Condemnation, Experimentation, Adaptation:

Ambivalence in the Work of Three Jewish Émigré Directors in Golden Age Hollywood

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Film is one of the most fascinating developments in history. The cinematic medium does so much more than entertain its audiences. Throughout the last century, filmmakers have introduced viewers to incredible characters and narratives and discovered the medium's vast potential. While filmmakers influence their audiences, the individualized histories, experiences, and perspectives of the filmmakers also guide and influence their films. Film history is a unique field of study in that movies are lenses to interpret past and present societies. Since the early twentieth century, the interconnectedness of history and film has bred countless filmmakers, perspectives, and cinematic themes. One of the most gravitating themes in cinema is ambivalence, the state of having mixed feelings or uncertainty. Audiences are enthralled by characters who are outcasts living at the margins, confused and tormented by their thoughts and those around them. Their experiences are like no one else's. Those occupying marginal positions, whether literal or metaphorical, manifest individualized perspectives of themselves and others around them. In the context of cinema, filmmakers frequently call upon their backgrounds or specific life experiences as inspiration for their narratives and characters. Filmmakers often feel most inspired when enduring life-altering moments or revelations beyond the movie screen, encouraging them to produce impeccably raw work. Ultimately, the relationship between history and film is one in which each can influence the other.

Ambivalence greatly influenced the experiences and filmographies of Central European Jewish émigrés who migrated to the United States in the period surrounding World War II. This thesis refers to ambivalence as inherent contradictions in one's predetermined heritage and their self-constructed identity. As Jews in Central European countries, such as Germany and Austria, their identities foster an inherent ambivalence. Before and during World War II, Jews were not considered German or Austrian by non-Jews. Instead, they were simply Jewish, nothing more

and nothing less, despite many of them identifying as German or Austrian historically. Filmmakers were just one of the many factions of Jews that fled Central Europe upon the rise of Nazism. Hollywood was *the* place for film production in the 1930s, so most Jewish émigré filmmakers wound up at the gates of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Paramount, 20th Century Fox, Warner Brothers, and RKO Radio Pictures. However, their arrival would not be met with smiling faces and shaking hands, as Classical (or the more colloquially used "Golden Age") Hollywood was a competitive market with loads of talent. Moreover, émigrés were challenged with the prospect of integration into American culture and the additional process of "Hollywoodization." As a result, émigré filmmakers experienced conflicting influences, as they are Central European but are expected to adopt American practices on and off screen, thus manifesting an ambivalence within their work and themselves.

This thesis demonstrates that even though all Central European émigré filmmakers experienced ambivalence, each of them interpreted their heritages and identities in an individualized manner. It is important to understand this individualization because no two migrant experiences are the same, despite potential similarities in home countries or methods of travel. Through detailed investigations of Billy Wilder, Fritz Lang, and Otto Preminger, one comprehends the various effects of ambivalence. Furthermore, by examining each filmmaker's background in Europe, early career in Hollywood, and American filmography, one recognizes how the ambivalence of the Central European Jewish identity transfers to the ambivalence of a Jewish émigré. Cinematically and in his real life, Billy Wilder was torn between two worlds, as he maintained nostalgia for pre war Europe and a complicated fascination with Hollywood. His narratives are often cynical and pessimistic, with frequent themes of ambivalence within his characters. Fritz Lang's identity was less easily decipherable, as he maintained a complicated

relationship with his Jewish ancestry and ultimately constructed his biographical legend. His cinematic narratives are characterized by paranoia and psychological conflict, while his characters live at the margins of their worlds, fostering a sense of ambivalence. Lastly, Otto Preminger demonstrated ambivalence through his frequent disregard for the Production Code and censorship standards. His characters are multidimensional, and his highly progressive and problematic narratives shocked American audiences.

Through close examinations of historic press reports, memoirs, interviews, biographies, and the filmographies of Wilder, Lang, and Preminger, as well as a synthesis of secondary source material, this thesis determines how ambivalence impacted each filmmaker differently. Despite their shared experience as Central European Jewish émigrés in Hollywood, all three filmmakers upheld unique perspectives and endured individualized career paths. Rather than the ambivalence of the Central European Jewish identity vanishing upon their departure, it claimed a new face, molding into the ambivalence of a Jewish émigré filmmaker in Hollywood. As demonstrated by their early careers in America, Wilder, Lang, and Preminger each brought ambivalence across the Atlantic and into their pictures.

Historical Background and Literature Review

In the period surrounding World War II, many European Jews emigrated to the United States, yearning for protection from Nazi Germany. As Nazi discrimination toward Jews became more prevalent and violent in the 1930s, thousands sought to emigrate as soon as possible. However, the American population tended to be tentative and hostile toward Jewish immigrants, as they were, in their eyes, undesirable. Although there was a general distaste for all immigrants in the United States, Jews and Central and Eastern Europeans were especially unwanted. Central European Jews who were fortunate enough to obtain immigrant visas were confronted with

another issue: assimilation into American culture. Americanization created a difficult decision for émigrés; should they maintain some European and Jewish practices, or abandon these traditions entirely and begin a new life in America? Despite this unforgiving atmosphere, a few European Jews assimilated into American culture and made names for themselves, specifically those in the Hollywood film industry. Directors such as Billy Wilder, Fritz Lang, and Otto Preminger adapted their cinematic practices and collaborated with American colleagues to produce marketable pictures for what was, for these émigrés, an unfamiliar audience. Ultimately, these directors gained traction and became three of the most notable filmmakers from Golden Age Hollywood. When investigating their undeniable success, one might consider how both their Central European and Jewish identities impacted their cinematic narratives and the early stages of their careers in Hollywood.

To begin to examine this question, one must familiarize themselves with antisemitism in America in the twentieth century, Hollywood's social and cultural climate, and the complex careers of Wilder, Lang, and Preminger. Neal Gabler's *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* and Steven Carr's *Hollywood and Anti-Semitism: A Cultural History up to World War II* examine the presence of Jews in Hollywood and the industry's embedded prejudices against them. In addition, Vincent Brook's *Driven to Darkness: Jewish Émigré Directors and the Rise of Film Noir* explores the significance and impact of their "Jewishness" on their filmmaking, which is a generally understudied topic in this scholarship. Brook defines Jewishness as the directors' relationship with their Jewish heritage and "the impact of their ethno-religious identification on their work."[1] When interpreting "Jewishness," this thesis will reference Brook's definition. When investigating the directors mentioned above, there are

[1] Vincent Brook, *Driven to Darkness: Jewish Émigré Directors and the Rise of Film Noir* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 1.

numerous biographies that personalize these extravagant figures and detail their transitions from Central Europe to Hollywood, such as Bernard Dick's *Billy Wilder*, Patrick McGilligan's *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast,* and Foster Hirsch's *Otto Preminger: The Man Who Would Be King*. Ultimately, this paper will reference each of these sources in tandem, pondering the specific impacts of the three directors' Central European and Jewish backgrounds on their filmographies and perspectives of Hollywood.

In *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood,* Gabler asserts that the Jewish émigrés in Hollywood, specifically the producers and studio executives, strategically reinvented the film industry to fit their liking. Through Americanization, the Hollywood Jews manifested a unique interpretation of the country; while they upheld conventional morals and values, they acknowledged the inherent prejudice in these norms elucidated by their Jewish identity, creating an ambiguous middle ground. Because of their stature in the industry, the Hollywood Jews were able to execute significant decisions. As Gabler observes, "The studio consumed [their everyday lives], not because the demands of the industry necessarily made it that way […] but because the Hollywood Jews wanted it that way […] the studios were repositories of dreams and hopes, security and power."[2]

It almost seems unimaginable that the heads of major studios were virtually all Jewish, mainly because of the long-lasting antisemitic climate of both Hollywood and the United States, as elaborated in Carr's *Hollywood and Anti-Semitism: A Cultural History up to World War II.* In his work, Carr essentially defines and bridges the "Jewish Question" of the nineteenth century and the "Hollywood Question" of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, determining how both concerned the presence and participation of Jews in public spheres. For example, he explains that "instead of

[2] Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1988), 188–9.

overtly asking whether Jews can participate in the regular affairs of daily life [i.e., the Jewish Question], the Hollywood Question asks whether Jews, given their quasi-racialized difference, should participate in the regular affairs of mediated life […] it constructs Jewishness for Jews."[3] Therefore, Jewish filmmakers would have to create narratives that both catered to the market and downplayed their ethnoreligious identities. However, abandoning their European Jewish backgrounds would not be a simple process, fostering an ambivalence in the status of a Jewish émigré in Hollywood. Ultimately, both Gabler and Carr examine direct and indirect antisemitism in Hollywood, as well as how the Jews worked around these prejudices.

