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REVIEWS

Ben Urwand. [*The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler*](#), Cambridge, MA: [Harvard University Press](#), 2013.

Reviewed by [Jeffrey Thompson](#) (Assistant Professor, Sewanee: The University of the South)

The Devil is in the Details: Framing Ideologies in Ben Urwand's *The Collaboration*

Cinema is not simply and specifically ideological "in itself"; but it is developed in the context of concrete and specific ideological determinations which inform as well the "technical" as the "commercial" or "artistic" sides of that development.¹

Cinema is true. A story is a lie.²

At this late date, another review of Ben Urwand's *The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler* may seem unnecessary. The book has already received widespread consideration in the popular press. Critics and academic reviewers writing in publications as varied as *The Nation*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* have characterized *The Collaboration* in a number of ways, using the terms "reckless," "ahistorical," and "disingenuous."³ This rather remarkable distaste for

Urwand's history of Hollywood in the 1930s centers on the implications set forth in his title: that American studio bosses and bureaucrats collectively decided to collaborate with German government representatives to remove Jewish subject matter from their screenplays and to ensure that their films did not run counter to Nazi ideology. The title of the book alone—containing the words “collaboration” and “pact”—ramps up the degree of accusatory fervor in Urwand's account, simultaneously linking Hollywood's behavior during the 1930s to the Munich Pact of 1938, the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of 1939 signed by Hitler and Stalin, and the specter of the Vichy government in France. Clearly this was intentional, and the publicity surrounding the book's release meant to take advantage of the cultural-historical resonance of these words.

Reviewers to date have predominantly adopted one of two approaches to *The Collaboration*: some seem caught up in Urwand's web of accusations against individual persons and feel the need to rebut them while others have offered an alternative history of the period—1933 to 1939—as a corrective to Urwand's version. The book has been thoroughly dissected. My contribution to the discussion will also offer another counter-history by moving the timeline back—into the 1920s—because in my view Urwand's analysis would have been better served by a thorough understanding of the international commercial network of the film market prior to 1930. My overall argument is that Urwand's book is, at its core, a wholesale demonstration of an ideological “reading” of historical documentation. The evidence that Urwand holds up as proof of Nazi collaboration could, in many instances, be read as evidence that Hollywood executives altered scripts and re-edited films due to pressure from domestic forces such as the Catholic League of Decency or the Anti-Defamation League. Urwand insists that Hollywood Production Code officials and studio executives structured their reaction to these films around minor details of plot, excising Jewish cultural content or anti-fascist storylines for the sake of profits: “The studio heads...would not make movies about the Nazis; they would do business with the Nazis instead.”⁴ He implies they should have been able to foresee the criminality of the National Socialists, and, by extension, the Holocaust. But if the Hollywood studios couldn't see the fascist forest for the trees in 1930, Urwand takes a complex tangle, the forest of history, and converts it into an oversimplified, flat, painted backdrop.

Urwand writes as though possessed by a righteous zeal to ferret out Nazi collaborators in Hollywood. He doesn't tell us the story of 1930s Hollywood so much as prosecute collaborationists among the executives at MGM, Warner Bros., Paramount, Fox, RKO, Universal, Columbia, and United Artists for their lack of foresight regarding German politics during the last phase of the Weimar Republic. It was a period complicated by the breakdown of the “great coalition” that held the patchwork republic together and the change to a presidential government in March of 1930.⁵ Scholarly opinions vary as to the causes, scope, and effects of the decisions in Germany during the spring of 1930, but there is general consensus that decisions were forced on a government in crisis.⁶ The fact remains that the political decisions made between

