The Martyrdom of Carole Lombard and the Release of To Be or Not to Be *(1942)*

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While Ernst Lubitsch's Nazi satire *To Be or Not to Be* (1942) was not well-received at the time of its release, scholars and critics have embraced the film in the decades since its release for its erudite deconstruction of the performativity of fascism. This essay departs from the previous literature by examining how the death of star Carole Lombard shortly before the film's release may have impacted the film's reception. Evidence from archival documents, including fan magazine articles and the film's pressbook, illuminates how advertisements for *To Be* obscured the film's overt politicization in favor of an "apolitical" patriotism that Lombard exemplified through her participation in state-sponsored defense bond rallies. The incongruence between advertisements for *To Be* and the film's content itself only serves to illuminate the film's questions of what political entertainment should be, a debate that Hollywood industry executives hoped to suppress.

A woman walks into the Gestapo headquarters from stage right, dressed in a white gown with her hair beautifully coiffed. As the men around her argue, she makes herself known to the director, a Mr. Dobosh, by strutting into his line of sight. After a beat, Dobosh realizes that something is amiss, for this elegantly dressed woman was supposed to be a concentration camp detainee. The woman insists that her outfit makes for "tremendous contrast," primed to provoke visceral reactions from the audience. In response, Dobosh laments how the great actress Maria Tura (portrayed by the renowned Carole Lombard in her final film role) could be so "inartistic." After all, *Gestapo* is supposed to be a "document of Nazi Germany," and this outfit would have no place there.

This scene takes place at the beginning of Ernst Lubitsch's World-War-II-era Nazi satire *To Be or Not to Be* (1942), released just after three months following the official entry of the United States into World War II. A war effort the United States supported from afar took on greater significance as American soldiers entered combat overseas. As both the Americans and the Nazis bolstered their cinematic propaganda apparatuses, public debate raged in Hollywood's guilds on the best way to handle the Nazi threat in cinema (Webb 751). Coinciding with increased United States engagement with the Second World War, "an emerging patriotic decorum" enforced by both government censorship and within-industry censuring—by non-governmental regulators (the Production Code Administration, or PCA,) studios, and filmmakers themselves—provided a hostile environment for *To Be's* release (Webb 754).

The film's sharp satire—Lubitsch's Nazis are incompetent, blundering bureaucrats who prove to be no match for a group of unlikely heroes in a Warsaw-based theater troupe—was not well received by many critics (Crowther 1; Martin 15). Even in a favorable review of the film, Howard Barnes of the *New York Herald Tribune* notes that the sociopolitical context of *To Be or Not to Be's* release makes the humor set in Nazi-occupied Warsaw harder to digest than in Lubitsch's preceding *Ninotchka* (1939), which was set in an at-the-time free Paris (8).

In Brandon Webb's analysis of the PCA's treatment of anti-Nazi parody films during World War II, he notes that the PCA did not attempt to censor (or explicitly condone) *To Be's* lampooning of Hitler (754). The timing of the PCA's review of *To Be* (dated October 10, 1941) is significant considering it predates the United States' entry into World War II (Webb 766n26). On the other hand, the film was "retroactively" criticized at the Hollywood Writers Mobilization's 1943 Writers' Congress "for failing to take Nazism seriously" (Webb 754). Conversely, the PCA attempted to block the release of the realist drama *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (dir. Anatole Litvak, 1939; Lewis 11), while the 1943 Writers' Congress hailed the film "as a model of anti-fascist filmmaking"

(Webb 751). After 1939, once the distribution of American films under Axis regimes was banned (Webb 752), within-industry support for "realistic" portrayals of Nazis increased, given these films need not appeal to Nazi-allied markets. Yet, satirical films like *To Be* did not enjoy these same benefits. *To Be* may have passed through industry censors, but that did little to curb the negative reactions of critics and Lubitsch's industry compatriots. The critical dialogue surrounding *To Be* mirrors conversations (including the one described previously) that occur throughout the film, which take on questions of what political entertainment is and should be. Within the film's comedy lurks an astute and timely examination of how fascism derives its power from spectacle (Melehy 27).