When questioning how the directors' European and Jewish identities impacted their cinematic narratives and careers in Hollywood, one must understand their background as Jews in Germany and Austria, more specifically the ambivalence of this identity. In *German Jews: A Dual Identity,* Paul Mendes-Flohr investigates the subjects' complicated souls and convoluted history: "The view that German Jewry was benighted, beguiled by an imagined but nonexistent symbiosis between Judaism and German culture, is an ahistorical construction."[4] Despite numerous attempts to participate in Germanic *Volk* culture, Jews were denied access time and time again, both frowned upon and villainized by nationalists. Due to these antisemitic practices, Central European Jews altered their approach and instead contributed to culture. As explained by Vincent Brook: "Restrictions in the established professions shunted many immigrant Jews into the fledgling mass media and popular entertainment forms of the larger cities […] that characterize urban life, such as the newspaper, the journal, the art gallery, the café, the theater, and the political group."[5] Historians ultimately assert that despite being barred from Central

[3] Steven Carr, *Hollywood and Anti-Semitism: A Cultural History up to World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 9.
[4] Paul Mendes-Flohr, *German Jews: A Dual Identity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 2–3.
[5] Brook, *Driven to Darkness,* 23.

European politics, Jewish engagement became more distinguishable in larger cities' popular culture and entertainment.

As a result of their complicated position in society, a sort of ambivalence emerged surrounding Central European Jewish identity, which came to greatly influence émigré filmmakers in Hollywood. In *Driven to Darkness: Jewish Émigré Directors and the Rise of Film Noir,* Brook determines that "the German Jews who had attained 'intellectual pre-eminence in Modern Europe' owed much of their innovative, iconoclastic spirit to living 'at the margins between cultures.'"[6] This concept of "living at the margins between cultures" can be interpreted in numerous ways. While it may be acknowledged with uncertainty or confusion, it may also be recognized as the manifestation of a unique experience. When investigating the careers and filmographies of Wilder, Lang, and Preminger, this concept is significantly applicable. Brook also mentions that "another contributing factor, however, can be assigned to Jews' marginalization from their own Jewishness, a *self-imposed* estrangement that was not only a precipitator but also a by-product of modernism."[7] Again, in the context of the émigré filmmakers' assimilation into Hollywood and gradual separation from Europe, this notion further thickens the themes of their films.

Not only were these émigré directors forced to assimilate into the United States, they also had to position themselves into a distinct culture and era of America: Classical Hollywood. As both émigrés and Jews, the three directors molded themselves and their craft to be accepted as respectable Americans and Hollywood figures. As described by Neal Gabler, "publicly, the families of the Hollywood Jews were as beautiful, loving, secure, serene, and American as the families in the movies the Jews made… for here, life not only imitated art. Here, among the

[6] Brook, *Driven to Darkness,* 25.
[7] Brook, *Driven to Darkness,* 26.

Hollywood Jews, life became art itself."[8] To make matters more difficult, Wilder, Lang, and Preminger arrived in a Hollywood that had yet to fully recover from the Depression. Studios sought after filmmakers that appealed to the masses, did not exceed the budget, hired bankable stars, and, ultimately, made substantial profit. Even though every major studio upheld these standards, each was distinctive from the next: "Studios had faces then. They had their own style. They could bring you blindfolded into a movie house and you opened it and looked up and you knew. 'Hey, this is an RKO picture. This is a Paramount picture. This is an MGM picture.' They had a certain handwriting, like publishing houses."[9] Eventually, Wilder, Lang, and Preminger would come to identify their cinematic tastes and aspirations with one or a few unique studios, which had different consequences for each of their careers.

As mentioned, *Driven to Darkness: Jewish Émigré Directors and the Rise of Film Noir* by Vincent Brook broke new ground into the research of Jews in Hollywood. While previous scholarship repeatedly acknowledged the influence of German and Austrian film noir directors based on their refugee status, "the significance of these individual's *Jewishness*, and the impact of their ethnoreligious identification on their work, has remained almost wholly unexplored."[10] Brook elaborates on four themes that describe how the Jewish identity impacted the noir cycle: (1) rather than being drawn to Hollywood, many Jewish émigré directors were driven from Europe; (2) aesthetic elements with German attributes bore a strong Jewish influence, including references to modernity and progressive themes; (3) French poetic realism in film noir (the combination of working-class settings with noir art direction) can be linked substantially to Jewish émigré directors; and (4) the disturbing effects of Nazism were particularly influential on Jewish directors and their filmography. Film noir is characterized by narrative and aesthetic

[8] Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own,* 249.
[9] Quoted in Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own,* 187.
[10] Brook, *Driven to Darkness,* 1.

elements such as chiaroscuro (high-contrast) lighting and deep shadows, which were also recognized as attributes of German Expressionist cinema. Although, Brook determines that "indeed, for a time, Expressionism seemed the place where 'the German-Jewish symbiosis' came 'the closest to being realized.'"[11] Rather than attributing Expressionism solely to Germany, Brook identifies the additional Jewish influence on this noir trait. This is just one of many examples of how the Jewish identity of filmmakers influenced the narrative and aesthetic elements listed by Brook.

In addition, *Driven to Darkness* includes three individual chapters reserved for the works of Wilder, Lang, and Preminger. Brook's interpretation of Wilder is revealing and quite dark: "From this post-Holocaust perspective, the punishment of the 'tough guy' protagonists in Billy's noirs can be seen as partial penance for Billy's not having done more to save his mother from extermination."[12] From this notion, Wilder's Jewishness influenced his film's darkly comedic and fatalistic themes, as he had such strong connections to this history. Brook presents a fascinating perspective of Lang's ambivalence toward his Jewishness: "For a man haunted, and hounded, throughout his career by his connection to, yet rejection of, his Jewishness, the subject matter is deeply resonant." To further complicate things, "Lang declared himself an agnostic, yet in public, he steadfastly referred to himself as a Catholic."[13] This is not unusual among integrated German and Austrian Jewish émigrés, but it sets Lang apart from Wilder and Preminger. Perhaps Lang's complicated indifference to the Jewish aspect of his identity, Brook observes, is manifest in the paranoia and psychological conflict in many of his films. In his chapter discussing Preminger, Brook asserts that "Preminger's and his father's firsthand experience of anti-Semitism, and their proud and stubborn assertion of their Jewishness in the face of it, contrasts sharply with Lang's

[11] Brook, *Driven to Darkness,* 39.
[12] Brook, *Driven to Darkness,* 141.
[13] Brook, *Driven to Darkness,* 63.

complex yet persistent Jewish self-denial."[14] Preminger's persistent determination and Jewishness are also recognized through his progressive themes and dismissal of the film industry's Production Code.

Ultimately, while extensive source material illuminates Central European Jewish experience, Classical Hollywood's perception of Jewish émigrés, and the careers of Wilder, Lang, and Preminger, a proper investigation of the intersectionality of these experiences remains understudied. By comparing and contrasting the three filmmakers, one acknowledges their individualized ambivalences as Central European Jews and Jewish émigrés in Hollywood. Just as Central European Jews occupied a complicated position in society, Jewish émigré filmmakers had to work to find their niche in the Hollywood film industry. Even though Wilder, Lang, and Preminger each carried both forms of ambivalence, their acknowledgment and treatment of them varied. Although the surface-level meanings of ambivalence remain the same, each filmmaker experienced them differently.

Billy Wilder: Torn Between Two Worlds

Among the many talented European Jews who penetrated American cinema was Austrian-born filmmaker and screenwriter Billy Wilder, one of the most brilliant and accomplished figures of Golden Age Hollywood. Throughout his decades-long career in the film industry, Wilder wrote and directed critically-acclaimed comedies, melodramas, romances, satires, and thrillers, ultimately earning 20 some Academy Award nominations.[15] However, during the first fifteen years following his transition from Europe into the United States, Wilder's specialty was the cynical attitude and grim aesthetic of film noir. The classic noir films of the 1940s and '50s often communicate a dreary narrative from a tough male protagonist's point of

[14] Brook, *Driven to Darkness,* 146.
[15] Bernard Dick, *Billy Wilder* (Woodbridge, Connecticut: Twayne Publishers, 1980), 18-19.

view, depicted through recognizable stylistic techniques, such as chiaroscuro lighting, a wide depth of field, and claustrophobic framing. In Wilder's early film work, the pessimism of his narratives and the estrangement of his characters can be seen as symbols of the filmmaker's own experience with ambivalence as a Central European Jew and as a Jewish émigré in Hollywood. Although such symbols do not always relate literally to these complicated identities, Wilder's narratives and characters often allude to themes of ambivalence and living at the margins between cultures, subjects that Wilder was intimately familiar with. Through an examination of Wilder's background in Europe, including his family life, education, and early careers, the Central European Jewish ambivalence that refashioned itself as the ambivalence of a Jewish émigré in Hollywood can be observed. In addition, an investigation of four of his most well known productions from the 1940s and '50s (*A Foreign Affair*, *Double Indemnity*, *The Lost Weekend*, and *Sunset Boulevard*) demonstrates how Wilder lived at the margins, torn between two worlds: the nostalgia of pre war Europe and the complicated fascination with Hollywood.

