The Emergence of Proletarian Cinema in the Weimar Republic

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Abstract

Seldom does an epoch produce as dynamic a progressive presence as did the Weimar Republic in Germany (1919-1933). This included two substantial party presences; the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) as well as the Communist Party (KPD), as well as other offshoots engaged vibrantly in journalistic, social and cultural activities. Within these activities across the various groups, discussions on the proletariat tended to be holistic including, but not limited to, economic, social and educational matters of the working class but also including thoughts on what a "proletariat culture" is, a concept that remains ambiguous to this day. In this paper I examine this era and the ideas of a proletarian culture and how it would be manifest in proletariat-inspired art. I would like to do this specifically by looking at the development of Prometheus Film (Prometheus Film-Verleih und Vertriebs GmbH), a German subsidiary of the Soviet company Meschrabpom-Film, which produced films for the left, and specifically the Comunnist Party. I would then like to support my assertions by using as an example one of the most famous of the proletariat film projects, Piel Jutzi's 1929 film *Mutter Krausens Fahrt ins Glück* (*Mother Krause's Journey to Happiness*).

Keywords

Weimar Republic, German Social Democratic Party, Communist Party, Prometheus Film, proletariat film, *Mutter Krausens Fahrt ins Glück*

The Weimar Era in Germany (1919-1933) stirred an enormous flourishing of intellectual and artistic activity. Recording this in his seminal study, Peter Gay noted this as another "Pereclian Age" (Gay, 2001, p. xiv). Of all of the arts that flourished, the new technology of cinema was fresh and unknown. Germany was one of the world leaders in cinematic innovation, and has been celebrated for its technical artistry, particularly what it adopted from Expressionist theater (Eisner, 2008) and for the ensuing depth of its social insight that could be gleaned from many of the films (Kracauer, 2004). Less recognized is the creation of a "proletarian cinema" which was a significant and noteworthy part of Weimar film history. Both the conspicuously active Socialist (SPD) and Communist (KPD) parties promoted through propaganda efforts during the Weimar era working-class conscious film production. Scholarship that has covered the cinema of the left has focused on its genesis within German film production through the International Worker's Aid (Horak, 1981; Kepley, 1983) and its use as a tool of propaganda (Welch, 1981). The most comprehensive study in English remains *Film and the German Left in the Weimar Republic: From Caligari to Kuhle Wampe* (Murray, 1990) which includes a detailed comprehensive history of the political,

economic and social events which together stirred the creation of distributors to lease Soviet films and production firms to create films with a collectivist message. The volume also gives a detailed overview of the films distributed and created by leftist firms during Weimar.

There have also been significant works on individual films, particularly the two most celebrated works of proletarian cinema, *Mutter Krausens Fahrt ins Glück* (*Mother Krause's Journey to Happiness,* 1929) (Freund, R. & Hanisch, M., 1976; Korte, Happel & Michaelis, 1980; Horak, 1982; Frey, 2019) and the Bertolt Brecht scripted *Kuhle Wampe oder: Wem gehört die Welt* (*Kuhle Wampe or Who Owns the World,* 1932). For my modest purposes here I will focus concluding discussion on *Mother Krause's Journey to Happiness* and leave aside *Kuhle Wampe,* though, due to its Brecht pedigree, significant scholarship in both German and English has been published on the film.

The concurrent development of a commercial film industry was very relevant to the debates about the creation of a proletarian culture. The impact on artistic expression in film was, of course, a game-changer. Film as artistic expression was a live debate among the German left, particularly through the influence of Soviet social theory and discussions on proletarian art. Art or no, the role it would play in communication and consciousness had yet, at the time of the Weimar Republic, to be fully understood.

