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Transnational Romance: Love and Politics in the Cinema of the 1930s and 1940s

1. Introduction

In a recent essay on the persistence of exceptionalist thinking in discussions about American art, the art historian John Davis argues that two exceptionalist tropes became dominant after the creation of the American republic in the 18th century. American art was seen to be unique and different from Europe, on the one hand, because of the democratic government and culture in the United States, and on the other, because of its unique representation of nature. Following Davis, this exceptionalist rhetoric has come increasingly under fire from a globalist position claiming that the notion of national identity is not a useful category for the study of artworks and should be abandoned along with the focus on area studies and national schools of art. To scholars working in American Studies, this acrimonious debate in the field of art history between the so-called modernists and the Americanists sounds familiar. It is similar to conceptual and theoretical debates about the transnational turn in American Studies, which began to take shape in the 1990s. Here, too, a radical critique of exceptionalist thinking was at the heart of the debate. And even though the research paradigm of transnationalism has resulted in a very productive turn at numerous levels, it still often led back to questions and concepts of national identity that it had set out to deconstruct and move beyond (Decker and Böger). For media and film-related studies in a transatlantic framework it may therefore be helpful to clarify the use of transnationalism vis-à-vis the equally relevant yet more abstract and descriptive notion of comparative studies.

The study of the cinema usually includes a great variety of aspects, among them films as aesthetic objects or 'texts' shaped by historically changing conventions and norms, narration and style, genres and the star system, the cinema as an architectural place as well as a space of reception, the activity of going to the movies, industrial practices and technologies, the social and cultural functions of entertainment and information, or the value of film as an art form in relation to other art forms. In general, the *comparative* study of film cultures means comparing and contrasting similar structures shared by all industrialized and regulated societies. It includes identifying structures and norms at the local, regional, or global level and trying to find ways of interrelating them. Some structures may be found only in one country at the local or regional level, while others may be found in numerous countries, i.e.

at a global level. Yet in most of these instances notions of the national do not appear to be of primary importance since the underlying structures are the result of processes of modernization as well as the competitive logic of popular storytelling.

The study of film cultures through a transnational lens, on the other hand, needs the notion of the national as a crucial point of reference that is at the same time transcended and reaffirmed. In this essay, such moments of transnationalism shall designate instances that address and make explicit acts of border-crossing by bringing together, imitating, emulating, reworking, or adapting characteristics ascribed to national origins (Decker and Böger 7-11). Importantly, these physical and verbal encounters crossing national borders have to be narrated and noticeable in the films themselves. In other words, this essay will focus on making the clash of the transnational explicit through narrative and stylistic means, or as a major theme. More specifically, drawing on films from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany from the 1930s and 1940s, I will explore the diverse functions of what might be called the narrative of transnational romance. This narrative is developed through the combination of two major story lines connecting and intertwining love and politics, with a national twist. As I will argue in this essay, the combination serves both to heighten the entertainment value of suspense and wish fulfillment and to negotiate ideological conflicts. Juxtaposing different film cultures, the following sections address significant moments of defining and revealing self-ascribed national characteristics by looking at the fantasy of performing Americanness in Glückskinder (1936), contrasting national identities and styles in Casablanca (1942), and staging confrontations between national self-images in A Matter of Life and Death (1946).

2. Romance, Transnationalism, and the Cinema

In a pivotal cinematic moment of artistic and political reflexivity from the period under consideration, Charles Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940) made thinly veiled references to Nazi Germany through a biting parody of Adolf Hitler's body language and verbal speech patterns. By satirizing the rituals of political rallies and oratory of the 1930s, Chaplin presented a powerful critique of Nazi ideology but also of the ways in which mass media had turned politicians into actors on a global stage. And by locating his story in a foreign culture emulating its garbled language and performative codes, Chaplin—an actor born in England making a film in the United States about the rhetoric of a dictator from Germany—created a truly transnational film.

