The Austrian musical film of the early sound era would not be primary in carrying the cinema’s reputation nationally and abroad. Instead, the core Viennese Film of Willi Forst and Walter Reisch, their lavish, mostly period melodramas set in Vienna and dealing with love in the music or art world, were more significant and many were remade by Hollywood studios throughout the 1930s. Nevertheless, Austrian film could showcase an uncommonly large pool of famous musical talent which it borrowed from its formidable opera stages and concert halls. These were often confusingly split between the “aryanized” films after 1933 (often co-produced with Germany) made for German import and the Emigrantenfilm, or the independent cinema, comprised of German émigré and Austrian/Hungarian talent unacceptable to German racial standards.

This article will examine how Austrian musical film performed a “national service” under Austrofascism by underscoring Viennese and Austrian cultural identity. Set in contemporary time, the Musikfilm or Sängerfilm differs in mood and message from traditional cinematic operetta treatments – ironically more popular during the silent era than in sound after 1930 – through a self-conscious awareness of the era’s economic and social hardships. Unlike the escapist opulence of Hollywood musicals during this period or the Nazi German attempt to provide entertainment that ideologically supported its new racist order, Austrian musical films projected a sense of measured or reasonable “fantasy” which, to some extent, echoed the modest values of the Biedermeier period settings of the Viennese Film and the core genre’s self-sacrifice themed narratives. These films were the most popularly successful in approaching class conflict, poverty, and gender role questions. Their mild experiments in mise-en-scène, montage, photography and lighting, and most importantly music, offered a more accurate cultural barometer of Austria’s attempt to absorb postimperial sociopolitical realities than the more internationally famous Viennese Film genre.

While sound production came relatively late to Austria given the high costs of refitting studios and theatres, the country could boast one of the leading sound processes of the time. Austrian film had experimented as early as the
mid-1920s with a sound to film transfer process, but the American synchronized Western Electric system beat it to the international market in 1927. By the early 1930s, the Austrian Selenophon system and the German Tobis-Klangfilm system were considered rivals of the American system, vying for European dominance until the 1938 Anschluss ended Selenophon’s run. Rather than copy Hollywood’s “all singing, all dancing, all talking” productions that attempted to capture global imagination with new technology overkill, Austria used sound to bring its vaunted cabaret tradition to the screen, and like the French, particularly René Clair, who would so influence Willi Forst in his Viennese Film genre, initially concentrated on romantic comedies and dramas, with interspersed song or dance numbers. Additionally, Vienna’s film industry, still influenced by leftist politics and projects of the 1920s (the theatres in the city were run by the Social Democratic KIBA organization), used sound to present unique proletarian cinema; feature narratives that explored the working class milieu and the fables of anti-capitalist comedies influenced by Soviet film.

The core Forst/Reisch Viennese Film genre, its imitations and generalizations (to the point that any film dealing with a sentimental narrative in Viennese dialect would eventually be considered such), was to represent Austria’s motion picture style through the Austrofascist period into the Anschluss and even influenced the imperial-era costume dramas and comedies of the postwar cinema. It appeared nearly simultaneously with the Dollfuss clerico-authoritarian state, and its stylized period romances dealing with the sacrifice of love for art emphasized the topos Vienna at the same time that it provided a more edifying film experience than simple operetta or the few overtly Catholic-themed features. The contemporary Austrian musical film which also emerged with sound was unlike those that made history in Hollywood, London, Paris, or even Berlin. With the Viennese Film as bearer of the image of a Vienna both national and international audiences wanted to see (but without the tired clichés and narrative limitations of operetta brought to the screen), the Austrian Musikfilm concentrated on contemporary settings, mostly believable romantic/comic characters which had been influenced by the cabaret tradition, and new music – which also meant waltzes reframed by modern orchestration. The genre attempted to locate a modern Vienna, yet its urban and suburban petit bourgeois and working class world struggling to survive the economic depression and find happiness in a modest way, had not forgotten its artistic and cultural heritage. For the most part, while the Musikfilm makes this past an unquestioned basis of Viennese/Austrian identity, it does not sentimentalize the past or aspects of the lost monarchy.
Two films by Hungarian director in Vienna, Paul (Pal) Fejos, ostensibly had the most influence on the direction of the contemporary Austrian musical film. Fejos, who had studied medicine and had worked in minor positions in film in Vienna, Berlin, and Paris after the war, managed to find employment in the U.S. in 1926 as a research assistant in chemistry for the Ford Foundation in New York, but he moved to Hollywood to direct low-budget films for Universal Studios. His 1928 film, *Lonesome*, a socially critical love story between two alienated New Yorkers which anticipates his first Austrian film, *Sonnenstrahl/Ray of Sun* (1933), brought him attention and he directed the lavish 1929 art-deco sound musical *Broadway*, for which he and his cinematographer Hal Mohr developed a giant crane and which utilized early Technicolor in its finale. His prediction of what would become the Hollywood Golden Age musical spectacle moved him to MGM, but his unsatisfying tenure there turned him briefly to productions in Paris and Budapest. After being replaced as director of the royal intrigue melodrama *Captain of the Guard* (1930), his contract with MGM was terminated and he relocated to Vienna. There he followed in the cinematic footsteps of the successful Austro-Hungarians before him (Michael Curtiz and Alexander Korda) under the tutelage of leading silent-era producer Sascha Kolowrat, and their concept of creating a more internationalist Austrian film style. Fejos, however, rejected the concepts of Hollywood’s trendy Busby Berkeley musical epics or the Rogers and Astaire dance films in favor of fables about achievable personal goals. He aimed these at audiences that had to rebuild identities amid sociopolitical trauma and had experienced none of the postwar economic success that America enjoyed.

French star Annabella, with whom he had worked in Paris, and German leading man Gustav Fröhlich were Fejos’s choices for the socially critical Viennese musical film of 1933, *Sonnenstrahl/Ray of Sun*. Shot mostly on location and presuggesting neo-realism, the film grounds its story firmly in the poverty of the day, opening with a newsreel informing of the world’s events and concluding with a report on unemployment and financial depression in Austria, in which the male lead, Fröhlich, as the unemployed chauffeur Hans Schmidt, is spotted by the camera as he stands in an unemployment line. He is an unhappy, rumpled everyman attempting to avoid the camera’s glare. The introduction breaks the audience’s expectation of cinema as escapist fantasy and reproducer of safe convention. The spectator is forced to sympathize and even identify with the character of Hans and the “realism” functions as a distancing effect from notions of the constructed romance or comedy in favor of a more socially critical involvement. In the following scene, Hans is informed that he has been locked out of his room...
because he owes rent and his belongings have been taken in lieu of payment. The dejected man makes his way to the Danube Canal intending to drown himself. As he attempts to write a suicide note, he is interrupted by another figure with similar plans. A young woman suddenly jumps into the canal and Hans rushes to pull her from the dark, cold water. He sits wrapped around her freezing body in the dramatic chiaroscuro lighting used to suggest that this ought to be a romantic moment. But it cannot be. As he berates her for wanting to throw her life away, she finds his note. The failed double suicide attempt instead becomes an introductory catharsis that underscores despair. Hans’s rescue of the woman, which also rescued him, provides a tabula rasa at the very start of the narrative. The hope of the film, even as the musical it will become, stems from this moment of gentle intimacy and the conveyance of the value of a single life. In the police wagon, covered in blankets and with their faces denying the artificial cinema glamour of the era, the film falls silent as if to indicate that the vulgarity of sound technology is not needed to bring the point across. It is both unspoken and universal. In what should have become one of the classic scenes in Western cinema history, Hans writes on the frosted window words that will make us hope for this couple in a measured and honest way: “Das Leben ist schön.”

Rather than echo the contrived Hollywood escapism he had known, Fejos transforms a social critical narrative into a poetic realist musical. The film begins with the disaster that other melodramas might conclude with. Film historian Christine Brinkmann maintains that the sequence in the police wagon is central to all his sound work, which continues a love for the silent, the atmospheric, and the rapidly altering emotions of the characters (3). His narrative prefers the clarity of realism and its irony without the convoluted subplots usually found in romantic and urban drama films. At the police station, Hans discovers that saving Anna’s life earns him a small reward, and so they pass beyond the other pathetic figures in the station until they see the sun rising and Hans points out the “Sonnenstrahl.” There is a new day and it has promise.

Hans buys Anna a comb and discovers he can create small spot removers from soap chips which he then sells. They manage to afford a room for Anna, while Hans sleeps on a park bench. The scene of the following morning underscores Fejos’s poetization of the impoverished existence: the newspapers which blanket him blow away in the wind as he awakens (referencing the “magical” effects of Hollywood musicals but finding visual beauty in the everyday world), and a fountain provides for Hans’s morning ablutions. Anna sells balloons in the Prater and Hans, in blackface, also works as a “moor” in a shooting gallery. But he is hurt and Anna loses the balloons. The
druggist who subsequently treats Hans’s wound hires Anna to be his shampoo model, and Hans parades the streets with a sandwich board promoting the shampoo. Fejos uses silent montage to essay their interactions and to convey Hans’s desire to own a taxi, which is set to the tinny opera music that is heard from a store’s loudspeaker. It suggests a metafilmic parody of the form of the musical/opera/operetta film itself.

Hans and Anna manage to secure work as managers of an apartment house, but only as a married couple. Hans places a curtain ring on Anna’s finger and they symbolically marry themselves as they watch a fancy wedding at the St. Stephen’s Cathedral from a distance. Unable to afford such a ceremony and without relatives or friends, they nevertheless insist on the sacrament. They may “borrow” the ritual from another couple, but the experience is theirs. Brinkmann believes this to be homage to Murnau’s *Sunrise* (1927) in which a couple secretly doubles a wedding, but it is also an ambiguous statement on the importance of Catholic values in Austria. The couple has found a basis for their happiness together aside from what money might bring them. Their symbolic honeymoon, which they pantomime as a world trip in an empty travel agency, “works like an insert of a musical number,” (Brinkmann 3).

Even more so is their next job as night cleaners in a department store after they have lost their required deposit for the dual managerial position at the apartment house. With the radio on, they dance to the band music accompanying the report of a millionaire’s gala party in Florida, again referencing the Hollywood musical with its exotic locales and its dream resolution, which is unthinkable here. Donning the elegant clothing they find, they continue their fantasy honeymoon, but are dismissed the next morning when they are found asleep in their costumes.

When the couple witnesses a street accident that involves a bank courier, they return his bag to the bank and as a reward, Hans becomes the new courier. With a decent wage, they are able to rent a room in the Wohnhaus Friedrich-Engels-Platz, the modern Social Democratic workers apartment block completed that year (it became one of the sites of conflict between the Austrofascist regime and Leftists in the short civil war of 1934). Fejos seems less interested in making a point regarding partisan politics than about the human condition, and he contrives the first shots of the new building complex to make the site only slightly recognizable. Hans and Anna have also managed the down payment on a taxi. The couple subsequently attends a chauffeur’s ball where they emerge from a pile of streamers and confetti as from a marriage bed singing “Ein kleines Lächeln bringt dir wieder Sonnenschein.” This apotheosis of their relationship and celebration of their measured success is Fejos’s closest approach to the production style of a conventional musical
film. But while their hard work continues, their luck does not last. Hans’s injury in attempting to find a child’s lost coin in the tracks of an oncoming streetcar lands him in the hospital and Anna unsuccessfully attempts to fill in as a courier. Her heartbreaking exhortations to block the man who has come to repossess their taxi for lack of payment evolves into a mass scene of support by her neighbors who take up a collection for the payment by opening their pockets and purses to toss their spare coins onto her in the courtyard. This artificial ray of sun more than covers the outstanding payment, and ultimately integrates the isolated couple into the community.

In the epilogue, Hans is dressed in his dashing chauffeur uniform and Anna in a white dress, a recollection of their unconventional wedding. They take the children of their new friends for a ride in their flower-strewn taxi. The upward spiral of Hans and Anna, a wry reference to the downward civilization spirals of such timely philosophers as Oswald Spengler and other pessimistic social critics, is one that empowers the audience with dreams that are won through hard work and love, but can also be understood through the Catholic ideology of the new corporate state. Having been cleansed of their pasts in a baptism in the Danube, their chaste faith in their marriage, true joy with one another, and the return of the wedding symbolism at the end, this time with children – a suggestion of a family to come – articulates Fejos’s realistic cinematic escapism with a purpose.

The director’s second film in Vienna, the 1933 Frühlingstimmen/Voices of Spring (released before Sonnenstrahl) reworks Johann Strauss melodies and offers new music by operetta composer Robert Stolz to support this urban petit bourgeois comedy, which focuses on the collision of values and mores of the aspirant boheme – the young singing students of Vienna’s famous Academy of Music and Performing Arts. Fejos again maintains a “small dreams” concept here and uses the chubby Austro-Hungarian character actor, S. K. Szakall (Szőke Szakáll in Hungary; S. K. Sakall in his Hollywood career), to be the through-line which keeps the large ensemble cast and its subplot of mistaken identity less operetta and more a comedy of contemporary mores and egos. In the role of Schuldienner Krüger, he establishes himself as one of the most popular comic actors in the independent (not for German distribution) Viennese Film before 1938. His blustery character here is responsible for everything from distributing piles of sheet music, to fixing and cleaning instruments, to assisting the music professors and students in their work, and seems to be a parody of Paul Hörbiger’s porter in Max Ophüls’s acclaimed cinematic treatment (and influence on the Forst/Reisch Viennese Film) of Schnitzler’s bourgeois tragedy, Liebelei/Flirtation (1933). Hörbiger had to contend with one willful daughter but Szakall’s Krüger is given two: Hannerl
(opera star Adele Kern) and Olly (Ursula Grabley), and the unrelenting men who want to marry them. They are not the helpless süßes Mäderl character of the bourgeois tragedy, but rather self-aware and often headstrong young women who intend to be stars and find love with the men they desire. The skeletal operetta structure of the film allows Fejos to hang fresh and provocative commentary about the younger generation, poverty, the agency of woman, and the self-importance of the creative man on a trusted form. His Vienna is a modern urban site in which we hardly see anything recognizable. Even a trip down the Danube in which the music students sing Johann Strauss is given the feel of a working class youth outing, and what little romance it conjures in the surroundings and the music is subverted by a comedic scene in which the befuddled Krüger has a stack of sheet music blown from his hands and then, in a fit of exasperation, dumps the rest of the Blue Danube Waltz score into the Danube. It is a patent symbolic farewell to Viennese operetta cliché.

The film pits the contemporary attitudes of youth against the tradition of their elders and the individual against the mass. While the concept of voice and music students studying and performing in Vienna recalls similar territory in the core Viennese Film, Fejos avoids the sentimental or the bittersweet by creating true gender role conflict that rises above the comedy and the musical aspects of the film. A group of young female singers supports Hannerl, who insists she is ready for public engagement, while her love interest, composition student Franz (Oskar Karlweis), equally supported by his male comrades, berates her for being immature and self-destructive if she does not finish her vocal training. This conflict becomes more important to the narrative than the operetta-type misunderstandings regarding Krüger’s daughters and the two possible suitors. The film stresses traditional values of education for a brasher new generation, even as the narrative partially liberates women on a social level and plays with traditional gender role convention. An “impromptu” operatic confrontation during lunch in the academy’s cafeteria between the female and male students over the ownership of a sausage satirizes the traditional functions of male and female voices in opera and provides one of the most entertaining scenes in the film.

When Franz fights for control of Hannerl and her studies, she blatantly rejects his demands and decides to quit the academy to find a theatrical agent. Meanwhile, Toni (Hans Thimig), the intractable son of the owner of a chain of ice cream parlors, angers his father by rejecting work because he is seduced by Olly’s strong desires. The couple’s relationship is cemented in a comedic set piece in which Toni is responsible for delivering an ice cream “Bombe” to Hannerl’s engagement party, but which melts by the time he has finished
flirting with Olly, nibbling at the ice cream, and ultimately realizing they too must get married. The subtext of financial hardship skewers any opportunity for the narrative to fall into sentimental romance and is even used to derail any audience expectation of it. Fejos sets up a typically lavish, even Hollywood style mise-en-scène for the engagement party at Krüger’s apartment, filling it with beautiful flowers, well-dressed and haughty bourgeois guests, and the promise of wine and delicacies, and then literally deconstructs it. Maids and other representatives of the performers from the Academy’s concert come to claim the flowers that were delivered by family and well-wishers, and which Krüger, believing no one wanted them, has used for the party’s decoration. As the flowers are removed and the room becomes more ordinary, the guests lose their happy mood, and the ice cream bombe, which was rather small to begin with (emphasizing the costly nature of such exotic trifles) arrives melted on a plate with a few wafers. With his social climbing ruined, an exasperated Krüger tosses the rest of the flowers out the door. Like the stack of sheet music that goes into the Danube, Fejos and Szakall literally toss out film convention in a romantic anarchy that Hollywood would call the screwball comedy.

