

I AM NOT A RACIST...

NOSTALGIA AND APOCALYPSE

(LEONORE AND THE KOLO)

AN EVERYDAY STORY

Place: Crediton, a provincial town.

Time: The day before the Referendum on Brexit

A German woman, married to an Englishman living in the town, tells me she will travel to her mother in Munster and adds with a joking smile that implies the question is rhetorical: 'Will I be welcome when I come back?'

The same woman a week after the Referendum is in shock and tells me how people have been ordering her 'to go home'.

The Referendum was ostensibly about 'taking back control', couched in contradictory economic arguments. Politicians and experts know that Europe and the Eurozone are not the same concept. However the people who swung the vote see no difference: Europe is a foreign continent, and the Eurozone an interfering governing body which bosses them around. As the immediate reactions to their successful campaign continue to show clearly, the desire for national autonomy drove the result: Great Britain for the British; foreigners, wherever you are from, get out.'

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The following piece is written under the shadow of a move across the world, especially Europe and the United States increasingly to extreme nativism, isolationism, protectionism, xenophobia and dismantling the liberal consensus.

Further to my father asking, on looking at a photo of Hitler as a baby, how an innocent child can grow up into a monstrous tyrant, another frequent question hung in the air perpetually unanswered, and continues so to the present time. That unanswered question invariably followed talk about a particular artist, the visionary water-colourist Emil Nolde maybe, or Knut Hamsun the Nobel prize-winning Norwegian writer of such humanist classics as *Hunger*, books that were read, admired and discussed in our house: why were these

internationally significant and celebrated artists committed Nazi sympathisers? The question rose again when I read recently that Frank Lloyd Wright, one of the most iconic American architects, had also been a supporter of Nazi ideology. Admired by the author Ayn Rand, believer in the supremacy of the strong and talented who, by reason of their exceptional character, are justified in subjugating and exploiting the weak, used him as a model in her novels, specifically *The Fountainhead* about a ruthlessly ambitious architect. That Frank Lloyd Wright subscribed to a brutally racist ideology raises this question in a manner where the answer reveals itself in the paradox expressed in his buildings. The rugged architecture with its clean lines and fundamental simplicity reflects both the supremacist ideology of Ayn Rand, but also takes the environment into account, linking the aesthetics of structure with natural surroundings. Such ambivalence finds expression in on the one hand controlling and domineering, but at the same time striving for harmonious coexistence with the environment. The desire for harmony between man and nature is one element that runs like a thread through the development of a white-dominated New World American culture, for example in the transcendentalist movement epitomised in Thoreau's *Walden*, the paintings of Thomas Eakins and the poetry of Walt Whitman.. This 'white' utopian vision is discussed surprisingly in Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (the director indicated later that the title is ironic, adding 'heaven is stingy'), about the relationship between a young widow and her gardener who believes in the equilibrium of nature and mankind. .In an often forgotten and always neglected culture, New World natives had of course for centuries been living in complex harmony with their natural surroundings, but then fell tragic victim to aggressive and destructive white colonisation. At the heart of this ambivalence in colonial attitudes is nostalgia for utopia and guilt rising from the narrative of subjugation.

In my essay *The Face of a Child*, I have tried as a son of refugees to answer the question about how foreigners including asylum seekers, economic 'migrants', and ethnic minorities

make a home in countries in which a vociferous minority of the population aggressively resents their presence. This minority, which recently decisively contributed to the Brexit victory, hates, fears, despises and wants to eject and eliminate the ‘other’. A substantial part of the rest of the population claims not to be a part of this xenophobic minority yet clings to a nostalgia for a time when there were far fewer foreigners, if any at all, and homeland meant a racially pure and mono-cultural place ‘when we were in control.’ Time and again comes the phrase with dispiritingly monotonous frequency: ‘I am not a racist...’ with the inevitable ‘but’, which on the one hand exonerates the speaker from any hint of xenophobia, and then the qualification in itself only serves to emphasise it.

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At the end of Mussorgsky’s *Khovanschina*, a political opera about Russia’s resistance to the liberal reforms being violently imposed by Peter the Great in his drive to modernise his vast country, bringing it in line with social and cultural developments in Western Europe a group of religious zealots, ‘Old Believers’, devoted to entrenched nationalist traditions, commit mass suicide rather than be tainted by foreign influence. Mussorgsky’s music sympathises with these fanatics. The deep sonorous bass of their leader Dosifei suits a message of doom and gloom while promising balm of salvation and apocalypse.

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The protest and pressure group Black Lives Matter shows that racism remains a constant as it has been throughout my life. After the Second World War children would shout ‘dirty Jew’ without thinking or understanding what that meant. Like homophobic bullying, which still goes on, the words, however hurtful and never without a sense of danger, mean no more than a general dislike, fear and contempt for something strange, mysterious and challenging, traditional bigoted attitudes picked up from home and also unconsidered. Then as the first

immigrants from the West Indies began to arrive in the 1950s, people were scandalised when the men married white girls, and this hatred carried on being constantly and openly expressed for decades. Meanwhile Pakistani immigrants began to settle in Lancashire taking on menial tasks such as road cleaning and bus conducting. Films about intermarriage like *East Meets West* show that despite xenophobia being a toxic part of everyday life, mindless abuse as an expression of rage and frustration at politics, social ills and simply having someone to shout at and persecute, in general I experienced working class attitudes then being more welcoming to foreigners.

Racism from the educated classes cut deeper: foreigners might be welcome, but they needed to know their place...at the bottom. This considered racism against blacks, browns and even whites from other parts of the world, including Australia, America and Europe, reflected then, as now, the shame of loss of Empire, and a grudging acknowledgment that foreign skills were needed in a country debilitated by war, industrial collapse and the challenges of global competition, problems that used to be minimum when the UK tried to control vast parts of most continents.

The span of my life covers the rise and success of socialism in the shape of the Labour Party in post-war UK. I experienced the benefits first hand and observed with increasing dismay the erosion of socialist ideals over the decades, replaced by individualism and personal ambition along the understandable lines of 'what the rich and powerful have for generations enjoyed at our expense, we want to have now for ourselves as well.' Communal progress gave way to individual material aspiration.

The present fears that the remnants of the working class are turning to extreme populist right-wing movements alarms the Party which had been created to support and defend that class from those who controlled power. However this disillusion with socialism began before

Margaret Thatcher brought about her own revolution. In fact it was this class, which had always been assumed to be anti-Tory and faithful to Labour which carried her to power. I observed with growing confusion and despair this change taking place through the later 1970s during my time living on a housing estate in South London, a solidly working class environment.

A TV film in the late 1970s nailed the nature of this change so accurately that it became iconic of its time. The brilliance of *Abigail's Party*, particularly Alison Steadman's performance of frustrated passion distilled to lethal venom, turned the play into a satirical comedy when in fact it is a tragedy. There is of course always a fine line between satire and tragedy, but in this case the desire to interpret the play as mocking the aspirations of a suddenly affluent working class meant that viewers did not need to deal with the disturbing insight at the heart of the play: the spiritual vacuum of individualistic material consumerism not just in that one home, but throughout the country.

BARN DANCES

Throughout most of the two post-war decades housing conditions were cramped in Lancashire mill towns, and the mill labour tediously mechanical and dirty. However the crowds of workers descending on the factory early every morning were animated and focused on getting through the day together before leaving for socialising in the evening, the women in preparation covering their curlers with scarves. In the early 50s children from poorer families smelled pungently of stale piss and sweat. Most of working people's homes still had toilets outside at the end of the backyard. Communal activities were the heart of social life. The men gravitated to football, while women stayed mostly at home. So, as Terence Davies' early classic films show with poignant bitter-sweet nostalgia, one of the main hubs of joint after-work recreation had to be the pub with its lusty communal singing, never raucous but

always loud: 'Here we are! Listen to us!' Children sat outside the pub waiting for the parents to come out, so barn dances at the weekend became opportunities for the whole family to escape cramped rooms, put on attractive clothes, the men in dark suits and white shirts, the women in starched and meticulously ironed colourful frocks. The dances entered into with gusto allowed for letting the hair down, metaphorically only as no one dared spoil the sculpted perms.

In the immediate Labour government post-war years, the seeds of aspiration were being sowed on a large scale, but more along the lines of welfare, health and education than acquisition. Aspiration focused on quality of life rather than materialism. The people I came to know as a child and young teenager in the mill town took education seriously as well as the arts and music. They needed little encouragement to paint and play instruments. Seizing new freedoms and curious about everything, they joined in discussions on political and social matters relevant to their lives. Once exploited masses now felt they had a stake in society and the country's future. To help economic growth the first immigrants from former colonies began to arrive and settle in the UK. A mill worker's daughter used to visit our house regularly for long talks with my parents. Despite reservations from family and community she then married an immigrant from the West Indies. These reactions might seem quaint now, especially their underlying assumptions. Whereas now parents might reasonably worry about daughters marrying unemployed druggy gang members from sink estates, in those days they balked at son-in-laws who were not only educated and high-flying, doctors or lawyers, but looked like Sidney Poitiers in *Guess Who Is Coming To Dinner*, paragons beyond most people's dreams whatever race or colour. Spencer Tracey's bigotry in that seminal 1960's film is hard to take, already at the time, but Sidney Poitier's evident qualities in the film suggest a subversive sub-text: a sense of inferiority and even guilt at the father's inadequacy.

Spencer Tracy's subtle performance suggests professional envy and sexual jealousy play a significant part in racist and xenophobic attitudes.

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The cramped terraced houses of the industrial Lancashire town I grew up in were kept scrupulously clean by mill workers' wives and mothers, charwomen, who after servicing the rich on the other side of the railway tracks, scrubbed their own door steps with pride. My parents arranged evening discussion groups in several of the homes. The workers, local policemen and mechanics listened agog to late Beethoven quartets and to my father reading from the Russian classics. These people took it all in their stride. Only at the weekend barn dance did these people balk at dancing to Bach's Orchestral Suites, declaring they preferred The Cumberland Gap. Saturday nights were for fun but they appreciated my parents' efforts to open up culture to them, a world that up to then had been the preserve of the middle and upper classes. My mother taught the Secondary Modern teenagers painting, and I remember the bright eyes of the young men, more used to causing trouble, riding round on motorbikes in gangs, or prowling the streets of Bolton at night, now proudly hanging their vivid art work in exhibitions at the Town Hall.

My parents wrote plays for the community including their first drama *Nothing To Live For But Life* in which my father took the lead as a thinly veiled self-portrait, an innocent visionary forced to face reality in the shape of people trying to survive as best they can in a world that doesn't care for them. His optimism is broken down, along the lines of Bunuel's film *Nazarin*, which my parents would not have seen yet. In the play it is also a streetwalker who takes care of him. One of the millworker women played this part with gusto. My parents then wrote their groundbreaking theological books, *Irreligious Reflections on the Christian Church, God is no More* and *True Deceivers*, inspired by their experience of this Lancashire

working class community. Along with an autobiography, *Distant Strains of Triumph*, and a controversial imagining of Hitler's final days in the bunker, a theme the Germans would later turn into a successful film, *Downfall*, my parents also paid tribute to the community in *Fringe Edge*, a book of vignettes along the lines of Turgenev's *Tales from a Sportsman's Diary*, which told the stories from the lives of the people themselves. I remember how despite not attending church, because my father as the new curate-in-charge told them they should only come if they wanted the people in this mill town loved my parents.