His example allows us to identify two important issues concerning the cinema during the period of modernism, first, the transition to new technologies introducing recorded language and sound; second, the cinema's function as the dominant audiovisual mass medium participating in both, entertainment and propaganda, by shaping notions of identity, community, and nation. With actors such as Chaplin, who had begun his career in the 1910s, silent cinema had represented a universal, performance-based popular culture—an art form with global appeal. Yet the introduction of recorded voices in the late 1920s, ranging from standardized forms of language to regional dialects, helped to transform the cinema into one of the major arenas defining national identity. As a consequence, language together with centralized, usually government-related cultural institutions and political ideologies (or systems) such as socialism, fascism, or democracy became crucial elements shaping the national characteristics of the cinema in the 1930s and 1940s (Celli 1-10; Nowell-Smith).

Writing in the 1940s, the interrelation of the cinema and national identity was explored in detail by authors such as Siegfried Kracauer, who claimed that the films of a nation allowed access to psychological patterns, a collective mentality, and the inner life of the nation. Yet, contrary to more recent arguments about the cinema's expression of national essences (Celli), Kracauer did not presuppose a fixed national character but rather posited a continuously changing, processual identity (3-11). Moreover, as Stephen Lowry has argued, even though the cinema was the dominant medium creating collective, ideologically charged fantasies, these ideologies were not coherent entities but (imaginary) narratives full of contradictions. Thus the rhetoric and ideology of national identity was a common trope in the cinema of the 1930s and 1940s and an important component of themes, stories, motifs, and stereotypes, but it was constantly negotiated and transformed.

During the historically volatile and politicized early decade of sound film the function of entertainment as propaganda—shaping attitudes, inducing action—was an important feature relevant to film cultures in the U.S., the U.K., and Germany (Eder). Biopics were devoted to the biographies of political leaders, usually geared to then fashionable historical interpretations, while other genres shaped national symbols and self-images, among them institutions such as the army, concepts of the people or *Volksgemeinschaft* (Germany), the norms of gentlemanly conduct (U.K.), or the rule of law (U.S.). In the larger media context of books, newspapers, and the radio, film communication thus contributed to defining national characteristics as well

as images of the enemy, representing shared rituals, values, identities, character traits, or forms of heroism, and imaging romance.

Indeed, the discourse of romantic love was one of the crucial elements present in almost every film, a ubiquitous ingredient of mainstream cinema. Following David Bordwell, "[t]he classical film has at least two lines of action, both causally linking the same group of characters. Almost invariably, one of these lines of action involves heterosexual romantic love." (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 16) In times of social crisis and war this norm of two causally connected and intertwining story lines in mainstream cinema was politicized. Linking love and politics, romantic couples became a focal point for negotiating ideological tensions and contradictions. In many genres the portrayal of heterosexual romantic love expressed the claims and desires of individual lovers and, by implication, their individualism, while the second line of action made communal values, rules, and expectations explicit, in particular the duty to serve society and the nation. This usually meant limiting the freedom of the individual, for instance through service in the army, accepting the loss of life, or prioritizing the interests of the nation. Furthermore, reflecting the gender politics of the time, masculinity often signified death and destruction, while femininity was associated with the forces of life, thus envisioning a mythic femininity as the guarantor of cultural values and social cohesion.

3. Performing Americanness

The first case study to be discussed in detail here is *Glückskinder* (or *Lucky Kids*) from the historical period of Nazi Cinema, which was produced in 1936, two years after Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night*. Sometimes referred to as a remake of Capra's earlier film, *Lucky Kids* may be regarded as a fascinating example of 'performing Americanness' and an instructive case of making transnational affective and cultural attachments explicit. On the U.S. American side, Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* had been a surprise box office success in 1934. More importantly, it is generally acknowledged as an influential, Depression-conscious screwball comedy and road movie. It brought together the millionaire's daughter Ellie (played by Claudette Colbert), on the run from her father, and the newspaper reporter Peter (played by Clark Gable) looking for a sensational story, and it sent them on a bus trip from Miami to New York City.

