightly contaminated by the revolution, have once again been morally purified; when the pleasure provided by war in the form of decorations and virgins replaces the memory of its horrors; when, once again, a new generation grows up which does not want to know what it is battling for, so that it can triumph and perish with all the more honor. The moral Intent of these films is confirmed by the fact that they also acknowledge the humanity of the enemy. The Russian general who is after the

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patriotic lass is an honest man. Respect for the opponent makes war into an absurdity. This is precisely the aim of its producers, since, as such, war must be accepted as an inexplicable necessity. Only when the populace considers a heroic death a senseless fate can it endure it ethically. Military films serve to educate the populace. This is particularly true of the Fridericus Rex movies, in which—always according to the wishes of the same influential circles—the audience is once again treated to a king that inspires more enthusiasm than its real leaders, who, in turn, profit from this enthusiasm.¹³ When good old Sombart called the Germans "heroes" and the English "merchants" in a war pamphlet, he erred as profoundly as only a professor can.¹⁴ The film heroes of all countries unite as the propaganda bosses of their nation's businessmen. It is hard for the little shopgirls to resist the appeal of the marches and the uniforms.

The World Travelers

The daughter of an airplane engine manufacturer takes off on an air race around the world—a flight that is supposed to demonstrate the quality of daddy's motors.¹⁵ A competitor she has previously turned down tries to delay her all along the voyage. A young man whom she will assuredly not turn down helps her all along the voyage. Against the backdrop of India, China, the calm ocean, and America, a love affair develops with great speed, and great speed develops with this affair. The woman aviator always appears in the traditional garb of each respective country. In the end, triumph and an engagement. In other films, the characters get engaged on the shores of northern Italian lakes or in Spain (the choice of country depends on the whims of fashion). Each engagement is linked with the continuous use of one's own car.—I have traveled around the entire world in order to find myself, Count Keyserling affirms in his philosopher's travelogue.¹⁶ Society likewise never finds itself through its voyages; but unlike the count, it travels precisely in order not to find itself. Whether at home or in some modern means of transportation, society's actions remain everywhere the same. Changes in the landscape, however, distract attention from the hypocrisy of

societal events, whose monotony is forgotten in the adventure of the voyage. The woman aviator who overcomes danger in India pretends to be a modest damsel in distress; nobody recalls the capitalist transaction in Berlin that prompted her to take the trip in the first place. Travel is one of the best means for a society to maintain a permanent state of absentmindedness, which prevents that society from coming to terms with itself. It assists fantasy along mistaken paths; it occludes one's perspective with impressions; it adds to the wonder of the world, so that the world's ugliness goes unnoticed. (The concomitant increase in knowledge about the world serves to transfigure the existing system in which it is gained.) Some important social figures who can afford to spend their vacations in St. Moritz truly feel like human beings when they're there; they go to St. Moritz only to repress the fact that they really aren't human beings. Even the lower social classes, which have to stay at home, are sent away. The illustrated newspapers disseminate images among them from every country; and anyway, whom does the woman aviator fly for, if not for them? For the more they travel, the less they understand anything. When all geographic hideouts have been photographed, society will have been completely blinded. The little shopgirls want so badly to get engaged on the Riviera.

The Golden Heart

A young Berlin wholesaler, an industrious manager of a first-rate company, visits a business friend of his father's in Vienna; the paternal friend's firm is going to pieces because of the disorder in Austria.¹⁷ The guest would leave, if it were not for the business friend's daughter, a sweet Viennese gal who makes it clear to him that there are other things besides management: the waves of the Danube and the wine gardens specializing in new vintages. With delight, the young man from Berlin discovers his dormant feelings. He cleans up the company, which will soon be turning a profit again, and gets the gal for home use.—Even without close-ups, this course of events would be believable. Whether in the city of waltz dreams or on the beautiful beaches of the Neckar—someplace, but not here in the present, the rich are falling in love and

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discovering in the process that they have hearts. It is not true that they are heartless: films refute what life would make one believe. Outside business—which admittedly would not be the right place for heart—their hearts are always in the wrong place. They are brimming with feeling in situations where it is of little consequence and are often unable to do as they like, only because they waste their feelings so uneconomically in private affairs that their supply is continually running out. One needs to have experienced the tenderness and gentleness the young man from Berlin expresses to the Viennese girl under the Stephansturm in order to understand once and for all that his brutal behavior on the telephone does not indicate a lack of sentiment. The camera reveals this. What he really loves is operettas, and what he really longs for is an idyllic retreat in which, undisturbed, he can open his poor heart, which he has had to close off in all other situations. If there were no Viennese woman in the house to keep his heart from interfering in economic matters, it could, in a pinch, be well accommodated by the record player. Through films, one can prove on a case-by-case basis that with rising prosperity the number of emotional nature preserves is constantly growing. The little shopgirls learn to understand that their brilliant boss is made of gold on the inside as well; they await the day when they can revive a young Berliner with their silly little hearts.