However, audiences looking at advertisements for *To Be* (which have thus far been little examined in the literature) would be prepared for patriotic entertainment in a different vein. Complicating the film's advertising campaign was the death of star Carole Lombard just before the film's March 1942 release. On January 16, 1942, Carole Lombard and 21 others died in a plane crash on their way back to Los Angeles from a War Bond drive in Indianapolis (Motion Picture Herald 327). Though she did not serve in a combat role, Lombard's star persona nevertheless became synonymous with service in the months preceding her death as a fixture of state-sponsored entertainment supporting the war effort ("Lombard's Tragic End" 2). The rallies and shows that stars like Lombard highlighted during World War II were expected to be apolitical events, in the sense that these events avoided discussing specifics of the war in favor of boosting morale around a more general American "war effort." As I will demonstrate in this essay, attempts to memorialize Lombard within press materials for *To Be* present the film as thematically analogous to these "apolitical" shows, in the process suppressing the film's (perhaps controversial) arguments.

Lombard's publicized activities preceding *To Be* were in service of a purely pro-American (rather than an explicitly anti-Nazi or anti-Fascist) ideology. Hailed for her eager volunteerism and love of country, she headlined rallies that raised millions of dollars in defense bonds and stamps ("Lombard's Tragic End" 2). Some of the last photographs taken of Lombard before her death depict her active on the home front: participating in a publicity campaign for stamp sales (Carruthers 26) and leading a crowd in the National Anthem (Romayne 32). The outpouring of grief over the death of Carole Lombard in fan magazines framed her as something unprecedented for an entertainer on the home front: a war hero ("The Movies Go…" 14). In the April 1942 edition of *Photoplay*, writer William French, who, by his account, had an established relationship with Lombard (357), states that it was "Lombard's Greatest Wish" to die in service of her country. Multiple industry figures, including Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America chairman Will Hays, referred to Lombard as Hollywood's first active-duty casualty ("Hays Hails Patriotism" 38; "Lombard's Tragic End" 2). President Roosevelt himself celebrated Lombard's service ("Roosevelt Lauds Carole…" 15). As such, expectations for *To Be,* as Lombard's last film, were remarkably high.

The film's pressbook leans into the intrigue of the film being Carole Lombard's last as an aspect of why *To Be* was "The Picture Everyone Wants to See" (2). Lombard receives first billing for the picture, above co-star Jack Benny (who arguably has a bigger role in the film) and the title of the film itself (Studio Press Book 1). Headlines for some reviews of the film do not mention the film's title at all, focusing purely on Lombard's involvement (i.e., Mildred Martin's "Last Lombard Picture Opens on Stanley Screen"). The byline-less *Life* review characterizes Lombard as "play-acting part of the world disaster which cost her life" ("Carole Lombard's Last…" 63). Though the text of the review itself is quite brief, the captions of the pictures are particularly interesting, referring to Benny and Lombard by their names rather than the names of their characters. The result includes statements like, "Carole is nabbed by Nazi soldiers" (64), seemingly positioning this film as part of Lombard's wartime service. Yet, for an audience who loved Lombard for her role boosting troop morale and raising money for an amorphous "war effort," the physical scope of which did not include the American mainland, her participation in an overtly anti-Nazi film like *To Be* could be somewhat unexpected.

To Be, regardless of its faith to the source text of *Hamlet* invoked by its title, promotes the ethos of one of Shakespeare's most memorable quotes: "the world's a stage" (Gemünden, "Space out of

Joint" 64). Much of the previous literature on the film addresses the opening scene (before Lombard's entrance), in which Hitler seemingly gets caught wandering the streets of Warsaw pre-invasion. This man is not Hitler but Bronski, who is to portray Hitler in the play *Gestapo* at the Teatr Polski. The audience learns of Bronski's true identity through a flashback to "the Gestapo headquarters in Berlin," where a cascade of Heil Hitlers leads to Bronski exclaiming: "Heil, myself!" This statement catalyzes a debate between the play's director, Dobosh, and his actors, over the merits of comedy versus "realistic drama" for depicting the Nazis, one that pre-empts the contemporary critical debates surrounding the film. This scene not only serves as an introduction to the dysfunctional theater troupe who are to be our heroes but also establishes the film's interrogation of the performativity of fascism (and the best way to deconstruct it).