September 1930 and January 1933 contributed to making Hitler's regime possible. Responsible historians, however, tend to agree that other decisions were on the table, other outcomes were imaginable. Any attempt to deal with this period must adopt a synthetic and cautious approach to the political, social, and commercial landscape of a nation in crisis. It is at this nexus of contingent factors at play in the late Weimar Republic that Urwand's *The Collaboration* attempts to fashion a story of inevitability regarding the rise of the Third Reich, as if Hollywood moguls could see the horrors on the horizon. Urwand bases his argument on correspondences, invoices, and script notes the author found during dozens of archival investigations in the U.S. and in Germany. These documents are not the problem. Their discovery may yet serve as an important contribution to the field of cinema study. In reading these documents, however, Urwand brandishes his thesis like a cudgel. For Urwand, each archival discovery is proof of collaborative intent. However, many of the documents described in the book call out for a nuanced interpretation of their meaning in the midst of political and social unrest. An essential problem with the book is the lack of subtlety required for this fraught period of history.

Urwand presents significant facts in the book, prompting the reader towards one set of conclusions, only to adopt the logic of the stultifying pedagogue—as if knowledge followed the logic of straight, uniform transmission⁸—and interprets his own research in a fashion that seems counter to the facts. It should come as no surprise that the bosses in Hollywood were businessmen running businesses. And it shouldn't come as a surprise that they wanted to protect their global interests not only in Germany, but also in Spain, South America, and Asia. Were Urwand a more curious scholar regarding the nature of the cinematic apparatus, his curiosity might have been piqued to consider how the films that feature in his history communicated threatening or subversive ideologies to those charged with reviewing the content, whether those people were executives in the Hays office following the prescription of the Production Code, or the German consul in Los Angeles, Georg Gyssling.

The prologue of *The Collaboration* is just such a missed opportunity. Eleven men sit in a screening room in Berlin to view *King Kong*. The year is 1933. A German company is seeking distribution rights for the film. In attendance is Dr. Ernst Seeger, a chief censor for the German film industry who had been on the job before Hitler's rise. Also present is a Professor Zeiss from the German Health Office. Urwand tells us that these men are trying to determine whether this film fantasy produced in Hollywood would "damage the health of normal spectators." Zeiss determines that the answer is "yes" in his expert opinion, "that the film is in the first place dangerous to one's health, and that it additionally endangers the race instinct, which is another reason it endangers one's health." In the same prologue, we learn that the film was released in Germany with a new title—*King Kong, an American Trick-and-Sensation Film*—only to modest business, yet Adolf Hitler apparently loved the film and "had it screened several times."⁹ This moment is one of the few dynamic sections of *The Collaboration* where Urwand

writes a compelling account of a private, administrative meeting bolstered by new archival research. Even the illustrations used in the book are compelling. What remains unexamined is, unfortunately, the paradox regarding why Professor Zeiss would pronounce the film harmful, yet Hitler apparently spoke of the film often and claimed it as one of his favorites.

What is missing in *The Collaboration* is an acknowledgement that ideology is not necessarily found in aspects of story or plot. Films are powerful (or not) precisely because we identify with the reality mimed by the cinema. The cinema constructs a transcendental subject who traverses the “space” of the film via the camera that constitutes the visible world and all of the objects in it. A viewer identifies less with the filmed events that unfold before the eye, and more with the camera that obliges the viewer to see what it sees. The bond established between the camera and the viewer is an ideological one, a mechanism that structures our response to story, plot, or images.¹⁰ An important lacuna in Urwand’s analysis of Nazi reactions to *King Kong*, *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Hell’s Angels*, or the Anti-Defamation League’s reaction to *The House of Rothschild* is the particular way messages regarding politics and race were conferred in these films. For instance, Urwand situates the German release of *All Quiet on the Western Front* as a turning point in the relationship between the Nazis and Hollywood. In December of 1930, Joseph Goebbels organized a protest by buying 300 tickets and throwing stink bombs and releasing white mice in the theater. The Nazi ire was directed at the portrayal of German troops as cowards. (The film portrays German soldiers suffering wounds and “shell-shock” while fighting in the trenches in WWI.) *All Quiet on the Western Front* was removed from screens in Germany after the Nazi protests. Urwand sees this moment, prior to Hitler’s presidency, as establishing Hollywood’s willingness—in this case, Universal Studio’s willingness—to alter the film content to mollify Nazi agitation. Technically, however, the film was removed from screens by the German Foreign Office, by officials in place during the last years of the Weimar Republic. The internal political struggle between the Republican bureaucrats and the reactionary National Socialists is unmentioned by Urwand. Likewise, very little analysis is devoted to *All Quiet on the Western Front* as a film. Questions about how the film tells its story remain unasked. Why would the Nazis object to the plot, for instance? How does the film structure identification with characters in a way that offended Nazi sensibilities?

