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The Austro-Comedy and the Brenner Trilogy

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The Austro-Comedy and the Brenner Trilogy

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An abstract of
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Abstract

The Austro-Comedy and the Brenner Trilogy

By Sarah Richards

Austrian director Wolfgang Murnberger, author Wolf Haas, and comedian/actor Josef Hader have collaborated on three recent films based on Haas' best-selling detective novels: *Come, Sweet Death* (2000), *Silentium!* (2004), and *The Bone Man* (2009). All three films have been critically acclaimed and stand among the top ten most successful domestic films at the Austrian box office since Austria's national film subsidy began in 1981. While they can be considered part of the national film renaissance known as New Austrian Film, these are commercial popular films meant to entertain a domestic audience. All are also exemplars of a local genre, the Austro-comedy, which has developed out of the Austrian tradition of the *Volksstück*, or folk play, and which takes a self-critical perspective towards Austria. This project attempts to situate the three Brenner films within the Austrian film industry and "translate" them for an American audience by providing historical and cultural context. In addition, it investigates each of the three films as an example of the Austro-comedy, an adaptation of a novel, and a specifically Austrian work of art. The analysis of *Come, Sweet Death* centers on the characterization of its anti-hero protagonist, Simon Brenner, familiar to local audiences from the books but appearing on-screen for the first time; the depiction of his milieu, the non-touristy side of Vienna; and the establishment of an unusual film language to adapt the remarkable voice of Wolf Haas' narrator into a different medium. *Silentium!* is considered in light of the ways in which it disrupts Austria's well-known guiding narratives, putting the lie to stereotypes of Salzburg as simply a tourist's Baroque paradise (and the setting for *The Sound of Music* and the glamorous *Salzburger Festspiele*) and questioning, if not smashing, people's trust in long-standing institutions such as the Catholic Church. The investigation of *The Bone Man* focuses on the use of Austrian dialect as a cultural marker and unpacks the two key sets of tensions, between Austria and neighboring countries and between Vienna and the provincial countryside, that collide in a masquerade ball at the end of the film.

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Introduction

"*The hills are alive with the sound of music…*" If the 18.5 million viewers who tuned in for the December 6, 2013, NBC live special starring Carrie Underwood and Stephen Moyer are any indication, *The Sound of Music* still captivates the American imagination;[1] the 1965 version directed by Robert Wise and starring Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer is, adjusting for inflation, the third-highest grossing film in North American history, trailing only *Gone with the Wind* and *Star Wars*.[2] Americans and other (mostly British) tourists so frequently confuse Austria with Australia that vendors in Vienna have taken to proffering bright yellow T-shirts clarifying "Austria: No Kangaroos!" But even among those who are well aware that Austria is a small country nestled in the Alps on the eastern edge of western Europe, *The Sound of Music*'s romanticized portrait of edelweiss blossoming on snowy mountaintops still exerts a powerful influence. Not only does this shape Austria's image as a tourist destination, but if an American knows anything about Austrian cinema, it is likely to actually be knowledge of an American musical film that has little to do with Austria now, or the pre-World War II era it depicts. (Another potential reference point for American movie buffs is Arnold Schwarzenegger, the body-builder-turned-actor-turned-California-governor born in the Austrian province of Styria and made famous in Hollywood; however, his films do not even pretend to be about Austria, and his identity in America, thick accent aside, does not center on his nationality.)

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[1] Weisman, John. "'Sound of Music' Ratings Sing for NBC Thursday Night." *Variety*. December 6, 2013. http://variety.com/2013/tv/news/sound-of-music-ratings-sing-for-nbc thursdaynight-1200925968/.

[2] "All Time Box Office: Domestic Grosses Adjusted for Ticket Price Inflation." *BoxOfficeMojo.com*. http://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/adjusted.htm.

Another milestone, far less famous but more relevant, in the mainstream American cinephile consciousness of Austrian film is the November 26, 2006, article in the *New York Times* titled "Greetings From the Land of Feel-Bad Cinema."[3] Dennis Lim's essay, published on the occasion of the Film Society of the Lincoln Center's series on contemporary Austrian cinema, summarizes that "the salient quality of Austrian film's new wave is its willingness to confront the abject and emphasize the negative. In recent years this tiny country with a population the size of New York City's has become something like the world capital of feel-bad cinema." While it somewhat oversimplifies the situation, the *Times* article and the film series it accompanied are evidence of the recent renaissance in Austrian film and of its renewed presence on the international stage, for the first time since cinema's earliest decades.

