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For Posterity's Sake: Emil Jannings' Autobiographical (Self-)Denazification

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Book: Emil Jannings, *Theater, Film – Das Leben und Ich* (Berchtesgaden: Verlag Zimmer & Herzog, 1951)

In 1939, twenty-five years after his first screen appearance, the German film star Emil Jannings offered a publishing company his autobiography which he hoped would offer the definitive account of his life and career. However, Jannings' manuscript was subjected to heavy censorship, including the excision of all Jewish names. He ultimately withdrew his work, and sealed it away in the attic of his Austrian lake house, where it would remain for the rest of his life. Only after the fall of the Third Reich in 1945, Jannings' own death in 1950, and the Bavarian publisher Zimmer & Herzog's persistence the following year, would *Theater, Film – Das Leben und Ich* (1951) finally enter the public sphere – though twelve years late, and circulated amongst readers now living under a drastically different socio-political system.

Acknowledging the autobiography's tumultuous (pre)history, Zimmer & Herzog offered a short preface serving to contextualise Jannings' anachronistic narrative. However, the added context portrays Jannings as a victim of the now-defunct Nazi dictatorship. Indeed, Jannings is introduced in veritable opposition to Nazism, as the publisher's adulating preface problematically concludes with a recycled, and recontextualised 1928 quote from the *Los Angeles Times*, stating that "he [Jannings] stayed true to his principles ..."¹ But what exactly were the principles of Jannings; a man who had received the prestigious Goethe Medal in 1939 – in recognition of his twenty-five years in the industry – from Adolf Hitler himself?²

Recently, Bill Niven has argued that “Germany has never really confronted the fact that the German film industry as a whole pandered to Hitler in one way or another.”³ Indeed, “in popular perceptions,” film stars and directors are seen as mere products of a German state propaganda machine, rather than agents or individuals supporting, propping up, and personally benefitting from this authoritarian political system. Instead, these individuals are today collectively viewed as “victims or as opponents of Nazism.”⁴ Mikkel Dack highlights the immediate postwar period of denazification, and, particularly, the act of filling out the Allies’ mandatory questionnaires (*Fragebögen*), as the moment when “a narrative foundation was built and the line between fictional and autobiographical realms became blurred.”⁵ This contributed towards the transition “of a nation of Nazi supporters and sympathisers to one of resisters and victims.”⁶ However, this exploitative autobiographical practice appears to have later gained a greater, targeted purpose amongst members of the Nazi-era film industry. Film stars and directors began publishing, and disseminating – this time, *en masse* – their similar whitewashed accounts of the period in question, and of their past relationships and associations with the Nazi Government, in the form of popular autobiographies in the 1960s. These were problematic for their authors’ lack of self-reflection – uninterested in re-evaluating the likely implications of their past actions – and now liberated from any threats of censorship or government backlash.⁷

Meanwhile, Jannings’ earlier exercise in life-writing had turned a blind eye altogether to any relationship with Hitler, or his government, as the dictator is awarded but a brief, singular mention towards the end of a narrative which, nevertheless, navigates the entirety of the 1930s.⁸ But, by 1939, Jannings had climbed to such a position within the German film industry that, as Michael H. Kater argues, he could “simply no longer be overlooked” by the Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels.⁹ Indeed, Jannings was no longer simply an actor, but rather the Chairman of the Board of Directors at Tobis Film – one of the four main production companies

in Nazi Germany responsible for the routine production and distribution of blatant state propaganda – a position undoubtedly attained through his service, and obedience to the Nazi regime.¹⁰ The memoir's surface-level apoliticism is thus problematic, as it isolates its author from a socio-political system which, in reality, had greatly impacted the trajectory of his professional career. Published as such, and preceded by Zimmer & Herzog's questionable foreword, Jannings' autobiography offers a damning example of this broader whitewashing of the industry's responsibilities within, and development alongside the larger Nazi enterprise.

