

## Playing with the Camera. Critical Notes on Two Films by Austrian Director Willi Forst

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### Abstract

This essay aims to critically reflect on the work of Austrian film director Willi Forst, devoting special attention to two of Forst's films of the 1930s, *Mazurka* and *Allotria*. Forst's career developed successfully in both Austria and Germany between the 1930s and the end of the 1950s and Forst has been widely counted among the major figures in German-speaking cinema of the time. In scholarly works on the history of Austrian film, Forst's name has been typically associated with the musical genre and the so-called Viennese Film, of which Forst has been regarded as the indisputable master. In this association of Forst's work with the Viennese Film and the musical genre, long predominant among film historians, one may detect a reason for the scant consideration dedicated so far to films such as *Mazurka* and *Allotria* which, not belonging to the above genres, have been usually regarded as of minor relevance in Forst's work. With the aim of correcting this assumption, the present essay intends to critically focus on *Mazurka* and *Allotria*, placing them within the wider context of Forst's work. Though the two films belong to different genres, *Mazurka* being a melodrama, *Allotria* a comedy, they appear to have a significant number of points in common, and through their discussion and comparison, this essay hopes to contribute to a better understanding of Forst's oeuvre, shedding light on a number of facets of Forst's work to which scarce attention has been devoted so far.

**Keywords:** Willi Forst, Austrian Cinema, German Cinema, Hollywood, Avant-Garde Cinema

### 1. Introduction

The present essay intends to investigate the work of Austrian-born film director Willi Forst, devoting special attention to two of Forst's films of the 1930s, *Mazurka* and *Allotria*, directed by Forst in Berlin respectively in 1935 and 1936. Forst's career developed successfully in both Austria and Germany between the 1930s and the end of the 1950s (Loacker, 2003; Bono, 2010) and Forst has been generally counted among the major figures in German-speaking cinema of the time. Forst's name has been typically associated with the musical genre and the so-called Viennese Film. With its stories set in Vienna between the 19th century and the eve of the First World War, and characterized by a variable mixture of comedy, romance and melodrama, the Viennese Film significantly contributed to the renown of Austrian cinema in the 1930s (Fritz, 1991; von Dassanowsky, 2005, 2018), with Forst generally regarded as the indisputable master of the genre.

In this identification of Forst's work with the Viennese Film and the musical genre, that has long been predominant among film historians (Bono, 2010, pp. 12-13), one may detect a reason for the slight consideration dedicated so far to films such as *Mazurka* and *Allotria*. Not belonging to the above genres, they have been usually regarded as of minor relevance in Forst's work. As examples may be cited Robert Dachs' (1986) biography of Forst as well as the scholarly volume devoted to Forst's oeuvre by the Austrian Film Archive in 2003 on the occasion of Forst's 100th anniversary of birth (Loacker, 2003), which both scarcely consider *Mazurka* and *Allotria*.

In linking to previous studies by the author on *Allotria* (Bono, 2006) and, more generally, on Forst's cinema (Bono, 2010), this essay aims to critically investigate Forst's films *Mazurka* and *Allotria*, placing them in the context of Forst's work, with the purpose of contributing to a better understanding of the Austrian director's oeuvre. Though the two films belong to different genres, *Mazurka* being a melodrama, *Allotria* a romantic comedy, they appear to have a significant number of points in common, and through their discussion and comparison, the present essay intends to shed light on a number of facets of Forst's oeuvre to which scarce attention has been devoted so far.

## 2. Through a Woman's Eyes

After debuting in 1933 as a director with the musical film *Leise flehen meine Lieder*, followed in 1934 by *Maskerade*, both set in Vienna respectively in the early and late 19th century, with their definitely Austrian flavor as to their milieu, characters and genre, Forst seems to have conceived *Mazurka* and *Allotria* as products with explicitly an international character. In both films, Forst worked with subject matter that was not located specifically. "I have already revealed to you that I filmed a story that is not tied to one time or place," Forst pointed out about *Mazurka* (Bono, 2010, p. 51). At the same time, Forst seemingly aimed with *Mazurka* and *Allotria* to prove his ability to work within different genres. In the pressbook for *Mazurka*, Forst expressed his intention to move freely between the genres. "Following my first two films, [...] I felt the urge to finally depict not only one epoch and milieu." In answer to the question, "Which genre will the film belong to, and what style did I envision?" Forst replied, "My film has no style at all. That is, none in particular! I hate nothing more than when, in making a film, the style is set first, and then all the subsequent work is imposed on it" (Bono, p. 51).