In 2012, Austria took home two of the top Oscars…kind of. Austrian director Michael Haneke, on whom most contemporary Austrian film scholarship is focused, won Best Foreign-Language Picture for *Amour*, which is more French than Austrian, and Christoph Waltz, who was born in Austria but also holds a German passport,[4] took home his second Best Supporting Actor statuette for his role as a German bounty hunter in Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained,* a Hollywood hit. Even qualified by the many connections to other countries, though, the night was a triumph for Austria, building on the 2008 Best Foreign-Language Picture win for Stefan Ruzowitzky's *Die Fälscher*/*The Counterfeiters,* the 2009 nomination of Götz Spielmann's *Revanche* in the same category,

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[3] Lim, Dennis. "Greetings From the Land of Feel-Bad Cinema." *New York Times,* Nov 26, 2006. http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/26/movies/26lim.html.

[4] "Waltz to become Austrian citizen." *Wienerzeitung.at.* August 26, 2010. http://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/english_news/38618_Waltz-to-become Austrian-citizen.html.

and Waltz's first Best Supporting Actor win for Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds* in 2010. All of these Academy nods further support scholar Robert Dassanowsky and others' claim that a 'New Austrian Film' is beginning to thrive and make itself felt in film circles around the world.[5]

The rise of the so-called, loosely-gathered 'New Austrian Film,' the beginnings of which are typically delimited by Barbara Albert's *Nordrand/Northern Skirts* winning awards at festivals all over Europe in 1999, has been largely based on expanding recognition at international festivals and the worldwide prominence of stars such as Michael Haneke and Christoph Waltz. Austria's recent productivity can in part be attributed to increased state financial support; on November 25, 1980, Austria became the last western European nation to establish a national film subsidy (the *Filmförderungsgesetz,* or Film Subsidy Act), which went into effect in May 1981.[6] The Austrian Film Institute was also founded in 1981. Additionally, in contrast with austerity measures slashing funding across most of the continent and in response to an open letter from Haneke and others, in 2013 Austria increased its national film funding by about $4.5 million per year, to about $26 million.[7]

Despite this support for domestic production, major Hollywood releases still dominate the Austrian box office. For example, in 2012 the top film was the Twentieth Century Fox animated comedy sequel *Ice Age: Continental Drift*, which took in $9.5

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[5] Dassanowsky, Robert. "Austria *Hungry*: The Return of a Film Nation," *Bright Lights Film Journal*, Issue 51, February 2006. http://brightlightsfilm.com/51/51austria.php#.UghVE9LCaSo.

[6] Austrian Film Institute website: Tasks and Aims. http://www.filminstitut.at/en/tasks-and-aims/. A copy of the updated Film Subsidy Act from 2010 is available at this site. The German-language version specifies that the original law was created November 25, 1980.

[7] "Austria Boosts Film Funding." *The Hollywood Reporter*. October 17, 2012. http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/austria-boosts-film-funding-379589.

million on about 950,000 tickets sold.[8] In addition to Hollywood, Austrian releases must also compete with popular films from Germany that do not even need dubbing or subtitling. However, slotted between the two extremes of art-house fare aimed at an international but elite, niche audience – the main thrust of what has been counted as New Austrian Film – and Hollywood blockbusters meant indiscriminately for the entire world – like *Ice Age* – is the growing domestic commercial industry, key to which is a local genre, the *Austrokomödie*, or Austro-comedy. As will be further discussed in the next chapter, culturally-specific genres such as this one offer one useful way to approach the study of national cinemas.