In a world where the Anglosphere dominantly shapes the academic canon, advocating in favour of translating the memoir of a since-neglected, but once-internationally-renowned film star may appear a valuable scholarly endeavour. However, whilst such first-hand testimonies are invaluable towards the development of popular, and scholarly understandings of Nazi history – and, in this case, German film history – it is simultaneously vital to challenge and cross-reference any claims produced under such heavily-biased authorship. Therefore, a critical reading of Jannings' autobiography is necessary; acknowledging and challenging its various attempts at cementing an everlasting, whitewashed legacy.

Following the publisher, Jannings offers his own short preface, justifying his decision to write, and seek to publish his autobiography back in 1939. He states that:

So much has been written about me over the course of my twenty-five-year-long film career. A great deal of it flattering, some complete invention, but at times so fanciful that I would be quite astonished by what I read. For this reason, and because I was so often told that the audience is entitled to learn the truth about what the life of a man in the public eye was like, I am now writing about myself.¹¹

This idea of the public being entitled to peek behind the curtain of the public figure's private life is one directly attributable to Nazi discourse and ideology. The previous year, as rumours had begun to circulate about his extra-marital affair with the Czech film actress Lída Baarová,

Goebbels was reportedly scolded by Hitler as “he who makes history has no right to a private life.”¹² As a famous film star, Jannings was also in the public eye, and would have been similarly aware of the interwar press’ broader disregard for such individuals’ private boundaries. In fact, it was this very matter – and the press’ supposedly false reportage of his life and character throughout his career – which seemingly prompted his decision to publish his own life’s tale.

The memoir’s opening sentence seemingly offers such an early correction, listing its author’s birthplace as Rorschach, Switzerland.¹³ This differed from narratives otherwise circulating in the international press which asserted that the actor was instead born in Brooklyn, New York.¹⁴ Was this the sort of rectification Jannings had wished to carry out within the public record? It is worth mentioning that this ‘mistruth’ had, in fact, been the product of Jannings’ own telling, having sought to promote his internationalism before embarking for Hollywood in 1926.¹⁵ And so begins a questionable memoir, conveyed by a highly unreliable narrator.¹⁶ Furthermore, Jannings’ denouncement of the press’ inaccurate reportage is particularly bizarre considering his numerous interventions on matters pertaining to his own private life within these same outlets – from as early as 1926 in *UFA-Magazin* in Germany, to 1941 in *Ciné-Mondial* in Nazi-occupied France.¹⁷ Jannings clearly recognised how to construct a disingenuous narrative in service of personal, and professional gains.

Throughout his memoir, Jannings is prone to shameless bouts of self-adulation. These are heightened whenever discussing his experience filming such early productions as the German First World War propaganda film *Im Schützengraben / In the Trenches* (1914) and the Italian production *Quo Vadis* (1923). In both cases, Jannings claims to have confronted various authority figures on behalf of all actors (though evidently mostly for himself) regarding the

lack of safety measures in place. Jannings is seemingly vindicated as his directors' gross negligence results in on-set injuries, and, in the case of *Quo Vadis*, the actual death of the very stunt double hired to replace Jannings after he refused to film alongside dangerous, starved lions.¹⁸ Whilst this exact rendition of events appears somewhat unlikely, its inclusion nevertheless highlights Jannings' propensity towards an embellished, self-promoting narrative.

Throughout his career, Jannings frequently embodied the roles of famous historical figures both on the stage, and on the cinema screen; from Louis XV in *Madame DuBarry/Passion* (1919) and Henry VIII in *Anne Boleyn/Deception* (1920), to the German scientist Robert Koch and the Boer President Paul Kruger in later wartime propaganda films. Jannings' autobiography reveals an intricate preparatory process which involved reading "history book after history book to learn what I could" about his subjects' lives and characters.¹⁹ From his earliest days in the industry, Jannings had thus approached the practice of historical storytelling through the lens of chronological, biographical narratives recounting the lives of famous historical figures. Whilst Charlie Chaplin's biographer David Robinson recognised common traits spanning across Chaplin's writing processes – whether writing a script, or his own memoir – with Jannings, these two processes appeared to merge, but also inform, and influence one another's practices.²⁰