The exodus of one of *Gestapo's* actors onto the streets of Warsaw subsumes these streets into the play's set. Though the voiceover narration situates the action in Warsaw, the establishing shots are on cookie-cutter sets differentiated only by names with the suffix *-ski*. Placing a stage actor onto this set emphasizes the purpose-built nature of the location; this is Poland through Hollywood's machinations (Melehy 25). Adding to the spatial disorientation are the accents of the film's "Poles," which are indistinguishable from those of Americans apart from Greenberg, whose German accent indexes his "foreign" nature (McCormick 288). By establishing the un-reality of the film from the outset, Lubitsch emphasizes that the world is indeed a stage, laying the groundwork for his examinations of political performance (see Gemünden, "Space out of Joint" 65). In other words, farce reveals farce.

Gerd Gemünden, a scholar of German exile cinema, views *To Be* as an "essential" text of the movement for how it encapsulates the liminality of the exile experience (Performing Resistance 81). Lubitsch was one of Hollywood's first émigré directors and Hitler's "Archetypal Jew," "un-German" in Germany but "too German" for America (Gemünden, "Space out of Joint" 61-62). Lubitsch's exile status informs his aesthetic decisions, including his use of "double encoding," a practice enacted by Jews in the Weimar Republic (McCormick 297). For German Jews, the fifteen-year period of the Weimar Republic was a time of great uncertainty and psychological instability borne from simmering antisemitism, leading Jewish filmmakers like Lubitsch to suppress signifiers of Jewish identity in their films behind general symbols of the "other" (ibid). According to McCormick, before *To Be*, Lubitsch's last film with an "overtly Jewish" character was released in 1919, before Lubitsch left for America in the 1920s (ibid). Operating within a framework of "anticipatory self-censorship" of Jewish identity to ensure widest possible distribution and commercial success for his films (Rosenberg 204), Lubitsch's Americanized Poland allows him to covertly comment on the plight of the Jews without alienating distributors (see Melehy 24). This setting makes the emergence of Greenberg, the film's sole "overtly Jewish" character (McCormick 295), as the hero of the film even more striking, as I will address later in this essay.

Preceding the United States' official entry into World War II, a series of hearings in the United States Senate during Fall 1941 convened by Sens. Burton Wheeler and Gerald Nye attacked seventeen films the pair deemed "war-mongering… propaganda" (Lewis 10-11), including *The Great Dictator* (dir. Charlie Chaplin, 1940). Though not explicitly mentioning Lubitsch, Senator Nye argued the problematic films catered to "the agenda… of foreign-born Jews" (Lewis 11), whom he alienated from the general American public. Ultimately, no sanctions resulted from these hearings, and the United States government did not overtly flex its power over the film industry again until after the war (see Lewis). However, these hearings— and the political climate that enabled them—elucidate the film industry's willingness to censor politicized messages in anti-Nazi films. Lubitsch's status as a foreign-born Jew within Hollywood's upper echelons arguably made *To Be* a likely target for government scrutiny, only strengthening the rationale for the film's sanitized press campaign.

Accordingly, the pressbook sketches the film's plot in vague terms ("An exciting, romantic comedy, keyed to an ever-mounting tempo of suspense"—Studio Press Book 1) and emphasizes Lombard's involvement above all else. "The America which was moved with deep pride at her last magnificently performed assignment for her country's Defense Bond Drive" is the target audience for the film (Studio Press Book 2). The pressbook argues that a

screening of *To Be* would be as natural as Lombard at a defense bond rally (6). Naturally, organizers of these events could honor Lombard and help fulfill her "unfinished business" in the war effort by celebrating her final performance in a patriotic film (French 406). However, the "apolitical" government wartime entertainment apparatus, which disavowed the joke "the Russian Army has the Germans by the Balkans" at a USO Camp Show (Lebovic 272), would not dare to circulate a film in which a Nazi colonel asserts, "What [Joseph Tura] did to Shakespeare we are doing now to Poland."