In her chapter in *New Austrian Film*, a 2011 compilation of essays edited by Dassanowsky and Oliver C. Speck, "National Box-office Hits or International 'Arthouse'? The New *Austrokomödie*," Regina Standún analyzes this increasingly popular, quintessentially Austrian genre. Seven Austro-comedies (also known as cabaret films, or *Kabarettfilme*, because of their connection with the Austrian tradition of *Kabarett*) appear on a 2006 list of the top-ten recent domestic box-office hits in Austria. By far the most successful has been Harald Sicheritz's 1998 *Hinterholz 8*, which sold well over 600,000 tickets and of which Standún writes, "It is astounding that [the film], for instance, attracted almost the same number of viewers in Austria as Hollywood blockbusters did."[9] The Austro-comedy will be described and analyzed in much greater detail in later chapters, but essentially, "they portray one or more stand-up comedians showing the harsh side of life in Austria, which strangely enough makes the audience

[8] "International box office snapshots." *Variety*. January 12, 2013.http://variety.com/2013/film/news/international-box-office-snapshots-1118064545/.
[9] Standún, Regina. "National Box-Office Hits or International 'Arthouse'? The New *Austrokomödie*." *New Austrian Film*, ed. Dassanowsky and Speck. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), p.320.

laugh, although sometimes it might be laughter that sticks in the throat."[10] Significantly, as Standún emphasizes, "The success of the *Kabarettfilm*, the Austro-comedy, is perceived as a specifically Austrian phenomenon."[11] The Austro-comedy is therefore worth investigating for what it, against the contrasting backdrops of *The Sound of Music* and New Austrian Film, might reveal about Austria, Austrian cinema, and, most broadly, the conceptualization of national cinemas in general.

Among the top ten Austrian films in terms of domestic box office since the federal subsidy began in 1981 are three Austro-comedies that can be grouped together as the "Brenner trilogy." This unofficial title will soon need to be amended, as a fourth film is slated to arrive in 2014, and there may eventually be as many as seven in the series. But for now, the Brenner trilogy consists of three films: *Komm, süßer Tod*/*Come, Sweet Death* (2000), *Silentium!* (2004), and *Der Knochenmann*/*The Bone Man* (2009). *The Bone Man* is currently the fifth-most-attended domestic film since 1981 with 280,342 viewers, while *Come, Sweet Death* is seventh with 231,339 viewers and *Silentium!* is tenth with 205,516 viewers.[12] All were directed by Wolfgang Murnberger, all star comedian/actor Josef Hader as the eponymous Brenner, and all are based on best-selling, award-winning crime novels written/published in the late 1990s by Wolf Haas. (Haas has written seven books featuring Brenner, of which two, including *The Bone Man*, have been translated into English for the Melville House International Crime series. The third to be translated, *Come, Sweet Death*, will be released in July 2014.[13]) The three men also co-wrote the screenplays, and most of the same team worked on all three films, including

[10] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits" p.323.
[11] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits" p.323.
[12] Austrian Film Institute website: Statistics. http://filminstitut.at/de/besuchszahlen/.
[13] See Melville House International Crime series website: http://www.mhpbooks.com/books/come-sweet-death/.

supporting actor Simon Schwarz, cinematographer Peter von Haller, editor Evi Romen, production designers Andreas Donhauser and Renate Martin, and costume designer Martina List. The Austrian band the Sofa Surfers created and performed all three soundtracks (Americans may remember the group from a brief contribution to the soundtrack of Ben Stiller's 2001 *Zoolander*). The three films were produced by Danny Krausz and others through DOR Films, a leading Austrian production company founded in 1988 by Krausz and Milan Dor, an Austrian producer, screenwriter, director, and actor, "with the aim of creating an innovative production studio for young Austrian directors."[14] Nearly everyone involved in the production of these films is Austrian, which is somewhat unusual in this era of transnational collaborations and lends substance to the claim that there is something specifically Austrian about them.

The Brenner trilogy features as its protagonist the unwilling everyman detective Simon Brenner. The stories, all darkly funny crime thrillers, take place in an unmistakably Austrian milieu (but one likely unfamiliar to tourists who have been presented with only the shiny imperial bits). And the dialect is so heavily *Wienerisch* (Viennese) that the films must be subtitled into *Hochdeutsch* (High German) for distribution abroad. The films' plots can be summarized as follows:

Come, Sweet Death (2000), the first collaboration between Murnberger, Haas, and Hader, introduces viewers to Simon Brenner, a former police detective, as he apathetically adjusts to his new job in Vienna's *Kreuzretter* private ambulance service, which is engaged in a turf war with a competitor. The rivalry centers on which group, Brenner's *Kreuzretter* or the thuggish rival *Rettungsbund*, can secure more donations by "rescuing" wealthy widows in order to worm their way into a will and then kill the

[14] "About Us." *Dor-Film.com*. http://www.dor-film.com/page.php?modul=HTMLPages&pid=23.

patients off; the paramedics inject glucose into the veins of the elderly diabetics, neatly inflicting "sugar shock" (hyperglycemia) but in a way undetectable from an autopsy, and then collect their inheritances. *Come, Sweet Death* begins with a pair of murders, the investigation into which sets off the unraveling of the whole "sweet death" racket. (The title of the film also refers to a line in a Johann Sebastian Bach cantata; while he was German, this can still be considered an allusion to Austria's famous musical history.) Brenner is sucked into the inquiry by his eager colleague Berti (Schwarz), a "civie geek" working in place of his required military service, and along the way he is further encouraged by an encounter with his high-school classmate Klara (Barbara Rudnik), beautiful but contemplating suicide. Almost against his will, and not without more bloodshed, our cynical protagonist disentangles the threads; as the film ends, he and a co-worker stroll off along the *Donauinsel* (the manmade Danube Island in the northern part of the city) as the voiceover narrator contemplates Brenner's future.

For the second film, the scene shifts to Salzburg, four hours west of Vienna by rail and perhaps best known outside of Austria as the picturesque setting for *The Sound of Music*, as well as the birthplace of Mozart and the home of the *Salzburger Festspiele* music festival. In *Silentium!* (2004), though, the hills are alive less with do-re-mi than with screams and bodies being shoved to their deaths. As the narrator announces, using one of the books' catchphrases, "jetzt ist schon wieder was passiert!" (**"**now something else has happened**"**); Brenner finds himself caught up in another mystery. The son-in-law of the head of the *Salzburger Festspiele* has, apparently, conveniently committed suicide immediately after hurling damaging allegations of sexual abuse at the Catholic Church, but his fetching young widow (Maria Köstlinger) believes he was murdered to preserve

his silence. The viewer knows from the first moments of the film that she is correct. Brenner finagles his way into a handyman job at the Catholic boarding school in question; once inside, he plays bloody games of Foosball, uncovers the sex trafficking of Filipina virgins, nearly dies in a boiling shower, and ultimately stops popping headache pills just long enough to, with Berti's help, reveal the corruption at the heart of the whole enterprise. At the end of the film, Brenner and Berti are relieved to return to Vienna, once again with the criminal apprehended but still without a lady friend for Brenner.

Having skewered institutions in both Vienna and Salzburg, for *The Bone Man* (2009) Murnberger, Hader, and Haas turn their attention to the provincial Austrian countryside, specifically the *Gasthaus Löschenkohl*, a traditional inn/restaurant surrounded by snowy forest and well-known for its unusually delicious *Backhendl* (fried chicken). Per Berti's request, Brenner arrives at the tranquil Löschenkohl in search of a yellow Volkswagen Beetle and a Herr Horvath, who is late in returning the rental car to Berti's firm. While he does not find Horvath, at least not immediately, he does find a gorgeous woman behind the bar (Birgit Minichmayer); the inn's owner (Josef Bierbichler), mixed up in a prostitution-murder-blackmail situation in Bratislava; the owner's angry, snake-eyed, Porsche-driving son Pauli (Christoph Luser); and, most alarmingly of all, a human finger in a basement drain. In the final third of the film, the inn hosts a masquerade ball as part of the *Fasching* season, during which all these strands come together amid 80s pop tunes and colorful, costumed whirls. Berti himself turns up to find that Herr Horvath is not who he had expected, while Brenner barely survives the gory proceedings beneath the festivities. He and Berti must rush back to Vienna to have

his own finger reattached; waiting underneath a grey sky for helicopter service after having car trouble, they once again express relief to be returning to the city.