Before becoming one of Classical Hollywood's most prominent screenwriter-directors, Billy Wilder was raised in Sucha, Galicia, a town in the Polish region of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, with his elder brother, William, and German-speaking Jewish parents. Born Samuel Wilder in 1906, his mother nicknamed him "Billie" after Buffalo Bill, whom she had developed a crush on after visiting and falling in love with the United States. At the outbreak of World War I, the Wilder family relocated to Vienna. Despite the Wilders' "low economic and social status" and resultant "estrangement from mainstream society," Billie still experienced and enjoyed exposure to the cosmopolitan culture of the Austrian capital.[16]

[16] Brook, *Driven to Darkness,* 124.

However, the Wilders also experienced antisemitism, as "there comes a time when every German-speaking Jew 'realizes he's a second-class citizen.'"[17] Even though neither Billie nor his brother had much exposure to Jewish scripture from their parents, they connected with their Jewish heritage in a variety of other ways. For instance, their grandmother, who lived with the family, was an observant Jew, and their uncle was a staunch Zionist who eventually migrated to Israel, but not before he immersed Billie in the "muscle Jew tradition of Judah Maccabee and Bar Kochba [historic Jewish military leaders in Judea]," instilling in him the values of strength and discipline. Additionally, the Wilders lived in close proximity to Vienna's *Judenplatz* (Jewish district), so Billie absorbed knowledge from both fellow students at school and the overall environment, where Jewish traditions and practices were standard.[18] Here, one understands the ambivalence of Billy's identity as a German-speaking, Central European Jew: because the Wilders were Jewish, they were not acknowledged as Polish, Austrian, or German by their non-Jewish neighbors or the Austro-Hungarian Empire. At the same time, however, Billie was not raised religiously. Therefore, Wilder had always occupied a strange position at the margins between cultures, establishing an inherent ambivalence in his identity.

As mentioned, Central European Jews' exclusion from the dominant culture tended to direct many into mass media and popular entertainment forms, such as the newspaper and the theater. Billie was no exception to this trend. In the year 1924, he enrolled at the University of Vienna, but decided to leave after three months to pursue a journalism career, writing for *Die Stunde* (The Hour), a Viennese tabloid specializing in "crime features, sportswriting, and interviews." After gaining two years of experience, he left Vienna for Berlin, where he would write for the city's tabloids and earn a reputation as a notable crime reporter. While working in

[17] Ibid.
[18] Brook, *Driven to Darkness*, 125.

Berlin, Billie developed a keen interest in film, and screenwriting specifically. By 1929, he was "associated with at least twelve German films for which he receives story, screenplay, or coscreenplay credit."[19]

Following the rise of Hitler in 1933, Billie migrated to Paris, where he co-directed and co-wrote numerous films. From the start, however, Billie acknowledged Paris simply as a "stopover on the way to Hollywood," the entertainment capital of the world.[20] One of Wilder's Paris projects was titled *Pam-Pam*, a script for a comedy that never reached the filming process. Interestingly enough, this is the project that brought Billie to the attention of Columbia Pictures, who welcomed his arrival in Hollywood in 1934.

Even though Billy, who changed the "ie" to the more gender-appropriate "y" upon his entrance into the United States, kick-started his Hollywood career with Columbia and Twentieth Century-Fox, he later established a seventeen-year association with Paramount. In 1930s Hollywood, the five major studios each had distinct faces, and "both [Wilder] and Paramount excelled at films of deception and masquerade that differed from the typical mixup movie in one important way: they were plausible, if not always probable."[21] Although Wilder seemed to be a perfect fit for Paramount, his rise to the top of the movie business was no easy feat. As explained by film historian Vincent Brook, "with fewer credits than Siodmak at the start of his US career, and lacking the Weimar-era stature of a Lang or even a May, Billy had to start from scratch."[22] Wilder's status as a Jewish émigré in Hollywood hindered his ability to gain traction in an industry with overwhelming talent. However, Wilder had come to Paramount at the right time, as he crossed paths with Charles Brackett, a Harvard Law school graduate, novelist, and ex-drama

[19] Dick, *Billy Wilder*, 17.
[20] Brook, *Driven to Darkness*, 125.
[21] Dick, *Billy Wilder*, 27.
[22] Brook, *Driven to Darkness*, 127.

critic of the *New Yorker.* Although he could write brilliant works of fiction, the art of screenwriting intimidated him. Therefore, Wilder and Brackett initiated a decades-long partnership in 1938 with *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife.*[23] Even though the two had a productive working relationship, Brackett was very politically conservative, and Wilder was not. In fact, Brackett was fairly antisemitic. Despite their differences, Wilder and Brackett would collaborate on a number of Academy Award-nominated pictures that received wide acclaim.[24] As émigré filmmakers were expected to become American filmmakers, Wilder had to overlook his partner's prejudice and establish a name for himself at Paramount.

Although Wilder's identity expanded to include his émigré status, he still experienced ambivalence as a Central European Jew. For instance, biographer Bernard Dick utilizes a metaphor to describe the Viennese Wilder and Wilder the Berliner: "The Viennese likes his coffee served the way it is in Vienna's coffee houses–*Kaffee mit Schlag*, coffee crowned with a swirl of whipped cream. The Berliner prefers his coffee hot and black."[25] This conflict in identity is translated onto the screen, as Wilder's films often employ both sentiment and cynicism. Rather than the ambivalence embedded within his Central European Jewish identity disappearing once Wilder entered Hollywood, it transferred to his newly acquired identity as a Jewish émigré, which ultimately came with its own opportunities and drawbacks.

Despite direct and indirect pressures to Americanize himself and his films, Wilder could not completely abandon his Central European Jewish identity to fashion an entirely new persona in Hollywood. Ultimately, he still felt a deep connection with his European and Jewish roots, as well as a sort of nostalgia for prewar Europe.[26] Although most of his earlier productions in

[23] Dick, *Billy Wilder*, 27-28.
[24] *Billy Wilder Nobody's Perfect*, directed by Clara and Julia Kuperberg (2016; Wichita Films), YouTube.
[25] Dick, *Billy Wilder*, 167.
[26] "Portrait of a '60% Perfect Man': Billy Wilder interview (1982)," FilMagician, YouTube.

Hollywood simply allude to themes of such ambivalence, his 1948 Paramount feature *A Foreign Affair* tackles the subject head on. Starring Jean Arthur, Marlene Dietrich, and John Lund, *A Foreign Affair* is a romantic comedy-drama with a serious political undertone. The film involves a US Army captain John Pringle in post-World War II Berlin, occupied by the Allies following Germany's defeat. Pringle finds himself torn between two women, a prominent Nazi's wife-turned-nightclub singer, Erika von Schluetow, and an Iowa congresswoman, Phoebe Frost. Even though Pringle ultimately chooses the "good woman" from the Midwest, "like Billy's own transnational conflict, the triangular tensions are never fully resolved in this ultimately incoherent, yet personally revealing, film."[27] Wilder's internalized ambivalence as both a Central European Jew and a Jewish émigré in Hollywood come to life through his narrative and aesthetic portrayal of postwar Berlin.

As mentioned, despite *A Foreign Affair*'s classification as a romantic comedy-drama, its narrative, characters, and aesthetic elements collaborate to illustrate a very complicated political portrait. Essentially, Wilder's portrayal of postwar Berlin was anything but simplistic: "Hitler's Berlin was also Wilder's, and now it was a Berlin with an American sector," observes biographer Bernard Dick. "Wilder could not denounce the city where his film career began; besides, denunciation is not art. He also could not condone an ideology that sent his mother to a death camp. So, Wilder tries to be objective, which is not quite the same as being impartial."[28] Important to note, three years prior to *A Foreign Affair,* Wilder served as head of the film unit of the American Information Control Division in Germany, where he was expected to revitalize the German film industry. His return to his homeland was bittersweet: "His mother and grandmother had died at Auschwitz, and the Berlin cemetery where his father was buried was so war-ravaged

[27] Brook, *Driven to Darkness*, 143.
[28] Dick, *Billy Wilder*, 64.

that Wilder had difficulty locating the gravesite."[29] Even though postwar Berlin was certainly not the way he had left it in 1933, it seems as though Wilder carried a sort of responsibility to honor his homeland, as demonstrated through the ambiguity of *A Foreign Affair*. Film historian Gerd Gemünden describes this ambiguity particularly well: "Made by an émigré who returns as a ranking officer in the occupying army to the city that he loved and from which he had to flee, the film is saturated with ambiguity–with a nostalgia seeking to recover a better past so as to forge a better future, but also with the urge to take the Germans to task for the atrocities of Nazi rule, thereby disallowing historical amnesia and a simple plea for innocence."[30] *A Foreign Affair* is an exemplary cinematic manifestation of ambivalence, as Wilder attempts to locate a balance between condemning Nazism and appreciating his experience in pre-war Berlin, all while producing an entertaining and profitable Paramount feature.