The pressbook boasts a unique and timely tie-in for *To Be*: a recording of a song called "Bless 'Em All" as sung by RAF's Polish squadron in the film (4). The song itself is a variant of a soldiers' song that emerged during World War I called "Fuck 'Em All" (Cleveland 82), a sordid title that would lead to immediate exclusion from a Camp Show. The song as performed in the film echoes the film's overt anti-Nazi politics, including lines like: "There's one [a bomb] for old Hitler… [and] an especially big one for old Hermann G" and "We'll never be seated till Hitler's defeated." In the film, this song serves to introduce the Polish squadron, shown gathered around the piano, laughing even in the shadow of unspeakable evil.

The pressbook volunteers three previous recordings of the song for advertisers to use in a promotional campaign for *To Be,* including one by Barry Wood and the Four King Sisters (4). However, the lyrics in this version (recorded in 1941) talk not about Hitler's defeat, but about missing the comforts of home (more specifically, the comforts of women) as a soldier at camp. Rather than blessing the bombs on their way to Germany, this version "bless[es] all the Blondies and all the Brunettes" and chides "no ice cream or cookies for flat-footed rookies." Where the version sung in *To Be or Not to Be* has a darkly humorous bite, this version has a jovial innocence (complete with cutesy complaining) untouched by the horrors of war. Highlighting this latter version of the song rather than distributing the version from the film bolsters the pressbook's positioning of the film within the mainstream wartime entertainment Lombard was a key participant in, hiding the film's subversive qualities behind palatable advertising. However, this incongruence between film content and press copy reinforces the significance of the political statements Lubitsch makes through *To Be,* ultimately serving to illuminate rather than obscure the film's comparatively radical nature.

The characters of Maria Tura (as portrayed by Lombard) and Lombard herself share many similarities: both line the pages of fan magazines, are married to famous actors (Joseph Tura—portrayed by Jack Benny—and Clark Gable, respectively), and are widely regaled for their feminine wit and charm. In the eyes of the public, Carole Lombard could do no wrong. In the fan magazine *Screenland*, Romayne, director Wesley Ruggles' secretary, memorialized Lombard as the kind, hard-working, and generous standard of comparison for any other actress and a devoted wife (86). She worked the fields and "hunt[ed] like a man" (Carruthers 490). Maria Tura's introduction, on the other hand, establishes her as vain and appearance-obsessed; why else would she insist on wearing an elegant gown to play the role of a concentration camp detainee in *Gestapo*? Fans of Lombard flocking to theaters to see their idol in all her glory for the final time would likely be unsatisfied by the character of Maria Tura. Yet, her flawed character provides a crucial vehicle for Lubitsch's deconstruction of patriotic entertainment.

Through the character of Maria Tura, Lombard enacts a parody of the conception of the secret-country-girl starlet, implicating Lombard's real-life public persona. As she entertains the flirtation of the handsome young pilot Lieutenant Sobinski, he infers that she must want to run away to live a simple life with him. After all, the fan magazines that he has read at length talk about how Tura is a farm girl at heart. However, when Sobinski vocalizes what he sees as Tura's desires to her, she seems confused and even a bit amused, though news of Hitler's invasion of Poland cuts her off before she can react. The pressbook does not let on that *To Be* is not a memorial to Lombard's outstanding character.

