On Kuhle Wampe
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While the early Weimar cinema evolved innovative visual, narrational, and technological effects to depict the volatile social relations of the period, *Kuhle Wampe, or Who Owns the World?* marks a more radical, overtly politicized appeal to the spectator in the context of social polarization toward the end of the Weimar Republic. Addressed to a fractured and even indifferent working class audience, buffeted by the consequences of social and economic crisis, the film suggests why and how only a collective subject can sustain the emancipatory claims of revolutionary change. Produced as a collaborative project by Slatan Dudow, Bertolt Brecht, Ernst Ottwalt, and Hanns Eisler, under the protection of the Communist Party and with the participation of many prominent leftist artists, *Kuhle Wampe* was released less than a year before the Nazi takeover in 1933. The project not only reveals symptomatic hopes and illusions on the part of the left during this time of unrest; it also marks a watershed in discussions on the nature of cinematic representation, as well as the abrupt endpoint of a decade-long development of leftist filmmaking in Germany. With the onset of the Third Reich, it was at the top of Joseph Goebbels’s list of films to be banned and withdrawn from distribution.

*Kuhle Wampe* was banned by the Nazis on March 23, 1933. One month later, on April 23, 1933, *Kuhle Wampe* premiered at the Cameo Theater in New York City. Malcolm Cowley, the American novelist, poet, literary critic, and journalist, introduced *Kuhle Wampe* as “a triumph for proletarian cinematic art.” *The New York Times* announced the event, noting that “*Kuhle Wampe* [would be] prefaced by screen talks from Amos Pinchot, Norman Thomas, Hendrik Willem Van Loon, Mrs. (sic) Lincoln Steffens and others denouncing Hitlerism and the persecution of the Jews.”

Despite Lenin’s stress on the cinema as the most important of the arts, the German Communist Party (KPD) saw popular entertainment films as a tool used by the capitalist class to divert the attention of the workers from the class struggle. This suspicious attitude toward mass media dominated party policy until new Soviet films by Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Dziga Vertov demonstrated a different kind of visual and agitational model for a leftist alternative to the commercial industry. With the founding of the Prometheus-Film company in 1926, as a German distribution outlet for these Soviet films and, more important, as a company with sufficient capital to underwrite worker-oriented films produced in Germany, the KPD established a means of producing its own features aimed at mobilizing the working class. *Kuhle Wampe*, a non-commercial, independent production, was the last one produced by Prometheus. Before the film was finished, however, the company went bankrupt and was only able to complete *Kuhle Wampe* with financial support from the Swiss Praesens-Film company.

Prometheus-Film declared their official liquidation on January 20, 1932. In an interview recorded in 1974, one of the producers of *Kuhle Wampe*, Georg Hoellering, remembered: “There was still about 10% of the shooting to be done, mostly inexpensive scenes out of doors. At this point Prometheus-Film went bankrupt and the lab refused to do any more work for us.”

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Indebted to the example of Soviet montage, it shows how a politicized cinema that goes beyond issues of radical content tries to engage and empower the audience. Both documentary and feature-length entertainment films produced by Prometheus after 1926 stressed proletarian content as a contrast to the commercial industry, at the expense of formal innovation. As a result, these productions celebrated their status as “class-conscious” alternatives to the dominant cinema, although they imitated the already popular successes of the major studios. As such, *Kuhle Wampe* is an anomaly, for this collaborative film production argues for a dialectic of political form and social content that engages the spectator in a process of imagining a revolutionary collective subject.

For two reasons, 1929 marked a crucial turning point for independent leftist cinema: the introduction of the sound film and the onset of the international market crash. For the commercial film industry the coming of sound was a blessing in disguise, a new technology that despite its high investment costs promised to increase flagging audience attendance owing to its novelty. An undercapitalized firm like Prometheus, however, found it impossible to compete. The worldwide depression only complicated these tendencies. The major studios produced more and more escapist fare for an audience that had less and less discretionary income to buy admission tickets. Moreover, the growing polarization of German society affected all working-class cultural agencies, which were devoting reduced resources to battle ever harsher state censorship.