Even more revealing of the poverty of Austria at the time is the penultimate scene in the modern office of the talent agent where Hannerl has gone to find work. The establishing shot shows no traditionally recognizable Vienna, only a modern office building, in which well-dressed people populate the waiting room. Hannerl has a conversation with a distinguished elderly performer who confesses that “es ist so weit ... dass man nicht mehr zu essen hat...” But he refuses the coin she offers him imagining he will yet get work. When he emerges dejected from the agent’s office, he asks her for the coin, which he accepts with a tattered glove. He kisses her hand gallantly and departs. The allegory of a postimperial Vienna caught between important old traditions and vital modern possibilities, and the poverty that subverts the synthesis shatters the comedy of the film. But Fejos refuses to return the female figure completely to the role of wife and mother. Hannerl is stopped from going into the agent’s office by an elderly woman who tells her that she never managed to have a career because she too did not finish her studies and fell into the “schmutzige Gesellschaft” of show business. Her exhortation that the one year left in her studies will make all the difference and save her from failure may not be convincing, but it hints at a sleazy Vienna of prostitution and criminality that had only heretofore been articulated in such landmark dramatic silent films as G. W. Pabst’s Die freudlose Gasse/The Joyless Street (1925) and Gustav Ucicky’s Café Elektric (1927). Hannerl takes the woman’s advice and arrives in time to perform at the academy’s special broadcast on the radio. It is not in some ballroom or boudoir but amidst the technological and
stylistic modernity of the new radio station (suggesting Austria’s actual cutting-edge RAVAG founded in 1924) that Hannerl is reunited with Franz, and their relationship, now couched in continuing education and the respect of art over fame, seems to secure a progressive future together.

Fejos was not against seeing film production as a factory of fairy tales for adults. He comments as early as 1929 that it is no “lowly goal” to create such films: “an hour of dreams come true is worth years of strife in the present mad scramble for wealth; nothing could be closer to the pursuit of happiness than the fantasy produced by a few thousand feet of realistic bits of photography” (Koszarski 225). But his emphasis on “realistic” always forestalls sensationalism, contrived ideas of happiness, and the fantasy conclusions that European and American musical film often represented in the world depression era of the 1930s.

Also popular in Austria and abroad were the somewhat more idealistic transformations of the poverty Fejos used as a background to his musical comedy, particularly those that functioned as star vehicles for opera and operetta performers. Musicals built around the singing voice of tenor Joseph Schmidt whose significant success in Richard Oswald’s German production, Ein Lied geht um die Welt/My Song Goes Round the World (1933) was one of the first casualties of the new Nazi regime that would suggest the future for Jewish performers in Austrian cinema. Its condemnation by the Nazi press led to Schmidt and Oswald’s move to Vienna and the creation of three Emigrantenfilme not for German distribution: Wenn du jung bist gehört dir die Welt/When You are Young, the World Belongs to You (1934) directed by Oswald, Ein Stern fällt vom Himmel/A Star Fell from Heaven (1934) directed by Max Neufeld, and Heut’ ist der schönste Tag in meinem Leben/Today is the Best Day of My Life (1936), in which Schmidt plays a double role, directed again by Oswald. Although Schmidt’s popularity led him to star in the British remakes of Ein Lied and Ein Stern, his fame did not lead to an international career after the Anschluss, but exile and early death. As in Fejos’s musicals, Schmidt, who was not a leading man type, found resonance playing the everyman in a petit bourgeois setting: a naïve and poor music student who manages to substitute his voice for an ailing singing movie star and thus wins the girl and a career in Neufeld’s film. In Oswald’s final film with Schmidt, the singer plays orphaned twin brothers, Beppo and Tonio, each brought up by different uncles who detest one another. Tonio has a successful international career as a variety singer, while Beppo lives in the material neediness of running a booth in the Prater amusement park. Through confusion Beppo proves he is as talented as Tonio and the uncles are reunited. While the films manage to create a happy ending in the recognition of Schmidt’s characters as
talented performers, the conflict is always with circumstances caused by the economic depression which is neither resolved nor displaced by the modest possibilities of the main character’s future success.

More escapist in its romantic melodrama, but no less focused on material scarcity is Zauber der Boheme / The Charm of the Boheme (1936) directed by Geza von Bolvary as a vehicle for the Austrian singer Marta Eggerth and the Polish Jan Kiepura, a real-life couple who display the kind of “chemistry” in the film that classic Hollywood pairings such as Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire or Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy were known for. Von Bolvary, a Hungarian long in Austrian and German cinema, was an accomplished imitator of Willi Forst and the Viennese Film in his own right and style, and Zauber der Boheme mirrors the Puccini opera La Bohème in a contemporary story of impoverished artists in Paris. Like Fejos’s Vienna, it is not a recognizable Paris, rather a seemingly timeless stand-in for Vienna given the atmospheric cinematography of Franz Planer whose style added to the cinematic signature of the Forst films (crane shots of crowds, panning shots across ballrooms and concert houses, single figures juxtaposed against baroque patterns or design, intense close-ups), and the emphasis on the Viennese dialect to represent the lower class characters and the comedic relief of the Austro-German supporting characters, Paul Kemp, Oscar Sima, and Theo Lingen.

The contrivance of Eggerth’s character Denise managing to sing the role of the dying Mimi in the Puccini opera opposite her great love Rene played by Kiepura, whom she had pretended to reject years earlier so that his career would not be hurt by devoting himself to her illness seems pure operatic, even Hollywood-tragic irony. It is actually borrowed from the self-negation of the female in the bourgeois tragedy of the German-language stage and the sacrifice of love for art from the Forst/Reisch Viennese Film. Denise’s momentary success as she actually perishes on the stage singing the role of the dying Mimi, offers a sociocultural message on the danger of destroying one’s future by preserving an image or a role. She plays the demimondaine social butterfly to ward off Rene and then actually suffers Mimi’s ultimate fate. Does the claustrophobia that pervades Bolvary’s elegant film in which escapism into fantasy equates with an ominous future, even death, suggest the state of Austria a year before its annexation?

There were notable Hollywood musical imitations which placed its narrative in the fantasy of glamorous evening dress and tap dancing on art deco sets, but as impressively as Stefan Szekely’s Hungarian-Austrian film, Ball im Savoy/Ball at the Savoy (1934) manages to translate Busby Berkeley to Central Europe, his frothy internationalism fell short of appreciation in both
Hungary and Austria. The right-wing nationalists in Hungary condemned such internationalist (read: Hollywood) style filmmaking which employed Jewish performers in urban/cosmopolitan (read: decadent) story lines and demanded a “Christian Hungarian” cinema instead (Frey 203—22). While the independent film industry in Austria would have profited from more of Szekely’s coproductions and cosmopolitan use of international genres which made these films globally viable and removed the Nazi German factor both as market and with regards to style influence, it instead pointed to an exile future for Szekely and many of his performers.