Clearly, the films chosen by Urwand could use some theoretical unpacking. What I missed was a discussion of why *certain* films attracted Nazi attention and others did not. In other words, why did some films become political footballs while others dropped silently into the marketplace?

A contingent part to this question regarding why certain films were part of an ideological struggle is Urwand’s characterization of the German consul in Los Angeles, Georg Gyssling, who is featured in the text as the strong arm of Hitler’s American propaganda wing. Historians of the period debate the significance of Gyssling’s power

relative to Hollywood, but Urwand seems convinced that he intimidated studio executive into making specific changes to several films deemed inappropriate for German sensibilities. Charged with communicating the Nazi cultural agenda, Gysling requested numerous cuts after screening an anti-war film called *Captured* produced by Warner Bros. The studio agreed to make the cuts, initially, but then released the film to American theaters without changes. Gysling responded by blocking the film's distribution agreement in Germany. Frustrated by these actions and appalled by the treatment of its Jewish employees in Berlin, Warner Bros. closed its operations in Berlin in 1934.

Urwand interprets these events by stating that other American studios learned—given Warner Bros.'s dormant German operations—that adherence to the “Gysling line” would ensure commercial success. They thenceforth arranged special previews for Gysling, a decision that Urwand interprets as proof that other Hollywood studios learned to collaborate with the Nazis based on Warner's decision. The possibility that Warner Bros. resisted Nazi demands isn't mentioned. In fact, Universal, Columbia, RKO, and Warner Bros. were all out of Germany by 1934. The fact that Paramount and MGM remained has as much to do with the history those studios had with Germany in the 1920s as it does with Nazi collaboration.

This particular case of historiographical myopia on Urwand's part rears its head in his contextualization of the alleged collaboration between Hollywood and Nazi Germany. Thomas Doherty, author of his own history of the period, responded to *Hollywood and Hitler: 1933-1939*, by stating that Urwand makes the mistake of reading the past through the lens of the present.¹² While I don't agree that it is possible to step outside of history to create this objective lens, it is possible to state that the endgame of Nazism was not clear in 1930; “there was not a linear trajectory of successive events that would clearly end at the gates of Auschwitz.”¹³

Even so, Paramount and MGM had been intimately intertwined with German film production and distribution since December of 1925 when they formed a distribution company with the German studio UFA—*Parufamet*. As part of the deal, Paramount and MGM loaned UFA \$4 million to secure and stabilize the German market for, primarily, American films. Pushing the timeline back to the mid-1920s would lend greater clarity to the actions of studios in the 1930s and would, at least, establish a broader context for studio action in Germany. “Trade follows the film” was a common dictum among economic expansionists in the 1920s. There was enough consensus around the idea to motivate Congress to appropriate \$15,000 to establish the Motion Picture Section in the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce under the direction of Secretary Herbert Hoover. Its goal was simple: promote the sale of American movies and motion-picture equipment overseas. In China, for example, there were only 106 theaters across the country in 1927. Between 1927 and 1933, the Bureau produced twenty-two separate reports on the commercial markets around the globe that clearly

show American domination of the world's cinema screens.¹⁴ The Hollywood output of 700 feature films annually dwarfed the combined output of the rest of the world.