Through Sobinski's relationship with Maria Tura, as facilitated through fan magazines, Lubitsch draws attention to the role that stars play in the construction of national identity, especially pertinent during wartime. Though there is no physical evidence of a print campaign within the film hailing Maria Tura's patriotic bona fides like there was for Lombard, Tura's star persona nevertheless bolsters the war effort (though unbeknownst to her). As the Polish Squadron pilots give messages for home to

Professor Siletsky, presumably a friend of the Warsaw Underground, Sobinski passes a note with "to be or not to be" on it. To Sobinski's shock, Siletsky expresses a lack of familiarity with Maria Tura, which Sobinski reasons would be unfathomable for any true Pole. As such, Tura's connection with Polish national identity identifies Siletsky as an outsider, prompting Sobinski to return to Poland to thwart Siletsky and setting off a chain of events leading to Siletsky's death.

Key to the mythmaking surrounding Lombard after her death were the dynamics of her relationship with her husband Clark Gable, a massive star himself. In the fan magazine *Modern Screen* (April 1942), a memorial to Lombard functions as her biography through the lens of her relationship with Gable. Lombard pre-Gable was a typical starlet (closer to Maria Tura), who frequented all the best parties and enjoyed the trappings of stardom (Carruthers 441). Gable is represented as a paternalistic figure in Lombard's life; by multiple accounts she called him "pappy" (Carruthers 490; Romayne 86). Under Gable's tutelage, she learned the joys of a modest country life, and "overnight, the lusty, swearing, striding, arrogant girl became a woman" (489).

In contrast, much of the humor of *To Be* stems from Joseph's inability to control his wife's antics. This man is not Clark Gable reproduced in narrative form, a man capable of bringing his wife down to Earth from the high of stardom. Though Sobinski references Maria's interviews with fan magazines that demonstrate a desire for a simple life, Joseph is not the type of man who can hold her accountable like a Gable-esque figure could. Even war cannot humble Maria; the end of the film illustrates a return to the status quo (albeit in a new locale), as Maria invites a new man into her dressing room while Joseph attempts in vain to complete his "To Be or Not to Be" monologue uninterrupted. As characters, neither Joseph nor Maria Tura meet the viewing publics' expectations for how stars of the period should act, those standards established by Clark Gable and Carole Lombard, that is. The vain Joseph and the disloyal Maria remain morally ambiguous to the end (Webb 755). The characterization of the Turas bolsters the radical nature of the film; *To Be or Not to Be* bucked convention by making its protagonists flawed (ibid). While this decision enhances the film's narrative complexity, it further undermines the pressbook's positioning of the film as an uncomplicated morale-booster.

One of the pressbook's more astounding claims is that Jack Benny is "playing straight" in his portrayal of Joseph Tura. "No Zany Antics, No Slapstick For Hero In Lubitsch's 'To Be Or Not To Be'" boasts the title of a publicity piece included in the pressbook (15). This assertion does not ring true with some of Joseph Tura's defining gags in the film; as critic Mildred Martin remarks, "Benny, though presumably playing straight, is still Benny" (15). Joseph's reaction to the interruption of his monologuing as Hamlet by Lieutenant Sobinski on his way to Maria's dressing room, Joseph discovering Lieutenant Sobinski curled up in bed, Joseph shaving the face of a Nazi spy to boost the credibility of his disguise: all these moments have an irreverent humor that depends on Jack Benny's physicality.

To characterize Joseph Tura as the "hero" of *To Be* also ignores how his delusions of grandeur seem to prevent him from fully digesting the gravity of his situation. As Sobinski and Maria discuss the implications of Nazi spy Professor Siletsky giving up RAF pilots' family members, Joseph cannot look past his jealousy of Sobinski and reframes the discussion in the context of their domestic conflict. When preparing to impersonate Siletsky, Joseph remarks to his wife that the scene "has a lot of dynamite." Earlier in the film, as Siletsky sees through Joseph's Gestapo officer facade and starts shooting in the theater, Joseph grabs his back as if he has been shot on stage. Melehy argues that Jack Benny, under Lubitsch's direction, perfectly embodies his role of a "ham" actor whose exaggerated affect blurs onstage and offstage divides (23). In this sense, he asserts that the character of Joseph Tura "calls attention to the fact that one is viewing a simulation" (ibid). As such, Benny's performance provides another mechanism for Lubitsch to challenge his audience to consider power as performance, which is accordingly ignored by the film's press materials.