Lucky Kids, directed by Paul Martin, cast Lilian Harvey and Willy Fritsch as romantic leads, who had already played these roles in the Weimar period

(Ascheid). The newspaper-centered story was set in New York City and made explicit references to It Happened One Night, thus acknowledging the importance of Capra's screwball comedy as a fresh way of presenting the battle of the sexes. Yet despite using plot devices such as the missing millionaire's daughter, mentioning Clark Gable in one of the songs, or using snappy dialogue, it is neither accurate to call it a "remake" (Rentschler 377) of It Happened One Night, nor to refer to it as "eine Eindeutschung" (Witte 133; "a Germanization", all translations from German C.D.). Rather, Lucky Kids created a unique form of cultural and stylistic intertextuality which appropriated certain aspects of Americanness while at the same time maintaining a sense of cultural distance. The film was unusual, even singular, in its efforts of cultural appropriation, but it was not exceptional in its interest in U.S. American culture and society. Despite the strong anti-democratic trajectory of the Nazi regime's political ideology, American culture was still very much present in everyday life. American films were shown in Germany until 1940 and, on the whole, American culture played an important, if ambiguous part as role model, antagonist, or source of subcultural activities (Spieker, Eder, and Schäfer; for postwar developments, see Fluck).

Lucky Kids introduced numerous performative elements that, following Erving Goffman (40-82), could be called instances of cinematic re-keying. First, playing American or performing Americanness in Lucky Kids combined the tourist's gaze with the vicarious fantasy of being American. As the story unfolded, yet starting already with the opening credits sequence, the setting of New York City evolved as an imaginary space inhabited and enjoyed by the main characters. Even though they spoke German, they had American names, Ann Garden (Lilian Harvey) and Gil Taylor (Willy Fritsch). They walked through an American city and seemed to have the same problems as ordinary New Yorkers. Newspaper articles and editorial offices, Night Court and diners, Metropolitan Opera and the skyline at night as well as urban street life with public transport and a great variety of metropolitan newspapers—all of these elements and locations took on the mesmerizing quality of an immersive and vicarious experience of Americanness. Importantly, this quality was supported by the skillful and creative use of stylistic and narrative conventions which had been partially shaped by Hollywood but had developed into a global norm of 1930s popular cinema (Eder).

The pleasure of this immersive experience lay in the fantasy of changing one's social, cultural, and national identity. Yet, in *Lucky Kids* the pleasure of playing American was more concrete; it was fueled by the power and speed of modernity, the joy of modern life styles, the desires of consumer culture,

and the pull of capitalist, profit-seeking forms of business and selfimprovement. Clearly, the film participated in a discourse about the United States that had emerged in travel writings of the 1920s where numerous authors had described the "Rausch des Amerikanismus" (Rundt 9, "the ecstasy of Americanism"), portraying the U.S. as the avant-garde of modernity and modern ways of life but also of injustice and a staggering level of inequality (Kerr, Feiler, and Hensel). For instance, Arthur Rundt's Amerika ist anders told its readers about consumer culture, technology, speed, informality, strength, opportunity, and individualism in American society, yet the illustrations accompanying the text also expressed bewilderment concerning the experience of differences—such as the different sizes of old buildings and skyscrapers—as well as the inhumane and racist activities of the Ku Klux Klan. Writing in 1925 after his third trip to the United States, the renowned theater critic Alfred Kerr defined the essence of America as "Naturkraft plus Kraftnatur" (Kerr 5, "natural power plus a powerful nature"). Lucky Kids was equally infected with the promises of a youthful, powerful America. However, in contrast to most travel authors who were trying to define the essence of nations and their national character, the film used a more playful notion of moving in and out of national characters, of being able to perform the fantasy of cultural otherness.

Secondly, both films included scenes that, following James Naremore, could be defined as performance-within-performance-scenes (68-82). Yet, while *It Happened One Night* used reflexivity to enhance its comedy, *Lucky Kids* reflected upon itself as a performance to create a sense of cultural distance, i.e. to signal its act of appropriating a specific notion of Americanness. Capra's film included a by now famous hitch-hiking scene in which Peter and Ellie each attempted to stop a car on their way to New York. Furthermore, it included two role-playing scenes: one in which Peter took on the character of a gangster, the other in which Peter and Ellie played a quarreling lower class couple, much to their enjoyment. All of these instances created their comic effects for a cinema savvy young audience relating the fun of role-playing to the knowledge about generic conventions, which the film was playfully deconstructing, for instance through the gangster parody.