The creation and development of film technology at the end of the 19th century was concurrent; spanning America and Europe. Its inventors were all of a similar kind; gifted engineers who were industrious and business-minded. The Edisons, Lumières and Skladanowskys of the first technologies presented their instruments as practical and profitable; of value for teaching and trade. None of these men thought of their creations as suitable for what was understood as artistic expression, nor would it have occurred to them to present it as such. So thrilling and sensational was the phenomenon of projected moving images to its first audiences that its allure would have been anything but serene and reflective as was associated with the hitherto established arts. Perhaps the most famous discussion on audience reception of early cinema was by Tom Gunning who spoke of a "cinema of attractions". He defined this as "a cinema that wants to *show* something… a cinema that displays its visibility, willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of the spectator." (Gunning, 1990, p. 57) Relating the term "attraction" back to Eisenstein's theory of theater where an attraction possesses a 'sensual or psychological impact," Gunning incorporates Eisenstein's insight into what he views as revolutionary developments in the arts, where theatre should "consist of a montage of such attractions, creating a relation to the spectator entirely different from his absorption in 'illusory depictions'" (Gunning, 1990, p.59), a hallmark of "bourgeois art". Also tellingly, Gunning notes that the creation of cinema is contemporaneous with the emergence of the avant-garde, sharing at least the inspired zeitgeist with audiences, "enthusiasm of the early avant-garde for film was at least partly an enthusiasm for a mass culture that was emerging at the beginning of the century, offering a new sort of stimulus for an audience not acculturated to the traditional arts." (Gunning, 1990, p. 59) Film was, at its naissance, a novel and lucrative fairground attraction, although as Gunning notes, subversive and revolutionary for its audiences.

The early years of cinema were international, and Western audiences in technologically advanced industrializing countries where film-craft was developing was developing shared many of the same

experiences. The first audiences in Germany who visited the parlors and storefront movie theaters (*Kinotopp*), which were appearing in the heavily trafficked nonexclusive parts of cities, were by-and-large of the working class. The reasons for this is not hard to understand. Unlike the established arts, the expense for admission as well as the demands on literacy and education were modest. While the working class made up the first audiences, enquiring visitors of the middle class debated in newspapers and journals what, if any, value for edification had this new entertainment. In what became known as the *Kino-Debatte* (cinema debate) in Germany, the question was asked if film was a refined art akin to the classical arts which made up the humanistic education of the educated or was it merely a technical novelty (Kapczynski & Richardson, 2012, p. 18); perhaps one insidious to the morals of its viewers, especially the working class? Opinions differed but as film craft and form developed one thing did become clear: that once film emerged from its early novelty stage its considerable source of profits would rest upon the use of the medium to tell dramatic narratives to a paying broad audience from across society for purposes of entertainment and enlightenment.

It would be useful here to point out the genesis of the major German film production unit UFA (Universum-Film Aktiengesellschaft). In the early 1910s, because of the enormous demand for films and Germany's generally smaller production capabilities, 80 to 90 percent of films shown in Germany were from England, France, Italy and Denmark. As World War I unfolded, French films (which dominated the international market) were banned in Germany, and other nations slowed in export. Germany, hoping to increase domestic production and, with encouragement from the Kaiser who saw the potential of film for propaganda purposes in stirring the masses, saw the benefit in the centralization of the film industry for military and political purposes. By 1917 it had become clear to the German High Command that the war lost and that it was only a matter of time before capitulation. As the United States entered the fight, General Ludendorff was frustrated with the overwhelming amount of filmic propaganda that was being generated by the Allies and the inadequate means Germany had to counter such efforts. In an attempt to remedy this disparity, he helped bring together various production companies operating in Germany, as well as government, the War Ministry and Deutsche Bank to create a single unit to produce propaganda films. This collection of interests is what became UFA. (Kapczynski & Richarson, 2012, p. 19; Kreimeier, 1996, pp. 23-25)

UFA never succeeded in creating the pro-German propaganda films, documentaries and newsreels as had been envisioned. Instead, friction developed between the government and militarist wing and the interests of capital which wanted to invest in the demand for inexpensive entertainment demanded by the population. With the end of the war, film production seemed a broad horizon and UFA went on to turn out immensely creative films including historical spectacles, melodramas and comedies. (Kreimeier, 1996, pp. 31-33) Many of the films of early Weimar are international cinematic classics today as much innovation in areas like mise-en-scene, lighting and camerawork were products of the staggering growth of UFA and the German film business. Indeed, within a few years of UFA's founding the vast majority of films shown in Germany were domestically produced.

