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Film & History

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Is the Grass Always Greener? The Question of Emigration in Film

Introduction

The immortal lyrics of British punk band The Clash echo in the minds of characters in every corner of cinema who, faced with mounting odds and intolerable conditions, turn their eye to further shores and wonder, “Should I stay or should I go?” A common theme that connects many of the films we viewed in class this semester is the question of emigration. This query is considered by characters in the films *Mephisto*, *Sunshine*, *The Silent Revolution*, and *Cold War*. Each film approaches the questions surrounding emigration with a unique perspective, and often draws very different conclusions about the morality and advisability of emigration from a nation in a time of crisis.

Mephisto

The historical context of the question of emigration in Istvan Szabo’s *Mephisto* was the decay of the Weimar Republic and the rise of the Nazis in interwar Germany. The main character, Hendrik Hofgen, was an actor with Communist ties. These identities became liabilities when the Nazis come to power, as the arts are brought under the ever-stricter ideological control of the State and Communists are rounded up, imprisoned, and summarily shot. Regarding the question of emigration, Hendrik faced several dilemmas. He had an opportunity to emigrate when he was shooting a film in Budapest, but he did not seize this opportunity. If he had fled to America, he could have pursued a movie career in Hollywood. To do so he would have had to learn English, a language he did not speak a word of. Furthermore, Hendrik declared himself a German thespian, one who must work with German culture in the German language. Hendrik’s national and cultural commitments inform his decision to not emigrate, a decision whose effects would haunt Hendrik throughout the rest of the film. As a consequence of his actions – rather, his *inaction* – Hendrik becomes a stooge and pawn of the Nazi regime. Hendrik remained in

Germany, but he lost everything – his friends, the freedom of his art, a genuine and not nakedly politicized German cultural scene – that he loved about Germany. In a sense, Hendrik's Germany left him even as he would not leave her. To remain in Germany was indeed a brave act, but to remain passive in Germany was an act of great cowardice. Hendrik declares that "An entire people cannot emigrate." This statement is true, and the sentiment buried within it is as well. The problems of a nation cannot be solved simply by leaving it. What Hendrik misses, however, is that remaining is not enough. Passivity is just as poisonous to the solution of national concerns as emigration. The individual could not hold even a forlorn hope of taking on the monolith of modern totalitarianism, but this grim reality does not excuse one from their obligation to actively resist oppression. This moral calculation was made ten million times over across Germany and most came to the same decision as Hendrik. Most Germans stayed in Germany, and most did not resist the Nazis or their programs and policies in any materially meaningful way. This decision being widespread – nigh universal – does not decrease the cowardice conferred upon every person who made it. The consequence of Hendrik's decision to not emigrate, paired with his decision to not resist the Nazis, was the hollowing out of his humanity and his functional collaboration with the Third Reich by non-action.

Sunshine

The historical circumstances of *Sunshine* are varied, as the film takes place over the course of nearly a century. The question of emigration is most interestingly explored in the context of the interwar period. During this time, the liberalism and tolerance of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was steadily eroded and replaced with a more chauvinistically 'Hungarian' Hungary, one in which the Jewish Sonnenschein-Sors family would not be welcome. As war loomed on the horizon and conditions for the Jews in Hungary deteriorated, Istvan Sors' wife entreated her brother-in-law Adam Sors to flee the country with her. Adam Sors faced a personal moral dilemma in making this decision. Sors would not only be leaving his home country. Sors would also be leaving his family to run off with his brother's wife, with whom he was carrying on a torrid affair. Sors' career as a fencer would come to an end in Hungary, though he had been presented an offer to fence in Boston in America. Fencing was Sors' passion and going from the top fencer in your home country to the new kid on the block in a foreign land is a frightening proposition even in the most forgiving of circumstances. Ultimately, Sors decided that the cost to

his career and family would be too much for him to bear. He remained in Hungary and, as a result of his decision to remain in his homeland and brave the hard times, was murdered cruelly in the Holocaust. *Sunshine* treats the question of emigration with the weight and consideration such a momentous decision demands. The emotional turmoil that Sors suffers through is a painfully humanistic depiction of what many thousands of families in similar situations experienced in reality. The film does not misrepresent, as *The Silent Revolution* does, the question of emigration as an easy one to answer, or even one with a correct answer.