While the Austrian musical film of the period might have used elements of the more lavish Viennese Film, or even some Hollywood-style glamour, it remained based in the lives of the working class or impoverished petit bourgeoisie. Resolution of its conflicts would not lead to studio fantasies of Golden Age Hollywood or Nazi cinema, but to a general message of camaraderie that was seemingly apolitical and a hope for a future that was considered reasonable. *Opernring/Thank You, Madame*, directed in Vienna by Italian filmmaker Carmine Gallone in 1936 thus becomes an apotheosis of the form through its conscious re-collection of the familiar and expected elements of the 1930s Austrian musical film: a taxi driver (as in Fejos’s *Sonnenstrahl*) named Toni Kowalski with a brilliant voice is performed by Jan Kiepura in a conscious reflection of his *Zauber der Boheme* character but also of the Joseph Schmidt musicals. And like those musicals, a beautiful but poor young woman is in love with him – here it is the flower seller Mizzi (Friedl Czepa). Comedic support is provided by the blustery newspaper vendor Heini, played by Fritz Imhoff, but which is nearly interchangeable with similar roles performed by S. K. Szakall, Oskar Sima, or Hans Moser. Fritz Planer is the mandatory cinematographer and the music, while not recycled Johann Strauss or composed by operetta greats such as Franz Lehár or Robert Stolz, is from Austrian cinema’s most prolific film music composer of the era, Willi Schmidt-Gentner.

Impoverishment had become a reliable plot motivation in Austrian musical film by this film. The hungry Toni stumbles in on a free meal at a restaurant where a singing contest is being held. Unable to believe his luck, he sings for his supper and is an immediate hit with the hungry crowd in the restaurant, while Heini’s bad singing relegates him to the role of Toni’s manager. The news of Toni’s new popularity is happily received by Mizzi and the couple’s sentimental grandmothers. Corinne Dalma (Luli von Hohenberg), the powerful wife of an opera singer and a wealthy high-society woman in her own right, decides to make a star of Toni, which separates him from Mizzi, Heini, and his working class element. Ultimately it is revealed that Corrine is...
simply bored with her husband, whose career she also created, and that she is using Toni for her own pleasure. Toni walks out on her, but the taxi drivers unite to save his career by blocking traffic and allowing him to perform on the Opernring. Corrine returns to her husband and Toni to Mizzi. The happy ending signals the promise of a better future rather than any windfall of great success and it is the working class and the petit bourgeoisie that unite to make this possible.

Similar to Fejos’s films, and like Johannes Reimann’s Austrian-German Eva (1935), an updated version of Franz Lehár’s period operetta where porcelain workers unite paternally rather than politically to protect one of their own daughters from the aristocratic factory heir, the taxi driver unity in Gallone’s film indicates the corporatist economic structures of Mussolini’s Italy and Austrofascism. (Bernold; Dassanowsky, “Gendering the Crusade”). Rather than reject their working class roles in a revolt that might gain them a more capitalist or Marxist existence (National Socialist racism does not enter into this universe), these drivers support their industry and relate to the other classes and characters not as a mass of workers or as individuals struggling to escape the mass, but simply as taxi drivers, their identity as interest group functioning and collectively negotiating within the requirements of the corporative regime. Toni Kowalski’s breakout vocal success, particularly as he is typed as Austro-Pole, signifies the enduring cosmopolitan nature of Vienna, thus its connection with the imperial world, but also the multiethnic and seemingly classless high-art abilities found in Vienna.

The popular success and subsequent marketing of Jan Kiepura, who was so popular in Austria that Opernring received a double world premiere – in Salzburg and Vienna – gave the divided Austrian film industry hope for continued growth and popularity at home, even in competition with German and Hollywood imports. Nevertheless, by 1936, a great deal of the Jewish/German/Austrian talent that had participated in Vienna’s early sound film industry had already left the country for fear of eventual Nazi annexation.

Premiere (1937) was even more calculated to showcase a phenomenon and take on both the Hollywood musical genre and the German revue film with new hybrid elements. Zarah Leander, the Swedish singer with the deep voice and the Garboesque features who would become the leading popular film star of the Third Reich, was first a success on the Vienna stage, and her appearance in Premiere echoed reality in the re-presentation of her character as a new singing sensation. The spectator is bonded with the audience in the film and in its adulation of Leander, a totalizing formula that Hollywood had used to manipulate reception in its debut presentations and which was most notably translated in propaganda documentary to stimulate a mass identification in
Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph des Willens/Triumph of the Will* (1935). What was new, aside from Leander’s intelligent acting style and unusual vocal range, was the bonding of a murder mystery to the musical which suggests early Hitchcock. While the crime is based in an act of passion, the victim’s brutal treatment of his previous protégée echoes the warning of abuse of women behind the scenes of show business from Frida Richard’s character in *Frühlingsstimmen*. It provides a contrived but nevertheless moralistic condemnation of the (sexual) exploitation of a woman by a quintessential representative of the era’s capitalist manipulation of the arts, the impresario.

The central film guide of the Austrofascist regime, *Der gute Film* (The Good Film), found *Premiere* to be an entertaining production, but suggested in its rating of Category II (“einwandfreie Unterhaltung”) that it was not a particularly ideological or culturally valuable film. This Catholic Church-led publication rarely went beyond a calm approval of Austrian films, even the ones that suggested a moral message or were particularly well made. Instead, it is the application of the Category III rating that appears to have been the true mission of the guide, which was used to warn off audiences from the “undistinguished” or creatively “weak” Nazi German imports and some “immoral” Hollywood sensationalism (gangster and exploitation films). Its surprisingly frank criticism or lukewarm reception of films made by companies and filmmakers that might be considered “patriotic” in their positive depiction of Austria or cosmopolitan Viennese culture, or that blatantly positioned themselves against Nazi propaganda, seemed to intentionally avoid what might be construed as a contamination by government approval, particularly for films that were bound for the diverse European market and marginal North and South American release. The understanding that Hollywood often looked to Austria (more than any other European cinema aside from its coproduction with England) for popular remake material and the ability to participate in the global film market was more essential than touting an ideology that was difficult to crystallize in film beyond a few overtly Catholic narratives and without overlapping with some aspects common to both Austrian and German fascism: significance of völkisch/rural culture and of traditional family structure, anticapitalism/anti-Marxism, veneration of leadership and historical figures.

It is clear that throughout the Austrofascist era, the daily newspapers provided far more pro-Austrian film propaganda than the state’s official organ. While there was no official state cinema publication to greet Fejos’s *Frühlingsstimmen*, the 24 November 1933 issue of the “Deutsch-Österreichischer Jugendbund,” the publication of a Catholic cultural club that served as the basis for the Dollfuss regime’s *Der gute Film* later that year, underscores
the two standout sequences in the film, the impromptu “Sängerkrieg” about
sausages, and the moving character exchanges in the agent’s office. It labels
the film “harmlose Unterhaltung” but misses the opportunity to point to the
positive image of contemporary youth involvement with Austrian high
culture as a valuable national asset. By comparison, the daily papers provided
a far more “patriotic” evaluation of the film. Aside from the general praise
surrounding Vienna Opera coloratura Adele Kern’s first film appearance, the
Neue Freie Presse regards the scene in the agent’s office with the impoverished
actor literally begging for coins and the warnings of exploitation voiced by the
elderly woman as one “die ihn von sämtlichen in Berlin oder Hollywood
erzeugten ‘Wiener‘ Filmen mit ihrer Rosabeleuchtung und ihrer Zucker-
wassersüsslichkeit ganz gründlich unterscheidet” (18 November 1933). The
blatancy of pointing to the international rivalry in copying Austrian cinema’s
genre style gives importance to its films and its influence, while the review
discounts the imposters by touting the substance found in the Viennese
original, a publicity angle that would have been expected from more official
state sources.

Equally impressive is the review appearing in the Neues Wiener Tageblatt,
which in addition to praising the comedic talents of all involved, considers the
dramatic episode in the agent’s office to be career performance. The honesty of
Fejos’s reflection of Austrian poverty and the bittersweet quality it gives the
more comic elements is approached by the Neues Wiener Journal as a “Spiel
ums Wienerische” and compares him, of course, to René Clair (19 November
1933). The Illustrierte Kronen Zeitung does not even try to analyze Fejos’s
choices and simply suggests “daß er Österreich kennt und liebt, daß der
Zauber seiner Landschaft, der Welt seiner Bewohner unsentimental erstehen
lassen kann und hat auch gezeigt, wie weit die echte, grazöse Wiener
Leichtigkeit von der lächerlich-kitschigen des Hollywood Wien entfernt
ist” (18 November 1933). Once again, in pointing out a market rivalry which
also flatters the originals, it was a fact that the Hollywood remakes and
imitations of Viennese Film/musicals were popular but wooden and did not
measure up to the dramatic quality of the Viennese productions despite the
Nugent observed in 1937 that “it is unfortunate we should have seen Escapade
before having had an opportunity to admire Masquerade in Vienna [Mas-
kerade (1934) dir. Willi Forst], the Viennese film which Metro [MGM] copied
in 1935 when it sought an introductory vehicle for Luise Rainer. Escapade, we
now realize was a rather bad imitation.”

The 22 December 1933 issue of Der gute Film in which Fejos’s Sonnenstrahl
is reviewed, frames the publication and its role with the transcript of a talk by
Vienna’s Cardinal Theodor Innitzer in which he encourages Catholics to resist Russian film propaganda that has been banned in Germany and England, but is shown in Austria with the notice of the banning utilized as a sensationalist selling point. Fejos’s film, which poeticizes and musicalizes the lost lives of two unemployed lovers, and their attempt to find normalcy, is awarded a Category IIa rating for its remarkable entertainment value, but the very narrative of a couple attempting to escape poverty (and even suicide at first) through reasonable fantasies of a home and steady work are discounted as “Motive aus der Wunschwelt der Arbeitslosen.” Even the “romantic optimism” of the two “honest and descent” characters, and the willingness of their neighbors to help them, is pushed aside for the problem of form and style. According to the reviewer, the realistic and romantic scenes are presented without any internalized (psychological?) synthesis by the characters: “Als Traum eines Arbeitslosen in dieser Gestaltung durchaus möglich und bedeutend, als Schicksal eines Arbeitslosen verfehlt” (Der gute Film, 22 December 1933). The climax of the film occurs in the Friedrich-Engels-Platz housing block, one of the major accomplishments for the “Red Vienna” regime prior to the Dollfuss regime which would be a target for government forces the following spring in the short but bloody civil war between the Socialists and the rightist Fatherland Front government. The population Fejos presents at the apartment complex appears to be very middle class and there is no overt attempt at framing them (nor the impoverished central couple) specifically as working class. This ambiguity can be understood to reflect the anti-Socialist stance of the Dollfuss government. Nevertheless, the specter of “Red Vienna” overrides the fraternal lesson of the film, and the final statement – “Trotz des Mangels in der Gestaltung bemerkenswerte Unterhaltung” – seems to vaguely deride and praise the film’s ideology simultaneously.

