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The Austrian Aschenputtel: Empress Elizabeth of Austria as Icon of Austrian National Identity

Caitlin Gura

During the post-World War II era, the four Allied Powers restored sovereignty and established neutrality in the Second Republic of Austria through the State Treaty of 1955. Among other motivations, this policy was designed to thwart any movement to rebuild the pan-German nation. Austria was charged with the task of creating a new identity to make a clear distinction that it is dissimilar from Germany. The new Austrian republic turned its gaze to the golden age of the Hapsburg Imperial Empire as one of the starting points in creating a new historical narrative for the nation. The local film industry seized upon this idea, which resulted in the Kaiserfilm genre. A prominent example of this variety of film is Ernst Marischka's late 1950s blockbuster movies: the Sissi trilogy. Within the scope of this analysis, I argue how the films ignited a "Sissi phenomenon" which led to a resurgence and transformation of Empress Elisabeth of Austria as a popular cultural icon and a consequential impact on the reconfiguration of Austrian national identity.

The identity tension between Germany and Austria is a consistently problematic distinction. Austria is a Germanophone country, but is frequently mistaken as an extension of Germany. This notion is partially nurtured by the German Nationalist attitudes present in Austria during the 19th century. When pan-Germanism was executed with Hitler's Anschluss in 1938, Austria as an independent nation officially ceased to exist. Österreich (Austria) was reduced to Ostmark (Eastern march), which was further dissolved into the Alpen- und Donaugau (Alpine and Danube district) (Dassanowsky 77). The revisions of the region's title further developed the idea of a unified structure of all German-speaking peoples. Although the National Socialists symbolically effaced Austria as a country, the region was able to retain some of its unique cultural identity.

Cinematically, the country of Austria survived through the embodiment of Vienna and the production company, Wien-Film. Joseph Goebbels, Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda to the Reich, exploited Vienna's associations with music, opera, and dance with the creation of the Viennese Film genre and charging only Wien-Film with the responsibility of disseminating movies of this variety to the German-speaking public

(Dassanowsky 79). Goebbels envisioned these films as primarily sources of entertainment and pleasant diversion. In his thorough analysis of the development and evolution of Austrian cinema, Robert von Dassanowsky explains Goebbels' motivation: "Viennese-associated traditions and images, even the dialect, were to be utilized as indications of the Reich's Germanic cultural multivalence, to appeal to the audiences of allied and occupied lands and most important, to cinematically annex the historical/cultural Vienna (and by extension Austria)," (79). The phrase "cultural multivalence" does not connote "multiculturalism" explicitly. It refers to the complexity of National Socialist German culture through the abstraction of the German "Fatherland." Although this culture consists of many parts, they are deemed purely German. Consequently, Austrian cultural identity became deeply imbued with Nazism. This schema of the genre, however, appears contradictory to Nazi ideology. Although Austria was absorbed into the abstract German "Fatherland," the Nazis momentarily allowed the use of Austrian dialect in *Wien-Film* instead of the universal *Hoch Deutsch*.

At the war's conclusion in 1945, Vienna was under the four-power administration – Soviet Russia, France, Great Britain, and the United States. The Postwar era marked the beginning of a national identity crisis for Austria. How would this reestablished territory separate itself from the image of Nazi Germany? The Anschluss made Austria an early victim of the Nazi regime, but its strong anti-Semitic attitudes and collaboration with the Third Reich reveals an ambivalent relationship between Austria and the events of World War II. The Austrians took advantage of this ambiguity by distancing themselves as far as possible from the clearly defined enemy and perpetrator. Austrian actors who participated in wartime films, for example, were exiled from the cinema industry since they were deemed tainted by Nazi ideology.

With the creation of the Second Republic in 1955, restoring sovereignty to Austria, the country adopted a neutral foreign policy. This political strategy was Austria's coping method with the aftermath of WWII: to completely break with the past. In these terms Austria was reborn with no recollection of its immediate history. According to Dassanowsky, Austria, "chose to step out of history, reinvent itself as another Switzerland (with which it shares no important historical or sociocultural developments) and flounder as a vague bridge between the cold war blocs," (114). The new republic turned to film as a method to generate the new, non-Germany-associated national identity, or to use Dassanowsky's terminology, "neo-nationalism" (115).

This massive undertaking in the reconstruction of Austrian identity led to an exploration of different genres, including the crime/rubble film of Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949) and science-fiction such as Wolfgang Liebeneiner's *1. April 2000* (1952). Austrian cinema's strongest and most successful genres were variants of the German Heimatfilm, such as movies on biographies of Mozart and imperial romance (Dassanowsky 127). To

briefly define the Heimatfilm genre, this phenomenon developed in post-war Germany and concentrated on a break with the immediate past, which was countered with a return to the undefined, preserved countryside; symbolically, the essence of the Volk that was unsoiled by National Socialism. The nostalgic representations of simple life provided an escape for a war-weary people. Dassanowsky clarifies, "It was a concept based in the Romantic era's celebration of the land, the common folk, peasantry, and the mythical, often mystical, powers of nature," (119). A hybrid of the Heimatfilm is the Kaiserfilm genre, an occurrence unique to Austria. This category of film focuses primarily on the luxurious and romantic aspects of the Hapsburg Empire. Dassanowsky explains

The Habsburg-era romances, which defined Austria through the fantasy of a highly structured social order, world prominence, and high art, were stronger influences on identity reformation in the Second Republic than the often-touted Heimatfilm, which also shared German roots, a connection that was at least in terms of national representation, a closed door (160).

This genre set a clear distinction between Austria and Germany. Expressions such as "romances" and "fantasy" place the romanticized imperial era at the level of fairy tales. The Austrian Empire was the golden age. The former imperial nation was a magical and vast land filled with kings, queens, princes, princesses, and fabulous wars.

Fairy tales carry a strong association with the peasant folk, as the Brothers Grimm versions demonstrate. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm traveled to the countryside as scribes to collect oral tales of the folk. Siegfried Neumann explains in his essay, "The Brothers Grimm as Collectors and Editors," "At this time, under the influence of Napoleon's foreign rule, the Brothers Grimm... felt that by collecting and publishing surviving forms of 'Old Germanic' literature and folk poetry they were fostering national self reflection," (970). During a period of foreign invasion, the Grimms recognized the need to hold onto their "Germanness" when the French threatened their homeland. This literary form of patriotism helped perpetuate the strong antagonism against the intruder. The Austrian Kaiserfilm genre functioned similarly as a means to meditate on the condition of national identity in the presence of Nazism's traces. Since the end of World War II did not bring about the complete annihilation of the fascist movement, Austria continues to battle with the scars left behind.

The culminating oeuvre of this genre was Ernst Marischka's Sissi trilogy, consisting of *Sissi* (1955), *Sissi: Die Junge Kaiserin* (1957), and *Sissi: Schicksalsjahre einer Kaiserin* (1957). The films concentrate on the Cinderella story of Princess Elisabeth of Bavaria and her early life as Empress of Austria.

Before I delve into an analysis of the films, an introduction to the real Elisabeth must be made.

Although the life of Empress Elizabeth is equated with the story of Cinderella, her life reflects the inverse of the tale type. Elizabeth, often called Sissi, is already a princess, but not one raised according to strict court etiquette. Born in 1837 at a small castle in Possenhofen, Bavaria, Sissi's liberal upbringing allowed her to live a lifestyle similar to that of a common bourgeois. In her biography of Elizabeth, *The Reluctant Empress*, Brigitte Hamann describes the future empress' childhood environment

Elisabeth spoke Bavarian dialect, and her playmates were the children of the local peasantry. Her upbringing and manners left a good deal to be desired. Like her father and her brothers and sisters, she set little store by ceremony and protocol – which did not matter much at the Munich court. Since the ducal branch of the Wittelsbachs had no official function at court in any case, the family could afford to indulge in a colorful private life (4).

