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The Enemy Par Excellence: Nazi Germany and America's Mythology of Othering

Under Propaganda Minister, Josef Goebbels, direction, the German film industry had been taken over by the Nazi party in 1931, becoming an extension of the state's arm. As a result, film became not a modus of personal expression, art, or even of capital, but rather an ideological stronghold presenting Malinowskian social charters to justify expansion, war, and genocide. It's no secret that the Nazi's took inspiration from American structural racism in their genocidal exploits—so it is not surprising that the rhetoric of their films also took similar forms. Both *Jud Süß* (1940) and *Birth of a Nation* (1915) act as mythologies that justify the persecution of a minority group. Anthropologists consider myth as stories accepted as social facts that can sometimes act as a social charter that governs and controls “many cultural features...[forming] the dogmatic backbone” of a civilization (Malinowski 170). Anthropologists view some films as myths because they still serve an important role in society as stories connecting us to a universal truth or preoccupation.

*Jud Süß* begins by asserting its historical basis, with a message displaying that “the events in this film are based on historical facts” (0:01:27). The plot begins in 1733 after the ascension of the Duke of Württemberg, in which he is sworn in with the promise of caring for his subject's wellbeing and upholding the constitution. Later, the Duke begins to seek funds for what are regarded to be frivolous activities, such as the establishment of opera and ballet companies and gifts for the Duchess. As his expenditures continually get denied by the Lutheran Württemberg council, he independently sends a courier to borrow from Josef Süß Oppenheimer. However, Oppenheimer refuses to lend without personally seeing the Duke—despite the *Judensperre* banning Jewish people from entering the city. The courier agrees to provide a passport, and Oppenheimer changes his appearance to assimilate into Christian society. On his way to the capital, he gets in a carriage accident and is given a ride by the beautiful Dorothea Sturm, the council chairman's daughter. Upon arrival, Oppenheimer provides financing for the Duke's provisions and jewelry for the Duchess, on the condition that he gets to act as the Duke's minister. In this position, he levies heavy taxes and tolls on the province—the revenue of which goes back to Oppenheimer and the Duke, curbing the authority of the council. The pair become increasingly debauched throughout the film—exposing their greed, lust, and hedonism. Eventually, Oppenheimer asks the Duke to repeal the *Judensperre*, to which the Duke eventually yields. While Oppenheimer gets distracted by his lust, flirting with the engaged Dorothea—the stalwart, modest Christian council begin to question his influence on the Duke. As the council accelerates their objections, Oppenheimer uses

his position to have Faber and Dorothea's father, the council chairman, arrested. At the climax of the film, Dorothea goes to Oppenheimer to plead for their lives, to which he takes the opportunity to rape her. Once breaking free from his grasp, she succumbs to shame, and drowns herself in the river. Josef Süß Oppenheimer is met with a mob made up of the citizenry of Württemberg. He is put on trial for going to bed with a Christian woman and executed. The *Judensperre* is put back into effect, and the Jews are forced out of the city—the film closing with the statement: “May the citizens of other states never forget this lesson.”

Bronislaw Malinowski observed that myths act within a society as “a living reality, believed to have once happened in primeval times, and continuing ever since to influence the world and human destinies” (Malinowski 169). Nazi myth is no different, though it was created under the purview of a state apparatus—the truth of their antisemitism is not as important as their conviction that these stereotypes have a historical precedence that defends their inhumane policies. *Jud Süß* was released in 1940, and commissioned by Joseph Goebbels after he incited *Kristallnacht*, a violent pogrom where the SS and SA attacked Jewish homes, businesses, and synagogues in 1938. This is not the first media to be adapted from Oppenheimer's story, as numerous plays, novelizations, and even a British film had been produced only six years before the Nazi's released their rendition. The British film was far more sympathetic to Oppenheimer's case, and condemned antisemitism explicitly. The Nazi's adaptation sought to do the opposite, seeking to justify antisemitism, and hearkening back to historical precedents of it.

The night of broken glass that preceded the film, showed the horror of antisemitism to the lay German public, thus, to reverse its impact, Goebbels produced films that could “justify” this prejudice “to vouch for their antiquity and reality” (Malinowski 171). Hence, the film takes the audience back to the 18th century to the establishment and brief reprieve from the *Judensperre*. The film establishes norms (that the Nazi party sought to recreate with the Nuremberg laws, the various pogroms, and their eventual final solution), and strengthens the need for such norms by showing the dissolution of society once they are removed. The depictions of Jews in the film in comparison to Christians presents the audience with a moral paradigm on the basis of identity and in-groups. Jewish people, like Oppenheimer, his secretary Levy, and Rabbi Löw, play Jewish stereotypes, parading around with prosthetic noses, behaving greedily and morally duplicitously with usurping ambitions. The council and citizens of Württemberg, along with the almost angelic Dorothea and Faber are presented as virtuous, modest, strong, and honorable. Dorothea in particular, one of the few female characters of the film, is depicted as an innocent, weak, soft damsel in need of saving by her strong male counterparts. These characters appeal to the viewers' sense of morality,