In addition to the fact that they are all adaptations of Wolf Haas novels starring Josef Hader and directed by Wolfgang Murnberger, *Come, Sweet Death*, *Silentium!*, and *The Bone Man* clearly share other similarities as well. In each film, Brenner somewhat reluctantly undertakes the investigation of a crime, motivated both by his younger friend and colleague Berti and the persuasive presence of an attractive woman. The films are crime thrillers more than mysteries, as the viewer almost always knows "whodunit" (if not usually *why* they did it) from the beginning and the pleasure is in watching Brenner navigate towards the solution – at which, almost despite himself, he always manages to arrive. Each film also incorporates some romance, especially *The Bone Man*. This mix of elements makes the films difficult to categorize generically, but with their variously-proportioned hybrid combinations of crime thriller, black comedy, horror, and romance, they fall perfectly into Standún's description of the Austro-comedy.

As detailed above, the films have been very popular in Austria, each drawing hundreds of thousands of viewers and building up a cult following; *Come, Sweet Death* earned the *Romypreis*, named after beloved Austrian actress Romy Schneider, for the most successful Austrian film in 2001. Critics and reviewers repeatedly describe Brenner and the films as "typisch österreichisch" ("typically Austrian"), a phrase Austrians love to toss about but which would richly reward further explication/analysis, especially for a foreign audience. Despite their esteem in Austria, the films have attracted little (strikingly, hardly even in Germany) international or scholarly attention, in English or German. There are many possible explanations for why the films have been so successful

in Austria but largely ignored elsewhere, among them: Americans and others with little knowledge of Austrian history or culture may find them baffling or uninteresting; humor in particular does not travel well across linguistic and cultural boundaries; the Austro-comedy genre has no direct referent to audiences familiar with Hollywood-defined genres; and (perhaps for all of these reasons) the films have simply not been screened much outside of the German-speaking world, and even more rarely outside of Europe. All of these factors will be considered in more detail throughout this project.

Various historical and cultural facts make Austrian cinema particularly interesting, including the World War II-era exodus of major film talents to (and resulting influence on) Hollywood (and therefore the rest of the world); the Viennese love of and pride in traditional high culture, such as music and theatre; Austria's twentieth-century transformation from imperial monarchy to tiny, neutral state, and the resulting issues of national identity; Austria's relationship with Germany and with their dark shared past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, "coping with the past," or the lack thereof); and the multiculturalism of what remains of a former empire located at the crossroads of East and West. With their Austrian director, star, and author, the Brenner films are among the most purely national of collaborations imaginable, and this project will examine the ways they reflect, fit into, or speak to all of these influences. It will investigate the continuities both with historical Austrian film traditions (e.g., cabaret films, *Heimatfilme*) and with contemporary Austrian films (e.g., the work of Haneke, Ulrich Seidl, etc., the trend of pessimism) in order to situate the Brenner films within this larger context and discover what is revealed about Austrian cinema, and how Austrians see themselves and their place in the world today. Why are these films popular in Austria but, apparently, almost

un-exportable? What concrete evidence might they contain for an Austrian "national cinema"? How can these films be made sense of for an American or English-speaking audience, and why do they need to be "translated?"

While "translation" is a difficult word to define cleanly, fundamentally the process involves taking a text and making it accessible to a group of people other than those for whom it was originally intended. However, effective translation is not simply the literal substitution (or subtitling) of a word in one language for a word in another; not only language differences, but also cultural differences, must be acknowledged and overcome in order for the new audience to obtain an accurate sense of the original. As Antony Shuugar writes of literary translation, "People talk about untranslatable words, but in a way, there's no such thing. It may take three words, or an entire sentence, or even an interpolated paragraph, but any word can be translated. Short of swelling a book into an encyclopedia, however, there is no way of dealing with the larger problem: untranslatable *worlds.*"[15] Ultimately, this project will attempt to translate the three films of the Brenner trilogy from their Austrian context to an American audience, while examining why it is necessary to do so, and why they are beloved in Austria but not (yet?) across the ocean. In part, this task will involve carving the Austro-comedy genre, and these three films in particular, into sharper relief by making contrasts against some other works, many more familiar to American audiences, already mentioned – *The Sound of Music*, the films of Haneke and other international art-house stars of New Austrian Film, the Hollywood blockbuster, genre exemplar *Hinterholz 8*, the novels on which the

[15] Shugaar, Antony. "Translation as a Performing Art." *New York Times*, January 27, 2014. http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/01/27/william-weaver-and-translation-as-a-performing-art/?_php=true&_type=blogs&ref=opinion&_r=0 .

films are based – and others not yet mentioned, among them the Coen brothers' films (especially *Fargo*) and Ernst Marischka's 1950s *Sissi* trilogy.