Jannings' autobiography is reminiscent of a genre of propaganda films produced under the Third Reich, categorised by Eric Rentschler as Nazi 'genius films'. These hagiographic biopics hailed historically-revised narratives characterised by their protagonists' "strained relations to authority, and a constant undermining of established power," or, more precisely, "illegitimate power, staid experts, decadent leaders, and incompetent authorities."²¹ Furthermore, Jannings seems "tormented by unappreciative contemporaries," whilst simultaneously appearing

“unpleasant[,] difficult, and self-indulgent.”²² A large number of these genius films were produced by Tobis Film – the company on whose Board of Directors Jannings had sat since 1936, and would subsequently chair from 1938 onwards, and whose propagandistic genius films would frequently star Jannings as protagonist, such as in the cases of *Robert Koch* (1939) and *Ohm Krüger* (1941). If Jannings’ work with Tobis Film thus mirrors his own writing process, it is surely no great stretch at this stage to claim that *Theater, Film – Das Leben und Ich* similarly reshaped “the past while rewriting history, bending facts for the sake of flattering fictions.”²³

As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that, as recounted in his foreword, “as I began to work, I made an odd discovery. I found that from the moment I looked back on my life, all the colourful details flowed together into an amazing coherent whole.”²⁴ Jannings was crafting his own life story, influenced by the countless historical biographies consumed throughout his career, but also by various examples of Tobis genius films conceptualised, and produced under his own creative control in the late 1930s, and later in the early 1940s.²⁵ It does not seem so fanciful to wonder whether the ever-narcissistic Jannings was, in fact, considering his autobiography as crucial source material for a possible future genius film centred around the great actor himself. Jannings had frequently boasted about his Jewish heritage when considered advantageous in 1920s Berlin – a fact discarded throughout the following decade, but later to regain its usefulness as a means of discrediting any postwar allegations of Nazism.²⁶ Therefore, had the decision to retract his manuscript in 1939 truly been motivated by some strong moral code, or simply illustrative of a narcissistic control freak unwilling to relinquish creative control over a narrative which, as he was well aware, could greatly influence his future legacy?²⁷

Nevertheless, this emphasis on Jannings thus far should not detract us from applying similar scrutiny when considering the actions of those ultimately responsible for releasing his memoir to the public in 1951. Such a critical analysis uncovers further layers of amoral whitewashing. Indeed, *Theater, Film – Das Leben und Ich* was not the sole film-star autobiography published by Zimmer & Herzog in the early 1950s, as Olga Chekhova's *Ich Verschweige Nichts! / I Am Not Hiding Anything!* (1952) was also released the following year. Chekhova's biographer Antony Beevor offers a similar indictment of his subject's memoir – deeming it “exasperatingly disingenuous” – and thus bringing to question the intentions of the common denominator involved in both cases.²⁸

Whilst little information is available regarding the small Bavarian publisher, copyright entry records do allow a brief glimpse behind the scenes. For instance, the individual credited with editing both memoirs – a certain C.C. Bergius – was, in reality, none other than the company's eponymous Egon Maria Zimmer.²⁹ Though he would enjoy a modest career as an author after the war, Zimmer's pre-war legacy appears far bleaker, tarnished by his early conversion to National Socialism in 1930, some three years prior to Hitler's accession to the Chancellorship. In 1945, Zimmer returned from military service and set up his own publishing company: Verlag Zimmer & Herzog. Returning to Niven's initial qualms, how ironic to discover that the distribution of such problematic, postwar whitewashed memoirs to the wider German public should have unfolded under the control, and at the behest of (ex-)Nazi proponents. The Allies' denazification efforts had, to some extent, contributed towards the exoneration of guilty individuals.³⁰ Therefore, despite the collapse of the Third Reich in 1945, figures of yester-year remained in positions of power; thus, not only re-writing the history of the 1930s German film industry, but rather, controlling the collective direction of a larger postwar Germany.