It should be noted here, as Richard Taylor has pointed out, that there was "an unbridgeable gap between the proletarian and commercial cinema in Weimar Germany." (quoted in Welch, 1981, p. 3) Clearly the motivations of the investments and creative work of each cinema were different.

While both cinemas competed in a profit-driven market it could be argued that the commercial cinema, backed by conservative interests such as marketability, profit and financially driven expansion were in *de facto* opposition to the ideological aspirations of a proletarian cinema. Contradictions could occur; commercial cinema in Weimar could present subjects of progressive social concern while proletarian cinema often employed melodramatic elements to deepen audience involvement in the narrative. The engagement of such "Hollywood-style" artifice to storytelling, a hallmark of commercial cinema, presented a clear challenge to the ideas of artistic representation to which the traditional German left were accustomed.

During the Weimar Republic the greater part of the leaders of these parties on the left, especially the dominant SPD, were university educated members of the bourgeois. In Germany *Kultur* was a concept related to not only secondary and higher education but brought about in class identification as well. For German reformers of the left in the early 20th century attempts to "lift up" the working class were focused not on developing a critique of bourgeois culture or in nurturing an alternative culture of the working class, but on making the objects of bourgeois culture accessible to the uneducated working class. Culture, as understood at the time and place, was not generally recognized as the battleground. (Kapczynski & Richardson, 2012, p. 16; Murray, 1990, p. 19)

Indeed, in *Literature and Revolution* (1924), which was widely read among reformers of the left, Trotsky sees the creation of a unique "proletariat culture" as an impractical pursuit, at least until such time as basic daily necessities of the proletariat were met. Trotsky saw the value of established bourgeois *Kultur* and believed its works had elevated mankind as it would, but that the proletariat had no access to its benefits because of their place in society. The goal of human society is to first conquer nature and from that struggle is a society's culture created and defined.

> All science, in greater or lesser degree, unquestionably reflects the tendencies of the ruling class. The more closely science attaches itself to the practical tasks of conquering nature (physics, chemistry, natural science In general), the greater is its non-class and human contribution. The more deeply science is connected with the social mechanism of exploitation (political economy), or the more abstractly it generalizes the entire experience of mankind (psychology, not in its experimental, physiological sense but in its so-called "philosophic sense"), the more does it obey the class egotism of the bourgeoisie and the less significant is its contribution to the general sum of human knowledge. (Trotsky, 1925, p. 197)

Trotsky notes that "culture feeds on the sap of economics, and a material surplus is necessary, so that culture may grow, develop and become subtle." (Trotsky, 1925, p. 200) Without a material surplus the pursuit or creation of a culture is futile; the energies of the proletariat are best spent conquering power and establishing a new economic base. These tasks are transitional and to concentrate on "cultural tasks" would be a distraction to the eventual creation of a such proletariat culture when its time has come.

Lenin, meanwhile, had enormous foresight into the value of cinematic art in his famous dictum, which he allegedly said in a conversation with A. V. Lunacharsky in February 1922, "You must remember always that of all the arts the most important for us is the cinema." (Lenin, 2003). It was clear to the founding head of the Soviet state that the relatively new technology of film had

enormous potential to reach the widely scattered, multiethnic and often illiterate populations of the nascent transcontinental Soviet Union. In a decree by the Kremlin dated August 27, 1919, Lenin specifically placed the film trade and industry under the province of the People's Commissariat of Education, the agency charged with the administration of public education and most other issues related to culture signifying the exceptional role that film would play in the edification of the Soviet population (Mackenzie, 2021, p. 19).

Lenin's decree cogently recognizes the educational value of film at a time when much of the world viewed it, however successful, as little more than an entertainment novelty. Film, unlike established "bourgeois" arts such as literature, theater and painting, required of its viewers neither substantial financial means nor advanced literacy to access; it was an uniquely democratic in its appeal. The distinct power of film as a tool to create and sustain a "new" democratic and socialist culture was clear to Lenin, echoing views he expressed in 1913 in several Prosveshcheniye:

> The elements of democratic and socialist culture are present, if only in rudimentary form, in every national culture, since in every nation there are toiling and exploited masses, whose conditions of life inevitably give rise to the ideology of democracy and socialism. But every nation also possesses a bourgeois culture (and most nations a reactionary and clerical culture as well) in the form, not merely of "elements", but of the dominant culture. Therefore, the general "national culture" is the culture of the landlords, the clergy and the bourgeoisie. (Lenin, 1972, p. 24)

One person who contributed greatly to the promotion of film in the service of leftist ideals was Willi Münzenberg. Münzenberg was a media maven, "a cultural impresario of genius" according to Walter Laqueur, and referred to by some historians as a "Marxist Rupert Murdoch". (Hett, 2014, p. 126) As Sean McMeekan discusses extensively in his biography, Münzenberg was the unusual German Communist leader who truly was of working-class origin, coming from abject poverty in Thuringia. The son of a violent alcoholic innkeeper, Münzenberg became a socialist activist through experience working in a shoe factory as a teenager (McMeekan, 2003, pp. 8-17). As a youth organizer he quickly rose through the ranks of the far left of the Social Democratic Party, meeting the exiled Lenin in Switzerland during the first World War. After the war, when the German Communist Party was founded in 1919 Münzenberg belonged to its sectarian ultra-left and held the role of secretary of the Young Communist International.

In 1921 one of the most devastating famines in history threatened the lives of millions of Russians as well as the continuance of Soviet rule. Responding to a plea for help from the Soviet government the Executive Committee of the Comintern the Comintern commissioned Münzenberg with establishing the *Internationale Arbeiter-Hilfe* (IAH), (International Workers' Aid (IWA) and known in Russian as *Meschrabpom*), working as an emergency leftist campaign to alleviate widespread famine in civil-war torn Soviet Russia, one which might be born of leftist sympathies and counter relief efforts by ideologically opposed governments such as Herbert Hoover-led American Relief Administration (McMeeken, 2003, pp. 105-107).

As the German left-wing parties became more professionalized and engaged in give and take politics with other political factions, Lenin thought it best for Münzenberg to devote himself to organizing aid for people starving in Soviet Russia.

Münzenberg proved a most effective leader, being an aggressive fundraiser and possessing an aggressive, hard-headed management style. In its first year of existence the IAH had raised 5 million dollars through European and American contributions. By 1922, owing to the catastrophic post-war depression in Germany and other countries, the IAH broadened its geographic reach. In many places the human misery as well as relief efforts were documented by IAH-funded filmmakers. Münzenberg correctly and quickly foresaw that showing footage of the squalor and suffering created by the famine would motivate sympathizers to contribute to relief to the Soviets. Therefore, much of this documentary film was used to rally left-wing organizations in Germany both communistic and socialistic. By 1924, through the merger of the Soviet operation Studio-Rus and the film department of the International Workers' Aid (IAH), which opened in 1922, "Meschrabpom-Rus" (later "Meschrabpom-Film) was established to produce films in the Soviet Union. (Murray, 1990, p. 118).

By the mid-1920s the IAH's work had since expanded from assistance to cultural exchange with the Soviet Union thanks to the work of Münzenberg and Otto Nagel, an important leftist painter. In 1925 Nagel put together an exhibition of current German art, including the contemporary Bauhaus, to be shown in the Soviet Union. The Soviets were already impressed by the leftist mechanisms, structures, and products in Germany. Anatoly Lunacharsky, the first Soviet People's Commissar of Education believed that the Germans had "surpassed nearly all other artists in their assimilation of the revolution and the creation of revolutionary art." (Green, 2019, p. 176).

Münzenberg also expanded the newspaper of the IAH to become the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* (Worker's Illustrated) a much denser and fuller staffed enterprise, as well as acquiring other local leftist papers to create something of a media empire. To this Münzenberg recognized the importance that film would have and that it should play a big role in the revolutionary educational program of the proletariat. Many of the intelligencia on the left didn't see film and the cinema as much more than a distraction; crude lower-class entertainment and at worst a source for the reinforcement of bourgeois values. In his film manifesto *Erobert den Film!* ("Capture the Film!", 1925) Münzenberg addresses the shift in media influence caused by the proliferation of film:

> Even if the press were granted the greater numerical dissemination, let it not be forgotten that the film through the medium of the visual picture, influences its patrons far more strongly and emphatically than does the printed word its readers (…) We must develop the tremendous cultural possibilities of the motion picture in a revolutionary sense…. The film must truthfully reflect social conditions instead of the lies and fables with which the workers, etc. (Mackenzie, 2021, p. 490).