Sissi's title as princess evokes a way of life filled with rigid rules of proper behavior and royal duties; however, she experienced freedom from such obligations and enjoyed the spoils of a private family life. Emperor Franz Joseph's childhood at the Hofburg, on the other hand, lacked close familial love and privacy. The formal and political atmosphere was strongly maintained. When Elisabeth married Franz, she did not experience the "happily-ever-after" ending as naïvely expected for a princess. She felt trapped within the confines of a brutally traditional court filled with snobby aristocrats.

Not accustomed to the strict rules of regality, Sissi often fled from Vienna to the Austrian countryside or Hungary where she indulged in her passions of poetry and horseback riding. When forced to make public appearances, Empress Elisabeth was soft spoken, shy, and awkward. Although her beauty enchanted the people and royal visitors, she was not particularly strong in public speaking. The Empress' awkward comportment was noticed by several dignitaries, including the Prussian Crown Princess Victoria who wrote about her first encounter with Elizabeth in a letter to her mother Queen Victoria, "Very shy and timid, she speaks little. It is really difficult to keep a conversation going, for she seems to know very little and to have only minimal interests. The Empress neither sings nor draws or plays the piano and hardly ever speaks about her children," (Hamann 117). Sissi endured countless rounds of this type of criticism. Since her interests were bizarre, especially her pro-Hungarian views, in comparison to the aristocrats at court, Sissi did not have much to contribute in idle conversation. Therefore she tried to avoid as many appearances as possible by claiming sickness incessantly.

Elisabeth was not actively involved in politics, except when they involved her favorite country, Hungary. The crowning of Franz-Joseph and Elisabeth as King and Queen of Hungary was the climax of Elisabeth's political career. She had four children: Sophie (who died as a toddler), Gisela, Rudolf, and Marie-Valerie. Towards the end of her life, she became severely introverted, fell into bouts of melancholia, and often failed in her role as a mother and wife. She rarely remained in Vienna and constantly traveled. While vacationing in Geneva, Switzerland, the Empress was assassinated by the Italian anarchist Luigi Luccheni in 1898. Luccheni had no personal grudge against the Empress or Austria, but wanted to make a strong political statement through the murder of a sovereign. Overall, Sissi did not completely fulfill her role as the Austrian Empress and lived an unhappy life as a royal.

On the contrary, the Empress of Marischka's film series, played by Romy Schneider, exhibits a strong, confident, and enchanting woman; the narrative itself, though, is relatively historically accurate. Marischka casts Sissi as a naïve, beautiful, sweet-natured girl similar to the heroine of the Grimms' Aschenputtel. The stereotype of the simple girl who depends on the help of others to remedy her situation does not hold much ground, however, in the film. The cinematic Sissi is a rebel who takes full agency of her affairs.

Although the Sissi movies overemphasize the images of court splendor, they show that the Hofburg is not the paradise Elisabeth longs for. Her marriage to Franz Joseph does not bring about the fantasy of a "happily-ever-after" ending; her miserable fairy tale is just beginning. The riches and luxurious life at Schönbrunn in Vienna render Sissi unhappy. She feels the most relaxed and free disguised as a commoner. This attitude becomes apparent when Franz drives to Possenhofen to bring Sissi back to Vienna after running away from the Hofburg in the second installment: *Sissi: Die Junge Kaiserin*. Instead of returning directly to the capital, the couple enjoys a long detour through southern Austria, beginning in Tyrol. Accompanied by the comical Major Böckl and a mountain guide, Sissi and Franz hike through the snowy mountains. When a menacing storm begins to develop, Franz asks whether there are any chalets in the immediate area. The guide knows of a particular locale, but intimates that the owner would be embarrassed at being incapable of providing comfortable service to the Emperor and Empress. The couple willingly decides to go incognito, which exposes them to a crude and rough dialect-speaking host whom Sissi comprehends. She jokes with Franz about not understanding the language of his own people. Elisabeth's apparent joy of the masquerade leads her to candidly express that she wishes her and Franz were no longer the Emperor and Empress, but people of the mountains. To experience this delusion, she runs back to the small attic room and begins her chores in her role as a simple housewife.