justice, and cultural values. At the climax of the film, the viewer is shown Dorothea's weakness alone in the bedroom with Oppenheimer—they are shown his treachery, and wishes for someone to save her, Faber, her father, anyone. The viewer watches as she walks to her death—hoping for a hand to grab hers, whisk her away from her fate. The eye of the viewer lingers on her corpse as she is pulled from the river onto the palace steps, staring into her cold face for twelve seconds, sitting with what had just happened—then they are given the appropriate response: violence and anger—a wish to indiscriminately oust the culprit and anyone related. That is the emotional response that the Nazis wanted the viewer to have. The film both provides historical precedent to the behavior and inclinations of Jewish people—feeding into the 'parasitic Jew' archetype, their supposed ability to shape shift and assimilate into high society with aims of corruption—while simultaneously providing historical precedent and justification for laws that inhibit and harm the Jewish people. Oppenheimer's sentencing was based on a Lutheran law that prohibited intercourse between Jews and Christians—a law echoed by the Nuremberg laws, that similarly forbade interracial relationships. Malinowski asserted that the social function of myths is to convey, express, and strengthen "the local unity and...kinship unity of the group of people descendent from a common" ancestor (Malinowski 173). For the Nazis, films like this one strengthened the connection of the ingroup, the supposedly superior 'Aryan' race, while also further policing the racial boundary, excising the outgroup, the Jewish people.

Despite being released decades earlier; *Birth of a Nation* takes a very similar narrative form to *Jud Süß*. The film famous for its revival of the KKK and pioneering many cinematic techniques, also contains a mythology of othering, fear, and superiority. Like *Jud Süß*, *Birth of the Nation* negatively stereotypes the dominant white class's enemies, the newly freed black man in the aftermath of the Civil War. Similar archetypal figures are present in *Birth of a Nation* as in *Jud Süß*: Oppenheimer reincarnated in the mulatto Silas Lynch, the Duke as the radical republican Senator Stoneman, Dorothea as Elsie and Flora, Ben Cameron as Faber, the council as the Klan, even the characters of Levy and Rabbi Löw have their minstrel-show counterparts. Lynch, like Oppenheimer, seeks to ascend into power, remove the barriers to black people's suffrage, while limiting white peoples. Ben Cameron, a confederate soldier who is in love with Elsie Stoneman, plays a similar role to Faber. As Silas' stronghold on the legislature and his ambitions increase, Ben forms the Ku Klux Klan, complete with the white hood. As he does so, his sister Flora Cameron is pursued romantically by a freedman, Gus. The pursuit turns into a literal chase through the woods, as Flora continues to reject his advances until they end up on the edge of a cliff—she jumps to her death. In the aftermath, the Klan hunts Gus down and lynches him. As Lynch's power grab escalates further, passing

legislation allowing mixed-raced marriage and outlawing the Klan, he attempts to arrest the Camerons. Elsie, similar to Dorothea, goes to Lynch to plead for the Camerons release, only to be pursued by Lynch—however, instead of the more tragic ending of *Jud Süß*, Elsie is saved by the Klan headed by Ben Cameron, who violently reestablishes the former norms.

This film, like *Jud Süß*, has a preoccupation with justifying the state of power relations. Both implicate legal precedents, and concerns about interracial marriages and beds. *Birth of a Nation* also takes place in the past, during the Civil War and Reconstruction era, though it concedes some of its historical truth with most of its main characters being fictionalized. Its title also warrants its categorization as myth, as it purports to show an alternate birth of the United States in the institution of the KKK, rather than that of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. The world is imagined in both films as one fraught with factions of good and evil, with very little ambiguity to what moral code each is prescribed to, represents peace as something that must be fought for with violence. The penultimate transgressions, the pursuit of white women in the final acts of both films depict the best, most innocent individual they can offer (Dorothea and Elsie), being victimized by the biggest evil that they can conjure (Lynch and Oppenheimer). In the background, as Oppenheimer and Lynch respectively are shown to be upsetting the power dynamic, there is an assumption that the unequal one is the natural one. Another feature of myth, Malinowski suggests, is its ability to safeguard and enforce “morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for guidance” (Malinowski 169). In this regard, these films safeguard the sanctity and necessity of violence as a means to retain supposedly natural norms, to safeguard the superior morality of the dominant group, and provides precedence to prejudicial and restrictive rules on repressed people’s mobility. Above all, these films show an anxiety inherent to the dominant group of a society, the anxiety of the loss of power, an emasculation by the othered, something stolen, something taken, at the most minute placation to the desires of the other.

Comparing the two films, whose plot features, conflict, and conventions take place in different centuries, with different enemies, is not impossible—with structural analysis, these films are simply transformations of each other. The “various facts” of each film “can be understood only by relating them to ‘the life of the masses of mankind’” (Levi-Strauss 201). Nazi ideology and American racism cannot be analyzed in isolation, they exist as reflections of each other, and reflections of human anxieties as a whole. The combination of the two films reveals a universal anxiety of the dominant strata—white men who know that their power in society is not inherent and must

be protected and defended under any means necessary. Both films attempt to connect its messages across time, history, and region—the ending line of *Jud Süß* attempts to teach its lessons to “other states,” and *Birth of a Nation* ends with dreams "of a golden day when the bestial War shall rule no more...instead...Brotherly Love in the City of Peace," as images of ancient Greece and Jesus Christ flash onto the screen. As power relations are regarded to be social facts, an eternal war is waged in the fascist consciousness to protect it, never thinking twice about why their world is so fragile.

Bibliography