Mass Media and Commercial Entertainments in Germany and Britain: Global Change and National Contexts before the Second World War

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One of the most intriguing aspects of the history of the mass media and popular culture in the industrial era is the extent to which many of the basic developments have seemed so similar and universal across so many countries. One need not subscribe to Adorno and Horkheimer's thesis about the emergence of a singular capitalist 'cultural industry' and its overwhelming powers of standardization and commodification to note the many similarities.[1] The parallels are readily apparent, and can be observed at a number of different levels. After all, the expansion of new communications technologies and commercial entertainments (*Varieté*, popular press, eventually cinema and radio) was an absolutely integral part of wider processes of industrialization and urbanization, and thus took place everywhere they were visible, especially after the middle of the nineteenth century. Among the myriad social effects of these changes, one of the most basic was the emergence of a new market for cultural consumption among the poorer wage-earning classes. This signalled the emergence of a strikingly new form of 'public', one that was not composed of a network of educated private individuals, but rather a collective public of labouring masses – a so-called 'mass public', though one that was of course highly complex and multi-layered. By the turn of the century the new media and entertainments were becoming a constituent part of urban life itself, and gradually began to influence cultural practices far beyond the big cities. Over time, all of these developments thus tended to undermine older, local or regional-based networks of communication and began to overlay them with a 'national' or even 'international' public.[2] Alongside this shrinking of geographical space was the destabilization of the vertical stratifications and strict social hierarchies that had long structured cultural life. In short, the age of 'mass culture' (used here in a non-pejorative sense) had dawned.

In essence, this picture amounts to a history of the mass media and mass culture through the lens of 'modernization'. The key elements in this

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1 Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). For a critical overview of the 'Frankfurt School', see Michael Kausch, *Kulturindustrie und Populärkultur. Kritische Theorie der Massenmedien* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1988); also Deborah Cook, *The Culture Industry Revisited* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).

2 The most renowned analysis of the role of communications in the coalescence of nation-states is still Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

story are familiar: the rise of a mass public, the 'nationalization' of the public sphere at the expense of local particularisms, the commercialisation and increasing standardisation of popular culture, and the challenge – implicit or explicit – posed by technological innovation to traditional social and cultural structures. Clearly there is much of value within this overall approach, notwithstanding the various pitfalls of teleology and normalization that are too well known to need repeating here. The common elements that it highlights furnish a useful point of departure for any attempt to analyse cultural and social change across time and space.

Equally clearly, however, the rise of the media and mass culture, like the other elements of the 'modernization' catalogue, always possessed both global and local dimensions. The 'global' dimensions listed above were obviously of central importance, and have therefore taken pride of place within historical narratives. But if we wish to gain a clearer understanding of the shifting role of the media and commercial entertainments within the wider development of social, political and cultural life, then we must examine how these seemingly universal processes shaped, and were shaped by, local and temporal factors. This interaction between wider global forces of change and the specificities of the local, regional and national contexts in which they ultimately manifested themselves furnishes a solid rationale for comparison; indeed, it cries out for comparative analysis.

The following discussion very briefly considers some of the ways in which these precise contexts shaped the perception, social role and overall shape of both the media and the artefacts they distributed on such an unprecedented scale. Focusing on Germany and Britain from the latter part of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth – two societies that, for all their differences, shared more in common with each other than with most other places in the world – it highlights several factors that profoundly shaped the development of the media and people's engagement with it, and that may serve as useful points of comparison. The discussion revolves around three main issues: first, the self-understanding and cultural interests of the educated elite, which influenced both the social meaning of commercial culture and how it was regulated; second, the nature of the social and political divisions that shaped audiences; and third, the interplay of political, technical and social factors that shifted over time.

Commercial Culture and Elites

One of the most obvious differences between the development of commercial entertainments and media in Britain and Germany is the uniquely early emergence in Britain of a mass circulation press, popular tourism, professional sport and other amusements. This 'forerunner' status has been repeatedly invoked and analysed by historians, and is a reflection

of Britain's wholly exceptional urbanization rate and high proportion of industrial wage earners throughout the nineteenth century, which not only furnished the requisite time and money for commercial entertainments but also a geographically concentrated market.[3] The rise of commercial entertainments was part of a broader set of social and cultural changes that began in Britain earlier than anywhere else, and had already become a relatively established part of everyday urban life by the time that Germany's industrial cities began their extraordinarily rapid expansion in the latter decades of the nineteenth century.

To be sure, the issue of pioneer and latecomer varies from one theme or aspect to the next, with considerable two-way exchange across the Channel. What is noteworthy for our purposes here, however, is how the question of timing and speed relates to perceptions of the 'cultural industries' in the two countries; or, more bluntly put, to the impression that British elites seem to have come to terms somewhat more easily with the rise of modern commercial entertainments – and modern industrial society in general – than their German counterparts. While such discrepancies are difficult to measure, it is noticeable that whereas historians have long emphasized the turbulent currents of anti-modernism and cultural-pessimism in their accounts of Imperial Germany, the historiography on Britain places more emphasis on the increasingly pleasure-oriented outlook of the late-Victorian middle classes.[4] From this perspective, the strident critiques of commercial culture among German intellectuals were simply part of the wider anti-modern response to the sudden transformations that gripped Germany during this period, and which are thought to have been especially vehement there due to the self-understanding of the German educated elite and the centrality of culture to conceptions of German nationhood.[5]

Though a familiar argument, it is worth recalling that the rise of the new media and commercial culture around the end of the nineteenth century coincided with a broader sense of crisis among the German *Bildungsbürgertum*, which had grown accustomed to exerting a remarkable degree of cultural and political influence, certainly in comparison to the British educated elite. In response to the rise of a new industrial and

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3 E.g. Kaspar Maase, *Grenzenloses Vergnügen. Der Aufstieg der Massenkultur* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1997), 79-89; Richard Holt, *Sport and the British: A Modern History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Christiane Eisenberg, *'English Sports' und deutsche Bürger. Eine Gesellschaftsgeschichte 1800-1939* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1999).