He goes on to reproach working class organizations for being "timid and tardy in the effort to put this new medium to their use," noting:

> (the) time is not far past when social-democratic leaders in common with bourgeois ideologists, in all seriousness proposed to boycott films because of their competition with theater, their flattering of public taste and destruction of literary standards. (MacKenzie, 2021, p. 490)

Contrary to the social democrats (think "bourgeois leftist") the reactionary bourgeois recognizes the potential and value of film as a tool of powerful propaganda:

> The bourgeoisie, and especially the extreme nationalists and militarists, very early recognized the significance of the film as a propaganda weapon and constantly and most extensively put it to their service. (MacKenzie, 2021, p. 491)

In the same work he cites Clara Zeitkin, theorist and fellow activist:

> Film should reflect social reality instead of lies and fairy tales about it with which the bourgeois mass cinema deludes and defrauds the working people. Social reality, however, will be lent form through the class contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie and through the effects of this class contradiction. The film with revolutionary content must therefore convey knowledge of the class situation of the proletariat, develop proletarian class consciousness, awaken and strengthen resolve and the willingness to sacrifice for the revolutionary struggle. (Kaes, Jay & Dimendberg, 1994, p. 228)

Determined to offer the proletariat a cinema distinct from the well-heeled bourgeois industry. IAH, along with raising funds for Soviet famine relief and providing social benefits for workers maintained or founded various proletarian film production and distribution companies such as Prometheus Film-Verleih und Vertriebs GmbH and Filmkartell „Weltfilm" GmbH. After aligning its film division with the Soviet Studio Rus to form Meschrabpom-Rus in 1923, *Prometheus Film* was founded by the IAH in December of 1925 as a response to the restrictions of German film censors. Prometheus' regularly distributed Soviet films though none would have a greater impact than its distribution of Eisenstein's Броненосец "Потёмкин" (rom. *Bronenosets "Potyomkin"*) (*Battleship Potemkin*) (Murray, 1990, pp. 118-121).

In January of 1926 Soviet trade representatives invited Prometheus management to a showing of *Potemkin* at the Soviet embassy. The Soviets, who would have preferred more a more firmly established distribution firm, gave the task to the relatively new Prometheus, thinking perhaps that the film was surely, on any account, going to be censored. Prometheus management handed it over to Piel Jutzi for an edit and had composer Edmund Meisel (who had worked with leftist theater director Erwin Piscator) to write a fresh score. Eisenstein himself came to Germany to discuss the score with Meisel, as he wanted the images to be given the maximum effect. The film was, in fact, banned on its run-through with censors. Nonetheless Prometheus managed to appeal and, despite various cuts which had to be made to some of the material in the film for both political reasons as well as excessive violence, the ban was lifted. (Bulgakowa)

The film was, of course, stunning, revolutionary, - something to write home about. Prometheus knew they would have a hit. Recognizing the innovation of Eisenstein's film compared with the industry fare, cultural critic and film theorist Siegfried Kracauer wrote in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on May 16, 1926:

> (*Battleship Potemkin*) represses the only content that would matter by way of historical costume dramas, private psychological or high-life bagatelles, and even

> the ultimately formally irrelevant slapstick comedies. The film does not repress anything. It allows – what miracle! – the klieg lights to keep focusing on the struggle of the oppressed against the oppressors. It shows a moment of *revolution.* The wall is perforated; a true content emerges (Kaes, Baer & Cowan, 2016, pp. 353-54).

The Berlin premiere of the film served as a gateway for the film to the rest of Western Europe and America. Though competing against commercial studio fare in Germany and elsewhere, the film performed unusually well both critically and with audiences (Leyda, 1960, pp. 197-198).