Lucky Kids also used self-conscious elements. In the song "Ich wollt' ich wär' ein Huhn" ("I wish I were a chicken") Willy Fritsch as Gil changed the lyrics to "I wish I were Clark Gable" imitating Gable's gesture from the hitchhiking scene, while Lilian Harvey as Ann wished she were Mickey Mouse. The song sequence was mirrored at the end of Lucky Kids when the true story of Ann was revealed (the fact that she was not a millionaire's daughter). The

avid reporters not only exaggerated the details that Ann submitted about her humble family background, they also related them to "social problems" in the United States. In contrast to Capra's film, these performance-within-performance-scenes did not heighten the comic appeal of *Lucky Kids*. Overall the interaction among the characters appeared to be more antagonistic, less shaped by role-playing and role-reversals, less softened by a fundamental sympathy for other human beings (and in terms of presenting male and female bodies, more stiff than smooth, more prudish than sexy). Still, referencing fellow actor Clark Gable and the iconic character of Mickey Mouse had an important meta-narrative function: It opened up the possibility of reclaiming the performance of Americanness as difference in similarity. In other words, the references revealed the cinematic fiction as a vicarious form of playing American. They established a sense of cultural difference by looking at the United States through the lens of its pop-cultural image in Germany.

Finally, when the two screwball comedies were concluded and resolved, different kinds of social and cultural ideologies were re-instated. Frank Capra's It Happened One Night was a Depression-era fantasy of class harmony. Though divided along financial lines, upper and lower classes could live together in harmony as long as they behaved according to the norms of moral respectability and democratic equality. In Lucky Kids, on the other hand, the romantic couple did not transcend class boundaries which, overall, seemed to be framed in more hierarchical terms. Both characters had come from, and would remain in, the lower middle-class. Yet this position was made more attractive by the vicarious appropriation of American modernity. While this appropriation did not substantially deconstruct class and bureaucratic hierarchies, putting on an alien national identity, which in effect was interpreted as a modernist identity, clearly went beyond a remake or Germanization of Hollywood cinema. Indeed, playing American became a form of cinematic re-keying that made it possible to claim, at the same time, the cosmopolitanism of American modernity and the provincialism of looking at this modernity from the outside, as an outsider looking in. In this sense, as a hybrid claim of cultural difference in similarity, the performance of Americanness in Lucky Kids was a fascinating if singular instance of transnational romance.

4. Fantasies of Love and Freedom

Two masterful productions from the 1940s to be considered next shifted the romantic story line to a heterosexual relationship of two individuals from different cultural and national backgrounds, thus creating at the heart of the films the vision of romance as border-crossing. First, the well-known classic *Casablanca*—produced by Warner Brothers in 1942 and directed by the Hungarian-born Michael Curtiz—was characterized by a sophisticated style of overlapping and multiple narrative layers with mutable, porous boundaries of space, conversations, and music. This was a style ideally suited for its transnational theme of the city of Casablanca as a place where nations, cultures, religions, allies, and enemies were meeting and mixing in an atmosphere of pleasure seeking, fear, and the hope of emigrating to the U.S. The film assembled a roster of Warner Brothers' stars, among them Humphrey Bogart as Rick Blaine, Ingrid Bergman as Ilsa Lund, Paul Henreid as Victor László, Claude Rains as Captain Louis Renault, and Conradt Veidt as Major Heinrich Strasser.

At one level, *Casablanca* could be seen as a male melodrama, a story of the main character Rick giving up his lover, a story of personal sacrifice. Yet it was a triangulated love story linking Rick, Ilsa, and Victor in clever and complicated ways. With both couples the heterosexual romance between Ilsa and Rick as well as Ilsa and Victor crossed national and cultural borders: Rick was American, Ilsa Norwegian, and Victor Czech. However, the men represented different political and affective affiliations. While Rick was only implicitly or indirectly fighting for the right political causes, Victor was part of the active resistance against the Nazi aggression in Europe and North Africa.

One scene, which may rightfully be considered among the film's emotional high-points, demonstrated one of its crucial political arguments: that national boundaries had vanished and that in this transnational space of migration and resistance new alliances had to be created according to individual, highly emotional attachments to the love and passion of freedom and equality. The scene, embedded in jealous dealings of both men over Ilsa, introduces a 'battle of music', with music signifying a major form of national and emotional attachment. While Rick and Victor are discussing the latter's wish to leave Casablanca, Major Strasser and his fellow Nazis begin to sing *Die Wacht am Rhein* with one of the German soldiers at the piano. Hesitant at first like the other guests, then more self-assured, Victor asks the band in Rick's Café to play *La Marseillaise*. Reacting to the band leader's inquiring

gaze, Rick nods his approval, the band begins to play, and thus ensues the battle of music pitting *Die Wacht am Rhein*, a nationalist German song expressing anti-French sentiment from the 19th century, against *La Marseillaise*, the national anthem of France since the 1790s.