Not surprisingly, the daily newspapers utilize this criticism of narrative form in order to downplay the value of the film as working class fable. The Neue Freie Presse (17 December 1933) considers Fejos a director with fresh and unique ideas, and a style of his own, yet finds Sonnenstrahl still a nearly silent film in which the sound scenes seem to create a stylistic conflict (a criticism also voiced on the same day by the review in the Neues Wiener Journal) in a film that is a “mosaic” rather than the “obvious” model of René Clair’s (sentimental) view of the Parisian urban working class in Sous les toits de Paris (1930). Other reviewers followed suit: the Neues Wiener Tageblatt suggests that despite the deus ex machina, which robs the film of its “inner Wahrscheinlichkeit,” the film can still be satisfying. This review was published on 17 December 1933, five days before Der gute Film, and may have been influential.
Der gute Film seems open to diversity within the limits of its anti-Socialist/anti-Nazi stance. The opening essay of the 8 February 1935 issue which features the review of Szekely’s opulent Busby-Berkeley-esque version of the Paul Abraham operetta, Ball im Savoy, is a reprint of a presentation by Gustav Machaty at the University of Berlin, entitled “Der steile Weg zur Filmkunst.” A Czech director active in Austrian film, he is most remembered for Ekstase/Ecstasy (1933), the class-conflict romance in which Hedy Kiesler (the future Hedy Lamarr) not only appears nude, but gives what is ostensibly the first mainstream European film performance of a female orgasm. Machaty’s film style is a unique blend of studio fantasy and naturalism/realism, and his topics remained controversial in his following melodrama on adultery and the lure of wealth, Nocturno (1934). His appearance as a lecturer in a German National Socialist film symposium or in the pages of the Catholic government film guide of Austrofascism is one of the most unlikely results of the anti-capitalist social criticisms in his work, but an enlightening demonstration of the overlapping general ideals shared by these adversary fascist states.

The confusion of identities and a missing piece of jewelry make up the thin plot in what is Stephen Szekely’s emulation of opulent Hollywood escapist entertainment in Ball im Savoy. The director felt strongly that Hungary, Austria, and the transcultural cinema of Central Europe (excluding Germany) would do well to adapt a more Hollywood style both for market reasons and as a counter to Nazi cinema and that of the Nazi sympathetic film criticism in Hungary (see Frey 204—10). The government publication, as usual, presented the Hungarian-Austrian coproduction with a Category II rating (several German and American films populated Category III in this particular issue). But unlike the Fejos flirtation with “Red Vienna,” this Emigrantenfilm musical spectacle was heralded as a sensation, and its mix of Austrian, Hungarian, and German performers (all forbidden to work in any film bound for Germany) – Gitta Alpar, Hans Jaray, Rosy Barsony Felix Bressart, and Otto Wallburg – were praised as major film stars in the daily press (“Der neue Film. Ball im Savoy”). The Ilustrierte Kronen Zeitung, not known for its detail or in-depth criticism, elevates the film into a near cultural-political statement: “[I]n Budapest gedreht, in Wien uraufgeführt und für die ganze Welt bestimmt, die sich dieses österreichisch-ungarischen Erzeugnisses zweifellos freuen wird” (5 February 1935). The film becomes the so-called “proof” of the joint and natural Austrian-Hungarian prowess (suggesting its historical and mythic imperial identity) in world-class production of this genre. The enthusiasm which greeted this coproduction and its symbolic “Middle-European” union was certainly avoided by Der gute Film for just that reason. The lucrative Czechoslovakian, French, British, Italian, and Yugoslavian
markets were still wary of such a geopolitical reunion and firmly opposed to the possibility of a Habsburg return or any perceived reactionary “revanchism” by Austria.

The Franz Lehár period operetta *Eva*, re-visioned in 1935 by Ernst Marischka in a contemporary factory, avoids any image of working class threat to bourgeois control, even when the heir to the factory has fallen for one of their daughters. All anxieties are resolved through the idea that factory employees including the leadership are part of an extended family, and this negates any potential class conflict or necessary social shifts or changes. Interestingly, and fitting its tendency to avoid direct praise of pro-Austrofascist themes, *Der gute Film* awards this unique attempt at modernizing operetta a Category II rating and actually calls attention to the lack of more serious social commentary: “Das in die Handlung hineingelegte soziale Problem bleibt oberflächlich” (30 August 1935). Significantly, it questions whether the aristocratic heir to the factory who ultimately marries the worker Eva, will even be successful in saving the factory from failure. While this statement may suggest subtle leftist criticism, it in fact represents the Mussolini-style corporatism of Engelbert Dollfuss and his early Austrofascist phase which intended to actively deal with class-conflict ideologically. Following his murder by Austrian Nazis in 1934, the successor authoritarian regime of Kurt von Schuschnigg grew less dogmatic and more traditionally bourgeois. The popular press avoids the class conflict question by shifting the focus on the rupture of traditional gender role imagery. The *Neue Freie Presse* accurately types the character of Eva as a “süßes Mädel,” the sweet innocent girl of the lower classes or the suburb town that is a stock exploitation figure in the literary/cinematic bourgeois tragedy. Yet the review considers her, as played by Magda Schneider, to be a “new woman” of the postimperial era, and in no way weak or exploitable. She is aware of the traditional sexual politics of her relationship with a freewheeling aristocrat and refuses to play the outmoded role, even becoming the dominant partner. She is her suitor’s equal from the start despite class differences: “[N]ie ein Dirnchen, eigentlich immer schon in Ansätzen die Frau Direktor” (22 August 1935). The *Neue Wiener Tageblatt* avoids dealing with the social-political angle and simply praises the film for its music, charm and, most of all, for its excellence as a Viennese Film, although the film does not take place in Vienna. According to the review, its essence – “Geschmack, Witz und Gemüt” – is pure Viennese filmmaking which can only be found in films made in a Viennese studio (22 August 1935). This enthusiasm is a cinematic-patriotic volley against the imitation Viennese films from Germany and Hollywood, and like the interpretation of *Ball im Savoy* as a symbolic resurgence of an Austro-
Hungarian cultural merger by the *Illustrierte Kronen Zeitung* (see above), it is perhaps more important for what it seems at pains to avoid articulating: the difference of Viennese-Austrian culture from the German and a burgeoning nationalist (or retrograde imperialist) pride given the varied politics of the international cinema market, the desire not to alienate either the suppressed Austrian pan-Germans/crypto-Nazis or leftist readership/audiences in Austria and not to appear to be a state-controlled press as in Nazi Germany.