Harry Ashton the local chicken farmer befriended my parents and joined them on political demonstrations like the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. I spent many weekends collecting eggs and watching him 'sexing' the newly hatched chicks and having to mass kill all the male ones, tears of shame and remorse running down his grimy wrinkled cheeks as he looked at me with eyes that said: life is too full of cruelty and unfairness, but I cannot afford to keep and feed them. His wife suffered from perpetual lumbago which no one could treat, but she insisted on making me sandwiches. His stunningly handsome son and daughter helped with the work. A passionate music-lover Harry would thump out Mozart sonatas on an upright piano with gnarled strong fingers and heavy fists. He listened to the most recent recordings of opera and symphonies with my parents in the evening. I still play from his copy of the Chopin Nocturnes he gifted to me, with comments on famous performances written neatly above his favourite ones. He would visit my parents regularly, sitting in the garden smiling broadly, sturdily built, candid, forthright and enthusiastic. For me he represented the working class rising. My most telling memory is of sitting in his farmhouse sitting room eating his wife's white bread sandwiches listening to Mahler's *Song of the Earth*, hearing the otherworldly music through his ears and understanding and appreciating it in a way that breathed nature and a uniquely intense sense of life passing.

My parents wrote about both sides of the railway tracks. The seeds of envy were being sown already then. The mill, the church and the labouring community living in cramped terraces were on the one side. On the other side lived the mill owners and managers in grand houses shrouded in forests of rhododendron bushes on the hill. In between, along the road by a golf course, stood the semi-detached houses of professionals like teachers, doctors and the curate-in-charge, with carefully tended gardens, a public tennis court, outdoor swimming pools and even a paddock for horses. These amenities were symbols of aspiration.

The rich, the middle classes and even parts of the working class tend to look back to this ordered social way of life with nostalgia. People knew their place. Why should things not continue undisturbed in the same way.

When the mill closed everything changed.

The working community I had known while it still stood and operated expressed no nostalgia for their past. They wanted to forget the suffering and injustices, the grind of everyday existence, poor wages, no prospects, bad health and lack of any interest in their wellbeing. However they did display surprising nostalgia for the war years, a recent memory of bombing, towns on fire, fear and danger. At the drop of a hat they would indulge in lively exchange of stories, of near-misses, the excitement. A sense of possibility for a new life with promise of better health, education and prospects came through these narratives, a promise that remained unfulfilled but held on to fiercely. What had all the pain and horror been for if not the chance of change? The rich preferred to keep things as they were. The poor demanded a better future. Politically, under a series of Labour governments, interrupted by a return to old values under several Conservative ones that included hubristic colonial attitudes leading to the shame of Suez, the country doggedly continued projects of construction and rebuilding. Divisions still existed but acknowledgment that fairness and equality mattered also continued.

Education and access to a health service were established for everyone, even within systems structured to be unfair, such as one type of school for the privileged and intellectually gifted and another type for those with lower prospects. Money and privilege still purchase advantages, better schools, private healthcare and access to power.

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I returned to Lancashire in 1973, having left it for university ten years earlier.

During those ten years the working class side of the tracks in my home town had changed, sliced by a motorway bypass. The mill had been removed, not a brick remaining, the industrial past erased. The place which raised me had become a dormitory town for Bolton and Manchester. New houses scattered over the changed landscape, all expressing aspiration, each with a garden, drive, garage and neat lawns where the terraced houses like in the Coronation Street credits had once stood, each with a cramped narrow backyard leading to an outside toilet. Twenty years later in the 1990s further changes indicated how immigrant labour from the former colonies, mostly the Caribbean and Pakistan, began to change the demography of this part of Lancashire. There were fewer pasty white faces and wiry frames of the millworkers, mechanics and charwomen, bred for several generations in the grime and murk of smoking factory chimneys, coughing themselves into early graves. Bronzed faces, frankly open large brown eyes and fit bodies of second generation immigrant families populated the buses and trains.

Another twenty years later in the early 2010s, the influx of labour from Eastern Europe has become a turning point in the argument to leave the European Union. Relations between the different communities, especially with foreigners, had been uneasy for decades, having more to do with industrial neglect, regularly blamed on immigrants. By the time the UK voted for Brexit, xenophobia boiled over regardless of political correctness. Now it is considered

reasonable to express incendiary racist opinions. When nationalist political figures are questioned about the dangerous consequences of their rhetoric they answer: ‘Civil War? Bring it on! Get rid of the rubbish.’ When they are asked about the breakup of the European Union and Europe, they welcome the consequences and say: ‘War is normal... a good thing’.

In my life time there has always been a committed and vociferous minority which supports violent response to opposition. Occasionally right wing politicians have flirted with this minority. Margaret Thatcher notoriously welcomed a former member of the British National Party as a Tory MP. As by then she had dictatorial control over her party, Steve Bell could depict her welcoming him as just one more obedient goose stepper in her own Sturm Abteilung. Up to now the majority of the electorate has been able to contain this extremist group. However, according to expert pollsters, the success of UKIP targeting Labour strongholds in the North of England, indicates that the extremist minority is becoming a majority.

My experience of these people does not tally with this interpretation of working class attitudes. As a whole they possess a deep-rooted intelligent scepticism and mistrust of all extremists, whether of the right or the left. This intelligence is born from an awareness of manipulation by bosses and politicians over generations. For all their apparent lack of sophistication and degrees, most having been ruled out of the best schooling, the working class people I knew were highly educated, and shamed me often with my ignorance. I did however witness a decisive change of attitudes in the few years leading to Thatcher’s victory. This hinged on the Tory promise to allow people on council estates to buy their own homes. At a stroke these working people who had lived under the thumb of generally unreliable council maintenance could become independent, the second rung of the ladder leading to property speculation and being able to manipulate the capitalist economy rather than being

bullied and controlled by it. Thatcher cannily understood working class mentality, and pandered to their frustrated material aspirations.

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PRESENT CONTEXT

A few days before the UK decided to turn its back on Europe a young MP was killed on the street by a nationalist shouting 'Britain for the British.' The message couldn't have been louder or clearer. The majority shrugged its shoulders, agreed with the sentiment and voted to keep Britain British. Xenophobic and racist attacks increased markedly after the majority's success, indicating that hatred of foreigners took priority over all other considerations, particularly economic ones. In case the country still didn't get the message, nationalists beat up and killed a young Pole on the streets. Of course these acts will be punished, but they will continue and multiply. As a Czech friend of mine told me: 'I cannot come to the UK now. There is too much hate and violence. It is dangerous for me.' I cannot disagree with him. Politicians now insult other countries in Europe with impunity, dismissing them as incompetent and a shambles, the implication being that the UK as an island nation can control its borders on other people's territory, that the UK is a continent apart. The gloves are off and language is allowed to be toxic, raising threats to global peace and social relations.

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I observed the shift from a traditional sense of working class community to individualism already in the late 1970s when I lived on the St Helier housing estate in South London where Donald served as vicar of St Peter's Church. Thatcherism put the seal on this change, declaring: 'There is no such thing as society.' Her words are well known, but few answer the question this shift begs: why did the individual and family so easily replace community as the

focus of aspiration? Cultural pretensions of the new working class are easily mocked, although never in the films by Mike Leigh, notoriously misunderstood by those people who refuse to acknowledge their sharp social and political edge. Just as the French film *La Haine* prophesied the troubles to come between police and no-hope mixed race youth in the sink estates of Paris, so Mike Leigh's timely *Abigail's Party* commented on traditional working class culture being replaced by a new-found affluence, egotistical and hollow at its heart, with similar prophetic awareness.

Along with citizen action groups lobbying local councillors arguing housing problems in the vicarage office, liberation groups campaigning for women's ordination in the vicarage sitting room, urban ministry project training clergy and civil servants along the lines of the Civil Rights movement in the United States in the parish hall, WEA art classes in the vicarage dining room, gay liberation activists discussing strategy also in the sitting room, Donald also hosted informal gatherings of divorced couples recently married in the church, one of the few churches to offer this service. These remarried couples happened to be part of the newly affluent working class, people with money to spare for holidays and doing up their council houses, which they were then able to buy and own. Decorating and furnishing these small homes at an expense they could never have afforded in the past, failed to fulfil these young couples. They had the uneasy feeling of disappointment: that there had to be more to life.

Donald formed two informal groups, which came to be known as Group A and B. They met regularly at the vicarage ostensibly to open their minds to new possibilities and ways of thinking, in the way my parents did with the millworkers in Bolton. These groups came together without coercion, and I observed their enthusiasm, a sense of communality. Often nothing of any significance would be discussed, but just the fact that they met, sat together and felt warmth and solidarity meant more to them than anything said. Sometimes it became messy. One couple, professional ballroom dancers, eventually broke up. The husband

inspired by the campaigning and thinking going on in the vicarage, but without understanding their social and political context, took money from the Church, handed himself in and declared that according to basic Christian principles the institution should not be dealing with money at all. When we left Morden the groups folded up and lost touch with us. What I remember vividly is their sense of bewilderment at the new materialism, their knowing there must be more to life than acquisition and redecorating, but also a gnawing fear that maybe this was all life had to offer.

One of the churchwardens had been raised on the estate but had made good as a successful businessman and could afford a large house in Cheam, a middle class area of South London. Guests would receive a typically warm working class welcome with copious tea and biscuits in an enormous room, the walls lined with chairs around a large thick pile carpet in vivid colours. For all the family's success, they missed the communality of the estate and replicated their former council house on a larger scale. The sons were sent to private schools. One of them, a pianist, while still a teenager could play the Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto: a piece I still can't get my hands around. The parents commissioned me to do a painting of their garden, and insisted on my putting Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn in the picture, along with some squirrels. The royal couple had been known to court there several centuries earlier, at the bottom of the garden now belonging to a family born and raised on a London housing estate.

Another church warden, George Ball, still living in one of the council houses, also commissioned a painting from me. This proved I had been accepted by the community. Everyone knew about my relationship with Donald and although a few might well have expressed negative opinions in private, most were welcoming and friendly. As Olive Harrison a pensioner from next door once said to me, just as a matter of fact and with no sense of disapproval: 'We know about the gay goings on in the vicarage,' then carried on painting one

of a series of tree pictures at my art class in the dining room. George Ball had seen one particular painting of mine, a favourite of Donald's who always says he would rescue this one first if the house were to be on fire. George Ball asked me to paint a copy for him. His choice struck me as significant because the painting is about nostalgia for home, the dream of a moment when all is at peace and a new day is dawning. It is based on a dream, itself inspired by Schubert's song *In the Village* from *The Winter Journey*. A village with a church spire can be seen dark against a hillside in the moments just before dawn breaks, the sky lightening up with rays from the still invisible sun, and a morning mist lying over the fields. The song is disturbing, because the traveller does not feel at home, envies the people sleeping and dreaming, is unnerved by the dogs barking at him, the growls and rattling chains depicted in the restless piano accompaniment. He is driven to move on. However there is an envy of the peaceful dreamers who are unaware of the outsider's sleepless presence. I try to capture the longing for home-coming in my painting. George Ball shared this nostalgia, but I still ask myself: what did it mean for him?