In contrast to Forst's first films, *Leise flehen meine Lieder* and *Maskerade*, which inclined towards melodrama, yet were interspersed with humorous scenes, in *Mazurka* melodrama predominates and, with the exception of a few moments at the beginning, completely pervades the film. At its center is a mother, a cabaret singer, who does not refrain from murder to save her beloved daughter from an unscrupulous composer. French cinema historians Francis Courtade and Pierre Cadars disapproved of Forst's film for being "an unbelievable melodrama," in which "nothing has been left out: the unscrupulous seducer (pianist, moreover); the loyal bride violated on a drunken night; trampled-on love; the fallen diva becoming a bar singer" (Courtade & Cadars, 1972, p. 254). Yet in examining the film, one should not fail to consider the complex structure that distinguishes *Mazurka*, which will be discussed in the following.

The film's opening credits roll against the backdrop of a European city, as a car hurtles through the streets toward the train station. The camera continues its sweep through the station to stop in front of Lisa, who is bidding her stepmother goodbye. The woman is leaving for a couple of days. The narrative continues at a brisk pace, driving Lisa into the arms of the composer. She accepts his invitation to the concert, succumbs to his kiss, and meets him again in a nightclub; then, by Lisa's side, we witness the shot that abruptly ends his life. The film's opening explicates the strategy that distinctively shapes *Mazurka*. Forst aimed to confer the narrative with a subjective tone, by placing the viewer alongside Lisa. We are invited to adopt her point of view.

The opening shot, as well as the subsequent camera movement that follows Lisa's stepmother as she boards the train, though not attributed to any character, may be connected to Lisa. Lisa constitutes the focus of the first part of *Mazurka*, and the spectator stands by her side. We share her uncertainty about the composer's identity, her hesitation to attend the rendezvous, and her surprise as she finds him waiting for her in the conservatory. Here the camera abruptly rushes toward Lisa. The movement feels unusual and surprising and reflects Lisa's agitation. The camera movement is repeated when the phone rings at Lisa's home the following day. The composer is calling, presumptuously asking her to meet him. We listen to the conversation by Lisa's side, and the camera shows her from the front, yet we hear the man's voice through the receiver, warm and seductive, as though we were Lisa; acoustic subjectivity colors the scene.

The film subtly induces a process of identification between the spectator and Lisa's character (before passing the floor to her mother in court), which reaches a peak in the nightclub sequence and culminates in the kiss that the composer coaxes out of Lisa at the conservatory. As the couple dance a waltz, the montage alternates between Lisa and the man. Both are framed in close-ups that reveal themselves to be point-of-view shots, with the actors looking and talking to the camera as though it were their respective partner. A special trestle was employed to achieve this effect, connecting the actors to the camera so it could accompany them as they danced.

Similarly, Forst breaks up the scene where the man kisses Lisa into several shots, with the aim of conveying Lisa's feelings, her inner turmoil. First, the incident is shown from a distance; then the montage shifts to a closer shot of the couple, with the camera positioned over Lisa's shoulder. A further shot follows with the camera placed next to the man, and the segment culminates in a close-up. The effect is unusual. The transition between the shots is not action-based; indeed, the couple stands motionless, and time seems to expand, to momentarily come to a standstill. A second kiss follows, and Forst reinforces this impression by inserting a dissolve to black in the middle of it, thus breaking the continuity of action and making the length of the kiss uncertain. It is a moment that lasts an eternity. The dissolve is introduced by a double close-

up of Lisa staring at the chandelier on the ceiling before closing her eyes. The screen goes dark; then the chandelier reappears. Lisa opens her eyes and pulls out of the embrace.