The Silent Revolution

The historical context of the film *The Silent Revolution* was East Germany in the autumn of 1956. The most prominent historical event informing the film was the October-November Hungarian Revolution. To show solidarity with the Hungarian masses in revolt, numerous students at a DDR gymnasium engaged in protest via a minute of silence. As a response to the protest, the educational administration applied pressure on the students involved and their families. This pressure was steadily ratcheted up as time marched on, and ever greater punishments were inflicted upon those close to the students to coerce them into submission. The final consequence of their protest was their mass expulsion from school. With their prospects for class mobility in the DDR in shreds, the students all decide to leave the country. This decision appeared to be easier for these characters to make compared to other films. Kurt works through his decision to emigrate over the course of about a day. The rest of the students are not shown wrestling with the question and leave the DDR with similar rapidity. In *The Silent Revolution*, emigration was not really a dilemma or even a question. The film presents emigration, leaving East Germany for West, as a self-evidently correct decision that should be undertaken the first moment the opportunity presents itself. Any notion of community, *Heimat*, or national feeling for the East is left out to produce a cleaner, clearer narrative for mass consumption. There are few consequences, negative or otherwise, regarding the decision to emigrate by the students shown in the film. In fairness, the film ends during the process of emigration, making the depiction of consequences less demonstrable. Partially as a result of this, and partially as a result of the non-questionability of emigration to the film's production, the only meaningful consequence of emigration is Kurt's parting with and longing for his family.

Cold War

The historical circumstances of the film *Cold War* are Poland, France, and Yugoslavia in from the late 1940s to the 1960s. The film begins during the Stalinist era, and the question of emigration is first addressed at a Polish cultural performance in East Berlin. The arts community was under the close supervision of the Communist bureaucracy who imposed stifling political requirements for the content of the ensemble's performance art. Wiktor, the director of a Polish cultural ensemble, attempted to convince his lover Zula, a singer in the group, to flee with him to the French occupation sector in Berlin. Zula does not join him at this time and Wiktor travels to the French sector, then Paris, alone. Zula faced the dilemma of whether to be loyal to her lover or to her country. At this juncture, her affection for Wiktor did not outweigh her commitments to Poland. Wiktor was faced with the dilemma of how to respond to Zula's non-appearance at their emigration *rendezvous*. He ultimately decided to press on without her, his desire to leave Poland and the Warsaw Pact greater than his desire to be united with Zula. Years later, Zula and Wiktor reunited in Paris, both having emigrated by this time. Zula, however, was not as content with this decision as Wiktor was. Wiktor then faced a dilemma regarding whether to reverse his decision to emigrate. He ultimately decides to follow Zula, who was deeply unhappy in Paris, back to Poland. As a consequence of his previous decision to emigrate, Wiktor was imprisoned upon his return to Poland. He was eventually freed, but his hands were broken in prison and he could no longer play the piano professionally.

Conclusion

The dilemma of whether to emigrate is one that hangs heavy on the minds of many characters in films that we considered this semester. In *Mephisto*, Hendrik Hofgen decides to remain in Germany as the Nazis tightened their grip on the country. In *Sunshine*, Adam Sors chooses to remain in Hungary as antisemitism grew and the Holocaust loomed. In *The Silent Revolution*, the students decide to emigrate from East Germany after their prospects there are diminished following a protest. In *Cold War*, the two leads emigrate and repatriate at different times, ultimately ending up back in their home of Poland. Throughout these four films, different perspectives on emigration are offered, each situated in a distinct historical context and bearing particular consequences for the would-be emigrants.