The estate then had a shopping street with specialized shops including kitchen ware. I bought some French iron pots which I still use as I do a copper bowl for whisking egg whites. Such utensils are now hard to find in city centres let alone housing estates. The newsagents stocked international magazines. On the one hand young people wanted to leave. On the other hand the older generation remembered being moved out there from notoriously insalubrious inner city slums after the Second World War, and appreciated the place with its relatively healthy air, large green spaces and easy access to facilities. A gigantic hospital stood on the edge of the estate, and provided work for many residents. Nevertheless the young people had nothing to do on the estate which did not cater for their interests. Gangs of angry youths made the streets dangerous at night. Returning from the West End in the late evening, crossing the estate from Morden tube station, I quickly learned how to negotiate these gangs, never

making eye contact, and striding purposefully through them. Never once did they lay a finger on me, but my friends were less lucky, not knowing how to deal with the situation. Bored, restless with too much energy to burn, these youngsters were spoiling for a fight, and I frequently had to take visitors to the hospital.

Not all young people behaved this way there. I made friends with several who enjoyed expanding their horizons and accompanied me on mural painting expeditions across South London. A wedding photographer used to visit me regularly to talk about Visconti films. A milk delivery man came to my art classes. An elderly gardener would criticize my piano playing, identifying mistakes in my Chopin waltzes. These men were the backbone not only of the community but of the country. War years and appreciation at no longer living in unhealthy inner city slums made them self-sufficient. They taught me perspective and practical life lessons, for instance how to make best use of a garden, how to raise plants, to preserve fruit and brew. I remember them every time I decant wine into bottles after the final fermentation.

Now the descendants of these people and their families have left the estate to make better lives for themselves elsewhere in the world. Several keep in touch. The estate has changed, the council houses privately owned. Specialist shops are long gone. Most of the rest boarded up. There is nostalgia actually for how it used to be in my time there, even though at the time such estates were looked down on.

During the year that Margaret Thatcher came to power and before we moved to Central London where Donald had been appointed rector of St James's Piccadilly, I used to go swimming with several men from the estate. After pounding down the lanes and drying by the side of the pool we would discuss life and politics. Some of the older men had fought in the Second World War and one of them, a sailor, commissioned me to do a painting for him

of his ship. He gave me two photographs showing his ship carrying out a rescue at sea after a U Boat attack. This is not a subject or even a commission that initially captured my imagination, but something about the cold sea, the grey ship and the metallic sky unlocked the picture for me. This man experienced a terrifying ordeal, yet what meant most to him was being able to rescue people. War had taught people like him how to survive and make the most of what they had. It made them suspicious of cant, especially from those who had not been through what they had.

That generation were beginning to express disillusion with the way society had changed since the war, not as far as I could see for moral reasons, although they complained about the behaviour of the young generation which had also become alienated from their parents, but because the trauma of world wars, the stress and suffering, the deaths, the losses, the grief, and above all the consequences of both the holocaust and the dropping of the first atomic bombs had not been adequately addressed.

My paintings for the retired sailor were done from this perspective. However, humbled by the real life narrative behind them, I had the uneasy feeling they disappointed him. Thirty five years later his daughter contacted me to tell me he had died, and sent photographs of the two paintings, saying they had meant a great deal to him. So I had succeeded after all. The cold grey sea dominates, and there are the sailors pulling others from the choppy waters.

The last swimming session I attended before moving away from the estate, happened to be on the eve of the General Election in 1979. I stood with my retired sailor and his neighbours round the pool and to my horror they each declared: 'Maggie has my vote!' For the first time I felt everyone drift away from me and from each other. At one and the same time I not only understood their sense of betrayal by those who governed them, but also saw them move unwittingly into yet another betrayal disguised as a promise of home ownership, prosperity

and a nostalgic return to Victorian values, a time when everyone knew their place. This simultaneous realization shocked me so much that I could not challenge the enormity of the change in their allegiance from diehard communally-minded socialism to a puritanical self-centred conservatism. I also knew instinctively this really did not have so much to do with shifts in political allegiances, than with a deep seated mistrust of their leaders, a disillusion that only deepened during the centrist years when governments by all parties focused on following the money.

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Liberal arts studies used to be compulsory in the early 1970s for young male apprentices in manual trades and women training in office work. Because of this hour's unpopularity, and no call for special qualifications or practical skill, young part-timers like me, with no training, would be drafted to take the classes. In contrast to the enthusiasm around my art teaching, I immediately came up against a brick wall of disinterest and aggressive resistance. The men would have preferred to be playing football outside and deliberately turned their backs on me. A few were curious about how I might navigate the situation and seeing my dismay laughed and told me not to take it personally. 'We're really nice people – don't mind us.' But this blatant rejection turned out to be less painful than the young women who filed into the hall and without turning their backs, just carried on talking with each other. They did this while I tried in vain to interest them in the arts. Eventually one of them had enough and took me down several pegs by announcing she probably knew more about the subject than I did. I deserved this humiliation because I came with the arrogance of an educated middle class whippersnapper assuming working class ignorance. Had I been older and more mature I would have known how to involve them and together turn this dreary compulsory hour into an opportunity to talk about what really mattered in their lives.

The aspect of this experience that taught me most pointed at a justified anger of this up and coming generation of what used to be the working class, traditionally forced into menial labour, better educated than their parents and well aware of where they stood politically and socially. They were offered only material aspiration and each and every one of them knew that life could and should be more than financial security and acquisition: this at a time of relatively full employment, before the country's manufacturing and production industries would be closed down because of international competition and the global free market. They were intelligent and understood the precariousness as well as the limits of their working existence. Governments promised improvement in standards of living, and little more. Was this it? They resented being patronised by people like me, from what is still seen as the chattering educated class, privileged and considering itself better qualified to govern and lecture. This used to be how people saw the Tory Party, and how the Tory Party like to be seen: the natural party of government, where whenever Labour takes power the economy collapses in a financial mess which the Tories need to clear up. This view is expressed with sly symbolism in the Ealing comedy *The Ladykillers*, made after the Tories took over from the first post-war Labour government. The mixed bag of thieves, from the sinister educated one to the loutish oaf, bicker with each other and then fall out lethally, while the charming old-fashioned landlady, imperturbable and impervious to menace, survives and finally gets to walk off with the loot. The film's satire is even more biting relevant to current attitudes towards the main political parties, both of which have disappointed the general electorate. Unlike those immediate post-war decades when memories of the traumatic consequences of unfettered fascism meant a preference for liberal centrism, now there is the danger of a lurch to the extreme right, xenophobic, racist and isolationist on the one hand, and on the other a movement across the globe towards a new socialism. The younger generation knows the world cannot continue under the present political systems. There has to be radical change,

new ways of addressing social, political, economic and other matters, especially climate change, sharing the world's resources more fairly, and ending war. Over the decades all governments became more right wing centrist so the sense of betrayal felt by those who do not belong to the privileged wealthy one per cent is now leading to a search for alternatives, the simplest being nativism, a new name for the nationalism that bred fascism, isolationism and the rejection of the complexities of living in a world that has become a global village. It appears that the Western world in particular is evenly split between those who long for a revival of socialism, the rights and idealism spawned by the revolutions of the late 18th and 19th century and those who prefer a return to the safety of tribal allegiances, family and self interest. Whereas socialist idealism, intrinsic to democracy, has been under constant attack, diluted, ignored and crumbled by the small affluent minority that owns the power, whether conservative or communist totalitarian, and has never been allowed to flourish, the nationalist alternative encourages nostalgia for a past that never existed with simple solutions to complex problems. As the name implies, utopia doesn't exist, never existed and never will, except in the imagination. The nationalist utopia offers drastic solutions motivated by self-interest: the 'me' and not the 'we'.

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SOAP NOSTALGIA AND MATRIARCHY

From the beginning, home entertainment in the form of radio and television latched onto the popularity of never-ending story lines ostensibly reflecting people's everyday lives, the continuous dramas and relationships, Like people queuing up at Boston harbour in the 19th century clamouring to know the next episode of a serialized Dickens novel, now viewers are kept entertained by soap story lines. In the UK the two most popular soaps are firmly grounded in folk nostalgia.

These dramas function in the manner of *The West Wing* which achieved world-wide popularity in the years of the Bush administration, providing those disappointed and demoralised by his victory with a preferred alternative. The series portrayed President Bartlett as a possible template for what a ruler should be, while not being afraid to observe his flaws, and acknowledging the reality that such a thoughtful, intelligent and basically liberal president would always face problems winning majority support in both houses of representatives and senators. These political and personal conflicts, nationally and internationally, are what make the series such satisfying, instructive, entertaining and also thought provoking viewing. Soap operas at their best fulfil the same function.

From its inception *Coronation Street* described a particular view of Northern working class community. Despite the changes that I was witnessing at the same time, the series kept faith with a way of life encapsulated by the evocative title sequence: cramped terrace houses, pigeons and soulful brass band music. Albert Square at the heart of *East Enders* is a place long gone in an age of gentrification, The characters scrabbling for a living there would long ago have been moved out to the suburbs or further afield. Also the sense of community that provides continuity to the narratives is no longer relevant to London's present-day inner city. Tourists would look in vain for such a place. Both soaps are of course about nostalgia for a vanished way of life when the older generation dispensed guidance and life experience wisdom in a launderette or leaning against the bar of a pub. Even the 'bad boys' are a throwback to post-war gangsters, who had long been glamorized and mythologized: ruthlessly tough on rivals and upstarts, loyal to 'famerlee' and helping old ladies cross the road. Casting celebrated icons like Barbara Windsor in the role of gangster family matriarch added to the authenticity of the myth, because of her known former friendships with crime bosses of the past. Any attempts to bring criminality up to date only show up the nostalgic anachronisms that contribute to the popular success of these soaps. They provide an ersatz

religion for the white majority society that no longer regularly attends Church. Each episode contains at least one sermon, or piece of dialogue dispensing ‘good advice’, and frequently ends with a couple of emergency telephone numbers to ring for assistance with ‘issues’ peppering the narratives. For all the obvious soapy manipulation and scenarios rooted in a framework that belongs to another time, I am a fan. They are popular because they fulfil a need and feed nostalgia for a social network when people readily engaged in conflict but generally made peace in the end, helped each other out, broke each other’s hearts but also sustained community, where personal interaction is essential not just for gripping narratives, even if such relationships hardly exist any longer.

I have always been a fan of soapy melodramas, so-called women’s pictures, although they have to be of a superior kind which celebrates sentiment rather than manipulates it. These films penetrate to the heart of social problems and relationships. Emotional reaction can initiate political responses to change society. I would go so far as to say that such films in the hands of expert directors and actors are on the whole more useful, productive and revolutionary than machismo message dramas. Successful melodramas can be subversive. They appeal to nostalgia for an imagined future which promises improvement: ‘If only life could be like this! Even as we all know it never is, at least let us hope it can be.’