The actual idea for *Kuhle Wampe* was suggested by Slatan Dudow early in 1931, when he approached Prometheus with an idea for a film about unemployment and resignation in a working-class family (Brecht and Dudow 1931a). A Bulgarian who, after studying theater in Berlin, had become involved with Erwin Piscator’s political stagings, Dudow first met Brecht in 1929 and then became involved in the production of his *Lehrstück* (Learning Play) entitled *Die Maßnahme* (The Measures Taken, Gersch 1975: 104). Despite its financial difficulties, Prometheus accepted the project with an eye to integrating the sports and unemployment themes into what would become its first sound film. The intermittent shooting of the film lasted almost three quarters of a year, from August 1931 until February 1932 (Lindner and Gerz 2002: 438).

For Brecht, these were the years during which he was formulating his “materialist aesthetics” through the study of Marxist texts. Seeking new answers to the question of “What is political art?” he experimented with models for linking cultural production to social change in his *Lehrstücke*, in film scenarios, and in theoretical essays such as those that accompanied his court case against the producers of the filmed version of *The Threepenny Opera*, the 1928 Brecht/Weill musical that had become the most successful play of the Weimar years and thrust the author into the international limelight. Brecht, who was concerned with the implications of his play’s success in a thoroughly bourgeois theater institution, wrote a new film scenario in order to radicalize the musical’s formal means of distanciation and its anti-capitalist message. Film director Georg Wilhelm Pabst and the producer refused, however, to recognize Brecht’s rights as author to revise the play, and their film version opened in February 1931 to rave reviews. So Brecht and Weill sued in a widely publicized trial, which immediately preceded the start of shooting *Kuhle Wampe*.

In his 1932 book-length essay *Der Dreigroschenprozeß: Ein soziologisches Experiment* (The Threepenny Lawsuit: A Sociological Experiment), Brecht presents his most extended and coherent analysis of how the medium of film impacts the way art represents reality and the way the reader or spectator sees (Brecht 1932a). The trial, and Brecht’s presentation of it, were brilliant examples of an applied dialectics that counterposed two ideological institutions: the state justice system, with its norms of contract law and copyright protection, against the film industry’s media practice, with its economic exigencies and cultural legitimations. In fact, the lawsuit against the film production company was the point of departure, but the essay neither documents the trial nor raises the issues of cinematic adaptation surrounding his scenario or, for that matter, Pabst’s film. Rather, Brecht assumed the persona of the naive artist for the purposes of his “sociological experiment,” demonstrating how new technologies and capitalist market mechanisms had removed the means of production from the hands of the artist and, in the process, destroyed the idealistic and metaphysical ideology of cultural production. The modern artist, like the laborer in industrial society, had no choice but to organize collectively. Here Brecht sought to unmask the contradiction between bourgeois ideologies of autonomous art and the demands of capitalist production in the sphere of culture.
If *The Threepenny Lawsuit* represents Brecht’s most sophisticated contribution to media theory, then the 1932 film *Kuhle Wampe* can be considered his most important legacy in film history, the only example of his practical work that came close to realizing the idea of de-individualizing (aesthetic) production in the cinema. Not only the film’s image of the industrial metropolis and the polarized working class, but also its planning and shooting integrate the collective experience with new ways of representing reality. The artistic collective that came together around Brecht and Dudow was in part dictated by difficult and impoverished production conditions, but also reflected the attempt to counteract hierarchical studio arrangements in the commercial film industry. Dudow brought in novelist Ernst Ottwald, to whom the screenplay is attributed along with Brecht, because of his intimate knowledge of the working-class environment. Composer Hanns Eisler, who was working with Brecht and Dudow on the stage production of Brecht’s *Die Mutter* (The Mother), also joined the team. He had experience writing modernist film music and enjoyed a reputation for his popular workers’ songs (Eisler 1942). Brecht’s wife, Helene Weigel, who sings one of Eisler’s ballads in the film, and Ernst Busch, who plays the lead role of Fritz and sings the “Solidarity Song,” were also well-known actors in the workers’ theater movement. Finally, the appearance of the leading German agitprop theater group, *Das rote Sprachrohr* (The Red Megaphone), as well as the participation of four thousand workers’ sports club enthusiasts in the final section of the film brought an unusual degree of visibility and public interest to the collective project. Brecht himself emphasized the collective nature of the project as part of its political commitment to an alternative to the capitalist mode of production (Brecht 1932b). Although the film’s credits, as well as the original poster, list Dudow as director, Brecht and Ottwald (sic) as scriptwriters, and Eisler as composer (see Gersch and Hecht 1969: 7 & 137), in its post-1960s reception *Kuhle Wampe* is frequently attributed to Brecht alone, rather than recognized as the product of collaborative teamwork.