In addition to providing background on how national cinemas have been considered and conceptualized in Film Studies, Chapter One will contextualize the films by including a brief overview of Austrian history and a snapshot of the country's geography, culture, and politics today. Chapter One will also locate the films within a chronology of the Austrian film industry throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and introduce in more detail the popular local genre, the Austro-comedy, to which the films belong. Chapters Two, Three, and Four will focus on the three films in order of their release, highlighting prominent characteristics of each as an example of an Austro-comedy, an adaptation of a novel, and a specifically Austrian work of art. In Chapter Two, the analysis of *Come, Sweet Death* will center on the characterization of its anti-hero protagonist, Simon Brenner, familiar to local audiences from the books but appearing here on-screen for the first time; the depiction of his milieu, the non-touristy side of Vienna; and the establishment of an unusual film language to adapt the remarkable voice of Wolf Haas' narrator into a different medium. *Silentium!* will be examined in Chapter Three, particularly the ways in which the film disrupts Austria's well-known guiding narratives, putting the lie to stereotypes of Salzburg as simply a tourist's Baroque paradise (and the setting for *The Sound of Music* and the glamorous *Salzburger Festspiele*) and questioning, if not smashing, people's trust in long-standing institutions such as the Catholic Church. In Chapter Four, the investigation of *The Bone Man* will focus on the use of Austrian dialect as a cultural marker and unpack the two key sets of tensions, between Austria and neighboring countries and Vienna and the

provincial countryside, that collide in a masquerade ball at the end of the film. Finally, a brief Conclusion will tie together any loose strands and reexamine some of the questions raised in this Introduction.

Chapter One:
The Austro-Comedy in Context

National Cinema

At first glance, it seems simple enough: any "national cinema" consists of all the films that come from that nation, and from watching them one can learn a significant amount about the culture of the nation in question. Although largely assumed to be the case until the 1980s, and often relied upon in the distribution and marketing of foreign films, this apparently straightforward understanding needs to be problematized on several levels to make accurate sense of non-Hollywood cinema. As Stephen Crofts argues in his chapter "Concepts of National Cinema," the re-conceptualization of the nation-state, as well as the complicated nature of any film industry, require that analyses of national cinema take under thoughtful consideration not just the films themselves, but the contexts that surround them. Only then can one begin to evaluate what facets of culture and national identity they may reveal.[16]

First, the concept of the nation itself has been problematized. In recent decades Benedict Anderson and others have "advanced non-essentialist conceptions of the nation-state and national identity, arguing for both the constructedness of the 'imagined community' which constitutes the nation-state and its historical limits as a post-Enlightenment organizer of populations."[17] These theorists do not take the existence of national boundaries for granted as some sort of natural or necessary organization of the world, but instead attempt to illuminate how and why they came to be, and how and why

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[16] Crofts, Stephen. "Concepts of National Cinema." *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*. Ed. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp.385-394.
[17] Crofts, "Concepts of National Cinema," p.385.

these somewhat arbitrary delineations inspire such fervent patriotism that people will sacrifice their lives for their country. Anderson famously defined the nation as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."[18] He further explains each of the definition's key terms:

> It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion … The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations … It is imagined as *sovereign* because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm … and finally, it is imagined as a *community* because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may occur in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.[19]

This definition captures the scope and historical-boundedness of today's nations; what was it that allowed for the establishment and entrenchment of these imagined, limited, sovereign communities in the latter half of the second millennium C.E.?