Lest the central Catholic aspect of the regime and the Institute for Film Culture which functioned as the coordinating arm of the government’s film policies be forgotten with Schuschnigg’s somewhat more secular/pro-mono-narchist leadership, the 1 September 1936 issue of *Der gute Film* opens with a papal encyclical, “Vigilanti cura,” on the importance of cinema and the departure of film from its correct path into celebrations of negative social aspects. Further, it recalls the papal meeting with American journalists in 1934, in which the potential use of cinema in “Erziehung und Bildung” was expressed. It clearly reminds the reader of the very purpose of the publication and its categorization of film for Austrians. The same issue reviews Carmine Gallone’s Jan Kiepura star vehicle, *Opernring*, with an expected Category II rating. While it finds the production to be an attractive “singer film,” the short critique admits that it has become difficult to create new, believable, and not clichéd plots for this genre. Nevertheless, it emphasizes Gallone’s presentation of Viennese atmosphere, character types, and everyday life. In the year of the creation of the Berlin-Rome Axis, in which Austria’s erstwhile protector Mussolini abandoned Austria to Hitler’s goals of infiltration and ultimate annexation, the publication hardly provides a call to arms from its regime-loyal readership. Ambiguity rather than direct propaganda was apparently the wiser choice given the now German control of the board of Austria’s largest film concern, Tobis-Sascha (they had been invited to invest in the company before the National Socialists came to power in Germany in 1933). Its majority hold now removed the influential producers known as the Pilzer Brothers from the board in an “Aryanization” action which permitted the company to make films exportable to Nazi Germany, but also to destabilize and dishearten independent Austrian film production. Tobis-Sascha now began to buy up smaller production companies in an effort to control the Austrian production landscape and prepare for the planned German annexation from inside a sovereign country.

Instead of launching a campaign of counter-propaganda, the Vienna press heralded the hysteria that was caused by Kipura’s appearance at cinemas showing his film, and registered a mild suggestion of the unified, classless interest in things cinematically Viennese as represented by Kiepura’s public
performances: “Aus allen Bezirken sind sie gekommen, der Prater ist natürlich vollzählig versammelt” (Illustrierte Kronen-Zeitung, 22 August 1936). The 22 August 1936 edition of the Neue Freie Presse does, however, seem more film patriotic than before, given the now nearly hopeless situation of a future for independent Austrian film production. The review of Opernring frames the production as a core Viennese Film (a man having to choose between art/fame and love) and celebrates the atmosphere of the film’s petit bourgeois setting in a coded statement that backhandedly praises the avoidance of the proletariat per se, although Kiepura’s character is a taxi driver as are most of his friends, his love interest is a poor flower girl, and the society patron that gives him his operatic career for her own self-indulgent reasons, causes the same sort of nervously implied but undeveloped class conflict seen in Eva. Ironically, the review considers Friedl Czepa who plays the flower girl as the “great hope for Austrian film.” She instead became one of the popular character actors in Nazi cinema after the annexation and according to exiled Jewish author Carl Zuckmayer, who compiled a secret dossier for the US Offices of Strategic Services (forerunner of the CIA) between 1943 and 1944 in which he provided his impressions of cultural figures in the Reich for the purpose of postwar occupation, Czepa was indicated to be among the opportunistic or ideologically motivated supporters of National Socialism (Zuckmayer).

A stunningly positive review of MGM’s Rosemarie as a Hollywood Viennese operetta film follows on the page directly after the review of Opernring. While the Neue Freie Presse had, like most papers, been critical of Hollywood impersonation given the rivalry for box office at home and abroad, the flattering review suggests a true pro-Hollywood change in Austrian film politics in 1936. The attempt by several major studios (including MGM and Twentieth Century Fox) to invest in Vienna’s film industry, coproduce features, and offer a significant number of dubbing commissions was crushed by German demands and economic pressure, and the Hollywood plan was dead by early 1937. It led to a withering of American film distribution in Austria in favor of increased German product (Dassanowsky, Austrian Cinema 73–74).

Following this debacle, Zarah Leander’s film debut in the 1937 Premiere, a film made for distribution in Germany and thus following National Socialist racial demands, is reported with a specific turn against Hollywood in Der gute Film which had not taken such overt positions in the past. Considered a tasteful piece of escapist entertainment and given a Category II rating, the critique considers the film far better than American examples of the revue film and praises the murder mystery in this hybrid. Crime and murder had
previously landed Hollywood and other films in the Category III rating in this publication for its unattractive violence and, as the papal encyclical “Vigilanti cura” had reported in the 1 September 1936 issue, such aspects were part of the “wrong path” for cinema. The Neues Wiener Journal of 6 February 1937 goes even further with an anti-American stance, declaring triumphantly: “Das Monopol Hollyps auf dem Gebiete des Revuefilms scheint ein für allemal gebrochen.” It praises the music film’s hybridization with the crime mystery genre as more substantive entertainment than just a typical revue-serving narrative. The usual rivalry with German film is not evoked. The concept of an independent Austrian cinema has de facto perished along with its Hollywood hope the year prior to Nazi annexation.

The representation of burgeoning Viennese and Vienna-associated musical talent in the 1930s Austrian musical film genre points to the creation of a growing national cultural consciousness through cinema. Operetta fantasies which so identified Viennese culture function as extratextual reference in these films by dint of their difference, and in the attempt to reframe the unique cinematic topos of Vienna beyond imperial nostalgia. A mainstay in Austrian cinema since the early silent era, operetta had become too fanciful to function as bankable cinematic escapism given the severe economic hardships of the country, and as a competitive product of a film industry striving to locate and promote its own identity. The attempt to position Austrian film, particularly the musical entertainment genre, against Nazi German film and its ideologically-aimed co-opting of the Viennese cinematic idiom, and battle Hollywood’s flattering but market-dominating filmic “Vienna,” would ultimately signal Austria’s frustrated geopolitical isolation long before Hitler’s demands for National Socialist representation in Vienna’s government in his meeting with Chancellor Schuschnigg at Berchtesgaden in February 1937.

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