The experimental nature of this sequence stands out; it is remarkable in the way it dissects time, and it is infused with subjectivity. Later, as Lisa chats with her stepmother at home, a glimpse of the living room's chandelier, followed by a close-up of the girl, is all that is needed to evoke Lisa's distressing memory. The detail of the chandelier recurs in the scene where the composer forces Vera, the cabaret singer, into his bedroom, taking advantage of her drunkenness instead of escorting her home. The camera shows the woman's perspective as the man bends over her, and the screen goes dark. Behind him we catch a glimpse of the bedroom's chandelier. At this point, the spectator is still ignorant of Vera's connection to Lisa, yet the detail of the chandelier and the point-of-view shot clearly establishes a parallel. The chandelier becomes figurative of the violence both women suffer at the hands of the composer, evoking their trauma.

The sequence in which Vera is abused by the composer impresses through its stylistic audacity, and is one place in *Mazurka* where Forst appears to be explicitly influenced by the avant-garde of the 1920s. As the man forces Vera into his bedroom, the camera becomes unsteady and wavers. It adopts the woman's viewpoint as she stumbles through the corridor. The image blurs; the accompanying music is discordant. A door opens and Forst unleashes the camera, which drags the viewer along into the depths. We feel dizzy. Then a bed appears from the darkness, and the camera rushes toward it. The bed grows larger, and the camera suddenly stops in front of Vera.

### 3. A Turbulent Game of Love

This willingness to experiment with the film's techniques also characterizes *Allotria*, being a feature that this film shares with *Mazurka*. Scholars have generally overlooked this point and viewed *Allotria* and *Mazurka* in the context of their respective genres, romantic comedy and melodrama. Yet if one emphasizes this aspect, that is Forst's inventiveness in employing cinematic language which characterizes both *Mazurka* and *Allotria*, their similarity becomes evident. In the pressbook for *Mazurka*, Forst stated that it was intended as a work that "gives to film what belongs to it" (Bono, 2010, p. 56). Similarly, Forst declared of *Allotria*, "I was aiming to make an amusing film – to entertain." "If, in doing so, I have succeeded in sneaking in a few novelties, and revealed a little bit of what film is still capable of doing more (not just mine, but film in general), I will be very happy" (Bono, p. 56).

In being a comedy, *Allotria* represented a novelty in Forst's work. "*Allotria* was something new for me," declared Forst. "So far I have made three films, all of which were practically 'tragic!'" (Bono, 2010, p. 56). *Allotria* demonstrates Forst's effort to switch between genres and test himself in new fields. His intent in *Allotria* to confront Hollywood and the genre of sophisticated comedy is evident: "I want to try to create a comedy that has something of the lightness and insouciance of the Americans" (Willi Forsts neuer Film, 1936). Tracing German cinema's relationship with Hollywood during the Nazi era, Markus Spiker (1999) noted, "Starting in 1936, a series of German films emerged that were apparently modeled on American genre films, both stylistically and dramatically" (p. 155). He also included *Allotria* among the German films of the time that displayed American influence.

In *Allotria*, Forst clearly built on the films by George Cukor, Gregory La Cava and George Stevens. "We always say we cannot make anything similar in Germany," he noted. "I do not think that is true at all" (Willi Forsts neuer Film, 1936). Forst's effort was praised by the press, with a Berlin newspaper writing, "One can definitely say of this comedy of mistaken identities that it is on a par with American film comedy" (mabe., 1936). "Forst has no longer left untouched Americans' reputation for making smart, carefree, pleasant entertainment films," one critic remarked. "Now he himself has brought such a sprightly child of the cheerful muse into the world" (S-k., 1936).

The American template can be detected in various places, and the story as well as the characters are imbued with the spirit of the sophisticated comedy. Their names are Philipp and David, Viola, Gaby and Aimée, and together with Adolf Wohlbrück, Forst engaged some of the most popular stars of German cinema of the time for *Allotria*: Heinz Rühmann, Renate Müller, Jenny Jugo and Hilde Hildebrand.