4 For a recent overviews see Georg Bollenbeck *Tradition, Avant-Garde, Reaktion: Deutsche Kontroversen um die kulturelle Moderne* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1999); Judith Flanders, *Consuming Passions: Leisure and Pleasure in Victorian Britain* (London: HarperPress, 2006); Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998).

5 For a nuanced recent analysis: Kevin Repp, *Reformers, Critics, and the Paths of German Modernity: Anti-politics and the Search for Alternatives, 1890-1914* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

technical elite, Germany's non-economic elites tended to defend the status symbol of humanistic education over and above the acquisition of practical knowledge. This distinction of being 'cultured' (*gebildet*) and not just 'trained' (*ausgebildet*) was also used as a means of asserting national superiority via the idea of a unique German appreciation of culture as a distinguishing characteristic of the national soul.[6] A deep reverence for 'culture' was thus an indispensable badge of both national and social distinction. By the turn of the century, much of Germany's educated elite considered itself quite literally as the guardians of German national culture against the alleged soulless-ness and sterile rationality of modern industrial society.[7] For many such observers, there was no clearer symbol of this society than the 'mass cultural' commodities whose value was measured by profit rather than by intrinsic merit.

For a number of reasons, these underlying resentments grew particularly intense after around 1890. One important watershed was the lapse of the Socialist Laws in September 1890, which allowed the Social Democratic party and its affiliated unions to operate in the full light of day. This symbolic shift coincided with a period of explosively rapid growth in commercial leisure offerings (e.g. the popular press to popular *Varieté* shows to the advent of film from 1895), which itself was based on rising wages and falling working hours. The fact that both the labour movement and the commercial leisure industry experienced a sort of parallel heyday reinforced the tendency within Germany to regard both as part of the broader 'social question', which served to justify intervention on the part of political and social elites.[8]

In many ways, however, this situation was strikingly similar to political and cultural developments in Britain in the 1860s-1870s, which likewise witnessed a parallel surge of commercial entertainments and popular political participation. The mass-circulation press underwent especially rapid growth during these years after the abolition of advertising tax in 1853, Paper Duty in 1861, and above all the repeal of Stamp Duty in 1855. The 1860s also witnessed the first great boom in the construction of purpose-built music halls, which already numbered in the hundreds by 1870.[9] This was also a period of profound political change in the wake of

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[6] See Fritz Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 44-6; W. H. Bruford, *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Georg Bollenbeck, *Bildung und Kultur* (Frankfurt a. M.: Insel, 1994).

[7] Bollenbeck, *Tradition*, 165. See generally Hermann Glaser, *Bildungsbürgertum und Nationalismus: Politik und Kultur im wilhelminischen Deutschland*, (Munich: dtv, 1993).

[8] Jürgen Reulecke, "'Veredelung der Volkserholung' und 'edle Geselligkeit'. Sozialreformerische Bestrebungen zur Gestaltung der arbeitsfreien Zeit im Kaiserreich," in: Gerhard Huck (ed.), *Sozialgeschichte der Freizeit* (Wuppertal: Hammer, 1980), 141-163; Kaspar Maase, "Massenkunst und Volkserziehung. Die Regulierung von Film und Kino im deutschen Kaiserreich," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 41 (2001), 39-77.

[9] See Dagmar Kift, *The Victorian Music Hall: Culture, Class and Conflict* (Cambridge:

the 1867 Second Reform Act, which effectively gave the working classes the vote. And it was one that witnessed numerous efforts to link the issue of popular leisure activity to wider issues of social reform, often under the rubric of 'rational recreation'.[10]

In Britain, as in Germany, there was no lack of conservatives, clerics and academics who decried commercial culture and all it stood for.[11] Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, elite criticisms of commercial culture were many and varied, and were remarkably similar in the two countries, ranging from rants about aesthetic debasement to moral crusades to well-intentioned pedagogic concerns to misgivings about the intertwinement of commerce and culture. The attacks on Victorian music halls by coalitions of local politicians, religious and temperance groups resonated closely with campaigns against dance halls and so-called *Tingel-Tangels* in Germany.[12] The commercial publisher August Scherl, the most powerful newspaper tycoon in Wilhelmine Germany, attracted all of the same accusations of corruption and appealing to 'base instincts' as Lord Northcliffe did in London.[13] Cinema, too, faced similar charges of cheap sensationalism, violence, lasciviousness and aesthetic hodge-podge in the two countries.[14]

Without a doubt, Germany was home to a remarkably clamorous strand of cultural criticism and a broad array of organizations dedicated to the regulation and/or edification of commercial culture. Cleary, the anti-Socialist legislation and anti-Catholic policies of the 1870s also contributed to an unusually high degree of 'pillarization' of popular culture in Germany between different socio-political milieux. Yet the overheated tone of much of this criticism, combined with the distortions of hindsight, make it easy to exaggerate these differences between German and British debates about commercial culture. In spite of all the cultural-pessimistic

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Cambridge University Press, 1996); Peter Bailey (ed.), *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986).

10 Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian Britain: Rational Recreation and the Quest for Control, 1830-1885* (London: Routledge, 1978).