Germany and the Soviet Union had particularly notable film production during this era, notable for its artistic and technical innovations. Germany, of course, known primarily for its "Expressionist" films (an umbrella term that often is used beyond Weimar films that were strictly "expressionist) and the Soviet Union for "Montage," films based on various Marxist-inspired theories of editing. Nonetheless, film in Western European and American markets, was dominated by capitalist production firms creating entertainment which, of course, promoted an ethos conducive to the established norms and motivating messages of a nascent consumer culture. The reasons were clear, that the cost of producing films were prohibitive to small concerns and could only be the purview of larger investments made by profit-oriented backers. Here, finally was a revolutionary cinema.

Soviet films were to be distributed in Germany. However, to distribute Soviet films, a radical company/distributor was needed, as mainstream distributors frequently shied away. Around this time Münzenberg had received information that the KPD wanted to unload a small firm called Prometheus which had just produced a leftist film called *Namenlosen Helden* (Nameless Heroes). Münzenberg jumped at the opportunity to distribute Soviet films with Prometheus. The Soviets themselves weren't too excited to work with an untried entity, but Münzenberg was successful in convincing them to do so. (Green, 2019, p. 176) Prometheus distributed the first Russian-German co-production *Überflüssige Menschen* (*Superfluous People,* 1926) and was responsible in the following years for distributing many films now considered classics of Soviet cinema like *Storm Over Asia* (1928) and *Bed and Sofa* (1927), making Germany one of the largest export destinations for Soviet film. (Murray, 1990, pp. 124-125)

Aside from distribution activities Prometheus produced several films during its short existence, most famously perhaps being the last three productions: *Mother Krause's Journey to Happiness* (Phil Jutzi, 1929); *Jenseits der Straße* (*The Other Side of the Street* but titled *Harbor Drift* in English) (Albrecht Viktor Blum, Leo Mittler, 1929); and *Kuhle Wampe oder: Wem gehört die Welt?* (*Kuhle Wampe or Who Owns the World?*) (Slatan Dudow, 1931/32), which was completed under the Zurich company Praesens-Film when Prometheus went bankrupt in 1932. (Murray, 1990, pp. 204-24) These were films produced by the leftist Prometheus company with the intent of helping serve propoganda purposes. At the same time, they were works of art as well as documentation of social despair and societal challenges during the Weimar era, not unlike *Stassenfilme* (films of street life) such as *Hintertreppe* (*Backstairs,* 1921)*, Die Straße* (*The Street,* 1923), *Die Freudlose Gasse* (*The Joyless Street,* 1925) *Sozialdramafilme* (social dramas) such as *Die Verrufenen* (*The Outcasts,* known in English as *Slums of Berlin,* 1925), *Die Unehelichen* „The Illegitatimate", also known as *Children of No Importance,* 1926), *Menschen untereinander*

(*People to Each Other,* 1926), or *Kammerspielfilme* (films of lower middle class life) such as S*ylvester* (*New Years Eve,* 1923), *Scherben* (*Shattered,* 1921), and *Der letzte Mann* (*The Last Man*, known in English as *The Last Laugh,* 1924). Despite having several important aspects in common with these other genres, Prometheus films are recognized today with the distinctive designation *Proletarischer Film* (proletarian film), as they were purposefully created to highlight the lives of the working class and educate on their struggles. This nomenclature was the result of the encounter with Soviet films and the recognition of the revolutionary potential of the film's messaging.

Several proletariat films were made with sponsorship of the German Communist Party (there were also film associated with the Socialist Part of Germany, which had its own production outlet: *Filmgesellschaft Film- und Lichtbilddienst*), through Prometheus (as well as *Weltfilm,* another, smaller production arm oft he IAH). Its most notable success came with the silent 1929 classic *Mother Krause's Journey to Happiness*, a film based on satiric illustrations by Heinrich Zille, a Berlin graphic artist and illustrator whose works captured the social zeitgeist of the Berlin metropolis by satirizing and humanizing the lives of the urban poor in his drawings, photographs and captions. By the time of his death in 1929 he had developed a cult following and the influence of his work made its way into other avenues such albums, music, "Zille Balls" and film, a sub-genre of which came to be know as Zille Films, as several films were made which incoporated his work including most famously the above but also the earlier *Slums of Berlin* (1925). (Murray, 1990, pp. 81-85)