Philipp is a Don Juan type, impeccably dressed, preferably in a dinner jacket, and a gentleman who under no circumstances loses his nerve. He courts the woman, Viola, with whom he has become smitten during a voyage at sea, despite a storm churning the ocean. But when they reach Europe, they lose sight of one another in the confusion of the landing. Philipp has a friend, David, and they share not only unusual professions, as dictated by sophisticated comedy (Philipp owns a plantation on Java; David is a race driver), but also a lover, as they discover one evening when they meet by chance at the home of

Aimée (whose name is suggestive of her role). Viola is the best friend of Gaby (whom David marries at the beginning of the film), and the women both know Aimée, who owns a dress boutique. This completes the quintet and closes the circle that connects the characters.

This is the world of the sophisticated comedy as defined by Hollywood in the early 1930s. It is a world in which life is a game; women are beautiful, flighty and capricious; and men's professions are more like hobbies, a pastime of sorts. Nothing is taken seriously. The luxurious apartment in which Aimée receives her lovers, as well as David's and Gaby's villa – furnished in the modern style of the 1930s and complete with a park – where they live after marrying, serve as backdrops for the perpetual war between the sexes that fuels the sophisticated comedy. Love is only a game, a match in which every move is allowed – and they are often of particularly inventiveness. Aimée's weapon of choice for the disruption of David's and Gaby's engagement party is perfume; she pours a few drops in the tank of David's car, resulting in his losing the race.

Love in *Allotria* is not romantic. The nightingale sings not to seal a lovers' kiss, as tradition would have it. Rather, its song provides an ironic counterpoint to Philipp's and Viola's nightly conversation on the terrace of their friends' villa, where they have coincidentally met again. Philipp is jealous, taking Viola to be David's wife. She is delighted, since his jealousy proves he loves her. She asks coquettishly, "Am I not allowed to be happy? I am loved." Philipp thinks she is referring to David. "Are you so sure about that? And you love the man?" "Infinately," answers Viola. Every word jabs, like rapiers crossing in a duel. "He doesn't deserve you," remarks Philipp; and though the statement seems to be off the mark (if referred to David), at the same time it hits the nail on the head. When it was time to ask for Viola's hand at sea, was not Philipp paralyzed with fear? In *Allotria*, words are subtle, their meaning many-layered.

Against the backdrop of David's and Gaby's villa, the game of love becomes a play, a comedy of misunderstandings and coincidences of the sort that French author Georges Feydeau excelled at. When Philipp visits the couple after their honeymoon, Viola opens the door. She has also come to visit her friends. Philipp mistakes her for David's wife; Viola and Gaby think this is funny, and they play along. If Viola is David's wife, then Gaby will play her girlfriend. David does not like the game at first, but then he joins the two. And the game of love takes on a new facet, becoming a performance of sorts in which Viola, Gaby and David each take on a role. The villa turns into a stage on which a play in the style of Feydeau is unfolding: a recently-married man (David) has a relationship with the best friend (Gaby) of his wife (Viola). The comedy is staged for the benefit of a spectator (Philipp), who takes the game to be real.

Initially, Viola tries her hand at directing. The day Gaby and David return from their honeymoon, she hides a squeaky plastic pig under their bed and hangs a laurel leaf above their entranceway, that is to fall on them as they enter. Like in the theater, Viola rehearses the scene, with the help of the staff. If Viola's farce meets with little success, the ensuing comedy of errors comes off better. It will take until morning for Philipp to see through the game, take over as director, and assign himself the role of the seducer, disappearing with Gaby (who is enjoying her role as the friend of the lady of the house) in the middle of Aimée's party.

Frivolous and light, airy as the dresses that Viola and Gaby wear to Aimée's party, love in *Allotria* is a society game. "I'd like to finally know what game is being played here," remarks the elderly lady who is Viola's and Philipp's dinner companion during the sea-crossing, glancing at the orchid on their table. She is curious about Philipp's flirtation with Viola: will he ask for her hand before the journey ends? The question introduces the turbulent game of love that courses through *Allotria*.