11 For the long view, Matthew Hilton, "The Legacy of Luxury: Moralities of Consumption since the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 4, 1 (2004), 101-123; for a stinging critique John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber, 1992).

12 Kift, *Music Hall*, 80-114; Elisabeth Kosok, "Die Reglementierung des Vergnügens," in: Dagmar Kift (ed.), *Kirmes – Kneipe – Kino. Arbeiterkultur im Ruhrgebiet zwischen Kommerz und Kontrolle 1850-1914* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1992), 60-82.

13 Stereotypical: Walter Hammer, *Die Generalanzeiger-Presse kritisch beurteilt als ein Herd der Korruption*, (Leipzig: Vollrath, 1911); also the works quoted in D. L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 111.

14 See, e.g., Gary Stark, "Cinema, Society, and the State: Policing the Film Industry in Imperial Germany," in: Gary Stark, Bede K. Lackner (eds.), *Essays on Culture and Society in Modern Germany* (College Station: Texas A and M Press, 1982), 123-166; Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film, 1918-1929* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1971).

grumbling, by and large the pre-war *Bildungsbürgertum* possessed a deep-rooted belief in progress and in the ability of society to improve itself – an outlook and intellectual climate not altogether unlike the optimistic atmosphere of late Victorian and Edwardian Britain, Progressive-era America or Belle Époque France.[15]

Over the longer term, it was arguably the First World War that marked the most important divergence in debates about commercial culture, as this optimistic outlook took a particularly severe beating in Germany as a result not only of the war itself but also the subsequent trauma of revolution and inflation. This is not to posit a radical break with previous trends or a sudden parting of ways. Certainly many similarities remained; the principal themes and parameters of cultural critique continued to shape debates well into the inter-war period in both countries, sharpened by the experiences of the war, the rising cultural influence of the United States, and the far-reaching social and political changes underway. The unprecedented concerns about public opinion in the era of 'total war', the role of the media in maintaining home front morale, the vast extensions of suffrage soon after armistice – together this raft of changes constituted a fundamental structural transformation of the entire 'public sphere' across most of Europe. Yet the changes in Germany were both more revolutionary and more widely resented than in Britain, which inevitably coloured perceptions of what was in some ways a similar shift in power between elites and the 'masses' (as ordinary folk increasingly came to be called). It mattered a great deal whether one lost or won the war; elites and states on the losing end seemed, broadly speaking, considerably more willing and determined to regulate and instrumentalize popular culture as a means of shoring up their power or status. In this sense, the closing stages of the war and the immediate post-war years marked a second important watershed in elite understandings of commercial culture in Germany, and indeed one that, unlike the 1890s, did not have such obvious parallels among the victorious powers. Unlike in Britain, France or the United States – and despite the literati's fascination with the decline of civilization during the 'Morbid Age'[16] – scholars generally agree that the sense of cultural and social deterioration, of anger and despair, was more palpable and immediate in the defeated countries of central Europe. All of this greatly polarized post-war cultural debates in Germany to a degree unknown in Britain. Aggravated by the festering resentment of the radical Right, the ensuing culture wars were not merely about defending cherished aesthetic standards, reasserting elite authority or protecting the nation against 'Americanization', all of which were also central to cultural

[15] See Bollenbeck, *Tradition*, 189; Matthew Jefferies, *Imperial Culture in Germany, 1871-1918* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), 221-223; Suzanne L. Marchand, David F. Lindenfeld (eds.), *Germany at the Fin de Siècle* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004).

[16] Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain between the Wars* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).

debates in inter-war Britain. They were ultimately – and very evidently for contemporaries – about the legitimacy of the Republic itself.

From the German perspective, then, it is widely thought that these highly politicized cultural debates exacerbated the social and political antinomies of the Wilhelmine era and eventually played a role in destabilizing the Weimar Republic. Adelheid von Saldern, for instance, has explicitly argued that whereas mass commercial culture functioned as a relatively cohesive force in Britain between the wars, in Germany it tended to have the opposite effect. In this view, censorship and cultural reform efforts were more intense in Germany than elsewhere, due to the unusual degree of influence enjoyed by the cultivated elite and the deliberate politicization of 'mass culture' and 'Americanization' by nationalist and reactionary political thinkers. The differences are also attributed to the aforementioned 'pillarization' of German society that had shaped cultural life since the late nineteenth century: i.e. the Catholic, socialist and conservative milieus whose networks of communication, patterns of sociability, organizational life and even leisure pursuits rarely overlapped. By contrast, the failure of the Labour party to construct its own cultural movement along these lines is somewhat revealing in this respect – despite the immense social gulfs that structured status and privilege in Britain.[17]

From the British perspective, some scholars have indeed seen the inter-war years as an important period in the emergence of a more widely shared and increasingly 'classless' culture.[18] The clearest statement along these lines is D. L. LeMahieu's *A Culture for Democracy*, which argues that interwar Britain witnessed the emergence of a new and distinctive 'middle brow' or 'common' culture of music, literature and film that was shared by a large proportion of the population and that corresponded more closely to the needs and realities of a democraticizing society.[19] The existence of a marketplace for entertainments displaced bourgeois cultural predominance in two ways: by making commercial success rather than aesthetic merit (determined by cultivated elites) the main criterion of value, and by allowing the masses to choose what they wanted via the selective opening of their wallets. Unsurprisingly, some scholars have disagreed with the notion of a 'common culture' *per se*, suggesting rather an expansion of shared cultural artefacts and experiences that different groups still accessed and engaged with through the existing structures of class,

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17 Adelheid von Saldern, "Massenfreizeitkultur im Visier. Ein Beitrag zu den Deutungs- und Einwirkungsversuchen während der Weimarer Republik," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 33 (1993), 21-58; on Britain: Chris Waters, *British Socialists and the Politics of Popular Culture, 1884-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

18 For a brief overview of the literature on the emergence of a 'shared culture', see Peter Borsay, *A History of Leisure* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), 101-106.

19 D. L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

gender, and region.[20] Yet these developments are widely interpreted as the cultural correlates of the franchise extensions of 1918 and 1928, which together created an unprecedented sense of commonality and shared participation in both political and cultural life.

How far this apparent discrepancy was the result of distinctive national historiographic traditions with their own points of enquiry and debate, and how far it reflects an actual disparity in the social function and significance of commercialized popular culture in the two countries is impossible to answer with any certainty. It is worth noting that this difference was recognized not only by historians but also by contemporaries. Some German commentators held up England as a model of political and cultural stability to which Germany should aspire, and British cultural diplomacy efforts between the wars made a point of capitalizing on this image.[21] There thus seems good reason to agree with von Saldern that debates about the implications and possible regulation of commercial culture were significantly less fractious in inter-war Britain than in Germany. Yet examining the extent to which commercial entertainments actually promoted social and regional homogenization involves not only studying the discourse surrounding them, but also the patterns of availability and uptake of these entertainments, as well as their potential to exert any socially unifying effect.[22] Here the common focus on the 'global' dimensions of mass commercial culture – the transcendence of time and space, the expansion of the public, the standardisation of leisure – is of little use, as it inexorably accentuates similarities regardless of the various ways in which these developments were perceived, resented, welcomed or resisted in various contexts. As soon as we pursue these questions with a greater sensitivity to contexts, we quickly find that the displacement of traditional leisure patterns by a more classless and standardised 'mass culture' during the interwar years was patchy, incomplete and strongly influenced by existing traditions, cultural orientations and social structures – foremost among them the profound divisions of class, education and milieu. The double question that confronts us, then, is how far a supposedly standardizing set of communications media and commercial entertainments could efface differences not only within such divided societies, but also between them.

Any attempt to answer these questions must recognize the ambivalent social implications of mass commercial culture. On the one hand, the

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20 Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918–1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), esp. 527-528.

21 E. g. Hans Domizlaff, *Propagandamittel der Staatsidee* (Leipzig: Poeschel and Trepte, 1932), 60-4, 71; on Britain: Philip Taylor, *The Projection of Britain: British Overseas Publicity and Propaganda 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 111-122.

22 A point explicitly made by Elizabeth Harvey, "Culture and Society in Weimar Germany: The Impact of Modernism and Mass Culture," in: Mary Fulbrook (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Germany: Politics, Culture and Society 1918-1990* (London: Arnold, 2001), 58-76.

promotion of a standard set of cultural artefacts that transcends societal divisions suggests a fundamentally integrative impetus, as LeMahieu and others have argued. Yet on the other hand, the deliberate targeting of particular audiences and the conscious appeal to different tastes tended to segment audiences, in terms of both reinforcing existing social distinctions and creating new ones by means of distinctive cultural experiences and practices. How these two opposing forces shaped the culture industries and their role in society depended very much on the economic and technological attributes of specific cultural media or activities (i.e. commercial or non-commercial, user-friendly or otherwise), as well as the context in which they were produced and used. In other words, the answer could vary significantly not only from one cultural activity to another, but also according to time and place.

Integration and Differentiation: Cinema, Press and Radio

Cinema

Let us turn first to the cinema – the flagship medium of popular culture in the inter-war period – by way of illustration. In terms of audience size, Britain and Germany exhibited some noticeable differences. Britain was, for much of the pre-television age, the single most cinema-crazy country in the entire world. Both estimates for the 1920s as well as more reliable statistics from the mid-1930s clearly show that the British went to the cinema far more often than any other nationality in Europe. By the mid-1930s, attendance figures were 18-19 million per week – considerably more per capita than in the United States, and positively dwarfing admissions figures in Germany, which hovered around only 6 million per week.[23] Part of this difference was related to disposable incomes, which during the inter-war years were around one third higher in Britain than in Germany. But again, it was also due to the larger urban population in Britain, which accounted for the bulk of the cinema audience everywhere. Whereas only 27% of Germans in 1925 lived in cities of over 100,000 inhabitants (and 36% in villages of under 2,000), as early as 1901 44% of the population of England and Wales lived in cities over 100,000 and only 22% in towns under 2,500.[24]

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[23] On Germany: Alexander Jason (ed.), *Handbuch des Films 1935/36* (Berlin: Hoppenstedt and Co., 1935), 161; on Britain, Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1994), 83-4; Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace* (London: Routledge, 1984), 11-12.

[24] Jean Quataert, "Demographic and Social Change," in: Roger Chickering (ed.), *Imperial Germany: A Historiographical Companion* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 97-130, here 107; F. M. L. Thompson, "Town and City," in: idem (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950, 3 vols., vol. 1: Regions and Communities*, (Cambridge: Cam-bridge University Press, 1990), 1-86, here 8.