*Kuhle Wampe’s* theme is a departure from the “traditional” proletarian film productions supported by Prometheus and the Communist Party. Although it takes up plot elements similar to the social drama — including a suicide, a love affair, leisure activities, and the emancipation of the daughter through political work — the film specifically problematizes the apolitical behavior of the petty bourgeoisie and working class, i.e., the very issue that in the early thirties was proving to be a fertile basis for Nazi recruitment. In the period of crisis characterizing the last years of the Weimar Republic, the structural instability of the working and lower-middle classes caused by unemployment and impoverishment made them particularly susceptible to petty bourgeois ideologies of classless social harmony proposed by the National Socialists. *Kuhle Wampe* addresses this issue, not so much to clarify its causes, but to show the powerlessness resulting from the desire to escape from politics altogether.

Beyond its thematic and political distinction, *Kuhle Wampe* introduces as well a different structural approach. Brecht and Dudow were both familiar with the montage principles that Eisenstein and Vertov had introduced to Soviet cinema, and they resonated especially with Brecht’s explorations of Epic Theater. What he found congenial was the constructivist principle of cinematic montage, premised on interruption and collision. This type of montage editing brings together images or shots that do not “fit,” but insist on being “read” by the spectator, eliciting cognitive activity such as observing, evaluating, and deciding. *Kuhle Wampe* was, in fact, an important opportunity for Brecht to test his Epic Theater principles in the medium of film, which he thought used the most advanced artistic means of representation and therefore promised the greatest political impact. The cinema confirmed his notion that technological changes have a massive stake in constituting and interpreting reality. Yet just as Brecht’s dramaturgical practice was directed against “culinary” theater, so he rejected transforming film into a “high” art form as an alternative to the entertainment industry. Rather, he saw cinema as mass art with revolutionary potential. What’s more, Brecht considered the cinema closer to visual arts, like painting or photography, than to the dramatic or narrative arts. For that reason, his attention focused on the organization of images within as well as between cinematic frames, privileging the disjointed quality of montage. Dudow, Brecht, and Ottwald also shared an interest in the documentary nature of cinema, with its promise of referentiality and authenticity. Hence, they avoided the mimetic notion of realism that relies on the reproduction of an illusion of reality; instead, they invested their energy in the conscious selection and...
composition of reality. This explains why the camerawork in *Kuhle Wampe* is relatively restrained, even uninteresting, when compared to the virtuosity and expressiveness of the earlier Weimar cinema. On the other hand, from the Soviet cinema Dudow and Brecht integrated an awareness of cinematic punctuation, which they exploited to the full.