Musically and narratively the two compositions were cleverly contrasted but also blended together by veteran composer Max Steiner with *La Marsellaise* coming out on top through the passionate joining in of all groups associated with the active or passive resistance against Nazi aggression (Lebo 171-184). By including close-ups of the three romantic leads Rick, Ilsa, and László—all sharing the triumphant emotion of singing *La Marseillaise* (with László actively singing along)—the film made clear that in this instance of transnationalism, the story lines of love and politics, of individual happiness and the survival of the community could not be separated, they were intimately connected.

If the film's political argument could be interpreted as an attempt to present Rick as a Franklin D. Roosevelt-like figure, pondering his stance of isolation versus involvement vis-à-vis the struggle of the Free French (Raskin 157), this was not really an issue at the level of the triangular love story. Even though Rick was presented as a sarcastic saloon keeper looking out for his own interests, he was at the same time instinctively taking sides with the underdog. Thus while László was the obvious leader of the resistance movement, Rick represented a natural or innate democrat and fighter for freedom. The question facing Ilsa, their mutual love object, was whether she should choose the romantic love for the free spirit of Rick or the sacrificial love for the political movement of László. In times of war, only the latter—the sacrificial love for the resistance—seemed an acceptable choice.

An interesting coda to the reception of *Casablanca* happened in post-war Germany evoking a different, if equally significant aspect of transnationalism and the question of language. Sound film in the 1930s created the problem of showing films to audiences who did not know the language used in the film. There were three solutions to this problem: films could be shot in a second, foreign-language version using different actors but the same story and sets—this was popular but expensive; films could be subtitled (cheaper but not very popular); or films could be dubbed with actors speaking the lines in a different language, which would be substituted for the original lines recorded in the foreign language (Bräutigam). According to Thomas Bräutigam this option of dubbing was initially not very popular because body and voice were perceived to have been severed, yet after World War II this method of creating, literally, a transnational hybrid of body and voice became the

dominant form of showing films in post-war Germany: "As far as the Germans were concerned, the world they saw on the big screen spoke German." Following Bräutigam, this process eventually amounted to a subtle, or not so subtle form of censorship. After the war, scenes with Nazis were cut during the process of dubbing including classic anti-Nazi films such as *Casablanca*. This culminated in 1952 with a version of *Casablanca* "which essentially was a special version of the film for the average German: all scenes featuring Nazis in uniform were removed" (for postwar developments in Germany, see Elsaesser).

Finally, the English film A Matter of Life and Death from 1946 directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger may be the most obvious instance of what has been called transnational romance in this essay. It told the story of a British aviator and an American female soldier stationed in England (for an extended analysis, see Christie). The film opened with a spectacular and dramatic scene: Just before Peter Carter (David Niven) was about to crash with his burning plane, he spoke to the American radio dispatcher June (Kim Hunter). In the face of the looming catastrophe they fell in love instantly and then, miraculously, met in real life even though Peter's plane had crashed and he should have been dead. Yet Peter was not dead—he had survived the crash because, as the film revealed in subsequent scenes introducing wildly imaginative sets and alternating between black and white and color sequences, the angel who was supposed to take him to heaven had missed him.

This elaborate genre-bending fantasy of love, survival, and freedom continued, in a parallel development, in heaven where the fact that Peter was missed and had survived the crash caused a major crisis regarding the statistics and administration of life and death. In the second half of the film, after numerous visits of the angel on earth—cleverly interrupting the smooth flow of cinematic time and action—an extended trial took place in heaven to decide whether Peter could continue to stay alive on earth with June, his romantic partner from the U.S., or whether he should be declared dead and taken to heaven. The American prosecutor in this trial was Abraham Farlan (Raymond Massey), who had been killed in 1775 during the American War of Independence and hated the English. He argued against the romantic relationship and wanted Peter to be declared dead. His opponent was the Englishman Doctor Reeves (Roger Livesey), a recently-deceased psychiatrist who knew Peter, wanted the couple to stay together, and pleaded that Peter shall live. Thus, the matter of life and death in the film was not just an exploration—and fantasy-imbued displacement—of the traumatic experience

of war, it also included the question of how American and English national habits, differences, and cultures were judged, and whether or not they could, or should be connected through the heterosexual love between Peter and June.