Dack highlights the denazification *Fragebögen* process as contributing heavily towards the formation of a movement of mass societal victimhood in postwar Germany. Jannings appears to have acted no differently to his fellow countrymen, equally eager to distance himself from his past, and now cumbersome associations with Hitler's government. Whilst denazification had stripped Jannings of his ability to continue his acting career, this had not prevented him from denouncing his former superiors. In the late 1940s, Jannings began accusing Goebbels of having coerced him into appearing in the leading role of the anti-British propaganda film *Ohm Krüger*.³¹ Though, unsurprisingly, this genius film was yet another Tobis Film production, and, as Kater rightfully notes, had been "largely controlled by Jannings himself."³² In fact, its rough concept had originated as early as 1928, in Hollywood, as a project intended to revolve around Jannings as lead actor.³³ But the film was cancelled after the sudden upheaval caused by the introduction of synchronised sound cinema – though later re-designed, and lobbied to Goebbels as useful wartime propaganda by none other than Jannings.³⁴ The difference between Jannings and his fellow countrymen was that the broader postwar German societal phenomenon had originated in 1945, whereas Jannings' own behaviour had manifested itself years prior.³⁵

As evidenced through this critical reading of his autobiography, Jannings was a master of self-preservation. During the fall of Berlin in May 1945, legend has it that Jannings brandished his gold statuette upon confrontation with an American GI, shouting 'I have Oscar, don't shoot!'.³⁶ This is particularly ironic given Jannings' staunch refusal to obey Goebbels' commands that he return to Berlin in the latter years of the war to continue appearing in state-mandated propaganda films; "struck down by an almost pathological fear of bombs" according to the Minister of Propaganda.³⁷ However, as Goebbels' diaries highlight, Jannings' amorality equally swung in the opposite direction when deemed beneficial, as he falsely denounced a fellow, rival, and supposedly "better actor" for staging an imaginary anti-Nazi demonstration

in one of his studios.³⁸ The actor's strained relationship with the truth visibly extended beyond the written word.

How should Jannings' autobiography be approached today? Whilst translation undoubtedly occupies a vital role in shaping the academic canon, Jannings' unreliable memoir represents a cautionary tale in the matter. However, I do not suggest that Jannings should perpetually reside on the margins of film history – destined to remain a simple bystander to acknowledged peers such as Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo.³⁹ I would instead advocate for a critical approach; one providing a just balance between recognition and moral accountability. Currently, there is not only a lack of scholarly texts devoted to Jannings, but also an absence of modern-day biographies of the inaugural Oscar laureate for Best Actor in 1928.⁴⁰ As Gerd Gemünden carefully clarifies in the footnotes to one of such rare scholarly studies, the actor's autobiography should solely serve to convey the “authority *claimed*” by its author.⁴¹ Nevertheless, once correctly dissected, the *authority claimed* within *Theater, Film – Das Leben und Ich* should inevitably contribute – perhaps not towards an unethical, self-congratulating genius-film script – but rather towards a critical assessment of this nonetheless important figure within film history. A figure who undisputedly *stayed true to his* – albeit opportunistic and amoral – *principles*.