Couples are volatile units, and every combination is possible. Pairs form and break up again. Some are attracted to each other but fail to bond: the storm casts Philipp and Viola into each other's arms, but fear of marriage petrifies Philipp, and a stumbling passenger separates the couple. Others break up to form a new pair: David leaves Aimée to marry Gaby. Some simulate being couples (as do Viola and David); and some couples extend to a threesome, like Philipp, David and Aimée, or David, Gaby and Philipp, when Gaby, to spite her husband for passionately kissing Viola (is she not his wife for fun?) removes her wedding ring and flirts with Philipp. But Gaby drinks one glass too many at Aimée's party and wakes up in a sleeping car with Philipp in Marseille. All David's skill as a race driver is required to catch up with his wife and friend before their ship sails. Thus the couple eventually doubles to become a quartet. This leaves Aimée out, who takes up with Gaby's father, a widower. Five plus one makes six. Now the numbers add up.

The movement gives shape to the film: dynamics springing from the game of love drive the narrative, and the whirlwind sweeps the spectator along with the characters. Of note is the image that opens *Allotria*, a rotating circle. The geometric figure is emblematic, translating the movement that shapes the film into a graphic form. As the title *Allotria* appears on

screen, the letter O occupies its center. A second, larger circle doubles it in the background. Soon the film's title breaks apart, and the O-shaped circle dominates the screen. The names of the leading actors appear around its circumference; the remaining credits roll in the circle's center as it continues to turn.

The circular movement carries over from the credit sequence to the entire narrative. It extends to the glittering ball in progress on the ocean liner, as the dancing couples draw spirals while revolving to the music; it infects the ocean, where it churns up a storm; it metamorphoses into the track on which David is racing; it takes the shape of the game that Gaby's guests improvise at her engagement party. While they wait for David (who is with Aimée), they play blind man's bluff: Gaby stands blindfolded in the center while the company turns circles around her.

The circular motion that runs through *Allotria* sows confusion throughout the night that Philipp, Viola, David and Gaby spend under one roof. When it comes time to retire, David, Viola and Gaby switch rooms to maintain the illusion that Viola is David's wife. Gaby moves to the guest room; David goes off with Viola to the master bedroom. When Philipp closes the door to his room (which is between the others), David slips onto the terrace to get to Gaby, where he runs into Philipp. Gaby, impatiently awaiting her husband, heads through the corridor toward the master bedroom. Here she meets Viola alone, for David is being held up on the terrace by Philipp. Now Viola changes rooms, but bumps into David as he is aiming for the guest room in hopes of finding Gaby. He hurries back through the corridor, but meanwhile, Gaby, annoyed, regains her room across the terrace. And here she meets – Viola! "But Gaby," her friend protests, "you're running around in circles all the time." The line is emblematic: the circle is the scene's constructive principle, the game of love turning into ring-around-the-rosy, where everybody keeps moving around but eventually arrives back at one's starting point.

Gradually the motion accelerates, and the ongoing turmoil that characterizes *Allotria* reaches its climax with David driving hurriedly with Viola to Marseille. The Grand Prix has just started when they reach Monte Carlo, and David joins the race. After following a straight line from Berlin to France, the movement now resumes a circular shape and expands, moving beyond the narrative to the montage. Shots of a street with Monte Carlo in the background, building façades, and spectators stretched along the course, follow each another in a turbulent crescendo. The images almost blur as the montage imparts a feeling of speed, recklessness, thrills. Here Forst has clearly appropriated the lessons of the avant-garde cinema of the 1920s.

#### 4. The Camera as Protagonist

It is not the narrative material that makes *Allotria* special; indeed, the story's components are on the inventory list of every sophisticated comedy. Constant sparring between the sexes and deliberate or coincidental quid pro quos are elements traditionally favored by the genre. *Allotria*'s strength lies in its creative direction, and the precise script that Forst wrote with a renowned author of the time, Jochen Huth. Contemporary critics singled out Forst's elegance in translating the material to the screen. "[The film's] charm lies not in its subject material, but in the color and rhythm of the action," one critic noted (Hermann, 1936).