Mother Krause's Journey to Happiness (1929) was directed and shot by Piel Jutzi, who had worked extensively as a documentarist for Weltfilm as an assistant cameraman on other film productions for Prometheus and Weltfilm. While the film under discussion is his most well-known legacy, he completed several film projects of social criticism during this period, most notably socially critical projects such as the documentary *Hunger in Waldenburg* (1929) about Silesian coal miners ans well as the first film adaptation of Alfred Döblin's panoramic novel of Weimar Berlin *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1931). (Jelavich, 2006, pp. 201-03; p. 207)

The melodramatic story of Mother Krause and her family is set in Wedding, the working-class district of Berlin (known during the Weimar Republic as "Red Wedding" for intense leftist activity). Mother Krause lives a precarious existence in a small, poor apartment with her children Paul and Erna. A crook (identified only as a "Schlafbursche" – night lodger) and his fiancée Friede, a prostitute, also live there as subtenants, along with their small child. Mother Krause also earns a little pittance of money delivering newspapers. Paul steals twenty marks from her newspaper till and drinks it with friends, she is threatened with being reported to the authorities because she cannot pay the money back to her employer. Erna, who has met the respectable and politically active worker Max, wants desperately to earn money for her, even through prostitution, but backs away from it at the last moment. Paul lets the night lodger persuade him to break in to rob a jewelry store, but the two of them are caught by the police. While Erna and Max join the communists triumphantly marching through Berlin in demonstration, Mother Krause, given her desperate situation, opens the gas tap and kills herself along with the sleeping little child of the prostitute Friede: "What do you poor creatures have to lose in this world. Come on, you're going to "Glück" (Happiness) with Mother Krause" is the final intertitle.

The grim ending of the film pulls no punches in the portrayal of the devastated working-class quarter and its inhabitants. The characters are vividly portrayed and present types inherent to the Wedding milieu. Vice, immorality, and sloth are depicted at every turn. No one is spared and everyone is brutalized, the female characters in particular. There are no heroes, no twists or turns in the plot. Catastrophe is inevitable because the conditions under which the characters exist is a downward spiral. The last image in the film, after the discovery of the bodies, are of demonstrating workers marching through the streets of Wedding, the only antidote to the victimization of the working class is collective action and organized solidarity, embodied in the triumphant, self-assured joining of the workers march by Max and Erna. Nothing else is possible.

Several aspects of the film are exceptional to narrative film of the time. First is the use of the actual location of Wedding. In reviewing the film, *Die Rote Fahne*, a popular Marxist news organ of the time, called the film "the first German revolutionary proletarian film" and noted the worker district a "character" in the narrative. (Durus, 1930) The district, shown in opening shots of the film, has the quality of a documentary. As would not be the case with the use of studio sets, Wedding is given breadth and space. The streets are shot shakily in a *verité* style that show them being walked upon, where housewives barter for goods, where vagrants lounge about on benches. In this style of camerawork we can see a precursor to leftist documentary films of Great Britain and the United States as well as post-war Italian neo-realism. Secondly, the film makes use of some non-professional actors and less well-known actors. There were no "movie stars" in the cast. This follows the spirit of Soviet montage cinema where directors like Eisenstein chose actors for the character their features brought to the role but also the authenticity of self. This is before later movements in film made a virtue of such quirks. Third, along with the on-location shooting there is clear attention paid to the socializing and leisure of the working class such as in the wedding scene, the activity in the bar, and the time spent out at the fair and how the qualities of the characters are molded as creatures of the surroundings of their urban spaces (Hughes, 2022) and especially how their opportunism (Friede and the "night lodger), indifference (Paul) or despair (Mother Krause) contrasts with the "enlightened" stance of Max who is dedicated to collective action. (Horak, 1981)

There is a study being pursued in *Mother Krause's Journey to Heaven*, not just creating a melodrama out of the poverty displayed but an examination of the economic restraints of poverty on social life. In this way the film undermines the dramaturgy of popular entertainment, so preferred by the commercial cinema. The setting plays a significant role in establishing both a fateful social and economic context to the action, while the characters and what they each represent and how they interact between themselves offer a dialectical contrast which journeys towards a progressive resolution. This above all is the distinction of "proletarian film".

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