The German market, however, was peculiar when compared to the rest of Europe. Able to produce around 241 films annually, Germany was second only to Hollywood and the quality of Weimar cinema was recognized in the American market. Ironically, the stabilization of the German economy in 1924 through the U.S.-funded Dawes plan¹⁵—halting rampant inflation and unemployment—damaged the German film industry by limiting all exports, including movies. Hollywood began to pour films into Germany forcing many independent film production companies to close and pushing UFA toward the brink of financial ruin by early 1925.¹⁶ (The Parufamet distribution arrangement was one outcome of this financial crisis.) The German government, in turn, responded by putting into effect a *Kontingent* or quota system: the number of films imported would be limited by the level of domestic production—for every film made in Germany, a permit would be issued to bring in one foreign film.¹⁷

These parameters for an analysis of U.S.-German film trade remain unmentioned in *The Collaboration*. By essentially starting his history with the 1930 protests of *All Quiet on the Western Front* organized by Joseph Goebbels for the Nazi party, subsequent moves made by studios in response to German pressure look reactionary. In point of fact, Urwand paints an update to the *Kontingent* clause, Article 15, with a particularly toxic brush. Issued in the summer of 1932, Article 15 declared that exhibition permits for film distribution in Germany could be refused to films that were “detrimental to German prestige.” The fact that several nations had similar clauses regarding distribution rights is not mentioned in *The Collaboration*. Hollywood itself had to adhere to its own set of nationalistic imperatives—that movies must support “national feelings”—found in the Production Code of 1930 in order to secure *domestic* distribution rights. One could also argue that studios performed a more delicate dance with the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 and the Hays Office than they did with Nazi representatives in California. One could even extend the parameters of this discussion to consider the consequences of the 1929 economic crisis. Facing a declining audience, national economic uncertainty, and pressure from major banking interests, the studios were all willing to change scripts and cut their films to mollify rumblings in the marketplace regarding the indecency of American films. With ideological unity and an organizational apparatus, American Catholic bishops organized a committee on motion pictures in 1933. The committee known as the Legion of Decency established a coordinated campaign to boycott movies that the Catholic Church considered indecent. Motion picture producers in consultation with former postmaster general Will Hays, in turn, established the Production Code Administration headed by the Irish-Catholic, former newsman, Joseph Breen. The Production Code of 1930 had established rules to “govern the production of talking pictures,” but its flexible application of standards for sex, violence, and obscenity had been tacitly ignored by the studios. Breen's office had some teeth and established the moral values of film stories in which “evil and good are never to be confused, the guilty

must be punished, and the audience must never be allowed to sympathize with crime or sin.”¹⁸ The history of the Production has been examined in numerous published histories of course, but Urwand misses an opportunity to look carefully at the interplay between the Code, Germany quota laws, and the natural imperative of the Hollywood studios to remain profitable during a period of remarkable financial uncertainty.

In closing, we should ask ourselves, what is the subject of *The Collaboration*? It is not simply an ideological project to write a history of 1930s Hollywood haunted by the specter of Nazi collaboration. It is the shock of revealing Nazi collaboration in Hollywood as if it were *taking place for the very first time right under our eyes*. It is a reformulation of the historical landscape that others have already trod. It is sensational. It is underdetermined.

The project falls short. But it falls short in a way that helps demystify the process of writing a contingent history of the international film market in the 1930s. That Urwand does not accomplish this goal has allowed others writers to establish a conversation over the recklessness of his allegations. It has raised the profile of a much more nuanced account of the same subject by Thomas Doherty. The amount of criticism generated by Urwand’s thesis--the discourse surrounding the publication of this book--is a type of meta-history that bolsters our understanding of the international web of business partnerships and government control that, effectively, dictated Hollywood film content for two decades. And what about this content? What remains are questions about the films that feature in this turbulent story; questions that move beyond a basic recounting of plot and character detail. In other words, why *would* Hitler like *King Kong*?