As noted above, Wilder played a significant role in the emergence of film noir in the 1940s and '50s. The classic noir films of this period illustrate gloomy and cynical narratives, oftentimes from a tough male protagonist's point of view, depicted through recognizable stylistic techniques, such as chiaroscuro lighting, a wide depth of field, and claustrophobic framing. In the first fifteen years of his career in Hollywood, Wilder wrote and directed some of the most renowned noir films. Woven into his acclaimed noirs' narratives, characters, and aesthetic techniques is the common theme of living at the margins, a key component of Wilder's ambivalence as a Jewish émigré in Hollywood. Through an examination of *Double Indemnity*, *The Lost Weekend*, and *Sunset Boulevard*, the persistent theme of ambivalence can be recognized, which Wilder both experienced and illustrated.

[29] Dick, *Billy Wilder*, 63.
[30] Gerd Gemünden, "In the Ruins of Berlin: A Foreign Affair (1948)," in *A Foreign Affair: Billy Wilder's American Films* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 60-61.

Released in 1944, *Double Indemnity* perfectly encapsulates every narrative and aesthetic characteristic of the noir genre. Insurance salesman Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) is drawn into a murderous arrangement by the beautifully manipulative Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck), determined to kill her husband and collect on the accidental death claim. However, their scheme ultimately disintegrates, as insurance investigator Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson) inches closer to the truth, while the adulterous relationship between Walter and Phyllis erodes.[31] In the context of ambivalence and Wilder's own complicated experience with identity, Walter is a fascinating male protagonist. Of course, there is an obvious ambiguity in his character: he is a righteous insurance salesman turned murderer. Walter eventually succumbs to his doomed fate and collapses from a gunshot wound. Film historian Vincent Brook provides a fascinating interpretation of Walter's character as a representation of Wilder himself: "From [a] post-Holocaust perspective, the punishment of the 'tough guy' protagonist […] can be seen as partial penance for Billy's not having done more to save his mother from extermination."[32] As an émigré, Wilder not only left his hometown and career but his family as well at a time of unprecedented anxiety among the European Jewish population. Despite his new beginning in Hollywood, he never forgot his past or his decision to leave his family behind.

In addition, the way in which *Double Indemnity* illustrates Los Angeles is another indicator of Wilder's identity as an émigré in Hollywood, an outsider looking in. In the book *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts,* film and literature scholar James Naremore proclaims that Wilder's representation of Los Angeles "seemed less like the urban sprawl described by [James M. Cain, author of the original novella], and more like a dangerously

[31] *Double Indemnity,* directed by Billy Wilder (Paramount Pictures, 1944).
[32] Brook, *Driven to Darkness*, 141.

seductive El Dorado – a center of advanced capitalism, instrumental reason, and death."[33] Rather than glorifying Los Angeles, his reconstruction critiques the greed within it. It seems as though Wilder recognizes the "centrifugality" or vastness of Los Angeles and utilizes it to create uneasiness in the narrative, placing greater emphasis on what the city breeds, as Naremore describes.[34] Instead of centering the narrative around the city of Los Angeles itself, *Double Indemnity* observes the disorder it produces.

In addition to *Double Indemnity*, *The Lost Weekend* is another brilliant noir drama that demonstrates the theme of ambivalence through its main character, washed up New York writer Don Birnam. Based on Charles R. Jackson's 1944 novel of the same name, Wilder's cinematic adaptation was released the following year. Sober for a few days, Don is expected to travel out of town for the weekend with his brother, but, desperate for a drink, makes his way to the bar and ultimately misses the train. With his brother and girlfriend out of town, Don endures a weekend-long bender that takes him from the bar to nightclubs, pawn shops, and the alcoholics' ward before he finally commits to writing his novel that would detail the entire weekend. Ambivalence is a central theme. For example, in his poignant monologue, Don confesses to his brother and girlfriend that there are two versions of himself: "There are two of us, you know. Don the Drunk and Don the Writer. The drunk would say to the writer, 'come on, you idiot. Let's get some good out of that portable [typewriter]. Let's hock it. Let's take it to that pawn shop over on Third Avenue. It's always good for ten dollars. Another drink, another binge, another bender, another spree. Such humorous words. I've tried to break away from that guy a lot of times, but, no good."[35] Although they have different characteristics and occupations, Don's opposing

[33] James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts, Updated and Expanded Edition,* 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 82.
[34] Ibid.
[35] *The Lost Weekend,* directed by Billy Wilder (Paramount Pictures, 1945), Amazon Prime Video, 0:49:11 to 0:51:03.

personas are like Wilder's conflicting identities as an émigré and a filmmaker in Hollywood. Both have influence over the other in various circumstances, and both are essential in the construction of that person's experiences.

Like *The Lost Weekend*, Wilder's 1950 black comedy noir *Sunset Boulevard* further illustrates the theme of ambivalence through the concept of living at the margins between cultures. Discarded Hollywood star Norma Desmond hires a young, smug screenwriter, Joe Gillis, to help guide her movie comeback, as she refuses to come to terms with her fallen stardom. Ultimately, *Sunset Boulevard* is the tragic story of an aging silent film queen who has lost all touch with reality, literally and metaphorically living at the margins of the film world that once acclaimed her. While touring Norma's outlandish and dated mansion, Joe takes note of its strange aura: "Come to think of it, the whole place seemed to have been stricken with a kind of creeping paralysis, out of beat with the rest of the world, crumbling apart in slow motion."[36] Norma spends almost every day wearing glamorous outfits, resting on extravagant furniture, and rewatching her old pictures until the film wears out. She throws exorbitant New Years Eve parties and invites no guests other than Joe and her butler Max. Norma is out of touch with the world around her. Her exotic mansion and 1929 Isotta Fraschini automobile are cut off from the rest of Los Angeles, just like Norma is excluded from the entertainment industry. Too restless for retirement and too unconventional for 1950s Hollywood, Norma's character is riddled with perplexity, uneasiness, and loneliness. Even though Norma Desmond is not a direct representation of Wilder himself, her position at the margins between cultures is similar to Wilder's own confusion in the postwar years: "None of us–I mean the émigrés–really knew where we stood. Should we go home? Where was home?"[37] It is also essential to recognize that

[36] *Sunset Boulevard,* directed by Billy Wilder (Paramount Pictures, 1945), Amazon Prime Video, 0:25:30 to 0:25:40.
[37] Quoted in Brook, *Driven to Darkness*, 142.

Norma's seclusion from but yearning to participate in 1950s Hollywood could mirror Wilder's status as an émigré trying to gain traction in the same environment. As Norma is caught between her isolation and the newly-reformed Hollywood studios, Wilder was stuck between his European norms and the expectations of American filmmaking.

Billy Wilder ultimately experienced ambivalence as both a Central European Jew and as a Jewish émigré in Hollywood. Upon his arrival to the United States, Wilder was no stranger to occupying a space at the margins of the standard society, as he belonged to the minority group in both continents. However, despite this inherent placement throughout his life, Wilder established himself as one of the greatest and most accomplished figures of Golden Age Hollywood. In fact, because of his placement at the margins between cultures, Wilder brought a unique perspective to his pictures, creating unforgettable narratives and characters that viewers became engrossed with. Rather than the ambivalence of his Central European Jewish identity dematerializing upon his departure, it claimed a new face, molding into the ambivalence of a Jewish émigré filmmaker in Hollywood with expectations of becoming American. Luckily for audiences, Wilder utilized the medium of film to demonstrate his experiences and interpretations of them. Ultimately, Wilder was torn between two worlds, reminiscing about prewar Europe and acclimating to a new lifestyle in Hollywood.

Fritz Lang: A Self-Constructed Legacy

When pondering the background, filmography, and overall personality of Austrian-born filmmaker Fritz Lang, one might associate him with arrogance, complexity, and deception, in addition to his undeniably phenomenal contributions to German Expressionist cinema. Lang was just as much a storyteller on screen and off, fabricating details and perhaps having overly wishful hindsight about his life. Both Lang and Billy Wilder migrated from Europe to Hollywood under

similar circumstances: the threat of Nazism. As described by Vincent Brook, "the who's who of Jewish émigré directors begins with the historical distinction between first-wave Jewish *immigrants* and second-wave Jewish *émigrés*." While the former group arrived in Hollywood by choice, the latter "arrived in flight," often enduring a sort of "separation anxiety" that influenced their early experiences in the Hollywood studio system.[38] Although Lang may have been too egotistical to admit such feelings, biographer Patrick McGilligan synthesizes his statements, relationships, and documentation to locate the most accurate truth behind Lang's character. Ultimately, when investigating Lang's ambivalence as both a Central European Jew and a Jewish émigré in Hollywood, his complicated and ever-evolving identity becomes more comprehensible. By examining Lang's background in Europe, his relationships with his family and Jewish heritage, and his participation in German Expressionist cinema, his ambivalence as a Central European Jew transfers to the ambivalence of a Jewish émigré in Hollywood, can be understood. This is demonstrated with analysis of three of Lang's American films (*Fury*, *The Woman in the Window*, and *The Big Heat*), which manifest consistent themes of paranoia and psychological conflict that relate to Lang's status as a Jewish émigré in Hollywood.