The backbone of soap dramas like *Coronation Street* and *East Enders* is women, with few exceptions stronger than the men, who even at their best are feckless, prone to mistakes, violence and messing things up. Whereas the men generally say they’ll ‘get things sorted’, it is the women who end up doing that. The northern drama series began at a time when women ran the household as well as worked. I knew these women in Lancashire where I grew up. They spoke their mind and you just had to put up with their honest bluntness. They were matriarchs on a grand scale. Majestic and in charge, as Hilary Mantel once described them: ‘They blocked out the sun.’ Even though both drama series try and keep up with the times,

such matriarchs in places like Albert Square have long been an anachronism. They moved out to housing estates where homes were better equipped and the surroundings more salubrious.

I counted myself lucky to have known one such matriarch on the St Helier Estate in the 1970s. Gwen Abbot remembered the slums of the inner city and settled on this South London estate with gratitude. She not only worked full time, but raised a large family of strapping children who ended up as nurses, police officers and running businesses. She also looked after an ailing husband and managed at the same time to be a pillar of the parish community, singing in the church choir. Sunday lunch would not only have the whole family round the table, but the vicar too, me and other friends who happened to be around. Unlike in soap series where such meals generally end in fierce family rows, fights and slamming of doors, these real-life lunches at Gwen Abbotts throbbed with spirited conversation and a sense of communal sharing beyond family. Her thwarted ambition had been to be an opera singer, and she made up for that failure by performing the Easter Hymn from *Cavalleria Rusticana* at church whenever the opportunity arose, hurling her powerful soprano across the nave to the altar. She balked at some of Donald's experiments, such as Julia Usher's magnificent and daringly modern danced *Mass for the Sun Rising* which Gwen at first described as 'music of the devil' but finally performed with gusto. Gwen Abbot's defence of my own *Stations of the Cross* saved them. This large-scale series of vividly coloured contemporary interpretations of Christ's Passion painted on roundels ending with two massive panels depicting the Crucifixion and Resurrection facing each other in the chancel caused such a rumpus that a consistory court needed to be held years after Donald left the parish, to decide on whether to destroy them. The established artist, Leonard Rosoman, and a leading theologian, John Drury, spoke in their defence alongside the lawyer husband of the playwright Caryl Churchill, and their championship humbled me, but what touched me most were the great matriarch Gwen Abbott's words as she went from one painting to the other declaring their

importance and what they meant to her. More than anyone she persuaded the judge to save them from destruction. I had painted them for her and for the community as it existed then in the 1970s, on the cusp of social and political change that would eventually bring about the end of that kind of working class culture, with its deep roots in community, strong family structures that could be open-hearted, outward looking, naturally intelligent in a no-nonsense way, curious to learn, welcoming strangers and new ways of living, all on a human level and not because of ideology. This is the working class I grew up with and could never patronise because they taught me more than I could ever teach them. Personally I feel it is important to be reminded of these qualities in an age of relentless ‘dumbing down’ by the media and politicians, including many of those who would be expected to have more understanding and respect for the people they represent.

Gwen Abbott represents the beating heart of community at its grass roots. I had known other matriarchs, resilient, determined, faithful, candid and benevolent, in the north of England where I grew up, the women who bound families and communities together in times of crisis, not the men in mayor’s robes, or the bosses, who pretended to be in charge. There is a striking example of such a matriarch, acted by Imelda Staunton, in the film *Pride*. These matriarchs are trusted by the community, which they guide. They are open-minded and intolerant only of bigotry and intolerance. Without higher education, they nonetheless possess an intelligence that sees through cant and pretention. They deploy a sharp sense of humour that puts people in their place. Unthreatened they allow no one to stop them. I knew them and can vouch personally for their wisdom, understanding and compassion. Though powerful and robust in their opinions, they were never intimidating, because they had a genuine curiosity about people and felt instinctive care not only for family and community, but also for strangers and mavericks, eccentrics and those who are despised and discriminated against..

However, these British matriarchs flourish best in communities where people are in full employment. Those days are long past. This is why soap operas exert such a nostalgic appeal: the matriarchs are achingly missed.

Matriarchs are not nannies. This is why those women who became Prime Minister in the UK, Margaret Thatcher and now Theresa May are not matriarchs, even if their position might indicate this possibility. Political ambition is about control, which suits the nanny state. Matriarchy is about nurture of community.

This kind of matriarch is a British phenomenon: mistresses of household and community.. Healthy democracies, which are forever struggling to achieve their true purpose, encourage them. Tyrannies oppress them. The recent US election and victory for Donald Trump over Hilary Clinton brought this matter into the open. Dictatorships and democracies treat women, and especially matriarchs, differently. Each system feels nostalgia for how women preserving, strengthen and improve social wellbeing. Tyrannies place the woman firmly in the home away from community. Democracies welcome them in every part of society.

NOSTALGIA FOR UTOPIA AND ARMAGEDDON

There is the nostalgia for utopia. Then there is the nostalgia for the end of the world.

The one yearns after a golden age, a Utopia for all humanity, inspired by communal myths of a golden age. The other attracts recruits by fanatic belief in purity, whether religious or social and political, for which it is prepared to die and take the world down with it, inspired by dogmas that favour unpolluted ethnicity and faith and is intolerant of dissent and diversity. Utopia is a challenge which demands the world change radically and makes every effort to achieve peace and harmonious co-existence, even as the name implies, such an idyllic state

can never truly exit, but has always to be striven after. Purity demands different challenges: unquestioning and self-sacrificial obedience to a leadership which is trusted to make the decisions, and prepared for unthinking readiness to destroy and die. This is as true of right wing extremism dedicated to racial purity and white predominance as it is of militant Islam.

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I am a sucker for utopian nostalgia and sentiment, as my previous pieces indicate, but I am also fascinated by nostalgia for Armageddon: the apocalyptic aim for purity which repels because such purity depends on ultimate annihilation. By excluding everyone and everything else, the world is turned into place of constant war. So what is it about the desire for a simple solution, to be lead, to be unthinkingly prepared to die in the midst of destruction that fascinates? What is it about mortal self-sacrifice that attracts young people with long productive lives ahead for them?

My pieces *Face of a Child* and *Eyes and Smiles* began to explore the theme of utopian nostalgia as a yearning for home, Heimat. This sentimental longing washes like a watercolour into its opposite dystopian nostalgia for a past that is death by immolation.

This theme leads me to the heart of my piece on racism.

I intend to focus on the period of intense nationalism at the heart of Europe leading to the Second World War, specifically *Heimat*, a German film made in 1938 by Carl Froehlich. The perennial popularity of that film indicates dystopian nostalgia still simmering below the surface of a resurrected nation long after the horrors of that war have been generally acknowledged and regretted. Its title *Heimat* became also the title of the more celebrated Edgar Reitz's film epic made over a period of twenty years at the end of the last century and which succeeded, certainly as far as Germany is concerned, in challenging the insidious toxic

nationalism at the core of the earlier film, and its influence on subsequent events, while at the same time acknowledging the longing for homeland that is shared by people then and now.

Carl Froehlich's *Heimat* depended for its emotional resonance on Zarah Leander the film's Swedish singer who became known as the German film industry's answer to Greta Garbo. She came to represent a womanly ideal not only for the Third Reich but for generations after the war. Even those who regretted the crimes of the Hitler period never stopped adoring Zarah Leander, and she continued to make films in Germany in the post war years. Her performances reflected the changes of mood in her adopted country. With a unique low contralto voice and a face almost perpetually in stoic tragic mode she could be naughtily seductive, warmly motherly or self-sacrificially saintly, all within the same film. Basically this is a woman who yearns for independence and love, but is perpetually doomed to submission. The development of her roles from early films before the war, while the Third Reich established its authority, to films made after the war, is instructive on matters of national nostalgia in the lead up to war and guilt after Germany's defeat. I will focus on her three most famous films, Carl Froehlich's *Heimat* and the other two directorial debuts by Douglas Sirk, a non-Jew who rejected National Socialism and moved to Hollywood where he became master of the subversive melodrama, 'woman's movie'.

Heimat provided Zarah Leander with one of her most iconic roles, and the film warrants scrutiny because of its popularity, a classic German film from the years of the Third Reich, and for its themes of family, tribe, and nation which are at the heart of the present crisis in Europe.

At its best soap melodrama is subversive. In all Leander's films men are weak, bullish or devious and cannot be trusted, especially not those in authority. Only a woman's suffering, sacrifice and resilience in the face of tragedy can bring humanity to a harsh world, as long as

she accepts her subservient position. Apart from the sadistic entertainment value for a fascist machismo society enjoying the sight of a woman suffering, particularly one as charismatic as Zarah Leander, the subversive implication is that in a world that functions without humanity maybe the only solution is a rejection of male authoritarianism. The leaders of the Third Reich, chiefly Joseph Goebbels who used cinema for propaganda purposes, would not have been interested in this message or been aware of it, everyone fixated on Leander's performance, camp melodrama sumptuously costumed, skilfully mounted and directed, and therefore not to be taken seriously. But this is where the subversive element delivers its punch. The audiences would leave the cinema emotionally involved with Zarah Leander's fate and simultaneously be uneasily aware of the subliminal message that the male-dominated world is rotten.

As in grand opera, narrative logic is never a priority in these kind of melodramas, and most of the time my mind has difficulty accepting the sudden shifts of storyline and actions in the 1938 *Heimat* that cannot be reasonably explained. What matters is the emotional truth that allows for inconsistencies in behaviour. The mood in Leander's films is always set by the music. As a popular singer audiences expected at least one hit number, if not more, and she never disappointed. Whatever the silliness of narrative her songs would reassure audiences that it is her response to people and events that counts, and that they should empathise with her through the music,

So in *Heimat*, music drives the narrative and the mood is set by a sentimental number about longing for home, 'Three stars are shining...' Leander is Magda, a world-famous singer returning to her small home town in Germany, one that she fled some years earlier, rejected by a father who disapproved of her career choice, and ruined by a scandalous affair with one of the town's bigwigs which produced a child, a secret that had to be kept hidden. The film is about her longing for reconciliation with her father and struggle for acceptance by the

community, while resisting blackmail from the father of her child. After performing a popular number 'A woman only becomes beautiful through love', with a louche Marie Lloyd twinkle in her eye indicating that this has more to do with the physical act rather than anything romantic, she moves from whore to mother to saint in a film which ends with her singing in Bach's *St Mathew Passion*. Only then does she earn paternal forgiveness and acceptance by the community. For all the sentimentality, the look on her face as she intones the great passion chorale expresses a stoic awareness of the cost of such acceptance, the long journey of suffering, the battles of attrition with the main men in her life. That look on her face along with the beauty of her performance of the music is what audiences would take away, when the rest of the painful story is forgotten. The Third Reich would have appreciated the overt message that all true Germans should come home to the warm embrace of the Fatherland, with perhaps a sly dig at world famous singers such as Marlene Dietrich and Lotte Lehmann who resisted such a command, Lehmann laughing in Goebbels face before packing her belongings and leaving for a successful career in the United States, Dietrich performing for Allied forces during the war, an act that infuriated her mother country. Branded a traitor, even after the crimes of genocide had been revealed, it took years before Germany welcomed her back. Despite the then shame of having been misled by what Germans came to call the 'gangsters' it was still felt that she should have kept faith, even with fascism which she detested. Her deliberately chilly performance as the wife of a general indicates in the film *Judgment at Nuremberg* about the trial of Nazi leaders that Dietrich understood the mentality of people, even decent ones, who did not resist, and who despite the crimes of many compatriots, believed they were good Germans. The film makes observations which are particularly relevant now in Europe and the US moving to nationalism. *Kadar's The Shop on the High Street* gives an even starker reminder and warning for the future: what can a decent ordinary citizen do to resist the force of fascism as it attacks and destroys a community.

FIVE WOMEN (POLLY LEONORE MADDALENA SALLY AND ROSALINDA)

WEIMAR AND THE THIRD REICH

Like obsequious portraits of the leader, photo-realist styles of painting and rigid sets of rules for social behaviour, the representation of women indicates what essentially sets patriarchal dictatorships apart from liberal democracies.

Look at the films made in the free world during the 1930s and 1940s. Hollywood witnessed the emergence of powerful women characters who dominated the screen in parts created for stars such as Bette Davis and Barbara Stanwyck. They squared up to the men and most of the time came out on top. Even the 'eternal masochist' Joan Crawford turned her perpetual suffering at the hands of predatory males into female triumph. They all might have to be punished for being uppity in a world ruled by men, but the force and passion of their performances gave a subversively contrary message to audiences: women are capable and can run the world. The femmes fatales of film noir who challenged macho men sent a similar message: fear the strength of our thwarted passions and consider the waste of our energy which could be put to more creative use turning your fear into respect. There is nothing such women cannot do. In these politically and socially astute films that flourished precisely in the decade of build up to war, throughout the war and during the post-war blues, there is also commentary about the male character that is on the one hand needing to be strong, aggressive and victorious in battle but on the other hand turning out to be weak in peacetime and failing in domestic and social relationships. While these men were fighting, the women ran the place, not just the home but also in industry, successfully doing men's work. It has been frequently commented on how when the men returned from war, these women who had learned to be capable and independent were expected to return obediently to their subservient

role in domesticity. As film noir showed effectively, women resented such demotion, challenged male decision-making and in their own way fought to be independent. Thwarted ambition led to the femme fatales punishing the men by twisting them round their fingers and destroying them.

Enough has been written about film noir and the role of its women, and better than I can write, but too little and nothing that I have come across about the role of women under fascism. There is the celebrated shot at the end of *Roma Citta Aperta, Rome Open City* set and made in the closing stages of fascism in Italy when the image of defiant Italian womanhood Anna Magnani is gunned down shockingly on the streets. The point is being made that any woman who dares to protest against authority will as a matter of course be destroyed. But before I explore this theme with more examples from German cinema of the same decade as Hollywood film noir, tribute needs to be paid to a peculiarly British phenomenon, the matriarch virago, usually a figure of fun, like Peggy Mount who roared and bellowed at her quaking husbands and any man who dared to challenge her, a type that became the formidable 'her indoors' in series like *The Last of the Summer Wine*. While mocked these were at the same time considered to be essential pillars of society. During the war British cinema featured the maturing figure of subservient role models, obedient wives and home-makers who discovered the strength individually to take on the marauding enemy. Greer Garson in *Mrs Miniver* represents such a housewife with Oscar-winning quality, but this happened to be a film made in Hollywood where the actor had moved to join the ranks of other strong women stars. Back in the United Kingdom in more modest productions less glamorous types found themselves capable of doing what they had never imagined being called to do. For me the most moving example can be found in the alarming wartime fantasy, *Went the Day Well*, in which the women folk of a small country town taken over by German Nazi troops, find the courage to fight and defeat the enemy whatever the sacrifice. When the

post mistress under duress finally reaches for a knife and kills a German soldier, the look of shock, despair and disgust on her face tells us the cost to her of this act of violence for which her peaceful life of public duty had never prepared her, but that simply had to be done to protect the community even at the cost of her own life. Such women refused to be intimidated and defeated. Even at their most gracefully feminine and polite, like Deborah Kerr, also poached by Hollywood, and Celia Johnson who stayed in the UK and became the symbol of British womanhood, they possessed spines of steel, making the decisions that provide resolution to whatever drama they took part in. In *Brief Encounter* it is the woman, not the man, who has the guts and resolve to end the relationship that offers only a problematic future.

Much has been written deservedly about their American colleagues, a roll-call of strong and capable women too long and tedious to list here, they deserve a large book on their own, but indomitable British woman in the cinema of the 1930s and 1940s deserve matching recognition.

Powerful women existed in German cinema, but only for the brief period of the Weimar Republic, in the late 1920s and early 1930s which made what followed so different. The negative and depressing manner of this change provides a warning to the future. Ironically, this image of womanhood offered by the Third Reich had not been intended to demean and degrade women, but in fact to raise them on a pedestal. This however had the effect of restricting and hemming women in. They must know their place, and let the men do the business of state, business and warfare.

There is stark contrast between Lotte Lenya's robust Polly Peachum in Pabst's film of Brecht Weill *Threepenny Opera* and Zarah Leander's victimized Magda in Carl Froehlich's *Heimat* made only five years after, a year before Hitler launched the Second World War.

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First there has to be a brief comment by me concerning all those critics of the Weimar Republic artists, Berthold Brecht foremost, that because he set himself up as a political and social commentator, then blame has to be laid at his door for the failure of that group of artists to prevent the rise of the Third Reich. The blame can never be put on artists for such failure, but must emphatically be laid at the door of their audiences who did not heed the clear and trenchant warnings of the disaster to come.

Germany at this time tried to resurrect itself from the catastrophe of losing the First World War so artists as well as politicians were trying to find a way of creating a new society out of the ruins. Socialism looked to be the best alternative, but self-interested business threw its weight and finance behind aggressive nationalism. This is for me a significant point to make at the present moment because Europe is once again divided irreconcilably between extreme political forces. Aggressive nationalism is once again attracting support from business and the populace alike. Artists in prophetic mode warn as best they can and yet despite critical respect occasionally rewarding them, audiences in the inter-war years failed to react sufficiently.

This time round a young generation will hopefully succeed where they failed then. Michael Moore has faith in the under-40s. But old men like me with a life time of thinking and learning, have a duty to help when asked, and at least put the knowledge and experience out there.

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Villains are always, for me, the best parts in James Bond films. Hunky, icy-eyed Robert Stephens and dynamic Lotte Lenya bagged attention in *From Russia With Love*, providing the

thrills and absurdity. What is it with those awkward poison-tipped knives in Lotte Lenya's shoes? Couldn't she have found a more convenient place to store them? Probably not so securely with no risk to herself, but unfortunately the clumsiness of their location made it easier for Bond to dispose of her eventually, and in ungainly fashion. It also made for memorable cinema, like Oddjob's bizarre razor-rimmed bowler hat in *Goldfinger* – he could after all have stored a discus in his pocket.

Lotte Lenya turned out to be inspired casting because of her celebrated substantial back story as the muse of both Berthold Brecht and Kurt Weill, the artists who became universally representative of the post-First World War Weimar Republic years in Germany: when international socialism presented a substantial challenge and an alternative to nationalism. She might have been a villain in the Bond film, and it hopefully provided her with a fat pay check, as well as the opportunity of enacting in real life the example of Brecht's *Good Person of Szechuan*, in which capitalism is subverted to help the poor. Her back story meant she upstaged everyone in the film. Audiences would hear in their memory's ear the songs that made her such a potent interpreter of Brecht and Weill, in that unique voice both gravel and honey, and in performances, world-weary, cynical but resilient and ultimately hopeful, robustly challenging but also tender, dangerous to anyone who crossed her, independent with feet firmly on the ground, a survivor. This 'infinite variety' of character, not unlike Shakespeare's Cleopatra, made her a person who spoke to and for everyone: representative of a new breed of tough women who resist being pigeon-holed by anyone, especially not by men. Even in such ostensibly self-lacerating ballads like *Surabaya Johnny*, she manages to stand up to her faithless unresponsive lover, 'take that pipe out of your mouth, you dog', not concealing her emotion but also aware that she will get over the heartbreak. This woman is most definitely not a victim, for all her emotional candour.

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DAS EWIGWEIBLICHE ZIEHT UNS HINAN: THE ETERNAL FEMININE DRAWS US ON

Generations have attempted to interpret these somewhat ambiguous words by Goethe that end his magnum opus, *Faust*. What is 'feminine'? What is she drawing us on towards? What is her eternal aspect? The words can mean anything, although the fundamental implication is that the male character needs the quality of woman to achieve wholeness and 'salvation', at least in the play. 'Hinan' cannot be precisely translated. It implies a place to which one is going. To what and to where is the eternal feminine drawing us? What heaven? What salvation? That begs the question: why is this responsibility laid on her shoulders, in particular this woman who has been seduced and abandoned? Goethe, the poet, is deliberately ambiguous. This cultured and multi-talented Enlightenment writer, rooted in Greco-Roman culture, the Renaissance, the mythology of Central European folklore and the revolutionary thinking by his contemporaries across the continent, wants us to think for ourselves.

Beethoven took Goethe's declaration about the 'ewig-weibliche' at face value and in his opera *Fidelio* created a formidable woman protagonist who triumphs against all odds.

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An observation needs to be made at this point about the arts and society's changing attitudes to them. Before any performance or exhibition, the exhortation is to: 'Enjoy!' This assumes an overriding expectation to be cheered up, to take a break from and escape real life. Michael Moore declares that entertainment should in fact always be the main aim for the artist creator, but as his own films prove, skill at making an entertaining film does not need to get in the way of uncomfortable truth. Humour and delight can contribute to making the subject matter more palatable as well as trenchant and irresistible. Jonathan Swift proved long ago that satire could be politically challenging and effective of change. Holding a mirror to disturbing truths

without sugaring the pill can also succeed in changing attitudes even when not pandering to pleasure, but one is not necessarily exclusive of the other.

However brilliant the satire and penetrating the subversive message, audiences today on the whole remain resistant to being touched so as to rise up in revolutionary protest about the matters raised, say in the way Italians reacted to Verdi's *I Lombardi*, rushing out of the opera house to take up arms against the tyranny of oppression.

