

De morele verantwoordelijkheid van propagandist Veit Harlan door het regisseren van de antisemitische film *Jud Süß*

The moral responsibility of Veit Harlan by directing the anti-Semitic film *Jud Süß* (1940)

This thesis deals with the moral responsibility of artists during the Second World War. By an interdisciplinary approach, my thesis tries to investigate to which extent a creative artist could be regarded as moral responsible for crimes which were pledged during the Second World War. Could these artists be seen as purely artists or were they political actors as well?

The specific case I have investigated, looks at the actions of Veit Harlan, a German cineast who was the director of the antisemitic film *Jud Süß* which came out all over Europe in the year 1940. The film tells the semi-historical story of Joseph Süß Oppenheimer, a Jewish banker who becomes the financial advisor of the duke of Württemberg Karl Alexander in 1733, a time in which Jewish were excluded from living in German cities. After becoming the financial advisor of the duke, Oppenheimer starts to grant more rights to himself and the Jewish population. When Oppenheimer puts pressure on the duke to sentence the smith Hans Bogner to death, the German population begins to distrust Oppenheimer. The financial advisor eventually even tries to rape Dorothea, the daughter of the council chairman Sturm, after which the married woman commits suicide. Not much later, the duke dies because of an heart attack and his death means the doom of Oppenheimer, who is arrested and convicted to death by hanging. In the end, all Jews are obliged to leave Württemberg within three days.

Jud Süß was a very popular and effective film. The movie was seen by 20.3 million people between 1940 and 1943 and caused a lot of reaction on the audience: after the release of the film, anti-Jewish manifestations were held all over Europe, by which Jewish people got wounded and even killed. Even after the Second World War, the film remained a controversial issue. In the Spring of 1945, *Jud Süß* was confiscated by the ally, who decided to prohibit the projection of the film, although the movie was still projected on a secret base in the eastern part of Berlin. Since 1970, the film is showed again on a limited scale in countries like The United States of America, France and Egypt.

The film was seen as very controversial from the day it came out in. After the Second World War, Harlan was indicted twice for indirect crimes against humanity but he was acquitted each time because there was a lack of proof. Because these trials were held in a time when antisemitic feelings were still very vivid, a neutral process was not possible in that specific time period. For that reason, I found it useful to reopen the case of Harlan and to investigate the thin line between art and propaganda. By linking a new medium (film) to politics, I tried to find a new approach to look at the topic of propaganda. It's important to emphasize that my thesis doesn't deal with the juridical responsibility of cineasts like Harlan, since I don't have the theoretical basis to do such an investigation.

In my thesis, I start by giving an enumeration of the main characteristics of propaganda and by forming a definition for the concept. After relating this definition of propaganda to the film of Harlan, I conclude by saying that the film of Harlan can indeed be considered as a propaganda film. After forming this conclusion, I look back at the trials which were held against Harlan, by which I focus on the defects of the trials.

The judge, Walter Tyrolph refused the demand of Harlan to show the British film *Jew Süß* during the trial. The film *Jew Süß*, directed by Lothar Mendes in 1934, deals with the same theme, namely the rise and fall of the Jew Oppenheimer. But unlike the film of Harlan, *Jew Süß* doesn't stigmatize the Jewish population but shows the bad and the good qualities of the Jewish people. Since both films start from the same initial concept, a comparison between both stories could have made it possible to expose the differences between a fiction movie and a propaganda film. This opportunity was missed during the trials and that's why I've compared both films with each other in my thesis.

Before coming up with my final conclusion regarding the moral responsibility of Harlan, my thesis looks at the role of the press in promoting *Jud Süß* as a fiction film instead of a propaganda work. In

a secret press message, Goebbels asked to promote Jud Süß as a film in which historical facts were portrayed. By looking at the press articles which appeared in that time, I had the chance to investigate if the press was responsible for the positive image of the film. This indeed appeared to be the case.

In my conclusion, I begin by pointing out the difference between the filmproduct and the producer of it. After uniting all elements together, I state that there is no doubt about the fact that Jud Süß was indeed a propaganda film, which played a role in the in the general acceptance of an anti-Semitic thoughts in Europe. Since Harlan remained to state that he was put under pressure and had no other choice than to produce this film, the director cannot be held responsible for the film Jud Süß.

Still, this thesis proves that an interdisciplinary approach can be useful to explore he thin line between art and propaganda, which is a field that deserve to be investigated more in the future. Since film is still a very young medium, I can only hope that other propaganda films and cineaste will be examined in a similar way in the future.

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