Lang was knowledgeable and savvy. He knew how to enhance autobiographical details in interviews by blowing things out of proportion to cultivate his legacy. In *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast*, McGilligan asserts that "the true story of his life, he believed, was nobody's business. It was irrelevant, according to his point of view. Irrelevant to his vast audience of moviegoers, though they might be fascinated by the bigger-than-life figure who directed with such mesmerizing force some fifty motion pictures over the span of forty-five years."[39] Even though Lang was first and foremost a director, he may very well have been an actor, always

[38] Brook, *Driven to Darkness*, 8.
[39] Patrick McGilligan, *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 5.

sporting his infamous monocle and confident aura. As McGilligan and other historians note, Lang's interview responses and notebook entries must be examined cautiously, as his extravagant personality and exaggerations frequently clouded the truth.

Long before the British Film Institute coined him the "Master of Darkness," Fritz Lang was born in Vienna in 1890 during the "Golden Autumn" of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. "A confectionary city in a fairy-tale time," Vienna was immensely cosmopolitan and intellectually rich in the last decade before the twentieth century.[40] As much as the Viennese culture and art fascinated him, the city's architectural sprawl made a particularly long-lasting impact on Lang: "The director's unique visual style, especially in his epic silent films, was nurtured by his boyhood experience of dwelling in the shadow of gargantuan statues and massive stairwells, steepled churches and huge public buildings […] the characteristic shots from high places, the extreme upward-slanting low angles, the lingering emphasis on the size and structure of massive buildings, the people dwarfed by walls or doors–these were a legacy that was distinctly Viennese."[41] Lang's exposure to Vienna's monumentality, such as the *Ringstrasse* and the palaces and buildings that lined it, greatly influenced his future work.

Despite his contemporaries referring to him as a Jewish filmmaker, Lang never acknowledged himself as such. Although his mother, Paula Schlesinger Lang, was born and raised in a Jewish household, she eventually converted to Catholicism, threatened by the rise of antisemitism in Vienna. Paula had Fritz baptized soon after his birth. Despite his Catholic background and describing himself as an atheist, Lang "could still be considered formally Jewish based on the Judaic law of matrilineal descent," with the Nazis also considering him as such.[42] From Lang's perspective, his relationship with his mother was special. "Conversing with

[40] McGilligan, *Fritz Lang,* 6.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Brook, *Driven to Darkness*, 61.

friends," Patrick McGilligan observes, "Lang always placed his mother on a pedestal. The undying reverence he felt for her colored his attitude toward the women in his private life–they could never mother him enough–as well as toward the actresses and female characters who populated his films."[43] Alongside his mother was his father, Anton, whom Lang claimed was an architect when he was, in fact, a builder, perhaps another example of the frequent embellishment of his past.[44] Although not thoroughly bourgeois, the Lang family also did not experience poverty or live by meager means.

Lang's ambivalence towards his heritage has elicited much comment from critics and biographers. In *Driven to Darkness*, Vincent Brook effectively interprets the paradoxes of Lang's identity, which he calls his "non-Jewish Jewishness." For instance, he determines that "adding to Lang's personal ambivalence toward his Jewishness […] was his emotional attachment to his mother, at the expense of his non-Jewish father, and his resemblance to her in his dark hair and features. This overdetermined identity conflict no doubt partly explains the overcompensatory German, or rather Prussian, demeanor Lang affected as a director, from his tyrannical manner on set to his trademark monocle."[45] Ultimately, throughout his careers in Europe and Hollywood, his connection to, and rejection of, his Jewishness would consistently impact his psyche. Lang's German contemporaries considered him Jewish. Brook highlights a *New Yorker* article in 1933 which "called him a Nazi, because a swastika banner was reportedly seen hanging from his Berlin apartment window [shared with his wife and cinematic collaborator, Thea von Harbou], and he was listed as a founding member of the 'directors unit' of the Nazi workers union."[46] Occasions such as this, as well as Lang's marriage to von Harbou, who developed significant

[43] McGilligan, *Fritz Lang,* 10.
[44] Brook, *Driven to Darkness*, 59.
[45] Brook, *Driven to Darkness*, 62.
[46] Brook, *Driven to Darkness*, 64.

Nazi sympathies by the time they divorced in 1933, further complicated his relationships with both his Jewishness and Germanness. Although he could very well be considered Jewish, he blatantly rejected his heritage and refashioned a new identity as either an atheist or Catholic, depending on the day. This, ultimately, fostered a sense of flexibility within Lang's sense of self-identification.

Arguably, the most enthralling chapter in his biographical legend details his fleeing from Berlin after Joseph Goebbels, chief propagandist for the Nazi Party, offered Lang the *Führung* (leadership) of German film in 1933. Lang recited this story many times, one of which occurred during his 1968 interview with Swedish filmmaker Erwin Leiser. Dressed in a pinstripe suit sporting his monocle and grand hand gestures, he declared:

> "[Goebbels] started to talk about what he and Hitler had in mind for me. He basically offered me the position as head of all German productions. He said, 'the *Führer* and I have seen your films *Die Nibelungen* and *Metropolis* and the *Führer* made clear that this is the man who will give us the national socialist film. I was uncomfortable before, but by now I felt the sweat roll down my back, and I said, 'I feel very honored, *Herr* Minister […] I knew I couldn't stay in Germany […] on that same evening, I left Germany and never returned."[47]

Though captivating, contemporary historians conclude that Lang most likely fabricated this story, as his passport records and documented currency transactions debunk his proposed timeline. Regarding Lang's identity and the ambivalence within it, Brooks asserts that "lending credence to the notion that he may have concocted the story to shore up his shaky anti-Nazi credentials is the fact that Lang only began relating the incident in 1942, when a staunch anti-Nazi stance by a German-speaking émigré, especially one of Jewish heritage, had become de rigueur, and when chances of rebuttal were highly unlikely."[48] It seems as though the surrounding social and political climates influenced both Lang's perception and expression of his

[47] *Zum Beispiel: Fritz Lang,* directed by Erwin Leiser (Criterion Collection, 1968), YouTube, 0:20:45-0:27:30.
[48] Brook, *Driven to Darkness*, 59.

identity, evolving across various locations and circumstances. Therefore, a growing sense of anti-fascist necessity conflicted with his Jewish heritage, resulting in an ambivalence within his identity and a frequent rejection of his Jewishness.

Before he migrated to Hollywood and the United States, Lang was the sire of German Expressionist film in Berlin, directing remarkable classics with high acclaim such as *Dr. Mabuse: Der Spieler*, *Die Nibelungen, Metropolis*, and *M*. It is impossible to overstate his cinematic brilliance, as "the early and among the most successful examples [of film noir] were created by Lang while he was at UFA [German film studio and production company]."[49] Despite his success at UFA, he would experience culture shock upon entry into Hollywood's film industry. The dynamic theater and cinema scenes in major European cities were immensely different from the elaborate studio system in Hollywood. In the 1920s and 1930s, filmmaking in Central Europe had yet to be as professionalized as filmmaking in Hollywood, which had grown accustomed to producing guaranteed profitable pictures systematically. In *Weimar in Exile: The Antifascist Emigration in Europe and America*, Jean-Michel Palmier explains that a Hollywood production "was known by its main star, not by its director, and it was again public taste that engendered the star system: each artist saw their salary and roles determined by the number of letters and requests for dedicated photos that the studio received, all of which was keenly monitored by press attachés and producers, constantly informed of the number of tickets sold for each film."[50] Unfortunately for German filmmakers, American studios mostly considered German Expressionist cinema "macabre, foreign to public taste, immoral, or lacking a subject," depriving émigré directors "of all those means of expression whose conflicting diversity had

[49] Quoted in Brook, *Driven to Darkness*, 58.
[50] Jean-Michel Palmier, *Weimar in Exile: The Antifascist Emigration in Europe and America* (London: Verso, 2006), 500-3.

permitted the development of Weimar culture."[51] If émigré filmmakers wanted to earn respect in Hollywood, they would have to adapt their narratives and aesthetics to be palatable for American audiences. The Hollywood studio system essentially expected them to become American directors, thus fostering an ambivalence in their status as European émigrés. Therefore, Lang, among all other émigrés, had to start again at the bottom of the ladder.