In the musical *Cabaret* there is a seductive song about nature, sunlight, morning and fields which plays on nostalgia for a wholesome way of life before turning into a hymn in praise of fascism. The satire is effective because the song, both the words and music, subtly subverts expectations. Love of nature morphs into a nationalist call to arms. The song gives a stark warning: remember how this moment of sweet nostalgia led directly to war and holocaust; it can happen again. Steve Bell drew on this song for one of his cartoons before Margaret Thatcher's third election. The sinister last words, 'tomorrow belongs to me' became the cartoon's title, a chilling reminder of Thatcher's 'nativism'. By reminding readers of *Cabaret*'s narrative and satirical purpose, it should have stirred people to vote against her, but she won with an even bigger majority. An appeal to Victorian values won the day, in the same way as Brexit recently appealed to the majority's desire for a return to the 'good old days' when there were no foreigners and the UK used to be a happily self-contained island nation with no ties to anyone or anywhere else (all myths of course) and the consequences including a striking rise in hate-crime, are now being brushed aside as irrelevant and exaggerated, just as they were in the Weimar Republic before a minority of street thugs took over Germany. What this majority hears is just the opening strains of the song from *Cabaret* celebrating the dawning of a new day, unaware that it is paving the way seductively towards a future of conflict and oppression. This future is already being imagined by the right-wing media. When farmers after Brexit now complain about the future lack of foreign workers to

pick the fruit, the media now suggests prisoners should be sent to the orchards. They would of course need to be shackled and supervised so none escape. This conjures images of chain gangs. This is a small step to concentration camps that will be needed to incarcerate and dispose of illegal immigrants, dissenters and other undesirables. Attack on liberal attitudes, mocked as political correctness, and threats to the rights for all minorities prepare for this new future. A few days after his confirmation as the new President of the US Donald Trump announced he would be deporting or incarcerating three million unwanted immigrants.

Cabaret reflected on recent history, drawing on Christopher Isherwood's observations about Germany at the time of the events described. The disturbing warning of the musical hit home to me in an unlikely but potent amateur performance given by school children in Charlbury near Oxford. After the shock of seeing teenage girls pretending to be louche chorus girls in a sleazy nightclub, a withering performance as Emcee by a sixteen year old boy, one of the helpers at my Coffeehouse, struck home how dangerously close our world is to spiralling into fascism. He did not act sleazy, was himself, and simply pointed directly at the audience with the implication: 'You make your own mind up about this: does the cap fit?' The innocence of the performers only accentuated the political, moral and social corruption that permeates the narrative.

Johann Strauss's operetta *Die Fledermaus, the Bat*, holds a mirror up to the decadence of class division, morals and hypocrisy at the zenith of the Hapsburg Empire in Vienna. The music's charm lends a witty perspective to this classic risqué operetta about adultery, an oppressive class system where the only way out for talented lower class young women is to become 'actresses', and a society ruled over by an overbearing and jaded aristocratic elite focussed grimly on being ceaselessly entertained. The piece never fails to shock and charm because in the end it is human beings who triumph. Marriages, like society, can splinter dangerously but it is when people come to their senses, stop being selfish, and acknowledge

each other's frailties as well as talents that there can at least in an operetta be a happy ending.... of sorts. People may leave the theatre uplifted by the beauty of the music and vitality of the performance, but will not easily forget the mirror held up to them. The first act takes place in a living room, where a rocky marital relationship and unfair social division are on display, like in an Ibsen play. The second is a lavish house party where people behave badly but all in good fun. The final act takes place tellingly in a prison, a symbol of the society's decrepit infrastructure. This is where the resolution comes after several dangerous moments when relationships threaten to disintegrate beyond repair.

At the heart of this operetta are two knock-out arias, a laughing song in which Adele the chambermaid mocks her boss who is blind to her qualities because he can only see her as a servant, and a Hungarian czardas in which Rosalinda his wife asserts her independence as a woman who can handle any situation, including her faithless husband. In a good performance, like Gundula Janowitz under Karl Bohm's vigorous and tight direction, this aria can raise the roof. The whole cast for whom this operetta is so much in the blood they become the characters is completely at home in the Viennese dialect, as pungent as London cockney and inimitably expressive simultaneously both of sentimentality and cynicism. The bonus of Janowitz's effortless Hungarian accent in the Czardas, and Wolfgang Windgassen's equally effective Russian, reminds audiences how richly multicultural Vienna was at the time of the operetta's composition. *Die Fledermaus* remains as scintillating, entertaining, relevant and subversive as an Oscar Wilde play.

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Sally Bowles in *Cabaret* does not have the skill of Rosalinda, and we know that Christopher Isherwood while admiring, as who would not, Liza Minnelli's barnstorming performance on stage and in the film, did point out that the original Sally Bowles could neither sing nor

dance. Based on a real character in Berlin at the time, he was making an observation that it is precisely her lack of professionalism that made her lovable, particularly as she is aware of her faults. The character illustrates the weakness of a society that does not have the skills to resist the forces of fascism.

In contrast Lotte Lenya's power as a performer defined the resilience of her character which informed the roles she took on. She is effective as the ever resourceful Polly Peachum in Brecht and Weill's celebrated update of John Gay's 18th century *The Beggars Opera* about London lowlife, the same sleazy world as Sally Bowles's Kit Kat Club, above all in Lenya's understanding of the world she lives in and has to negotiate every day. The fascists trash Sally's club, in their first step towards war and the holocaust. Sally's world then came to an end. However the political and emphatically socialist message about state corruption and oppression, criminal solidarity and rebellion in Brecht's world cannot be trashed. It may go underground out of necessity under the Third Reich, with Brecht and Weill fleeing into exile, but would re-emerge later with its message intact, as prophetic now as it ever was.

Created in the crucible of revolution and the Napoleonic wars over a century before the Weimar Republic, Beethoven's only opera *Fidelio* shines every more brightly across the decades and centuries as not only a howl of protest against injustice and oppression but above all in the character of the courageous and indomitable Leonore: an example of Goethe's declaration about the 'ewig weibliche' drawing us on.

The work shocks with its contemporary resonance. Even the setting is timeless: a jail. It was an irony, but also a matter of no other choice, and even a necessity, that this paean to freedom opened the Vienna Opera House, a cultural centre for the Third Reich, rebuilt five years after its destruction in the Second World War. The occasion inhibited the main singers, so it is not a performance to hear for its interpretation, but it is moving to hear the usually dependable

dramatic soprano Martha Mödl choke on her role as Leonore, which challenges any singer whatever the circumstances, let alone one as charged as this occasion

The subject matter of unjust incarceration, harsh punishment and threat of death is sadly not of the past, but a regular occurrence even in the West which hypocritically considers itself morally superior to other cultures, while sanctioning torture and allying itself with brutally repressive regimes across the world. Into this dangerous and gloomy situation comes Leonore disguised as a man, because this is a man's world which restrains woman, to rescue her imprisoned husband, victim of an unscrupulous enemy. With no idea how she can release her man, she can only be resilient and be prepared to sacrifice herself. There is no other choice for her. The two words that leap out of Beethoven's score apart from Freiheit, freedom, are 'Mut' and 'Hoffnung'; courage and hope. Freedom cannot be achieved without these two essential qualities. Leonore represents these to a degree that is inspirational. However challenging, even at the cost of one's life, hold fast to courage and hope, and then there is a chance of achieving success. Her husband sits chained in a subterranean prison cell and hallucinates about freedom and being in the arms of his wife, but is a helpless chained prisoner about to be killed by the man who wants him dead. It is the wife who is not only prepared to endure every hardship and complication but puts her body between the sword and the intended victim. By lucky chance, as only happens in opera, the state governor arrives on cue to save lives, so the opera can climax in a sublime moment of celebration as the wife cuts the chains binding her husband: 'O welch ein Augenblick!' 'O what a moment!', words made all the more powerful by echoing the 'Ah! Welch ein Augenblick!' uttered with utmost ferocity earlier in the opera by the man who intended to kill him.

Of all heroines in music and literature Leonore is without peer the most inspirational.

Beethoven, who as an inexperienced opera composer admitted difficulty giving birth to this one, even offering three splendid overtures before settling on a fourth, wrote music that does

her justice, so she shines like a beacon across the centuries, as relevant and necessary today as ever. In her large-scale taxing first act aria, she sings a hymn to hope that never fails to move audiences, even though, as I observed before, they do not necessarily heed the urgency of her plea. At least the opera exists. With a soothing accompaniment of three horns she sings: ‘Come hope, do not allow the last star to pale for the wearied. Brighten my goal, be it ever so far.’ In the second act she begs for courage and strength, knowing that she may have to sacrifice her own life to save her husband. Were the challenge to confront me, and we live in times of growing xenophobia, racism, nationalism and persecution of the innocent in which that threat is ever present, I would hope to be inspired by Beethoven’s Leonore and find the resolve to stand my ground even if I fail. She is an ideal. The reality is Tono in Kadar’s *The Shop on the High Street*, who falters out of understandable fear and confusion in the face of a ruthless political juggernaut and then cannot live with himself for failing. One of the main characters, a Jew preparing for transportation to a death camp, says in that exemplary film about fascist corruption of community: ‘When the law persecutes the innocent, that’s the end of it.’

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Racism and xenophobia are bound up with the desire to protect national identity from influences considered alien and polluting. Such ideology has a direct consequence for women because nationalism decrees their fertility must be limited to a particular race. Miscegenation, a word hardly used now, is considered one of the most serious crimes in nationalist states, and as shown already a century ago in Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein’s musical *Show Boat*, is punished with the same degree of disgust as those branded ‘Jew lovers’ under the Nazi regime. However in that musical it is a white woman who subverts racism by taking a song belonging to blacks and makes it her signature: more than the physical fact of mixed

blood in one person it is the cross-fertilization of cultures that penetrates to the heart of society as a whole.

Already the pre-credits sequence of Carl Froehlich's *Heimat* tells the lie at the heart of extreme nationalism, and expresses the seductive deception of nostalgia. A woman sings of three stars that are sadly not the ones of her homeland. This is a lie. Stars are the same wherever they shine. They shine on her wherever she is, the same stars that shine on her homeland. It is a universal expression of union between parted lovers that they need only look up at the moon and the stars, and know they shine down on their beloved and it is this knowledge that unites them in spirit. To say that stars are not the same as those over other countries is as nonsensical as saying that every community, nation, religious group has a different and separate history, even within the same country. Yes, each nation may lay claim to its own mythology, but that is quite a different matter from history which is universal. The heart-string-pulling beauty of the song and its performance by Zarah Leander appeals not to truth but to sentimentality. The seduction of sentimentality implies that stars mean most when seen from home, that everywhere else is foreign and unfriendly. The song provides the emotional thread of the narrative.

When Marine le Pen greeted Nigel Farage's Little England victory for Brexit in the Brussels' EU parliament, and make no mistake he and no one else won it, she stretched her arms out to him and declared 'History can be beautiful'. This appeal to national mythology, the appropriation of events to forge particular and separate histories, is the same notion as stars being different for different nations. What struck me most about her declaration was the use of the word 'beautiful'. It implied that anything other than a return to a neverland of ethnic and cultural purity could only be ugly.

One of the purposes of my piece is to consider the word 'beautiful' that inspires a sense of consoling nostalgia for homeland and nationhood, a longing for family that depends on suspicion, fear and hatred of 'others'.