Striking editing and visual effects draw attention to the film’s strategies for producing meaning. The film opens, for example, not with an establishing shot, but with a prologue or overture. A collage of quick takes from dynamically contrasting camera angles reveals a striking economy of images to indicate location, urban space, and economic crisis: the action is located in Berlin (image of the Brandenburg Gate), in a working-class neighborhood (shots of a factory and tenements), during the depression (newspaper headlines document the steep rise in unemployment figures). The printed title (“One Unemployed Worker Less”) and the overture-like opening music — theatrical markings that recall Brecht’s stage productions — accompany the montage of static, discontinuous images. This filmic structure suggests, in other words, not the reproduction of reality but its construction; and the stress on the documentary aspect of each shot has an almost fine-arts, photographic quality, rather than a dramatic or narrative quality.

The next sequence introduces themes of everyday working-class life and marks a shift in the editing rhythm that retards with a long take of a group of job seekers gathering at a corner and waiting for the daily classified ads to be distributed. When the paperboy arrives, they grab the leaflets, scan them with the eyes of experienced job seekers, and jump on their bicycles. The pace quickens with rapidly cut shots of their feet pumping the bike pedals, often from extreme angles. The sequence of images describes a pattern of circularity as a metaphor for the hopelessness of the job search: the wheels turning, the fast pedaling, ever quicker turnarounds at closed factory gates. Accompanying these introductory segments is Eisler’s pulsating music — fast, staccato, and dissonant — underlining the abrupt montage editing and structuring the viewer’s relation to the bicycle race and its message of desperation through speed and repetition.

These first sequences illustrate how the use of montage editing in *Kuhle Wampe* expands Brecht’s evolving practice of Epic Theater. Interruptions (expository titles, inserts, songs, choruses), contrasts of sound and image (commentary, voice-off, autonomous music), documentary-like quotes (Berlin streets and architecture, newspaper headlines), and disruptive editing (unusual camera angles spliced together, sudden extreme close-ups, direct address to the camera) are central performance and representational principles for structuring meaning in this film. The famous “Mata Hari” sequence provides an example of Eisenstein’s polyphonic montage that produces an abstract idea from the collision of the parts (image, dialogue, printed text). While Anni’s father reads with fascination a passage from the newspaper about the adventures of the vamp Mata Hari, tripping over foreign words and deliciously enjoying the suggestive sensuality in the description of the dancer’s nude body, the mother calculates the weekly food expenses, oblivious to the father’s voice which continues throughout the sequence. The montage juxtaposes their two very different facial expressions with close-ups of price tags for food items, setting in relation through speech, written signs, and contrasting images the boredom and emptiness fed by the pulp press, on the one hand, and the family’s everyday distress, on the other.

The various montage strategies in *Kuhle Wampe* present images, music, dialogue, and action as signals to the spectator that this film is meant to be closely watched and evaluated. For Brecht reality is not what the spectator sees but what the spectator recognizes behind the visible surface of the images. If we spectators recognize ourselves in the film’s reality and at the same time see ourselves being confronted with reality as a construct, then this “epic cinema” can lead us to consider how to change reality. *Kuhle Wampe* is, then, an early and exceptional example of how to link questions of representation, social change, and the subject who will effect that change. It presents a visual argument, but subordinates to it both psychological depth and causality. Motivation for events arises only from the “verisimilitude” of the images’ documentary quality, whose references “quote” the real like a case study, rather than projecting the illusion of a seamless reality or totality. The narrative relies, then, on a complex web of fragments, in which the autonomy of the scenes draws attention to the spectator’s cognitive process of connecting them.
Dudow, Brecht, Ottwalt, and Eisler produced the film with a historical spectator in mind: the class-conscious workers who in the early 1930s were familiar with and sympathetic to the political demand for solidarity projected in the last act. In contrast to films of the 1920s, which typically bind the spectator to the spectacle through conventional narrative patterns of identification and catharsis, *Kuhle Wampe* constructs a dynamic relation of contradiction between continuity and discontinuity. It does not aim to providing an answer for the spectator, but it does aim to awaken the spectator’s recognition of the possibility for change. This emphasis on the spectator as producer of meaning is inscribed in the disjointed representation of a collective subject, whose position is only provisional, projected in the space between the film’s final question (who will change the world?) and answer (those who don’t like it!).