The freedom of hiking through the wild terrain of the mountains is liberating for the imperial couple. This feeling manifests as Franz and Sissi

admire the herds of mountain goats; the shots of goats running rampantly along the terrain last for about a few minutes. The camera also pans to the horizon of mountain peaks in the distance, coloring the rocky landscape as majestic and pristine. These panoramas praise the beauty and mystery of nature. The guise of a typical married couple and Elizabeth's comprehension of the dialect signify the Volk. These elements are stark reverberations of Heimatfilm. To use Dassanowsky's terminology in his definition of Heimatfilm, the enchantingly beautiful couple roams around the mystical Austrian landscape and indulges in the simple life of the peasantry for a day.

Another striking aspect that occurs in this scene is that Franz appears out of touch with his homeland, whereas ironically, Sissi blends in with the locals seamlessly. The Empress carries herself comfortably and confidently in this rural environment, which can be considered atypical behavior for a pampered royal. This scene creates a connection between Sissi and the common people, even though historically, the Empress did not openly love the Austrian citizens during her reign. Marischka transforms Sissi into a symbol of the people in this scene.

Throughout the trilogy, Marischka employs "masquerade scenes", like the one in the Tyrolean Mountains. In the traditional meaning of the word, a masquerade is a luxurious ball where guests enjoy the freedom of anonymity. The director plays with this concept by simplifying this extravaganza of mystery to imitate scenes in the countryside with the peasantry. The technique places emphasis on the unhappiness of court life and Sissi's preferred standard of living as a commoner. As a result, the fanfare of the Habsburg royalty fades to the background. Sissi and Franz are not reduced negatively to plain Austrians, but conversely are celebrated as such. Marischka presents these historical figures not so much as the Emperor and Empress of Austria-Hungary, but as young newlyweds and new parents who struggle to lead a life full of happiness and love amidst an archaic, crumbling absolutist monarchy.

This theme climaxes at the end of the third film, *Sissi: Schicksalsjahre einer Kaiserin*, when little Sophie runs down the red carpet placed in front of San Marco's Cathedral at St. Mark's Place in Venice to greet her mother whom she had not seen in quite a few months. The shots leading up to this scene show the Italians cold demeanor at the display of Austrian Imperial power during the royal couple's visit. At St. Marco's square, the people stare in silence watching Sissi and Franz process to the church, but erupt in applause upon the sight of the reunion of mother and child. The cheers are for Sissi not as the Empress, but as a mother. Historically, no such applause occurred. Hamann recounts,

In Venice, where the Emperor's ship, escorted by six powerful men-of-war, lay at anchor, the military reception was splendid, but when the imperial couple with little Sophie crossed the broad St. Mark's Place on their way to San Marco, not a single 'Evviva'

went up from the large crowd gathered there. Only the Austrian soldiers cried out ‘Hail’ and ‘Hurrah.’ The Italians demonstrated by remaining silent (74).

Marischka’s creative license with this scene demonstrates his notion of Austrian identity as firmly rooted within the family. According to his viewpoint, the country’s glorious past is filled with figures like Sissi and Franz who embody simple and good-natured people behind the mask of royalty and pursue happiness and love.

Essentially Marischka includes the masquerades to create an apotheosis of the Volk. The Emperor and Empress lower themselves in social position, which simultaneously places the Volk at the level of divine right royalty, evoking the Cinderella tale type. A person of lowly stature is then raised to a glorified position. On the surface, the Kaiserfilm focuses on royalty and tends to avoid a direct celebration of peasants. If the Volk were explicitly displayed as the central focus, the film would immediately conjure National Socialist ideology. The director, however, slyly plays upon the Heimatfilm themes by his depiction of Empress Elisabeth, who actually preferred a simpler life than that of the royalty. Sissi becomes the ideal historical figure to convey this particularly post-war Austrian neo-nationalism. I am compelled to invoke the pharmakon of Jacques Derrida’s “Plato’s Pharmacy” to clarify the paradoxical situation Marischka evokes in these films. Pharmakon is the Greek word for both poison and remedy (Derrida 70)¹. In this particular case, nationalism functions as the pharmakon in that Marischka and other Austrian directors during the postwar era combat the nationalistic fervor of Nazi Germany with their own form of nationalism. Consequently, the Sissis of history and cinema converge into a cultural icon.