The 1938 *Heimat* is set at the end of the 19th century in a small German town. Having sung about the stars of her homeland, Maddalena dall'Orto, a world famous opera star living in America, enthusiastically accepts the invitation from the prince of the town's to take part as soloist in the annual performance of the Bach *St Mathew Passion*, give a recital of popular music and be Orpheus in Gluck's *Orpheus and Eurydice*. He does not yet realize she is in fact Magda von Schwartze the daughter of the town's Colonel, and longs to return home. The film is making a point about the particular genius of German art, as well as Germany sovereignty and military strength. Note her stage name. Maddalena implies Mary Magdalen, the fallen woman who is forgiven by Christ. She had left her home town under a cloud. Not only rejected by her widower father who refused to support her ambition to be a singer but wanted to keep her at home where she should accept her duty as obedient daughter and look after him. To make matters worse she then embarked on an affair with the town banker who paid for her musical studies, and with whom she had a child, a daughter. At that time he did not want to marry her so the daughter needed to be kept a secret. The banker is the villain of the film, and bearing in mind the associations in Nazi times of banking there is the unspoken implication that he is also Jewish. The film's emotional narrative focuses on her search for forgiveness.

The film's setting moves between the army barracks, where Magda's sister's fiancé is a lieutenant, to the large house of her father the Colonel, the town bank, the Prince's palace and the church, with its grand baroque interior and a gothic spire that could be that of Freiburg Minster.

Much of the dialogue between the male characters, with the exception of the banker, is about the army, a reminder that Europe has been at war for the most part of the last two thousand years. Fighting is a European tradition, what men do, and is considered ingrained natural behaviour. Even today, at the prospect of the breakup of the European Union, a Polish minister smilingly reminded an interviewer of this fact, and that war between nations is not only a normal activity, but a good and honourable one, patriotic and strengthening of moral and physical fibre. After the carnage of the First World War many began to wake up to the catastrophic consequences of war, its inhumanity and destructiveness. Then within less than a quarter of a century it embarked on an even worse global destruction, initiated by Germany. The film was made the year before the invasion of Poland but Germany had already annexed Sudetenland and taken over Czechoslovakia, and by its appeal to patriotism, unquestioned obedience to authority and assertion of the primacy of German culture, clearly intended to prepare the country for that event. The disastrous consequences which included the bombing by both sides of whole cities and destruction of infrastructure, led to a small group of German and French politicians to instigate a union of powerful European countries that would prevent such future immolation. Even as that conflict ended, leading global powers embarked on a Cold War which involved arming the chief antagonists with enough nuclear weapons to completely destroy the whole world several times over. This possibility made the foundation of a European Union even more urgent. Given the apocalyptic consequences of a Third World War, people began to consider the possibility that war need not be considered ingrained human behaviour, and could even be a human weakness rather than a strength, and one leading to inevitable self-destruction, not just of people but the whole planet. In Carl Froehlich's *Heimat*, made before such thinking became an acceptable subject for discussion rather than cause for criticism and even punishment for lack of patriotism, war is celebrated as normal, the traditional activity for men. The job of women is to look after the men, who

will then do the fighting and protect the homeland. Everyone should know their place and never question it. There is a bitter-sweet comfort in that security, bitter in that it involves self-sacrifice, sweet in that those who obey are rewarded with love from the whole community. This love makes up for the suffering of self-sacrifice.

To modern eyes the film begs the question: why would a successful artist, an ambitious woman with resolve and talent, wish to return to this toxic environment? But that is how we look at the film now. At the time it would have been seen differently. However this difference is re-emerging from present political developments. Carl Froehlich's *Heimat* is relevant to understanding the phenomenon of nationalist protectionism, which encourages xenophobia and racism, and once again restricts the role of women in a society where the rules are determined by men, a world which once again looks to the military to solve problems. The film has superior entertainment value, is sumptuously mounted, expertly directed and performed with seductive use of music and is therefore popular and much loved, even today by people who fondly remember the 'good old days.'

At this point I need to make a personal observation. When now in post-Brexit Britain and in President Trump's United States people talk nostalgically about the country being 'great', when we had 'control', when we were not 'bossed about' by others and there weren't so many 'foreigners', it reminds me of an anecdote about my aunt, a Jewish survivor of Auschwitz who continued to live in Germany after the war. In those chaotic early years she found work as a secretary and eventually joined a typing pool with other women, all pure-blooded Aryan Germans. At a coffee break in the early 1960s one of them trilled about how much she had enjoyed the war years, what fun they were, exciting and sexy. My aunt bit her lip, which must have been difficult for her because she never normally allowed a remark like that to go unchallenged. To me she said ruefully afterwards: 'it depended who you were and

on what side.’ I learned the lesson that what might be pleasant nostalgia for some, for others is a trauma.

What is it about Zarah Leander singing through a filter with moist eyes raised upwards to the right of the camera lens that triggers such deep sweet nostalgia? Even in me, though I certainly never felt it for home, which I was only too keen to leave and to which I never in my life felt a desire to return. In Magda’s case she too wanted and needed to leave an oppressive family situation. But despite the conflict with her father, she yearns for home. The story of her return descends into melodrama, casual bigotry, hypocrisy and the triumph of patriarchy, but the opening song hints at subversion. Even the lie about the three stars could be a sly comment. The three roses mentioned in the second verse are a reminder of those Middle European legends, famously in one of the Grimm fairytales, about separated lovers who become white and red roses growing and twining despite the efforts of parental authority. The three palms trees in the third verse recall the Jewish poet Heine’s poem set to music by several composers, about a palm tree on a distant foreign shore and a pine tree on a northern crag dreaming about each other. The subtext of the song about stars appears to suggest the opposite of sentimental homesickness, that the foreign places and homeland have an intimate relationship.

All my life I have this nostalgia for the woods hills and fields of Central Europe from which my family came. I return as often as I can, but however much I love the nature, there is also the awareness of a lost paradise. This disappointment became most acute on my last visit to Thuringia, which I describe in my previous pieces. The place had become poisoned with recent history that the country wanted to forget, hide and deny. The woods and fields remain beautiful. Nightingales still sing in the ‘Gebüsche.. shrubbery’, just as they did for lyric poets and composers. Pushkin’s ‘tyomniye deyaniya.... dark deeds’ lie buried beneath, but sinister ghosts haunt this landscape. As the trial of Beate Tschäppe is now revealing in Germany,

extreme nationalism, including violence and murders is establishing itself again in precisely this region of the country. These facts only make my nostalgia for a paradise lost even more acute. It never had been a paradise.

Edgar Reitz quotes Magda's song in his own epic film chronicle *Heimat*, as he does scenes from another seminal Zarah Leander film, *Habanera*, which also deals with nostalgia for home. In that earlier film directed by Douglas Sirk for Germany's UFA studio before he quit the country and settled in Hollywood, Leander acts another headstrong independent woman who liberates herself from an oppressive parental straitjacket, and commits a cardinal sin against nationalism by marrying a foreigner, He turns out to be cruel and despotic. The marriage falls apart: confirming prejudice that miscegenation only ends in disaster. She dreams of home and eventually returns, chastened and 'realizing where her true feelings of love lay'. However Sirk subverts the apparent appeal to false patriotism. As the title of the film suggests, the foreigner can be seductive and in the final frames of the film Sirk shows Leander on the ship taking her back to her homeland, not gazing stoically and resolutely at her pure-white future, but looking back regretfully at the tropical island where she married and had a child, and the seductive strains of the Habanera remind her and the audience of its irresistible charm. There happens to be a similar piece of subversion in Carl Froehlich's *Heimat* also, though in a way that is unintentional as I will make clear later. Sirk went further and darker in perhaps the least glamorous film Zarah Leander ever made before he left Germany. In *Zu Neuen Ufern, To New Shores*, he takes the beloved Third Reich singer to a penal colony in Australia, a place from which she cannot return home. She is taking the rap for her lover's crime of embezzlement, following him to the other side of the world, enduring hardship in the self-sacrificing manner Leander made her own, her Garboesque tragic masque of a face set against fate. In this film her lover turns out to be an opportunistic egotist. The film ends with her rejection of him and perhaps beginning a new life in the outback with a

native white Australian, not an aborigine of course: this kind of native would have been taboo in a Third Reich film, not only despised but invisible. Sirk's film is bleak in its analysis of colonialism, depicting the far reaches of empire as dumping grounds for criminals, people escaping justice and taking any opportunity to further ambition and satisfy material greed. Instead of nostalgia the morally murky Australian setting offers a bitter observation about male duplicity, cowardice and unearned patriarchy that inflicts suffering on women who are expected to obey and endure.

Edgar Reitz makes another indirect quote from the earlier *Heimat* in the form of the celebrated tenor Leo Slezak, who takes a sadly non-singing role in Carl Froehlich's film. In Reitz's *Heimat* the working class Simon family are taking a picnic on the hills in the Hunsrück region of Western Germany, and the technically gifted eldest son has rigged up an aerial on a high ruin so they can listen to a radio broadcast, which happens to be the tenor performing a Schubert song.

Carl Froehlich's *Heimat* pivots around the relationship and power struggle between father and daughter. The emotional tie is unquestioned, however bitter the conflict. The 19th century, at the zenith of Empire before its collapse in the early decades of the 20th century, witnessed simultaneously growth of aggressive nationalism and socialism. The theme of father daughter relationships became central in the two great operatic composers of the period. Verdi and Wagner, composers both deeply involved in politics, focused on this theme with their most inspirational compositions. This is not co-incidental. Whereas *Verdi's Rigoletto* unwittingly destroys his daughter by being over-protective, in *Aida*, an opera about the toxic alliance of politics and religion, the plot pivots on the conflict of loyalty which the father inflicts on his daughter, leading to her self-sacrifice. In Wagner's *Ring Cycle* the plot again hinges on a daughter's disobedience to her father: more about that later, because this

theme touches not only on a challenge to corrupt patriarchy but also the longing for redemption at the cost of apocalypse.

There are several patriarchs Zarah Leander's Magda must deal with. On the one side is the banker lover who uses blackmail to access her wealth. He makes matters worse by ordering her to send their child abroad, to be kept secret. This cruel demand is what gives her the courage to resist, whatever the cost. She part solves that dilemma by giving all of her wealth to her sister. On the other side is the church organist and conductor who had encouraged her singing career. However her father, Colonel von Schwartz, will triumph, because the film declares emphatically that militarism is the unquestioned over-riding authority. Even when there is forgiveness, it is the father who alone can give it, and at a price which the daughter must pay. She must be obedient again. The film attempts to sugar the pill with extracts of organ music, Gluck's *Orfeo* and Bach's *St Mathew Passion*. Satisfied with the resolution, the father is even prepared to accept her illegitimate child. Zarah Leander's face in the closing moments as she joins in the Passion Chorale turns into her trademark mask of tragic stoicism. She relinquishes independence and ambition and must accept her future as an obedient daughter.

The film is in many details anachronistic, but purposely so, because the message is clear: be obedient to the Reich and put up with self-sacrifice, just as they used to do in the 'good old days'. There are also a number of racist comments in the script that go unchallenged, because at that time they would have been considered normal. When, for instance, Magda returns to her hometown under the pseudonym of an international star who made her career in America, the welcoming committee are relieved she is a white woman and not a 'Negerin'. She faces disapproval from the strait-laced wives and mothers for being an independent woman, confident in her looks and appeal, but faces them down with the risqué song about women becoming beautiful only through love. The women disapprove whereas the men

exchange lewd comments. Hypocrisy is endemic in this kind of society, but the film shows it also to be essential to cementing social relations between the sexes.