As described, transitioning from Europe to Hollywood was no easy feat, as it often came with different obstacles for various émigrés. For instance, Lang experienced feelings of isolation upon arriving in the United States, as friends and fellow filmmakers described him as "lonely and preoccupied."[52] During get-togethers in Los Angeles, he "seemed remote, unapproachable, sitting off by himself and nursing his martini. Distinctly uncomfortable in the group setting, he always behaved with meticulous formality."[53] McGilligan describes Lang's problems fitting into the studio system, as well as mingling with the burgeoning European refugee community in Hollywood. Forced to adapt his cinematic style, he also had to "embrace a new religion of teamwork, diplomacy, and compromise that was antithetical to his personality."[54] Although Lang made a substantial effort to alter his aesthetic and directorial tendencies, many émigrés developed an ambiguous attitude toward him. Palmier explains that "whilst a number of exiled artists came to terms with the system by adapting their style, and several discovered themselves anew in this way, it condemned a large number to inactivity and hatred towards a world that mocked their sensitivity, their individuality and their pride as creators."[55]

Therefore, a number of émigrés lost respect for the kingpin of German Expressionism, whose American films seemed very different from his earlier work. Additionally, "the director

[51] Ibid.
[52] McGilligan, *Fritz Lang,* 203.
[53] McGilligan, *Fritz Lang,* 217.
[54] McGilligan, *Fritz Lang,* 210.
[55] Palmier, *Weimar in Exile,* 503.

was also suspect politically; many of the refugees were Jews who wore their Jewishness on their sleeves; in Fritz Lang they saw someone who was Germany personified—and who continued to make a point of declaring himself a Catholic."[56] Essentially, Lang's expression of identity was riddled with ambivalence, as his statements and actions were never easily decipherable. He was proudly German but not overly or inappropriately patriotic. He was Jewish but declared himself an atheist or a Catholic. He was involved in the creation of the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League but reportedly displayed a swastika banner in his Berlin apartment window years before.[57] Ultimately, Lang experienced ambivalence as both a Central European Jew and a Jewish émigré in Hollywood, as his complex identity included many paradoxes.

The ambivalences implanted in the filmmaker's identity are demonstrated not only through his complicated self-expression and feelings of isolation, but also within the themes of his American filmography. For example, Lang's first American picture released in 1936, *Fury* demonstrates paranoia and psychological conflict, as well as extreme instances of isolation, loneliness, and unfamiliarity. While on his road trip to meet his fiancée, Joe Wilson is wrongly accused of kidnapping and thrown into the local jail. A collection of bitter townsfolk storm the jail and set it aflame, leading everyone to believe that Joe is dead. However, unbeknownst to everyone, Joe narrowly escapes the fire and reconnects with his brothers, yearning for the guilty townsfolk to receive "legal" deaths for their committing of arson and supposed murder. Despite his brothers' pleas, Joe staunchly refuses to declare his survival, blinded by rampage and revenge. The audience follows Joe as he experiences relentless psychological conflict and battles feelings of isolation and rage. However, he ultimately decides to come clean and reveal himself during the court hearing, saving the lives of the townsfolk on trial. During his monologue

[56] McGilligan, *Fritz Lang,* 218.
[57] Brook, *Driven to Darkness*, 64.

directed toward the judge, Joe declares that he lost faith in fairness and decency: "And the law doesn't know that a lot of things that were very important to me, silly things maybe, like a belief in justice, and an idea that men were civilized, and a feeling of pride that this country of mine was different from all others. The law doesn't know that those things were burned to death within me that night."[58] Perhaps Lang offers a critique of America through the character of Joe Wilson. This might also be directed toward fellow émigrés or American counterparts who made Lang feel isolated after his departure from Europe.

In addition to Lang's characters often experiencing psychological conflict and paranoia, his films also frequently allude to the notion that people are more often than not their own worst enemies. For instance, in Lang's 1944 noir thriller *The Woman in the Window*, he illustrates the psychological dichotomy between determinism and free will, as well as the concept that paranoia is seldom without validity.[59] With his wife and two children out of town, Professor Richard Wanley's quiet alone time is cut short when he observes a portrait displayed in a shop window. The woman in the picture miraculously appears, introduces herself as Alice, and invites Richard to her home for drinks, to which he cannot resist. While the two enjoy conversation on her couch, her lover arrives in rage and lunges at Richard's throat. After a short struggle, Richard ultimately murders the boyfriend in self-defense, and he and Alice decide to hide the evidence. As the plot thickens throughout the film, Richard is in a constant state of paranoia; he is an upstanding psychology professor who not only killed one man but who considered killing another because he knew too much. Was Richard a professor or a murderer? *The Woman in the Window* also frequently films its subjects through mirrors and windows, demonstrating the various versions of each character. Because ambivalence refers to the contradictions between

[58] *Fury,* directed by Fritz Lang (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1936), Amazon Prime Video, 1:31:09-1:31:30.
[59] *The Woman in the Window,* directed by Fritz Lang (RKO Pictures, 1944).

Lang's heritage and self-expression, it can be applied to Richard's character as a professor turned murderer. The film introduces him as a professor, establishing him as such in the viewers' minds. When he murders the woman's lover, the audience's perception of Richard changes, creating a contradiction in his character.

The Big Heat is another one of Lang's films that highlights themes of psychological conflict, cynicism, and moral ambiguity. A crime noir released in 1953, *The Big Heat* follows Dave Bannion, a respectable detective who involves himself in the investigation of a police officer who committed suicide.[60] After unearthing the far-reaching corruption that ties the police station to mob kingpin Mike Lagana, Bannion and his family find themselves in mortal danger. When Bannion refused to back off from the case, the mob murdered his wife, leading Bannion to quit the police force and reprimand Lagana and his men on his terms. Again, one acknowledges the conflicting personas in Bannion's character: a justice-serving detective and a widower seeking revenge. Each character experiences loss and disappointment, forcing them to ultimately stand alone. Just as Lang endured isolation as an émigré in the United States, his characters face their challenges independently.

Fritz Lang was a complicated personification of the Central European Jewish ambivalence that refashioned itself as the ambivalence of a Jewish émigré in Hollywood. Fascinatingly, Lang played an integral role in constructing this ambivalence, as he presented himself as an out-of-the-box figure who certainly lived at the margins between cultures. He was German but not a nationalist. He was Jewish but refused to acknowledge himself as such. His politics were anti-fascist and left-leaning, but he could still be connected to the Nazi Party through the alleged interests of Hitler and his propaganda official Goebbels. Lang constructed his own identity and legacy which makes him such a complex individual to study. Because of his

[60] *The Big Heat,* directed by Fritz Lang (Columbia Pictures, 1953).

marginal position, Lang incorporated themes of isolation, paranoia, and psychological conflict into his pictures, earning him the title of Master of Darkness. Instead of Lang's ambivalence as a Central European Jew dissipating upon leaving Europe, it refashioned itself into the ambivalence of a Jewish émigré filmmaker in Hollywood. Additionally, his non-Jewish Jewishness further complicated these ambivalences in both Europe and Hollywood among fellow Jewish émigrés and non-Jews alike.

Otto Preminger: Pushing the Boundaries of Censorship

In addition to Billy Wilder and Fritz Lang, another Austro-Jewish filmmaker who warrants attention is Otto Preminger, a talented but tough theater and film director, producer, and actor. Although acknowledged as one of Classical Hollywood's most progressive and multitalented filmmakers, Preminger experienced many rises and falls throughout his career. His counterparts, historians, and common people alike often remember Preminger as "Otto the Terrible" or "Otto the Ogre" because of his short temper and abrasive personality.[61] However, one must not disregard Preminger's impressive filmography nor his everlasting impact on Hollywood censorship. Throughout his time with multiple studios, major and independent, he mastered every genre conceivable: film noir, musical, courtroom drama, comedy, thriller, and more. Additionally, Preminger earned a reputation for turning unknown faces into stars. With regard to censorship, he frequently disputed with the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) over his films' language and content, including violence, sex, and addiction. Ultimately, Preminger was one of, if not the leading figure for dismantling the Production Code, which would forever alter American filmmaking from the Golden Age forward. As a Central European Jew and a Jewish émigré in Hollywood, Preminger experienced and displayed ambivalence in various manners. Through an examination of Preminger's

[61] Foster Hirsch, *Otto Preminger: The Man Who Would Be King* (New York City: Knopf, 2007), 3.

background in Europe, his relationship with his Jewishness, and his theatrical endeavors, one recognizes the Central European Jewish ambivalence that remade itself into the ambivalence of a Jewish émigré in Hollywood. This is further demonstrated with an investigation of three of Preminger's American films (*Laura, The Man with the Golden Arm,* and *Anatomy of a Murder*), which present controversial themes and troubled characters that reflect Preminger's status as a Jewish émigré in Hollywood.

Although Preminger consistently exhibited his "deeply engrained sense of self" and "unassailable amour propre" in all aspects of his life, he especially captured his confident persona in his 1977 autobiography. Interestingly, he offers two possibilities for his date of birth (December 5, 1905 and 1906) and his birthplace (Vienna and his great-grandfather's farm).[62] However, his younger brother Ingo later confirmed that Preminger was, in fact, born in 1905 in Wiznitz, Poland, into a Jewish family. In *Otto Preminger: The Man Who Would Be King*, biographer Foster Hirsch interprets the filmmaker's false claims as his attempt to "disguise the actual place of his birth, [which would reveal] class issues endemic to the Austro-Hungarian Empire." Ultimately, Hirsch explains that "the Premingers were Eastern European Jews, *Ostjuden*, an ethnic group scorned by many non-Jews, Viennese and Austrians in particular, and by German Jews as well. Eastern Europeans were widely regarded as less refined [and] less Germanic than their German-Jewish coreligionists."[63] As a result of societal prejudices, Preminger experienced ambivalence as an Eastern European Jew residing in Poland and eventually Vienna, following his family's relocation to the Austrian capital when he was fifteen years old. Although the Preminger family was hesitant to project their *Ostjuden* heritage in Vienna, they were never ashamed of their background.[64]

[62] Otto Preminger, *Preminger: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 24.
[63] Hirsch, *Otto Preminger*, 8.
[64] Hirsch, *Otto Preminger*, 15.

As mentioned, Preminger was born to affluent Jewish parents. His father, Markus Preminger, was a quick-witted public prosecutor who married Otto's mother, Josefa Fraenkel, who came from a "prosperous, nonreligious, assimilated Jewish family."[65] "Both Markus and Josefa," Hirsch determines, "bequeathed their sons a strong sense of self, and a belief that they were expected and entitled to be successful."[66] It seems as though Preminger radiated privilege, wealth, fame, and power since the beginning of his lifetime. In comparison to Wilder and Lang, Vincent Brook makes a fascinating observation: "While Preminger, like the other [two] Austro-Jewish directors, was raised neither in a religious nor an observant Jewish household, the dialects of Jewishness and Austrianness clearly played a prominent role in his identity formation."[67] Even though the Premingers were not practicing Jews, they always considered themselves Jewish nonetheless. For instance, after the family spent one year in Graz, Markus was summoned to Vienna and offered the position of chief prosecutor, an exceptional invitation as no Jew had ever been appointed. However, during his interview in the baroque office of the minister of justice, Markus was informed that he must convert to Catholicism to officially accept the position. Hirsch mentions that "although he had forsaken his father's devoutness, attended synagogue only on the high holy days, and would not give either of his sons a bar mitzvah, Markus nonetheless thought of himself as a Jew," so he ultimately refused the position.[68] The Premingers were proud to be Jewish, as they frequently confronted antisemitism with a proud assertion of their Jewishness rather than converting to Catholicism or concealing their identity.

As mentioned in the preceding section, Vienna was "a confectionary city in a fairy-tale time," immensely cosmopolitan and intellectually rich. The intersections of various cultures

[65] Hirsch, *Otto Preminger*, 10.
[66] Hirsch, *Otto Preminger*, 13.
[67] Brook, *Driven to Darkness*, 146.
[68] Hirsch, *Otto Preminger*, 15.

manifested into fascinating art forms, one of which was the theater scene. In an interview with James Day on the television program *Day at Night*, Preminger reminisces on his childhood in Vienna, remembering how his family went to the theater at least four times every week. When he was nineteen, Preminger participated in the theater scene as an actor while simultaneously attending law school at the University of Vienna: "I went to various theaters as an actor, and when I came home for vacation, my father had a tutor for me, and I studied, and I already had my own theater in Vienna when I became a doctor of law, but I never practiced."[69] Before he opened his own theater, however, "Preminger landed an apprenticeship at the prestigious Theater in der Josefstadt that Max Reinhardt [one of the most prominent Austrian stage directors of the early 20th century] was reviving in Vienna." Over the course of eight or nine years, Preminger rose through the ranks as an actor, director, manager, and owner of multiple theater companies. In his analysis of Preminger's theater career in Europe, Brooks recognizes a prominent similarity between the son and his father: "Uncannily mirroring his father's meteoric rise, Preminger was next offered the highest position to which any Austrian impresario could aspire: the director-managership of the Burgtheater, the Austrian state theater. And like his father, the offer was contingent on conversion to Catholicism, and like his father, Preminger refused."[70] Again, even though the Premingers were not practicing Jews, they steadfastly maintained a meaningful connection to their Jewishness.

Before making his way to Hollywood, Preminger migrated to New York to produce Broadway productions in 1935. That October, upon boarding a train departing the country, "he left with bitter feelings about Austria and Austrians that he was never to renounce, and with the conviction that catastrophe was about to engulf the country."[71] Although Preminger fondly

[69] "Day at Night: Otto Preminger, film director," CUNY TV, YouTube, 0:04:15-0:04:30.
[70] Brook, *Driven to Darkness*, 146.
[71] Hirsch, *Otto Preminger*, 47.

remembered his childhood and his contributions to the Viennese theater scene, he never once wavered in his decision to migrate to the United States. During his *Day at Night* interview, he describes his first-class journey to New York: "To go to America was in itself an adventure–the ship and the ocean. I came on a new ship, the Normandie, a faster ship, and it was just fascinating. I never forget it."[72] Once he arrived in America, Preminger did as his father taught him and "remained confident about himself" and "projected the aura of a man poised for success."[73] Throughout his life, he traveled back and forth between New York and Los Angeles.

Upon arriving in Hollywood, Preminger upheld a similar confidence and self-assurance when entering the movie business. "As in New York," Hirsch explains, "Preminger was touted as 'one of Europe's youngest and most distinguished stage producers.' And as he became accustomed to the rituals of American publicity, more forcibly and volubly than he had in New York he began to play up the role that had been created for him."[74] Although his personality attracted attention in a positive manner on Broadway, it seemed to incite negative reactions in Hollywood, as Preminger came off as abrasive and combative. He frequently had arguments with studio executives and maintained very high expectations for the casts and crews of his films, which earned him the titles "Otto the Terrible and "Otto the Ogre."

Like his counterparts Billy Wilder and Fritz Lang, Preminger found it difficult to make the transition from Europe to Hollywood. However, the latter struggled the most with the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America's Production Code, a set of moral guidelines regarding what was acceptable to include in films. The code prohibited "scenes of passion" unless they were essential to a movie's plot, "pointed profanity" in either dialogue or action, "sex perversion," justification or explicit display of adultery, sympathetic treatment of crime or

[72] "Day at Night," 0:07:50-0:08:10.
[73] Hirsch, *Otto Preminger*, 51-2.
[74] Hirsch, *Otto Preminger*, 52.

criminals, dancing with "indecent" movement, and white slavery.[75] Throughout his career in Hollywood, Preminger repeatedly pushed the boundaries of censorship and blurred the lines separating "decency" from "indecency." In addition, his film's characters and themes often deconstruct typical Hollywood conventions and resemble multiple manifestations of ambivalence and living at the margins.

As a European theater director turned filmmaker in Hollywood, Preminger brought a unique perspective, as well as unconventional narratives and aesthetic techniques. One of his most influential contributions to Classical Hollywood was his deconstruction of the femme fatale character, one of the principal characteristics of film noir. An archetype of literature and art, the femme fatale is a seductive woman likely to cause disaster to a man who involves himself with her. In her book *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir: Ready for Her Close-Up*, author Julie Grossman determines that "it is the leading female's commitment to fulfilling her own desires, whatever they may be (sexual, capitalist, maternal), at any cost, that makes her the cynosure, the compelling point of interests for men and women."[76] Rather than presenting his female characters as sexual manipulators or devious schemers, "every one of Preminger's noirs […] lacks a femme fatale, and their women are depicted as victims or saviours or simply important onlookers."[77] For instance, in Preminger's breakthrough film *Laura* (1944), the movie's namesake character is an unconventional leading woman, ambiguous and confused.[78] Rather than critiquing women through a femme fatale, "*Laura* pushes us to make judgments on the men around Laura […] The expected role of Laura as this film's femme fatale is undermined by the film's insistence that Laura's mystery is entirely a result of male projection."[79]

[75] "Producers Adopt Code of Conduct for Screen Shows," *The Calgary Herald,* April 1, 1930, 3.
[76] Julie Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir: Ready for Her Close-Up* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 3.
[77] William Beard, "Male Trouble: Masculinity in the Film Noirs of Otto Preminger," *Cineaction* 102 (April 2023).
[78] *Laura,* directed by Otto Preminger (20th Century Fox, 1944).
[79] Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir*, 31.