For someone who many scholars argue is one of *To Be's* key figures (see Bronfen, Gemünden, McCormick), Greenberg, portrayed by German Jewish character actor Felix Bressart, receives little attention in the pressbook, with publicity on Bressart instead spotlighting his prolific cheese-eating and lack of mustache (14-5). Greenberg occupies many roles throughout the film: a bit-part actor (like Lubitsch himself at the beginning of his career—Oya 100), a stand-in for Lubitsch, both in

terms of biographical similarities and in his repeated insistence of the importance of a "good laugh," and an unexpected hero. Throughout the film, Greenberg declares his affinity with Shylock, the Jewish villain of *The Merchant of Venice*, and recites one of the character's monologues at three separate points. The last time he recites this monologue is to a parade of Nazis; the troupe's escape from the occupied Teatr Polski depends on their ability to disrupt the Nazis' order by both blending in and standing out. Greenberg's recitation of the monologue, his "coming out" as a Jew (McCormick 299), allows for the rest of the troupe to carry out their roles in facilitating their plot. He is taken away by two "Nazis," after which "Hitler" (Bronski) has an excuse to leave the unsecure building. Ironically, *The Merchant of Venice*, where this monologue originates, was removed from the Camp Show circuit that provided entertainment to soldiers abroad "for fear it would insult Jews" (Lebovic 278). The reappropriation of this play within *To Be* by Lubitsch as enacted by Felix Bressart, the collective act of two German Jews (McCormick 297), thus contributes to the film's overt (and arguably radical) politicization.

The last time Greenberg appears on screen is when he is detained; he is not shown with the rest of the troupe upon their arrival in Scotland. All the credit for the troupe's escape goes to Joseph Tura, who is lauded by reporters as "the real hero in this amazing play" and thanks his colleagues for what "little" they did. This dialogue counters what viewers saw just minutes before, a disjunction between words and images that draws attention to how powerful entities (in this case, the troupe's leading man) manipulate images and narratives to best suit their purposes. We, as viewers, know not to trust Tura's words based on the evidence of Greenberg's contribution, as this film has taught us to see through constructions including Maria Tura's public image and the might of fascism. However, this sequence, in the shadow of Carole Lombard's death, also suggests questions of who gets memorialized for their sacrifice, and why? Someone with big star power with legions of fans, a Joseph Tura or a Carole Lombard, will naturally garner larger tributes than a bit actor of marginalized identity like Greenberg. Yet, how can we reconcile this reality with the fact that Greenberg's contributions were arguably larger than Joseph Tura's, but Tura was allowed to take sole credit?

Though *To Be or Not to Be* was released on schedule in March 1942 despite rumors of delays after Carole Lombard's death ("UA Scrapping Entire…" 2), the pressbook and associated advertising copy for *To Be or Not to Be* were reinvented (ibid). The original "ad campaign was along humorous lines" while the extant pressbook and ads "eliminate all humor [and] are completely dignified" (ibid). The mismatch between film and pressbook warrants the question: what would the publicity campaign for *To Be* look like had Lombard not died before the film's release? Was the initial "humorous" campaign one that leaned into the film's incendiary Nazi satire? Would the publicity team still err on the side of inoffensive patriotism if they did not have to walk the fine line of "tastefulness" in paying their respects to Lombard? Would they still pretend that Jack Benny plays Joseph Tura "straight?" Or would *To Be* be too radical for its circumstances even out of the shadow of the war-attributed death of its star, a film whose only hope for box office success would reside in the promises of an innocuous ad campaign? Even if, as Mildred Martin states, what "casts a pall" over the film is not Lombard's death but the film's subject matter itself (15), Lombard's martyrdom and the advertisement for *To Be or Not to Be* remain inextricably linked.

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