The Modern Haroun al Raschid¹⁸

A billionaire's daughter appears incognito as a poor girl, because she wants to be loved purely for who she is as a human being.¹⁹ Her wish is fulfilled by a rather plain young man who is actually an impoverished lord. Before he has even confessed his affection he learns, by chance, of the billions. He withdraws from his courtship in order to avoid any misunderstandings. Now, more than ever, the two come together, and since money loves to come into money, in the end the lord inherits an immense fortune.—In another film a young billionaire roams the world as a vagabond, because he wants to be loved purely for who he is as a person and so on.²⁰ Incognito revealed, the girl hesitates, and a honeymoon on a comfortable yacht ensues.—As in the

Thousand and One Nights, today's fairy tale prince also chooses discretion; but here the opulence of the ending stems from his billions, which outshine every social opulence. A huge fortune can be kept secret for instrumental reasons. The rich pauper and the tramp who isn't one do not appear incognito for any purpose other than perhaps wanting to be taken purely for who they are as human beings and so forth. Why don't they just throw the money away if they want to be loved as human beings? Why don't they demonstrate that they are something worth loving by doing something decent with their money? They don't throw it away, and they don't do anything decent with it. Instead, the feigned poverty serves to shine a bright spotlight on the luckiness of wealth, and the desire to be loved disinterestedly is a sentimentality that serves to obscure the lack of true love. For true love has interests; it is of great interest to it that its object be a worthy one. It might get uncomfortable for the billionaire's daughter if a suitor desired her out of real interest. So she hushes up the billions with which she has been provided and procures for herself, at the giveaway price of the open market, a husband whose unselfishness consists in the fact that he stumbles across a girl without billions who is nothing without her billions. But (so preach the moralists among the rich) what is important is the girl, not the wealth. According to the cinematic testimony, a human being is a girl who can dance the Charleston well and a boy who knows just as little. The love between one person and another—that is, between two private bagatelles—is therefore not superfluous but serves to justify property ownership. This ownership, in turn, is not nearly so aggravating to those without property if those who own property can show through so-called love that they can own it as human beings. The fairy tales have remained, while the theme of the incognito has been inverted. The authentic Haroun al Raschid traveled among the people anonymously in order to get to know them independently of property, and in the end revealed himself as their judge. The modern Haroun al Raschid presents himself independently of his wealth in order to be recognized as something special in this anonymity, and in the end reveals the only thing he really is: his wealth. If the little shopgirls were approached

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tonight by an unknown gentleman, they would take him to be one of the famous millionaires from the illustrated magazines.

Silent Tragedies

A banker goes bankrupt as a result of such immense incompetence that he commits suicide out of propriety.²¹ The insolvent estate includes a daughter. The first lieutenant who loves her must abandon his dreams of escorting her down the aisle; her lack of means and his career make this impossible. She goes on to earn her living as a dancer under an artistic pseudonym. The first lieutenant, who has long regretted his refusal of the relationship, meets her again after years of futile searching, and wants to be united with her at last. The only thing needed for a happy ending is his letter of resignation, which he has been planning to hand in. But the selfless dancer poisons herself in order, through her death, to force her lover to think only of his career. The officer, dressed in civilian clothes, stands wistfully beside the stretcher.—The young man need not be a first lieutenant; in other professions as well, an individual's career depends on marrying wealth. This leads to such tragedies, which really aren't tragedies. But for society's sake, it's imperative that they appear to be tragedies. If a woman kills herself so that a man can reach great heights, this guarantees the irrevocability of social structures. They are raised to the level of eternal laws, since, for their sake, people are willing to suffer a death reminiscent of a five-act tragic drama. The film companies know (or perhaps do not know) why they peddle such morbid fare. The death that confirms the power of the ruling institutions prevents a death in the course of a struggle against these institutions. In order to make the latter impossible, the former is glorified. The film producers glorify it, however, by passing off as tragic what is really lack of knowledge or, at best, a misfortune. The noble-mindedness that the dancer wants to prove by voluntarily killing herself is a squandering of feeling, which is cultivated by the better classes because it weakens the feeling of injustice. There are many people who sacrifice themselves noblemindedly because they are too lazy to rebel; many tears are shed which flow only because crying is sometimes easier

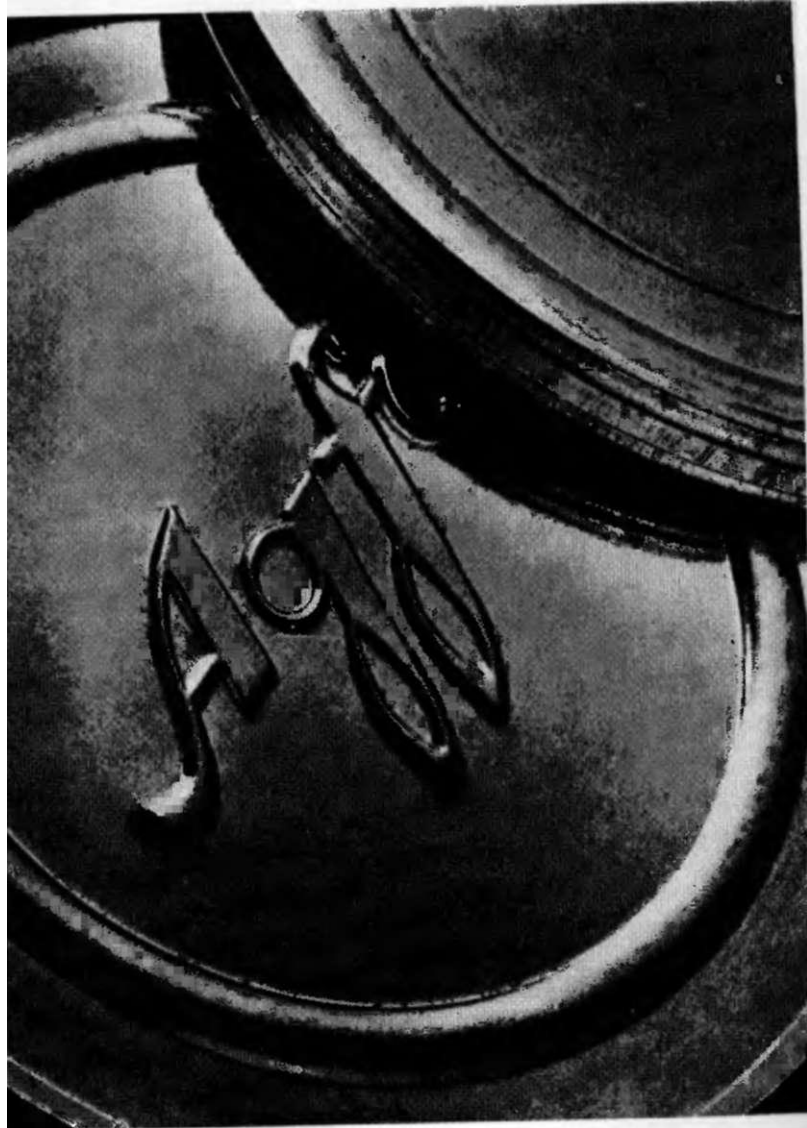
than contemplation. Today's tragedies are private affairs with a bad outcome which society has metaphysically dressed up in order to preserve the status quo. The stronger the power positions of society, the more tragically weakness and stupidity will behave. And with every new international agreement that heavy industry reaches, the number of suicidal dancers will certainly rise. The audience is so touched by the signs of the poisoning by which these dancers take their leave that it no longer wants to get rid of the poison. Thus, only the attempts to detoxify society can be called tragic. Furtively, the little shopgirls wipe their eyes and quickly powder their noses before the lights go up.

Close to the Edge

At times, films go mad. They have terrifying visions and spew images that expose society's true countenance. Luckily, they are healthy at root. The schizophrenic outbursts are only momentary; the curtain is lowered once again, and everything returns to normal. A girl from the provinces, for example, comes to Berlin with her admirer, a clumsy young fellow.²² Since she is a beauty, a board chairman makes her into a revue star and gives the youth a job. He would be a bad businessman if he did not want to cash in on his investment. The girl, however, refuses his advances, packs up her young man, and turns her back on dirty favoritism. (The film's scriptwriter is a man of letters.) An unmasking of social practices? The film producer deserves to go broke, since nothing is more demoralizing for an audience than the revelation of immoral activities that are officially sanctioned so long as they take place in secret. The danger is avoided at the last minute, when the board chairman regrets his actions and catches up with the innocent couple, who, following his renunciation, happily allow him to drive them back to town. There have to be such board chairmen in order to whitewash favoritism. (The author is a man of letters.) The following case is even more drastic. The king of a tiny impoverished southern country has brought home a lover from Paris that an American billionaire wants to include among his possessions.²³ In order to win her, the billionaire buys the cooperation of the discontented masses and bribes the king's general. A patriotic insurrec-

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tion is quickly staged. Machine guns open fire, producing a picturesque distribution of corpses in the streets and squares. The general informs the billionaire that, thanks to the incarceration of the king, the girl is now free; his attitude toward his new patron is that of an obsequious servant. Is this how coups d'etat and bloodbaths are staged by big capital? The film is insane. It portrays events as they actually happen, instead of maintaining the dignity usually accorded them such that they can continue to take place. Thank God the film recovers its rosy-cheeked smile immediately. The American is really a good person who deserves his billions. Upon learning that the Parisian woman is loyal to her lover, he frees the ex-king from prison and sends the happy pair on their honeymoon. Love is stronger than money when money is supposed to win sympathy. The little shopgirls were worried; now they can breathe easy again.



Willy Otto Zielke, Agfa, early 1930s