As the film proceeds Zarah Leander's costumes become more elaborate and restricting. The men too are seen to be hemmed in by tight-fitting uniforms. Their emotions are expressed in red-faced bluster. The women retreat into knowing their place and poisonous gossip. The film depicts this as amusing, not making any subversive point. The music takes an ever more important part, as words cease to have a purpose once the battle lines have been drawn up and order restored with patriarchy triumphant and uppity women subservient, whatever the cost to them. Music has a specific role in this drama. While celebrating German culture it also becomes repressive, a tool of authority. When Magda first enters the church on her arrival the organ is blaring at full throttle, on the one hand gloriously impressive, the way organs should sound in a grand building, but also intimidating. Magda the internationally celebrated singer looks diminished. Culture as the expression of nationalist fervour can be witnessed in documentary film footage of the Nazi elite attending concerts of Beethoven's symphonies, congratulating the conductor and giving the Hitler salute. The words of the 9th Symphony about 'all men will be brothers' are interpreted by the elite as 'only all men of the same nation, ethnic group, colour and orientation will be brothers'. In the same manner the sense of the St Mathew Passion becomes a directive to 'put up, know your place, and take the self-sacrifice as part of the journey towards patriotism, love of nation above personal desire.' Culture as a tool of authoritarianism existed not only in fascist states but under socialist tyrannies also. Attending concerts and performances became a duty, often being the only entertainment available. The authorities would also determine what music could be played. At times of crisis, such as the president's death, the Soviet Union media would play Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* on a perpetual loop, so people quickly came to realize something serious had happened.

In Carl Froehlich's *Heimat* music can also be stopped. When the sister begins to play a piece that reminds her father of his daughter, he comes behind her, shuts the lid firmly, and locks it.

This ambivalent attitude to culture is reflected in Magda's relationship with her father: 'Ich bin bange nach Ihm, bange vor Ihm... I am longing for him, afraid of him.' 'Bang' means both longing and fear in German, a significant piece of semantics.

To clarify the subservient role of art in this kind of repressive society beloved of nationalists the sister declares: 'Life takes precedence over art. It is not important what happens to us women. It is father who is the priority.'

The father emphasises this point at the dramatic climax of the film by dragging the wayward daughter into his study, locking the doors and taking two pistols from his desk drawer, then giving her an ultimatum: to obey him and for the sake of family honour marry the blackmailing banker, or both commit suicide. Fortunately the banker has already shot himself over another misdemeanour, embezzling bank funds, so there is no need for such a drastic resolution. His daughter will stay at home to serve her father, and be allowed to sing the Bach St Mathew Passion, pointedly the aria: 'Buss und Reu...penance and regret.'

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Wagner is well known to have been the Third Reich's favoured composer, although it is also a fact that very few of the Nazi leadership apart from Hitler, actually enjoyed sitting through long hours of his epic operas. Wagner's association with right-wing authoritarianism, let alone fascism, is a moot point for discussion, but from his own political history he would have supported more socialist libertarian systems of government. His nationalist principles were more to do with unifying Germany and dissolving the numerous autocratic princely states whose corruption and rivalries weakened the country in comparison to the United

Kingdom and France, and others surrounding it to the North, South and East. Although it can never be ignored, Wagner's anti-Semitism aside his music is open to much wider interpretation. His nostalgia for a golden age is tempered by awareness of how that never existed, that past systems of government and social traditions are easily corrupted. His focus on changing the world for the better, specifically in his final works for the stage, the *Ring Cycle* and *Parsifal*, show us with insight how power works, its fallibility and vulnerability and most strikingly and hopefully the role of women in initiating change. In the *Ring Cycle* a woman triumphs but at the same time takes it on herself to instigate apocalypse, in an act of redemption destroying the whole world, not only on the earth but also its belief systems, in order to make way for a better purer society. She knows the order of Gods must also perish: 'Ruhe, Ruhe O Gott... Be at peace, be at peace, O God.' She returns nature to its pristine order before human beings, dwarfs, giants and gods corrupted it with greed and bloodshed. The purity is of a world without human kind.

Wagner's Brunnhilde is an archetype of Teutonic womanhood: fearless, mighty and also self-sacrificing. In Fritz Lang's film of the Nibelungen legend, from which Wagner had taken some of his chief characters but altering the narrative for his own purposes, Brunnhilde is an independent woman who challenges the hero Siegfried in single combat. He cheats by wearing a helmet that makes him invisible, and only that way can he vanquish her. She then takes a minor part in the story. The main arc of the narrative focuses on another woman, Kriemhilde, who becomes Siegfried's wife and exacts a terrible revenge on the people who kill him. Josef Goebbels the Third Reich's minister for culture and propaganda objected to Fritz Lang's film because the actor playing Brunnhilde, viewed by the Third Reich as a paragon of Aryan womanhood, was Jewish. Wagner relegated Kriemhilde to the less important character of Guttrune, allowing Brunnhilde to take on the Gods and the world in the

final immolation scene which she ignites, causing the home of the Gods in the sky to burn up. This is then followed by a mighty flood which destroys the world below.

Today extreme radicalism yearns for a similarly apocalyptic resolution, but one in which a specific group is allowed to dominate and survive. Wagner could not have imagined the excesses of Islamic fundamentalism, but he understood the mechanics of excessive nationalism, which the outcome of two world wars was supposed to have rejected. The longing for the security of nationhood and nostalgia for patriarchal order is emerging again.

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What does a purified nationalist utopia look like? We already know the example of an extremist theocracy like the Islamic Caliphate, in which the whole world is forced by violent means to adhere to a strict definition of Islam. This is claimed to be based on the word of the Prophet Mohammed. In practise, from what we witness, it is a theology unlike anything the Prophet actually spoke about in the Koran. It is a state in which women are totally subservient, and punishment for any disobedience, however minor, is extreme. There is nothing nostalgic about this terrorist utopia, except a longing for self-sacrifice and annihilation: a cult of death.

We do have the evidence of the Third Reich to show us what nationalist utopia can become on an apparently more benign and seductive model, at least to those voting for it, which present day nationalists are also offering. The example provided by Carl Froehlich's *Heimat* in its acceptance of militarism and nationalist bigotry does already hint at the consequences that were world war and the holocaust. The film was not to know these consequences, but its nostalgic longing for a militaristic patriarchy and acceptance of that order prepares the way to them.

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Fifteen years after the defeat of nationalist fascism, I travelled in Germany. Europe still reeled from the economic disaster of war, the infrastructure slowly being restored. Everywhere I encountered nostalgia for the past and appreciation for what the Third Reich had done for the German people. Europe knew about the motorway network that made driving between the main cities easy. Few shared my agreeable experience of German youth hostels on which the Third Reich had spared no effort or money. No one I met mentioned defeat or the holocaust. Rose-tinted memories seduced me, an impressionable 15 year-old, and I still feel nostalgic for those evenings spent in the youth hostels singing along with the young men and girls in good voice, folk and HitlerJugend songs about blood red skies and victory. At one youth hostel the manager woke us up with a beautiful guitar solo. No one mocked. Everyone appreciated it, and considered themselves lucky to hear him. This tradition went back to a pre-Nazi time, when young people were encouraged to go on long walks, climbing in groups and socializing. The movement, quite separate from scouts and girl guides which had a political purpose of encouraging discipline and practical skills, was a branch of socialism focused on raising a new generation healthy in body, mind and spirit, freethinking and libertarian. It became known all over Europe, even in the United Kingdom, as Wandervogel... birds of passage. 'I like to go a wandering' translated from the German, would be frequently sung when British youngsters went striding in groups over the Yorkshire Dales or the Lake District. Nationalists took over the movement, which had always been intended to be international, and turned it into a training ground for patriots prepared to fight for the homeland. Defeat lent this movement in Germany a melancholy that came from a realization that it had been tainted by politics. It lost its freshness, openness and innocence. The young people I met and came to know and love understandably did not want to give up the 'wandering' and singing in the evenings, the relationships and affairs of every kind that

blossomed, the sports events and above all the warm camaraderie. While working in Israeli Kibbutzim I took part in similar events organized for young people, singing and circle dancing to steps taken from European folk traditions, particularly the Yugoslavian 'kolo'. The songs were all about 'Eretz Israel', patriotism and group solidarity. Those who didn't join in would be ostracised. I missed the Wandervogel innocence, and a sense of young people collaborating on building projects, as I used to on summer holidays in France and Germany, taking long walks together across the countryside, growing up and getting to know the world and each other.

Now in the days of social media focused on individualism and technology, finding solidarity and celebration at mass events like clubbing and rock concerts, such gatherings on shared journeys across the countryside no longer happen, probably not even in the Kibbutzim of Israel. Glastonbury is the nearest approximation to this kind of movement, particularly in its readiness to ask questions about politics and society as well as bringing young people together in an atmosphere of freedom and fun rather than under duress from the aim of creating a generation to serve nationalist or any extremist ideology. The latter aim leads to totalitarianism, invasion, terrorism, war and inevitable death and destruction.

This group dancing has not disappeared completely. I came across it in Kosovo at a day celebrating its independence from Serbia. At one time Yugoslavia considered itself a single nation, full of different ethnicities and faiths, with a staggering variety of landscape and climate. The people shared a diverse culture. Nationalism sprung out of the post-Communist period and led to division and separation. But on that day of celebration a group of young people joined hands in the traditional 'kolo'. A young woman taught a group of teenagers the complicated steps, arms across each others' shoulders, and tentatively forming a long line that could become a circle. Tears prickled in my eyes at the memories of my youthful sojourn

in Germany, at the significance of this kind of dance, shorn of any aggressive political message, just for the delight of communal movement and singing.

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Jan Kadar's *The Shop on the High Street* shows how a community of a typical provincial town anywhere in the world can easily and almost imperceptibly be taken over by extreme political forces so that normal people become complicit in violence and inhumanity. The story is all the more gruelling because of the film's objectivity, telling it straight. This really happened and on a large scale. The ending of the film is unexpectedly uplifting and for me is an example of 'utopian' imagination. These final frames are essential and follow immediately after the harrowing climax to the film. It is a story without heroics. Jan Kadar who made the film was a Jew who suffered and lost family in the holocaust. His sympathy for Tono, the non-Jewish carpenter and good-natured everyman with whom we can all identify, is therefore all the more telling and moving. The dilemma Tono finds himself in is too much for him as it would be for all of us. It is made all the more unbearable through camera angles and a powerful musical score in a sequence of intense moral, psychological and physical pressure. Tono has unwittingly killed Rozalia the elderly Jewish shopkeeper while trying to hide her from the fascist militia intent on transporting her to a death camp. Unable to bear his situation he hangs himself. Then the door of the shop, which has become a prison and torture chamber, opens into blinding sunlight. Rozalia and Tono rise from the dead as their younger selves and float out into the square where a brass band is playing and the couple dance smiling into the distance. The poignancy of this dream is almost as unbearable as the pain that preceded it, because we know that this is the only way we can survive: holding onto that hope of what life could be. The brutality of life as experienced then and is about to return would be unbearable without this hope.