To continue this nationalistic reading of the Empress, Sissi appears as the harbinger of the Austrian Republic. The Empress was one of the most liberal figures of the House of Habsburg, next to her son, Rudolf. She did not invest much faith in the aging neo-absolutist system in which her mother-in-law, Sophie, so firmly espoused. Hamann’s research supports this claim: “Nor did Elisabeth show faith in the stability of the monarchy. ... She praised [Switzerland] in several poems as the ‘bulwark of liberty,’ and she considered its republican form of government safer for the future than a monarchy,” (283). This perspective reflects Dassanowsky’s claim mentioned earlier in this essay: the Austrian Second Republic wanted to be like Switzerland. Following this vein, Marischka presents Sissi as an allegory of postwar Austria. As part of royal tradition she must renounce her Bavarian past and adopt a new homeland, Austria, in the face of political turmoil. The liberalization of the monarchy during her reign helped bring about the end of the aging, insufficient absolutist monarchy to the creation of a constitution. Similar to

1 “This *pharmakon*, this ‘medicine,’ this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence. This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be – alternatively or simultaneously – beneficent or maleficent,” (Derrida 70).

Sissi, the government of the Second Republic renounced its immediate past and espoused its new image as the neutral and independent Austrian nation.

Consequently, the Marischka trilogy presents Sissi as a fairy tale, almost legendary figure to the Austrians. Fairy tales as national property is not a recent concept. The work of the Brothers Grimm serves as an example for folk tales as the essence of national identity. In the article, "Yours, Mine, or Ours?", Donald Haase expounds on the problematic issue of fairy tale ownership. He addresses the fairy tale as national property by referencing the Brothers Grimm: "As the product of the German folk, the tales were thought to contain the scattered fragments of ancient Germanic myth, which – when collected – would provide the German people with a magic mirror in which they could discern and thus reassert their national identity," (355). The phrase "magic mirror" alludes to the looking glass in Snow White, which imposes the notion of the ideal woman according patriarchal society. In a similar manner, the German people endow these folk stories with the authority of holding all the answers to the existential question, "What does it mean to be German?" The Grimm anthology is tangible proof of national identity in this light.

As a German-speaking nation, Austrians most likely read the Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. The Sissi films of the postwar era were made to mirror the function of the Grimm fairy tales as providing a means to create a new Austrian identity. The trilogy's title implies the fairy tale genre by the use of her diminutive, "Sissi." This title evokes an intimate connection with a lofty royal being. If the films were called "Empress Elizabeth of Austria," they would suggest a documentary of her actual life story rather than a romanticized, fairy tale narrative of her persona. These cinematic imperial fantasies were Marischka's way of creating a tale that was the national property of Austria. Haase captures this mentality when he writes, "Differentiating between tales belonging to different countries, and thus differentiating between the countries themselves, has become standard practice," (358). Cultural property that is unique to a nation enables the people to stand as a distinct group. Marischka's representation of Empress Sissi accomplishes this goal.

Ernst Marischka's Sissi trilogy transformed the melancholy, introverted Empress of 19th century Austria into the Austrian Aschenputtel, a folk tale of and for the people. A neutral Second Republic struggled to regain its cultural and historical mores in wake of World War II. Marischka's Sissi became the answer to the ensuing identity crisis in the postwar era. The cinematic fairy tale renderings of Sissi's historical life story essentially helped her fulfill her role as Empress of Austria posthumously. Marischka characterizes Sissi as a girl in harmony with nature and in love with the simplicity of the pastoral lifestyle. The films represent her as an embodiment of the Volk. Overall, these *Kaiserfilme* helped pave the way to Austria's discovery of its neo-nationalistic identity.

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