*Kuhle Wampe* was finally released for distribution on April 25, 1932, after several cuts demanded by the censorship board were made in the original version. (See selected censorship documents in Gersch and Hecht 1969: 103-139).

For more on the 1932 *Kuhle Wampe* censorship case, see the East German TV documentary, *Kuhle Wampe - Censored!* (*Feigenblatt für Kuhle Wampe*, 1975, Dirs: Christa Mühl & Werner Hecht), also released by the DEFA Film Library.  

After first screening in Moscow in mid-May, during a visit by Brecht and Dudow, it opened in Berlin on May 30 for a successful run in multiple cinemas. The censors had been most concerned with the film’s political traction, seeing in it an example of communist propaganda that threatened both public morality (Anni’s abortion, a nude bathing scene), and the social order (linking the lack of social welfare to the son’s suicide). The widespread press reaction to the censorship attempt, on the part of prominent progressives and leftists, focused on the general threat to intellectual freedom and defended the film specifically on the basis of its artistic integrity (Gersch und Hecht 1969: 143-167; Kühn, Tümmler und Wimmer 1978, vol. 2: 130-85). Yet the actual film reviews, published after the screenings in Moscow and Germany, reflected an ambivalence and reserve that indicate the consequences of its unusual, open structure (Korte 1998: 245-265).

For decades, opinion has varied as to, how and when film material of *Kuhle Wampe* resurfaced after WWII. Wolfgang Klaue, former director of the East German State Film Archive, remembers the arrival of a print when he was still a research assistant there. An original 35mm print of *Kuhle Wampe* – presumably the only remaining original material of the film – was given to the Archive by the Cinémathèque Française in 1956 or 1957. This original print was used for the production of prints for the first postwar re-release of the film on February 26, 1958. For more information, see “The Second Life of Kuhle Wampe,” by Wolfgang Klaue – on this DVD.

For many years, *Kuhle Wampe’s* impact as a model for politically motivated, revolutionary cinema and as an alternative to studio conventions seemed largely negligible. A younger generation of filmmakers, cinema-goers, and critics raised new questions about the film’s historical contradictions, however. *Kuhle Wampe* reasserted itself in the post-1968 politicization of the public sphere within a tradition of political cinema and through Brecht’s ideas on the nature of cinematic representation and, more generally, his reflections on political art. In West Germany, the Oberhausen Manifesto of 1962 seemed to cite Brecht’s *Threepenny Lawsuit* in calling for the socialization of the means of communication. Moreover, many of the directors who came to represent the international success of West German cinema in the 1970s -- Alexander Kluge, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Harun Farocki, Helke Sander, etc. -- owed much to the constructivist model of anti-illusionist realism that Brecht and Dudow implemented in *Kuhle Wampe*. The most radical and consistent student of Brecht’s aesthetics was French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard. Through his films, especially *Tout va bien* (1972), Godard mediated much of the theoretical tradition for which Brecht stands in the French, Anglo-American, and Latin American cinemas. Furthermore, in the mid-seventies Brecht’s modernist aesthetics and *Kuhle Wampe* became important touchstones for discussions...
about the possibilities and limitations of political filmmaking among many film critics and scholars (Walsh 1981; Mueller 1989; Baecque).

The end of the Cold War and German unification, the publication of a new 30-volume edition of Brecht’s works, and the historicization of his contributions have not diminished interest in *Kuhle Wampe*, as scholars and viewers continue to offer different readings of the film. *Kuhle Wampe*, in other words, maintains its status as a paradigmatic work, negotiating the dialectical relation between aesthetic innovation and political commitment in the cinema, and demonstrating that any discourse about the real and the cognitive relations that govern it cannot escape an examination of how we represent “reality” and how those representations constitute that very reality.

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Boxed notes researched by Hiltrud Schulz


REFERENCES