At the end of the trial, the jury was swayed by the young couple's love and Peter was granted the right to continue living his life on earth. Yet, just as Casablanca, this film also connected the romantic story line with a second, political layer making the transnational character of the film explicit. The love relationship between Peter and June was contrasted with two political or ideological questions: first, the right of a nation to claim a soldier's life. If Peter were allowed to live then this would set a precedent concerning the nation's right to claim the life of the individual soldier. Indeed, Peter's sacrifice for the nation would become less important than his personal happiness with June, justifying his magical escape from heroic death. Second, the nature of their relationship as a transatlantic form of bonding raised concerns about the larger relations between the two countries and nations they represented. This included the question of cultural differences—in particular the seemingly overwhelming sense, at the time, of mutual disapproval—as well as the future roles of the U.K. and the U.S. on the world stage. Framing the two crucial political questions—who can claim the life of an individual and who will be the next global power—as a fantasy story transformed the somber meditation of A Matter of Life and Death into a playful, sly, cinematically reflexive, and at times spectacular mindgame set in heaven and on earth (as well as the long stairway to heaven in between). In the end, the film chose to decide these questions in favor of love and the common man and woman. Claiming that love and friendship would help to build a better world, the film envisioned the transatlantic and transnational romance at the individual level as a model for global relations and the dominance of Anglo-American ideals of freedom.

5. Conclusion

In all of the transnational romances, then, the happy end of successfully creating the romantic couple and of prioritizing love over politics served to displace and harmonize the underlying ideological and political tensions such as feelings of hatred, revenge, aggression, superiority, competition, anxiety, or self-interest. For the virtual cinematic nations of the 1930s and 1940s, narrative and ideological closure only seemed possible if it reaffirmed idealized hopes of love and cooperation. After the war this universalist desire of uniting all human beings under one umbrella of common emotions, rituals,

and life stages became a major cultural trope, not just in the cinema but more generally in visual culture such as the 1955 MoMA-based photo exhibition "The Family of Man" (with its implicit political subtext of imaging the United Nations). Although, on the whole, the show propagated a rather naive humanism, it demonstrated the wish to bring together all nations by means of visual style (Böger). This idea that visuality could have an inherent, border-transcending quality had already been noticeable in the final shots of the films discussed in this essay, framing the transnational romantic couples as man and woman in close-ups and compositions emphasizing their indivisibility (see fig. 1).



Fig. 1: June and Peter in A Matter of Life and Death

Similarly, many of the aspects presented as the American way of life in the films were by no means uniquely national or American but rather an expression of modernity and modern life. The big city as a place of adventure and alienation, the fascination with crime, the discourse of love and consumer culture as the promise to individualism and participation—all of these topics were less aspects of nationality than of the processes of modernization taking place in various industrialized countries. And yet, the countervailing force to these globalizing tendencies of visual style and ways of life was the presence

of language as the residue of local and idiomatic specificity. As Charles Chaplin so masterfully demonstrated in *The Great Dictator*, language not only erected semantic boundaries, it took hold of the body as a site of national inscription that could be emulated and playfully parodied but not deconstructed at will. Thus the film's final plea for universal brotherhood and love, spoken emphatically by Chaplin as the dictator's Jewish doppelganger, left all traces of Hynkel's garbled German behind and instead opted for British English. Addressing both, the soldiers and his romantic partner Hannah, Chaplin's longing for liberty, reason, and togetherness indicated, once and for all, that the universalism of the silent period had given way to the linguistic specificity and variety of sound cinema. In more general terms, as this essay has argued, recorded music and language had become key markers in the romantic discourse of the cinema for the definition and creation of emotional attachments as well as the idea of national belonging, thus suggesting that the liberating, border-crossing gesture of the kiss would henceforth be framed by the power of the word.

Filmography

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Film poster from A Foreign Affair (1948), directed by Billy Wilder.

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