In both countries, place of residence was therefore important, as country folk predictably went far less than city-dwellers. But there were large swathes of Germany that remained more rural and remote than almost any areas of the more densely populated British Isles, in particular in England. In the mid-1920s whole areas of eastern Germany were still referred to as 'Kinowüste', or cinema deserts, denoting regions with under one cinema per 1,000 square kilometres); by this time only a tiny handful of Brits remained so physically segregated from the cinema.[25] Region, too, made a difference: attendance in Germany was generally higher in the north and west than in the south and east; in England cinema attendance was nearly twice as high per capita in the North as in the South, apart from London.[26] Class also shaped audiences in roughly similar ways: attendance tended to drop with education levels, and the young always went more than the elderly. Yet overall, the extraordinary popularity of cinema in Britain and its ready physical accessibility to the bulk of the populace made it more of a common denominator than was the case in inter-war Germany. There was good reason for A. J. P. Taylor to dub the cinema in interwar Britain the 'essential social habit of the age'.[27] In Germany, by contrast, it would not attain such dominance over popular leisure activities until the latter part of the Second World War.[28]

To what extent were these cinema audiences seeing the same thing? While there was inevitably a degree of overlap, programmes in Germany and Britain were fairly distinctive. For one thing, censorship was noticeably more stringent in Britain than under the Weimar Republic (and noticeably less, of course, after 1933). Whereas Weimar audiences were allowed to see the majority of Soviet films, they were banned in Britain (like most other places).[29] Moreover, both countries witnessed considerable efforts to develop a national film style, largely in response to the challenge posed by Hollywood. During the 1920s in particular, as production costs remained relatively low compared to the sound film era, a considerable portion of films were never intended for international distribution in any event. Although this tendency diminished somewhat after 1930, it still remained fairly strong in Britain due to the sheer size of the national market, which, unlike the German domestic market, was large enough in itself to amortize the costs of most productions.[30] While there was, then, some exchange of films between Britain and Germany, what they most

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[25] Alexander Jason, *Der Film in Ziffern und Zahlen (1895-1925)* (Berlin: Deutsches Druck- und Verlagshaus in Komm., 1925), 25–56.

[26] McKibbin, *Classes*, 422.

[27] A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914–1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 313.

[28] See the figures in Jürgen Spiker, *Film und Kapital. Der Weg der deutschen Filmwirtschaft zum nationalsozialistischen Einheitskonzern* (Berlin: Spiess, 1975), 197, 231.

[29] See, generally, Klaus Petersen, *Zensur in der Weimarer Republik* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995), esp. 50-5; Margaret Dickinson, Sarah Street, *Cinema and the State: The Film Industry and the British Government 1927-84* (London: 1985).

[30] Generally: Rachael Low, *Filmmaking in 1930s Britain* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985).

shared in common was Hollywood. In both countries, American blockbusters proved immensely popular; likewise, run-of-the-mill Hollywood pictures tended to be most popular among working-class audiences. But it nonetheless seems clear that Hollywood was significantly more dominant in Britain than in Germany during the inter-war years, especially with the advent of talkies from c. 1929 onwards. Whereas the language barrier posed a significant hindrance to Hollywood talkies on the continent (dubbing was unpopular, and multi-language versions of the same film were prohibitively expensive to produce), if anything the classless accents on display only added to their appeal among British audiences.[31] Granted, American top films were still very popular in Germany, not least under the Nazis (until the ban on US film imports in 1940). But it is against this background that the acute fears of cinematic 'Americanization' in inter-war Britain must be situated.

Patterns of regional preference also shaped the cinematic landscape in both countries, though it appears that this factor was more significant in Germany. The differences in taste between audiences in Berlin and other areas were a constant topic in the film press. Observers were more or less unanimous that American films were significantly more popular in the capital than elsewhere. And the Berlin provenance of most German features repelled many Germans elsewhere. Rhineland audiences, noted one commentator, were positively put off by 'references to huge successes in Berlin.' In southern Germany the Berlin idiom of some films made them scarcely understood, let alone admired.[32] In Britain there were also regional variations, especially with regard to certain brands of humour, though contemporary Mass Observation surveys suggest that the differences were minor, and industry insiders tended to view Britain as a relatively homogeneous market.[33]

The social topography of cinematic preferences and experiences likewise showed a mixture of similarities and differences between the two countries, though in both cases the complexities blatantly belied the notion of a 'homogenized' audience. In Germany, contemporary cinema observers spoke of sharply segregated audiences that rarely overlapped except in the case of blockbusters.[34] In Britain, too, class structured preferences; as noted above, Hollywood films were most popular among working-class

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31 For Germany, see Thomas Saunders, *Hollywood in Berlin: American Cinema and Weimar Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); for Britain, Richards, *Dream Palace*; Stacey, *Star Gazing*.

32 Wilhelm v. Köln, "Das rheinländische Publikum," *Film Kurier* (11 June 1924), 1; Walter Jerven, "In Münchener Kinos erlauscht," *Film Kurier* (27 December 1928), 3; "Die Provinz und der Berliner Filmgeschmack," *Film Kurier* (12 November 1926), 1.

33 McKibbin, *Classes*, 438.

34 Irmalotte Guttmann, *Über die Nachfrage auf dem Filmmarkt in Deutschland* (Berlin: Wolffsohn, 1928); "Der Kinobesuch an den '4 Sonntagen'," *Film Kurier* (27 December 1930), 1; W. Lydor, "Unser Publikum wünscht," *Reichsfilmblatt* (28 August 1926), 17-18.

audiences.[35] Nor were the classes mixing to any great extent: not only did they tend to see a different palette of films, even when they saw the same thing they went to different cinemas with different prices. In both countries these differences were perhaps most clearly manifested in the gulf separating the plush cinema palaces from the thousands of local 'flea pits'. Yet in this respect, the differences appear to have been noticeably greater in Germany. By the 1930s there was a far greater degree of chaining in Britain, which tended to even out cinematic experience somewhat due to the more uniform standards of projection, decor, comfort, etc., not to mention the practice of block-booking films for entire chains of cinemas (though one must not exaggerate the degree of standardization). With greater chaining there was correspondingly less variation in the landscape of the cinema. Here, Germany was very much the exception among the major industrialized countries: in 1936, 82.3% of cinemas were still owned by individual proprietors, whereas only 6.1% were owned by entities running more than four cinemas.[36] Indeed, Germany's cinematic infrastructure remained dominated by single, small, independent cinemas right up to the 1950s. So while more Britons were seeing similar films in larger, more standardized surroundings, in Germany cinema audiences remained more physically segregated in their neighbourhood 'Stammkinos', whose programmes were closely tailored to local tastes.

Popular Press

In general terms, then, it seems that cinema audiences were, for all their differences, in certain respects more 'integrated' in inter-war Britain than in Germany. To what extent, if any, did this also apply to popular press readerships? Insofar as it did, it was more in terms of regionalism than class. The German press before the Nazis was largely defined by two factors: locality and milieu. In comparison to Britain, Germany had an extremely fragmented press landscape. The average circulation was only half that of England, and the vast bulk of newspapers served a distinctly local readership. To the acute frustration of advertisers, there were effectively no national dailies at all in Germany (nothing like the *Times*, *Daily Telegraph* or *Observer*): only the weekly *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* had anything like 'national' coverage, and even its impressive circulation (c. two million by the 1930s) could not match that of the *Radio Times* (estimated at five million). In Germany, social and confessional barriers further divided local readerships, and essentially represented different networks of communication in a starkly polarized political landscape. This was most observable among the socialist, communist and Catholic press,

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[35] See Jeffery Richards, Dorothy Sheridan (eds.), *Mass Observation at the Movies* (London: Routledge, 1987), 16-25; McKibbin, *Classes*, 431-433.

[36] Spiker, *Film und Kapital*, 137-8; for the exhibition branch in Britain: Stuart Hanson, *From Silent Screen to Multi-screen: A History of Cinema Exhibition in Britain since 1896* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

which primarily served their respective 'ghettoes'. While there were certain areas of overlap between such networks – for instance the many communist workers who turned to Ullstein's liberal *Berliner Morgenpost* for the serialised novels and sport coverage (and to escape the constant slogans of the communist *Rote Fahne*) – there appears to have been a greater degree overlap in Britain during this period, where many a Labour-voting worker bought, say, the *Daily Express* (with a circulation of over 2 million by the 1930s) on the way to work in spite of its anti-Labour stance.[37]

This kind of 'cross-reading' was of course related to the general, long-term trend towards consumer orientation and entertainment in the popular press, to the attempt to cater primarily to 'non political' identities and interests as a means of maximizing one's readership. This was a more or less universal pattern in the industrialized world at the time, and was pronounced in England as well as Germany. Provincial dailies (like the *Birmingham Mail* or *Liverpool Echo*) and *Generalanzeiger* (in Leipzig, Düsseldorf, and dozens of other cities in Germany) were remarkably socially inclusive, focused as they were on local news, sport, advertisements and the like. By contrast, the 'national' press retained clearer social profiles. In Britain, the *Daily Herald* was geared for the Labour-voting working-class male; the *Daily Mirror* among women, young and poor; the *Daily Mail* as a starkly anti-socialist, lower middle class paper, the *Times* for the elite. In Germany, the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and *Berliner Tageblatt* were relatively liberal, the *Vossische Zeitung* less so, the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* significantly less still, before reaching a number of starkly conservative papers like the *Kreuz-Zeitung* or *Börsenblatt*. In both countries the 'mass press' of the interwar years was still structured profoundly by class and political milieu. But in the fragmented press landscape of Germany it was also more thickly overlaid by locality. It was only from the 1950s onwards that the *Bild-Zeitung* changed this situation radically (and even then with regional editions).[38]

Radio

Such subtle differences between Britain and Germany are also visible in the case of radio, even if they are arguably outweighed by the similarities. The growth of radio listening in the 1920s-30s was impressive in both cases, though slightly quicker in Britain, where 71% of households had radios by 1939 compared to 57% in Germany (and this after considerable catch-up during the mid-1930s). In both countries, the architects of the

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[37] Though by the 1950s, the cross-class popularity of the *Bild-Zeitung* in Germany worked in much the same way. See, generally, Bernhard Fulda, *Press and Politics in the Weimar Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Corey Ross, *Media and the Making of Modern Germany: Mass Communications, Politics and Society from the Empire to the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 142-149; McKibbin, *Classes*, 503-508.

[38] Ibid.

broadcasting essentially perceived of the radio as an instrument for popular education and social integration rather than mere entertainment. In this respect, the similarities are in fact highly conspicuous against the background of broader international developments: the staunchly non-commercial, pedagogical orientation of both the BBC and the German broadcasting system meant that in neither country was radio a part of a commercial entertainment 'industry'. Quite the opposite, both systems were actually deliberate attempts to *prevent* the development of such a commercialized and standardized culture by means of displacing the market mechanism via state patronage. For the first decade or so this pedagogical mission was pursued very much at the expense of wider audience wishes, as the 'higher things' were emphasized over popular fare. John Reith was (in)famous for his strong views on the matter; his German counterpart Hans Bredow was probably more 'Reithian' than Reith himself. Both were determined to avoid what they viewed as the chaotic pandering to popular tastes that would result from a commercial, or even semi-commercial system as pertained in many other countries.[39]

