

The Director

Liechtspiel

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At the center of the novel *Lichtspiel*, named after the old German word for film, is the Austrian film director Georg Wilhelm Pabst, best known for his silent Expressionist films.

The novel is framed by a contemporary story narrated by Franz Wilzek, a fictional Austrian director who began his career as Pabst's assistant. He is going to a television program where he is supposed to talk about his work and collaboration with his considerably more famous older colleague. However, Franz shows signs of dementia and thus proves to be an extremely unreliable narrator, reacting very strongly to the host's question about Pabst's lost film by insisting that it was never made.

This provides the occasion for an analepsis taking the narrative back to the 1930s, when Pabst is in the United States, where he went following the Nazis' rise to power in Germany. However, the new world is entirely different from what Pabst was accustomed to in his homeland, and he is particularly unable to adapt to the studio-based mode of film production that dominated Hollywood. As a result, his only American film, *A Modern Hero*, performs poorly with both audiences and critics, leaving him with no choice but to become an assistant to one of the more successful directors. Afterward, the director returns to Austria with his wife and son. Following the Anschluss, Austria has become part of the Third Reich. Nominally, Pabst returns at the request of his mother, who is no longer able to live independently, although the narrator leaves enough room for this return to be interpreted as an opportunistic accommodation to the Nazi regime, allowing the director to continue making the films for which he had become famous.

But the world he had left behind no longer exists. On his estate, authority has fallen into the hands of Pabst's uneducated caretaker, Jerzabek, who has become a member of the NSDAP, while a minister will advise Pabst, with little subtlety, that he must make films if he does not want to be taken to one of the camps. During his life under the Third Reich and through its eventual collapse, Pabst makes three films, the third of which, *Der Fall Molander*, filmed in Prague, is considered lost during the Prague Uprising. Its loss will haunt Pabst for the rest of his life. Finally, at the very end of the novel, it is revealed that the lost film reel had been in the possession of Pabst's assistant, the demented Wilzek, while Pabst himself spent the remainder of his life burdened by his collaboration with the Nazis and hoping that the lost film would eventually be found.

A year after Pabst made his only American film, his colleague Leni Riefenstahl, with whom he would later be forced to work under the Third Reich, made her most famous propaganda film, *Triumph of the Will*, while Walter Benjamin was writing his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. For Benjamin, film and photography are precisely examples of desacralized art: artistic media that destroy the aura, democratize art, and bring it closer to the public. At the same

time, however, these are forms of art, particularly film, that can serve notorious purposes of manipulation and indoctrination. They enable political actors to manipulate reality and edit material in such a way that entirely different results emerge from those originally captured by the camera.

The role of the director in such regimes thus becomes highly charged with ethical implications, and Pabst becomes a Faustian figure who exchanges his morality for the possibility of creating. Aware of the criminal nature of the Nazi regime, Pabst nevertheless agrees to make films under conditions more favorable than those he had experienced in the United States. This context reveals the relationship between Nazi power and artists and their art. During one conversation, a Nazi minister, ostensibly acting out of goodwill, suggests to Pabst that he does not have to make political films if he is not sympathetic to Nazi ideology. Yet the impossibility of avoiding politics is demonstrated by the terrifying fact that concentration-camp prisoners were used as extras in mass scenes. The distance between mass scenes and mass graves is very short, and it is important in this context to recognize the role that art can play in this process.

Kehlmann's novel is therefore important precisely as a political novel because it demonstrates the ease with which art can be instrumentalized without its being possible to simply label it as propaganda. The material conditions of art, particularly collective forms such as film, depend upon structures of power that exclude the possibility of apolitical art. The political dimension of the novel therefore emerges precisely through its exposure of the entanglement of politics and art.

Pabst considers his 1945 film, which he was shooting in Prague, lost while fleeing the advancing Red Army on the eastern borders of the Third Reich. Yet at the end of the novel it is revealed that the film reels had been in Franz's possession all along, and that he never told the director—who spent the rest of his life searching for them—that they were in fact with him.

The novel is written through a dynamic alternation of focalizers, ranging from Pabst himself and his wife to his son, who is still a child during these events and later goes to the Eastern Front. Through this narrative technique, the narrator further emphasizes the impossibility of an objective perspective that could rise above the political and ideological formations within which it has emerged.

LANGUAGE: German / Deutsch

CENSORSHIP STATUS: