CHAPTER 6

Revolution and the Degeneration of the Weimar Republic: Worker Culture and the Rise of Fascism

6.1 Introduction

In 1932 an extended controversy over politics and obscenity erupted around the film *Kuhle Wampe, or, Who Owns the World* (*Kuhle Wampe, oder: Wem gehört die Welt?*). Produced by the left-wing film company Prometheus, the film was the result of a collaboration between the playwright Bertolt Brecht, the director Slatan Dudow, the writer Ernst Ottwalt, and the composer Hanns Eisler, although today it tends to be remembered primarily as a translation of Brecht’s theatrical innovations to the big screen. Seeing the film primarily as Brecht’s work is incorrect, however. Not only was it deliberately conceived of as a collaborative production between the different named figures, the film’s aesthetic also reflected a broader proletarian and Marxist cultural milieu that promoted collective forms of expression. The communist sport and body culture movements and the ‘Red Megaphone’ (*Rote Sprachrohr*) agitprop theatrical troupe, both of which appeared in *Kuhle Wampe*, were two of the collective actors playing key roles in this cultural scene.

In the case of *Kuhle Wampe*, these collective efforts produced a film that eschewed a conventional dramatic narrative while also resisting purely formalist experimentation. But it was the film’s politics that brought it to the attention of the censors. As we saw in the previous chapter, the provisions of the Motion Picture Law (the *Lichtspielgesetz*) were frequently used to censor or ban left-wing productions. *Kuhle Wampe* suffered both fates: initially banned, it was released only after the imposition of a number of cuts. Brecht, of course, deplored the censors’ decision, but, in commenting on the text of their decision, he nevertheless noted their astute reading of the film’s aesthetics and politics, writing in 1932 that the censor

> had penetrated far deeper into the essence of our artistic intentions than our most supportive critics. He had taught a short course on realism. From the perspective of the police.2

1 For a good general discussion of the film, see Silberman 2009.
The collective nature of the film’s production, which was evident at various levels, was central to its political intent. The workers’ theatre movement provided one important influence, with Brecht himself having worked with agitprop theatre movements, and Ernst Busch, a popular actor in workers’ theatre, was cast in a lead role in the film. Ottwalt, the film’s writer, was a member of the League of Proletarian-Revolutionary Writers (Bund Proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller, or BPRS) that worked to develop a proletarian literature. While these influences were crucial, however, the film also reflected the roots of many of the collaborators in avant-garde traditions, with Brecht himself tracing a familiar trajectory from Expressionism to his later communist art. The influence of the avant-garde was evident in the Constructivist principles of montage that shaped the film, but it was also there in a desire shared with worker culture movements for the abolition of art as a separate sphere. Indeed, one of the notable aspects of Kuhle Wampe was that it reflected a growing if still grudging acceptance of avant-garde approaches by the KPD, a tendency also evident in the Party’s endorsement of artists like George Grosz or John Heartfield.

The focus of this chapter is on these left cultural movements and the debates that they generated in the later Weimar years. Combining aspects of avant-garde practice with a broader commitment to a collective aesthetic, a host of movements affiliated with the political left, in particular the KPD, emerged in this period. These developments were especially evident in the establishment of extensive networks seeking to produce forms of worker culture. Ranging from literature to photography, theatre, and film, these movements for worker culture gathered steam in the late Weimar years, becoming one of the most significant areas of successful radical left mobilisation. It was especially in areas that I examined in the last chapter, in new media such as photography and film, that worker culture took hold, although radical theatre arguably provided the most participatory cultural form available. Kuhle Wampe itself was the product of one such endeavour, the communist-oriented film company Prometheus – which had gone bankrupt before the film could be released. The company distributed and produced a number of important films before collapsing under the weight of its debt and the growing costs of film production associated with the introduction of sound film. In the context of growing fascist influence both at the ballot box and in violent contestations over public space, the cultural sphere offered the left a space in which to develop political

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3 On Brecht’s links with agitprop, see Bodek 1996, pp. 137–57. On the BPRS, see Friedrich 1981.
4 Murray 1990, pp. 218–19. The film only came out after securing financing from the Swiss company Praesens-Film.