Notes

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- ¹ Emil Jannings, *Theater, Film – Das Leben und Ich* (Berchtesgaden: Verlag Zimmer & Herzog, 1951).
- ² Michael Silberman, “The Ideology of Re-Presenting the Classics: Filming *Der Zerbrochene Krug* in the Third Reich,” *The German Quarterly*, 57(4) (1984): 593.
- ³ Bill Niven, *Hitler and Film: The Führer’s Hidden Passion* (London: Yale University Press, 2018), p. 230.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 229.
- ⁵ Mikkel Dack, “Tailoring Truth: Memory Construction and Whitewashing the Nazi Past from Below,” *German Politics and Society*, 39(1) (2021): 21.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.
- ⁷ Bill Niven, *Hitler and Film*, pp. 121-123.
- ⁸ Emil Jannings, *Das Leben und Ich*, p. 203.
- ⁹ Michael H. Kater, “Film as an Object of Reflection in the Goebbels Diaries: Series II (1941-1945),” *Central European History*, 33(3) (2000): 411.
- ¹⁰ Michael Silberman, “The Ideology of Re-Presenting the Classics,” 592.
- ¹¹ Emil Jannings, *Das Leben und Ich*, p. 6. This, and any further translation of Jannings’ memoir found within this piece are my own.
- ¹² Bill Niven, *Hitler and Film*, p. 136.
- ¹³ Emil Jannings, *Das Leben und Ich*, p. 7.
- ¹⁴ See: “Savez-Vous Que ...,” *L’Intransigeant*, 12 February 1927, 4; “Film Star’s £2,000 A Week,” *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 2 December 1927, 6.
- ¹⁵ Emil Jannings, “Mein Werdegang,” *UFA-Magazin*, 1-7 October 1926, 6; Gerd Gemünden, “Emil Jannings: Translating the Star,” in *Idols of Modernity: Movie Stars of the 1920s*, edited by Patrice Petro (London: Rutgers University Press, 2010), p. 201.
- ¹⁶ It is worth acknowledging that other film stars’ autobiographies of this period similarly blurred the lines between the truth and fantasy. For example, see: Mary Pickford, *Sunshine and Shadow* (London: William Heinemann, 1956).
- ¹⁷ *UFA-Magazin*, 1-7 October 1926, 6; Emil Jannings, “La Meilleure École du Cinéma Est le Théâtre,” *Ciné-Mondial*, 21 November 1941, 4.
- ¹⁸ Emil Jannings, *Das Leben und Ich*, pp. 139-140.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.
- ²⁰ David Robinson, “Introduction,” in Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (London, Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 2.
- ²¹ Eric Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and Its Afterlife* (London: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 182.
- ²² *Ibid.*, pp. 182-183.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 182.
- ²⁴ Emil Jannings, *Das Leben und Ich*, p. 5.
- ²⁵ Michael Silberman, “The Ideology of Re-Presenting the Classics,” 592. Prior to sitting on, and chairing the Board of Directors at Tobis Film, Jannings had been elected to head the artistic committee, and would proceed to greatly influence Tobis Film productions from thereon.
- ²⁶ Gerd Gemünden, “Emil Jannings,” p. 201.
- ²⁷ Frank Noack, *Veit Harlan: The Life and Work of a Nazi Filmmaker* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2012), p. 103. In relation to Jannings’ stage career, Noack claims that “Unable to compete with [Walter] Krauss onstage, Jannings decided to immortalize himself as Matthias Clausen onscreen, knowing that celluloid would last longer” [my italics].
- ²⁸ Antony Beevor, *The Mystery of Olga Chekhova: The True Story of a Family Torn Apart by Revolution and War* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 16.
- ²⁹ *Catalogue of Copyright Entries: Third Series, 1952* (Washington: The Library of Congress, 1951), pp. 262-263.
- ³⁰ See: Mikkel Dack, “Tailoring Truth: Memory Construction and Whitewashing the Nazi Past from Below,” *German Politics and Society*, 39(1) (2021): 15-36.

³¹ Michael H. Kater, *Culture in Nazi Germany* (London: Yale University Press, 2020), p. 190.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Gerd Gemünden, “Emil Jannings,” p. 183.

³⁴ Michael H. Kater, *Culture in Nazi Germany*, p. 190.

³⁵ Konrad H. Jarausch, *After Hitler: Recivilizing Germans, 1945-1995* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 46. Jarausch argues that “Due to fear of the victorious powers and disappointment in Hitler’s promises, the total defeat initiated a rapid process of distancing from National Socialism and its organisations” in the latter months of the war – a process coined “self-denazification”.

³⁶ At the tail-end of his time in Hollywood, in 1928, Jannings had been awarded the very first Academy Award for Best Actor in recognition of his combined roles in both *The Way of All Flesh* (1928) and *The Last Command* (1928).

³⁷ Bill Niven, *Hitler and Film*, p. 213.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

³⁹ For example, see: Erica Carter, *Dietrich’s Ghosts: The Sublime and the Beautiful in Third Reich Film* (London: BFI, 2004).

⁴⁰ This is peculiar considering the numerous biographies produced across Europe throughout his career. See: Munkepunke, *Jannings 1000%* (Hamburg: Prismen Verlag, 1930); and Jean Mitry, *Emil Jannings: Ses Débuts, Ses Films, Ses Aventures* (Paris: Jean Pascal, 1928). For a rare, modern, and German-language biography of Jannings, see: Frank Noack, *Jannings: Der Erste Deutsche Weltstar* (München: Belleville, 2009).

⁴¹ Gerd Gemünden, “Emil Jannings,” p. 200.

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