Additionally, Preminger includes sensitive themes, such as the engendering of gender fantasy, investigative necrophilia, and subjectivity of truth. *Laura* is a nontraditional film noir that demonstrates Preminger's keen abilities to manipulate genres and break away from standard Hollywood cinematic tropes.

Through his problematic relationship with the MPPDA and its Production Code, one acknowledges Preminger's European background, cinematic preferences, and temperament. Throughout his career in America, Preminger stressed the importance of a filmmaker's freedom. When asked about the regulations within the Production Code, his passion for the subject is easily distinguishable: "Suddenly, we have no freedom. This is what happened in Germany. This is very dangerous. That is important. Each of us in our own area must defend his freedom."[80] As a Central European Jew and an émigré in Hollywood, Preminger comprehended the limitations of freedom and the dangers accompanying it far better than his American counterparts. Therefore, his negative interpretation of censorship is understandable: "Censorship should really be called pre-censorship. It is when people, be it the government agency or private agencies or vigilantes, tell you in advance before you do it you are permitted to do this and you are not permitted to do that. That's wrong."[81] From Preminger's perspective, censorship was an unfair punishment before any wrongdoing was made. Even though Preminger disagreed with censorship standards, he could not disregard them completely, furthering his ambivalence in Hollywood. While he wanted to make a name for himself in the Hollywood studio system, he also yearned to push against censorship. Ultimately, Preminger strategically navigated both desires and succeeded in Hollywood as a reputable filmmaker.

[80] "Day at Night," 0:13:20-0:13:35.
[81] "Day at Night," 0:18:05-0:18:30.

One recognizes the manifestation of this attitude with the production and release of Preminger's 1955 noir thriller *The Man with the Golden Arm.* As the film centers on illegal card dealer and recovering heroin addict Frankie Machine, issues regarding his portrayals of illegal drug trafficking and addiction with the MPPDA were predictable.[82] Preminger decided to release *The Man with the Golden Arm* with United Artists before submitting it for a Code seal of approval, risking the production company a fine of $25,000 by the MPPDA. In defense, Preminger asserted that the film would not encourage illegal drug trafficking or use, as Frankie's actions had severely negative consequences. In early December 1955, the Production Code Authority denied *The Man with the Golden Arm* a Code seal, resulting in United Artists' resignation from the MPPDA and a reduction in the amount of theaters showing Preminger's film. *The Man with the Golden Arm* would eventually receive a Production Code seal in 1961.[83]

In addition to illustrating traditionally taboo subject matter, Preminger's 1955 film also demonstrates ambivalence within its main character, Frankie Machine. Throughout the film, Frankie is determined to make a new name for himself, but is tormented by his dark past. He has dueling personas: a clean jazz drummer and a cheating drug addict. Frankie is also not fully integrated into either atmosphere, resulting in his ambiguous position at the margins between cultures. Ultimately, *The Man with the Golden Arm* was pivotal in the gradual laxing of the Production Code, as Preminger unapologetically dealt with problematic themes. This in conjunction with the ambivalence within Frankie's character exemplifies Preminger's status as an émigré in Hollywood, as he refashioned cinematic conventions and brought new techniques from the European theater scene.

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[82] *The Man with the Golden Arm,* directed by Otto Preminger (United Artists, 1955).
[83] "The Man with the Golden Arm," AFI Catalog, accessed April 21, 2024, https://catalog.afi.com/Film/51583-THE-MANWITHTHEGOLDENARM.

Like *Laura* and *The Man with the Golden Arm*, Preminger's 1959 courtroom drama *Anatomy of a Murder* incorporates indelicate themes and pushes the boundaries of censorship. Semi-retired lawyer Paul Biegler takes the case of Army Lieutenant Manion, a husband who murdered a local innkeeper after his wife asserted that he raped her. As mentioned, the Production Code was incredibly strict with themes surrounding domestic abuse and rape, so Preminger expected yet another clash with the MPPDA. Upon release, the film was temporarily banned in Chicago, as Mayor Richard J. Daley was startled by its content. The mayor's decision was eventually overturned when Preminger brought it to federal court. *Anatomy of a Murder* contained words that were never before heard in films with the Production Code seal, such as "contraceptive," "sexual climax," and "spermatogenesis."[84] Additionally, during the courtroom scenes, the film handled the topics of abuse with vehement dialogue: "And maybe good old Barney, when he came up to get some drinks from you, maybe he winked and said, 'Alfonse, I'm gonna take this babe out and rape her […] Yeah, maybe you said, 'do it once for me boss!"[85] Preminger presented his American audiences with concerning and unfamiliar themes they had not yet grown accustomed to, primarily because of the Production Code. His position as an émigré in Hollywood encouraged him to approach the studio system from an outsider's perspective, resulting in frequent tampering with censorship.

Ultimately, Preminger set new standards and stirred new controversies, which would not have been possible if it were not for his status as a Central European Jew and an émigré in Hollywood. Like his filmography, "Preminger himself possessed opposing character traits: priding himself, on the one hand, as an artist and aesthete; notorious, on the other hand, for a

[84] "Film Reviews: *Anatomy of a Murder*," *Variety*, July 1, 1959.
[85] *Anatomy of a Murder,* directed by Otto Preminger (Columbia Pictures, 1959), Amazon Prime Video, 1:45:30-1:45:50.

violent temper."[86] He also possessed opposing identities as a European theater director and a Hollywood filmmaker, which often influenced and confronted one another. Essentially, Preminger's pushing the boundaries of censorship reflected his status as an émigré, resulting in ambivalence surrounding his position in Hollywood. Instead of the ambivalence of his Central European Jewish identity disappearing upon his departure, it molded into the ambivalence of a Jewish émigré filmmaker in America with expectations of conforming to Hollywood standards. Preminger ultimately utilized these ambivalences to his favor, tampering the boundaries of censorship and altering the Production Code for years to come.

Conclusion

Despite Billy Wilder, Fritz Lang, and Otto Preminger's shared identities as Central European Jews and émigrés in Hollywood, their experiences with ambivalence were highly individualized. It is crucial to recognize this individualization because migrant experiences must not be generalized. Even though these three filmmakers all shared a similar identity as Central European Jews, their understandings of their heritages were incredibly personal. This thesis proposes that each filmmaker processed their transatlantic migration, acknowledged their Jewishness, and demonstrated the effects of ambivalence in different manners. On and off screen, Wilder was torn between two worlds, as he flourished in Hollywood but maintained close ties with his Jewish background and pre war Europe. Lang manifested his biographical legend by cutting ties with his Jewish ancestry and molding his identity to further himself among various crowds. Preminger's relationship with his Jewish heritage and Central European origin never wavered throughout his theatrical and cinematic careers. Even though each director is technically "Central European" and "Jewish," these characteristics are simply hypernyms that demand further investigation, as they relate films and lived experiences of each filmmaker.

[86] Brook, *Driven to Darkness*, 150.

As mentioned, Wilder, Lang, and Preminger incorporate various themes of ambivalence throughout their filmographies, recognizable in their complicated narratives and characters who occupy peripheral positions in their societies. Even though *The Lost Weekend*'s Don Birnam vastly differs from *Fury*'s Joe Wilson or *The Man with the Golden Arm*'s Frankie Machine, each character demonstrates the notion of living at the margins between cultures. Through analyzing these characters and the literal and figurative spaces they occupy, one acknowledges the unique ambivalences of the three directors. As Wilder was torn between two worlds and held nostalgia for pre-war Berlin, his narratives are often despairing and cynical. While Lang frequently altered his background and experienced feelings of isolation, his narratives communicate themes of paranoia and psychological conflict. Steadfastly upholding his European and Jewish heritage, Preminger presented controversially progressive narratives that conflicted with the standards of Hollywood while simultaneously working to succeed in the restricting atmosphere. Although experienced by each filmmaker, they interacted differently with the innate ambivalence of their position as Central European Jewish émigrés in Hollywood–all three utilized cinema to demonstrate their interpretations, whether they meant to or not.

In the twentieth century and before, Central European Jews experienced ambivalence because of the fundamental contradiction in their ethnic background. Non-Jews refused to associate Germanness with Jewishness and vice versa. Additionally, émigrés in Hollywood experienced ambivalence due to their conflicting identities. Although expected to become American, their previously acquired knowledge and culture are inherently European. Therefore, Wilder, Lang, and Preminger are unique in that they experience multiple ambivalences as Central European Jewish émigrés in Hollywood. Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates that ambivalence is not a universal experience, as Wilder, Lang, and Preminger each interpreted their heritage

individually. Even though their identities are innately characterized by seemingly negative ambivalence, the three filmmakers adopted unique perspectives that earned them wide acclaim in Golden Age Hollywood. It seems as though living at the margins makes for brilliant storytelling, as one's individual experiences provide the best and most personal narrative material.

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