Jeffrey Thompson is assistant professor of Art History and chair of Film Studies at Sewanee: The University of the South where he teaches courses in Modern and Contemporary art and film history. He received his M.A. in Cinema Studies from New York University and his Ph.D. in art history from Emory University (2006). He is a specialist in the history of Conceptual art in the United States, Europe, and Latin America with other research interests that include the history of photography, Pop art, and graffiti focusing on issues related to art media, mass culture, and the politics of display and reception. Jeff Thompson’s writing has appeared in *Art Journal*, *Number*, and the anthologies *Carl Andre: Cuts: Texts and Sculptural Concepts*. Contact him [here](#).

NOTES

¹ Stephen Heath, “Narrative Space,” in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, Ed Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 389.

<http://faculty.washington.edu/cbebler/teaching/coursenotes/Heathnarrsp.html>

² Jean Epstein, “Bonjour cinéma,” in *Écrits sur le cinéma* (Paris: Seghers, 1974), 86.

³ In a particularly interesting case, David Denby of *The New Yorker* wrote a review of the book combined with a review of Thomas Doherty's *Hollywood and Hitler*.

http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2013/09/16/130916crbo_books_denby

Urwand responded to the review in a letter published in the October 7, 2013, issue of *The New Yorker*. Prior to the published letter, Denby re-reviewed *The Collaboration* on September 23, 2013, in his online blog to call on Harvard University Press to recall the book. See David Denby, "Hitler in Hollywood: Did the Studios Collaborate?" *The New Yorker* (Sept 16, 2013): 75-79. Also see, David Denby, "How Could Harvard Have Published Ben Urwand's *The Collaboration*," *The New Yorker Online* (September 23, 2013).

<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2013/09/how-could-harvard-have-published-ben-urwands-the-collaboration.html>. Significant reviews of *The Collaboration* also include Akiva Gottlieb, "Shelf Life: Ben Urwand's *The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler*," *The Nation* (December 9, 2013) <http://www.thenation.com/article/177271/shelf-life>, and Alexander C. Kafka, "When Hollywood Held Hands with Hitler," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 10, 2013). <https://chronicle.com/article/When-Hollywood-Held-Hands-With/140189/>

⁴ Ben Urwand, *The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 75.

⁵ Eberhard Kolb, *The Weimar Republic*, 2nd edition, Trans. P.S. Falla and R. J. Park (London: Routledge, 2005), 203.

⁶ For an overview of the relevant scholarship, see Kolb.

⁸ Jacques Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009), 14. "What the pupil must learn is what the schoolmaster must teach her. What the spectator must see is what the director makes her see."

⁹ Urwand, 6.

¹⁰ Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 295.

¹² Harvard University Press employed a marketing firm to promote *The Collaboration*. The press material that accompanied review copies of the book included a reference to Thomas Doherty's *Hollywood and Hitler: 1933-1939* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). The reference implied that Doherty relied exclusively on Hollywood trade publications for his history as opposed to Urwand who performed extensive archival research in Germany. For a reaction to this marketing strategy, see Jerome Christensen, "Competition over Collaboration: On Ben Urwand," *Los Angeles Review of Books* (October 8, 2013).

¹³ Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood and Hitler: 1933-1939* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 9.

¹⁴ Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America* (New York: Random House, 1994), 217.

¹⁵ American financier Charles Dawes presided over an international committee set up to monitor Germany's war reparations payments. The Dawes plan provided for a long-term repayment plan that allowed Germany access to the European and North American economic system. The effect was to create in the Weimar Republic prosperity that lasted until the stock market crash of 1929. See David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2004), 105.

¹⁶ At this point, the American studios Paramount and MGM offered to subsidize UFA's huge debt to the Deutsche Bank by lending it \$4 million at 7.5 percent interest in exchange for collaborative rights to UFA studios, theaters, and personnel. This agreement led to a remarkable exchange of talent between Hollywood and Germany. The migration drained UFA of talent until Hollywood was glutted. In turn, this led many filmmakers to return to Germany until 1933.

¹⁷ Similar quotas were established in Italy, Austria, Hungary, France, and Great Britain.

¹⁸ Sklar, 174.