NEH Summer Seminar  
German Exile Culture in California:  
European Traditions and American Modernity  

Seminar Syllabus  

This is the basic reading plan for the seminar. We may undertake some modifications in light of participants’ interests and suggestions. Additional background material will be provided or suggested.

**Week One: Thomas Mann**

Readings: “The German Republic” (1922), *Joseph the Provider* (1943), “Germany and the Germans” (1945); Whitman settings by Hindemith (1946) and Weill (1947).

The seminar starts with Thomas Mann, the unofficial leader of the anti-Hitler German exile. The readings begin with his early “the German Republic,” in which he first declares himself in support of democracy. He does so through an extended invocation of Whitman, as the poet of American democracy. *Joseph the Provider* is the last in the tetralogy of Joseph novels, the one most informed by his American experience and in which he draws on the program of the New Deal. Within weeks of V-E Day, Mann spoke at the Library of Congress (as an American citizen); that address, “Germany and the Germans” provides his analysis of the roots of Nazism. We will also examine how exile composers set Whitman poems as monuments to their American experience (Weill’s version of “O Captain,” and Hindemith’s “When Lilacs,” a memorial to Roosevelt).

**Week Two: Bertolt Brecht**

Readings: *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941); *Journals* (excerpts), Hollywood poems

In contrast to Mann, who arrived in America with admiration for the democratic tradition, Brecht held common apprehensions about the United States as a site of crime, corruption and loneliness. His anti-Nazi play *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* displaces Hitler’s trajectory through a barely disguised fiction into the world of a crime-ridden Chicago. His journals provide detailed accounts of his exile years, with important insights into cultural life among the Germans in California. His loneliness and his anxieties about cultural prospects come out poignantly in his Hollywood poems. (We will read more Brecht in the weeks on Eisler and Lang.

**Week Three: Hanns Eisler**

Readings: *Hollywood Songbook* (with Brecht; 1943), *Composing for the Films* (with Adorno; 1944; excerpts)
The explosive growth of film during the first decades of the century challenged intellectuals to rethink traditional assumptions about culture. While some recoiled into a cultural conservative rejection of the new technological cultural form, others sought to explore its democratic potential. Eisler attempted to bridge the gap between a high art tradition, which he inherited from Schoenberg, and popular forms that mixed political engagement with entertainment. The *Hollywood Songbook* operates in the German *Lieder* tradition: high art songs, in this case settings of texts by various poets, including Brecht, to Eisler’s distinctively modernist music. At the same time, Eisler composed soundtracks for films, including Lang’s *Hangmen Also Die* (1943), but others as well, such as *None But the Lonely Heart* (directed by Clifford Odets; 1944). He received Oscar nominations for both. We will examine his theoretical account of film music in excerpts from the volume he co-authored with Adorno. Eisler has also experienced some current popular revival in recordings by Sting and Billy Bragg, and in a stage revue, *Eislermaterial*.

**Week Four: Theodor W. Adorno**

Readings: “The Culture Industry,” from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (with Max Horkheimer; 1944); *Minima Moralia* (1951; excerpts); “Résumé on the Culture Industry” (1963) “Twice Chaplin” (1930/1964); “Scholarly Experiences in America” (1968).

The seminal text on the German exiles’ concerns about the conformism of popular culture is “The Culture Industry.” The seminar will parse its account of industrialism, commercialism, and leveling in its analysis of Hollywood, and its political metaphors, as well as his later revision in “Résumé on the Culture Industry.” *Minima Moralia* is Adorno’s philosophical diary, recording his ambivalent estimations of modernity and American society. Two essays report on his encounters with Charlie Chaplin, evidence of his fascination with film (despite the pessimism in “Culture Industry”) and on his recollections about academic life in the United States.

**Week Five: Fritz Lang**

Film Viewings: *Fury* (1936); *Hangmen Also Die* (1944); *Rancho Notorious* (1952)

The questions of art and democracy intersect in film, the paradigmatic form of mass culture. Lang’s first American work, *Fury*, examines mob rule as the dark side of democracy, and is based in part on the lynching of the Brooke Hart kidnappers in San Jose in 1932. *Hangmen* brings Brecht’s screenplay and Eisler’s music together in an anti-Nazi film based on the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, a leader of the German occupation in Prague in 1942.*Rancho Notorious* is one of Lang’s forays into the western, the American genre par excellence. In these films across three decades, Lang treats mass culture, politics and (in the first and last) specifics of American culture.

**Week Six: Arnold Schoenberg**

Readings: Schoenberg, *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947); Schoenberg, “Criteria for the Evaluation of Music” (1947); Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music* (excerpts: 1947), Mann,
For Adorno, Schoenberg’s consistent modernism represented an appropriate response to the conformism of the culture industry (he casts Schoenberg starkly as an opposite to Stravinsky). Mann integrates key elements of Schoenberg’s twelve-tone composition into his novel of a fictional composer, as a metaphor for Germany on its way to catastrophe. Schoenberg’s Survivor, a key example of the problem of holocaust representation, draws on reports from the Warsaw ghetto and concludes with a transition into liturgy, combining ancient text and modernist composition. His essay on evaluation sets out a historical sociology of musical innovation, posing the question of culture in democracy.