The playful spirit animating its story and characters courses through the film to also encompass the camerawork and editing. As the ship rocks in the storm, the camera staggers along the corridor with Philipp and Viola, as though it too were losing balance. In *Allotria*, the camera becomes a protagonist alongside Philipp and David, Viola and Gaby, and the press appreciated Forst's ingenuity, describing it as "a film that brilliantly exploits all possible ideas through the camera's technique" (v.d.N., 1936), "a firework of pictorial ideas, a glistening cascade of movement" (pck., 1936). In a play on the film's title, *Allotria*, which means "frolic" in German, a Berlin newspaper commented, "[Forst] also dares to frolic with the camera" (Ma., 1936).

Time is also a variable in this game that takes place on screen; *Allotria* plays with it coquettishly, stretching and then compressing it as if it were a band of rubber. As David bids a hasty goodbye to Aimée (Gaby is waiting for him to celebrate their engagement), his impatience affects the film's tempo. He jumps literally to the door and is gone. Time feels elastic and subjective, adapting to David's mood of the moment. Later Aimée makes David believe that Philipp threatened to take revenge after discovering them together that evening. As David pictures the scene that Aimée imaginatively describes, the scene repeats in slow motion; his dash from the salon to the door breaks off halfway, the action reverses, and he falls back into the chair. "Even if the film does not want to take itself seriously, it is the first comedy in years that we have taken seriously," remarked the press (Stanzl, 1948, p. 98). The scene continues with Philipp scolding David. As Philipp points at

him, his finger grows enormous while David appears like a dwarf in the gigantic chair. Forst “knows what to do with objects;” “his ideas are like little shimmering balls that he juggles on the stage of entertainment” (mabe., 1936).

Forst’s inventive use of the camera – which he unleashed in *Allotria*, as he had done a year previously in *Mazurka* – and of the techniques and language of film, garnered the attention of contemporary critics. In light of Forst’s training as an actor and his work in the theater and popular films in the years previously, the press expressed surprise for the result, acknowledging Forst’s transformation “from leading lover of the cinematic operetta stage, glittering with epaulets, to a director of European proportions” (Betz., 1935). The Italian magazine *Cinema* dedicated a three-page analysis to the above scene from *Allotria* (Sabel, 1941), and critics of the time likewise called attention to the inventive nature of *Mazurka*, emphasizing “the virtuosic direction of Willi Forst, [...] who is conversant with all the tricks of the fantasy machine and implements them intellectually, and with keen understanding and mastery” (Betz.). For a Viennese newspaper, Forst made use “of all sound film’s achievements while also employing silent film methods that were long thought to be outdated, and which suddenly awaken to new life here, in an artistic way” (*Mazurka-Erfolg in Wien*, 1935).

In the prestigious Italian film journal *Bianco e Nero*, Guido Guerrasio (1943) reflected on the influence of French avant-garde, German Expressionism and Viennese culture on Forst’s work. “In Forst, one surmises the simultaneous presence of two or more stylistic flavors,” he observed, pointing in particular to “typical signs of emotional montage [...], that seem to originate distinctly in the French avant-garde school” (p. 11). For reference, the Italian critic cited Jacques Feyder’s film *Crainquebille*.

## 5. Conclusions

This facet of Forst’s work would later pass into oblivion. The technical audacity that distinguished several of his films – *Ich bin Sebastian Ott*, from 1939, also represents an interesting example, as well as Forst’s first post-war film, *Die Sünderin* – has been scarcely acknowledged by scholars. Alongside French René Clair and German Ernst Lubitsch, Forst counted Soviet director Vsevolod Pudovkin among the cineastes he admired most (Forst, 1963), and he considered Sergei Eisenstein as someone from whom “we have learned” and “whom we like and admire” (Bono, 2010, p. 63). This scarcely jibes with the typical profile of Forst that has been cultivated by the majority of critics, and Forst’s tribute to the Soviet directors may appear surprising, if one merely considers Forst’s preferred genres, or the escapist dimension that colored Forst’s work. Films such as *Mazurka* and *Allotria* challenge not to confine Forst’s work to the realms of operetta and Austrian tradition, with Forst’s admiration for the Russian cineastes suggesting that it is necessary to more closely investigate Forst’s relationship with the European cinema of the 1920s and the influence of the avant-garde on his work.

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