Yet even here we see two noteworthy differences. For one thing, Weimar broadcasters were even more reluctant to popularise the programme than the early BBC. Whereas the BBC had clearly begun to make concessions by around 1931, Weimar programmers made precious few moves in this direction, banking instead on the popular of folk music and the like (hardly what the young jazz fan was after). Paradoxically, it was the Nazis who eventually lightened the German radio programme by essentially filling it with the very music they had previously attacked as degenerate 'asphalt culture' and that the supposedly 'liberal' Weimar programmers had assiduously kept off the airwaves in favour of the classics and the promotion of *Volk* and *Heimat* culture.[40] A second difference was structural. Although German broadcasters quite consciously adopted the BBC's state monopoly as a model, they clearly opted for a system reflecting regional interests and particularities over a standard national service as in Britain – hence the dominance, to this day, of regional broadcasting in Germany.

A 'Middlebrow' Watershed?: the Inter-War Years

To return to the general point, the question of whether the mass media and entertainment industries of the first half of the twentieth century were more 'integrative' in Britain than in Germany is difficult to answer with a

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[39] Winfried Lerg, *Rundfunkpolitik in der Weimarer Republik*, (Munich: dtv, 1980); Asa Briggs, *The BBC: The First Fifty Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

[40] Ansgar Diller, *Rundfunkpolitik im Dritten Reich* (Munich: dtv, 1980); Adelheid v. Saldern, "*Volk* and *Heimat* Culture in Radio Broadcasting during the Period of Transition from Weimar to Nazi Germany," *Journal of Modern History* 76 (2004), 319-320; Ross, *Media*, 330-340.

straight yes or no. Nonetheless, it seems fair to say that the local versus global dimensions of these developments were structured differently in the two countries. At the risk of simplifying matters, in Germany the press tended to be local in scope, radio regional, and film and recording national/international (television, once it came in the 1950s, was also largely national in scope). By contrast, in Britain the press and radio were far more 'national' in scope than in Germany, while film and recording were at least somewhat more 'international' (or, to put it differently, more exposed to 'Americanization' due to the absence of a language barrier). In basic structural terms, then, one can discern somewhat less scope for audience fragmentation and more scope for convergence in Britain than in Germany during this period, quite apart from the differences in the tone of elite discourse surrounding commercial culture.

In suggesting this tendency it is crucial not to exaggerate the differences; class distinction and snobbery still permeated British cultural life, and there were numerous efforts in Germany – some of them fairly successful, such as the *Autorenfilm* or the radio *Hörspiel* – to create a shared 'middlebrow' culture. Equally important, however, the answer to this question depends in large part on the period under discussion. For if the notion of a relatively 'integrationist' mass culture in Britain is plausible for much of this period, in many respects it becomes less clear-cut by the late 1930s and 1940s.

Britain and Germany after 1933 admittedly make a rather odd couplet for comparison. Any evaluation of cultural life in these two very different societies will turn up huge and obvious disparities: the purges, the direct government control, the degree of censorship under the Nazis marked a break with both the Weimar past and with prevailing international norms, at least in western Europe and North America. But as Wolfgang Schivelbusch has recently highlighted in his comparative study of Fascism, National Socialism and the New Deal, it is nonetheless worth considering some basic, underlying similarities that are often obscured by these apparent differences.[41]

After all, it was the Nazis' avowed aim to use the mass media for the purpose of national integration, to create a wholesome 'national culture' that could be shared by all Germans regardless of social or regional background. By the end of the 1930s, and certainly by the middle of the Second World War, this attempt to integrate audiences across regional and class lines was to a considerable extent successful, though for a variety of reasons that the Nazis did not wholly control and that were common to other countries as well, including Britain.[42] Among these common factors were a number of technical and commercial changes: the effects of

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41 Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Three New Deals: Reflections on Roosevelt's America, Mussolini's Italy, and Hitler's Germany, 1933-1939* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

42 This is argued at length in Ross, *Media*, 263-379.

Depression-era concentration and amalgamation, the broad attractiveness of sound film, the greater affordability and user-friendliness of radio, as well as increasing technical and organizational overlap between the various media, in particular the growing convergence of cinema, broadcasting and recording associated with the transition to sound film (the hit film soundtrack being perhaps the clearest expression of this closer relationship). The overall result of these changes – in Germany as elsewhere – was fewer producers peddling a more consistent body of content to a larger and more variegated audience than ever before.

In addition to such secular changes, the particular political constellation of the Third Reich (the tighter censorship, the ideology of national unity over social division, the deliberate endorsement/subsidization of media use, especially radio) also promoted a popular set of cultural artefacts and practices that were significantly more widely shared than before—what Peter Fritzsche has called a 'public sphere in which Germans identified themselves increasingly as *Volksgenossen*.'[43] Disturbing though it may seem, the Nazi years were in many respects the heyday of 'mass culture' in Germany – not just of politically co-ordinated uniformity and standardisation but also of the expansion of a broadly accessible cultural space in which different social groups could readily find something in common, whether the radio variety show, the blockbuster film, or the hit song. Indeed, it is arguably in the realm of popular culture that the oft-cited 'modernizing' impact of the Third Reich was most apparent.[44] To be sure, the timing was to some extent coincidental: for the many millions of Germans living in small towns and villages it was first in the 1930s and early 1940s that the glitz and glamour of media hype and celebrity arrived in full force. But some of the changes were deliberate, for Nazi cultural administrators did more to legitimate 'mere entertainment' than most of their predecessors. After the Second World War, as the Federal Republic sought to latch on to the best political traditions of the Weimar Republic, it was nonetheless the Nazi years that most visibly shaped orientations and expectations in the realm of mass culture.

Nazi Mass Culture in Comparative Perspective

This suggests an interesting parallel to the 'common culture' argument advanced by LeMahieu for 1930s Britain. For in the 1930s and early 40s, Germany, too, witnessed something of a breakthrough in the emergence of a more widely-shared culture of entertainment that powerfully moulded the subsequent history of popular commercial culture. To put it pointedly, was Nazi mass culture, apart from some of its more explicitly racist

[43] Peter Fritzsche, "Nazi Modern," *Modernism/modernity* 3 (1996), 1-22, here 7.

[44] Clemens Zimmermann, "From Propaganda to Modernization," *German History* 24 (2006), 443-5; also Riccardo Bavaj, *Die Ambivalenz der Moderne im Nationalsozialismus. Eine Bilanz der Forschung* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2003), 158-163.

elements, really no different in its basic social messages and social implications from the so-called 'culture for democracy' that crystallized in Britain? Did the relative political independence of the media and entertainment industries in Britain actually make much of a difference in terms of their concrete content and social impact?

The answer, inevitably, is yes and no. Starting with the latter: no, in that there were some striking parallels between the socially inclusive entertainment formulae that came to dominate in both countries after the Depression. From the Hollywood-style blockbuster film to the radio variety show, there were, as in many other countries at the time, deliberate attempts to develop genres that could traverse class, generation and gender boundaries, often with considerable success. No, also, in terms of the processes of commercial concentration and technological convergence between the media during the 1930s/40s, which powerfully abetted the expansion of this more 'common' culture by making any particular song or film more universally available and widely known. Indeed, what often count as the specifically 'Nazi' characteristics of German popular culture during these years – the productivist thrust, the deliberate emphasis on collective experience, the thematic centrality of social harmony and national integration – are readily observable elsewhere, not least in Britain, even if the best examples are perhaps found elsewhere (e.g. New Deal cinema in the United States; the ambitious leisure policies of the Popular Front in France; the *dopolavoro* programme in Italy). Highlighting these parallels is most certainly *not* to argue that the Nazis established a culture for 'democracy' along the lines that scholars have posited for Britain. Quite the opposite, this culture was intended as an integral part of the struggle against liberal democracy. But it does suggest that this so-called 'culture for democracy' is actually better understood as a 'culture for popular political participation' rather than one that corresponded to any particular political system. Ultimately it was geared towards the more participatory and plebiscitary brand of politics observable across most of the industrialized world during this period, from the mass-mobilising 'totalitarian' movements to more open and democratic liberal polities. These international trends of the 1930s/40s were neither 'democratising' nor proto-fascist but rather politically polyvalent. Whatever they were, it was not merely 'demobilising'.[45]

Conversely, there are also points where the answer must be 'yes'. Despite all the visible parallels, the basis of this process of cultural integration in Nazi Germany was notably different from that in Britain, the United States or France. Much of what the Nazis 'accomplished' in terms of integrating media audiences was essentially destructive, not creative. If

[45] For a useful corrective to the Frankfurt-school emphasis on the anti-democratic and politically 'demobilizing' character of the 'culture industry': Frank Bösch, Norbert Frei (eds), *Medialisierung und Demokratie im 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2006).

the emergence of a more universal 'mass culture' in 1930s/40s Britain reflected the overlapping and amalgamation of different regional or milieu-based networks of communication via novel, more socially inclusive cultural forms, in Nazi Germany it was based in large part on the forceful repression of opposing views and the violent elimination of public spheres unwanted by the regime. Overcoming Germany's fragmented press landscape was based more on the brutal suppression of political rivals and the ruthless exertion of state pressure than on finding content that could appeal across regional and social divides. Transforming the radio into an instrument of popular entertainment was motivated more by the desire to lure audiences towards a tightly controlled flow of news and views than to fulfil audience wishes as an end in itself. The remarkable integration of audiences in the Third Reich was, in other words, as much about negative exclusion and repression as about positive assimilation.

It has only been possible here to touch on a narrow selection of themes, and to do so with only the smallest measure of explication. Nonetheless, the above comments have hopefully conveyed a sense of how the general transformation of the commercial entertainment industries, despite its many commonalities across the industrialised world, was crucially shaped by different local circumstances. Undoubtedly, many of the fundamental changes were universal, from the increasing medialization of politics to the 'plebiscitary' effects of an entertainment market. Yet this was always a process of mutual interaction between different levels of change. Understanding how this interaction worked requires that we consider not only the producer side of the equation or the specific content of media cultural genres, but also how they related to existing traditions and expectations, how they were perceived and accessed by audiences, and thus how they fitted into particular historical contexts.

For Britain and Germany during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were a number of particular contextual factors that gave a slightly different complexion to these common elemental trends. Most important among these were the exceptional urbanisation rate in Britain by the beginning of this period; the peculiar self-understanding of the German educated elite; the deep social and political divisions in Germany and the extraordinary politicisation of cultural debates after the First World War; the unique exposure of British popular culture to American influence; and, of course, the ruthlessness of the Nazi movement in controlling cultural life. In both countries, the mass media and commercial entertainments became an integral part of the social, cultural and political fabric during this period, and should in all events be treated as such. Whether we write social, political or cultural history, the key is to integrate them firmly into mainstream narratives. But in so doing, we should resist the temptation to see only the universal aspects of these changes, and insist rather on their 'historicity', their contingency and the crucial importance of context.