While Anderson investigates a variety of contributing factors, the most significant, he argues, is what he terms the rise of 'print capitalism.' In light of the decline of the previously all-powerful religious communities and dynastic realms, it is

> No surprise then that the search was on, so to speak, for a new way of linking fraternity, power and time meaningfully together. Nothing perhaps more precipitated this search, nor made it more fruitful, than print-capitalism, which made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways.[20]

This early print capitalism – Gutenberg Bibles, daily newspapers, eventually novels, etc. – is the ancestor to today's commoditized media, including cinema. Since its inception in various forms, media has always been the glue that ties nations, full of citizens who will never encounter one another, together; by expressing what unifies them and demarcating what differentiates them from others, media connects individuals and helps to draw these

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[18] Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (London: Verso, 1991), p.6.
[19] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p.6-7.
[20] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p.36.

imaginary boundaries. In addition, more practical factors like distribution area and language of media determine who is 'in' and who is 'out.'

Anderson rightly placed the establishment of nations in historical context, as a phenomenon specific to the past few hundred years; however, two somewhat opposing worldwide trends are now redrawing the maps. Decolonization and globalization are further complicating the concept of the nation-state, as well as the possibilities of the film industry, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. On the one hand, the world is fragmenting into ever-smaller pieces as (mostly) European powers' vast empires crumble. Peoples everywhere are gaining their freedom from distant imperial overlords; as Crofts points out, "The former Yugoslavia – with its five nations, three religions, four languages, and two alphabets – stands as a grim emblem of the historical role of the state in suppressing ethnic, religious, and cultural differences."[21] African countries are under native rule; what was once the Soviet Union is now (nominally, at least, in light of recent happenings in Ukraine) numerous free nations; and there no longer exists any empire on which the sun never sets. Though its dissolution took place at the beginning of the twentieth century, the former Austrian Habsburg empire exemplifies this trend, as will be described in the Austrian History section below. In addition, independence movements in places like Scotland and Catalonia, Spain,[22] suggest that if anything, the trend towards fragmentation is accelerating. In his discussion of eight types of nation-state cinema, Crofts lists "Third Cinemas" and "Sub-state cinemas,"[23] both varieties meeting along the

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[21] Crofts, "Concepts of National Cinemas," p. 386.
[22] See The Guardian's coverage of the Scottish independence movement: http://www.theguardian.com/politics/scottish-independence; see coverage of Catalan movement in World Affairs Journal: http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/domain-spain-how-likely-catalan-independence.
[23] Crofts, "Concepts of National Cinemas," p. 390.

"Political (anti-state)" and "Other or outside state provision" axes. Not only is the political map becoming increasingly carved up, but the number of potential voices in cinema is multiplying as well, as previously marginalized groups become able to express their own ideas. In addition to more open political climates, this increasing voice for marginalized groups can be partially attributed to the availability of inexpensive, portable cameras.

On the other hand, globalization has brought almost the entire world closer together. Crofts writes, "Historically, the 1980s and 1990s have put further pressure on the national, with the global spread of corporate capital, the victory of finance over industrial capital, the consolidation of global markets, the speed and range of electronic communications, and the further weakening of national cultural and economic boundaries which has followed the disintegration of Soviet communism and Pax Americana."[24] In the 2000s, all of this has intensified. The Internet, and handheld access to it via smartphone, has connected everyone to an unprecedented degree; McDonalds and Starbucks offer identical treats on what sometimes feels like every street corner on the planet; and it is nearly impossible to escape the influence of Hollywood, no matter where on Earth one may go. Every country's culture has become hybridized. Moreover, in contrast to the trend of fragmentation, the establishment of the European Union with the Maastricht Treaty in 1993 has further complicated the concept of nation-state and national identity for its member states. This has contributed to the development of a continent-wide European identity, but also, paradoxically, to a backlash promoting much stronger national identity in some member states. As Gregory Slysz writes in *The Quarterly Review*, "The manufacture of common [European] symbolism is a poor

[24] Crofts, "Concepts of National Cinemas," p. 386.

substitute for the cultural, emotional ties, ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic factors and collective memories that bind a people together within the embrace of a nation."[25]

In addition to the now-complicated conceptualization of the nation-state, the nature of film as an artistic and industrial medium presents further factors that muddy a common-sense understanding of national cinema. First, unlike some art forms, cinema is rarely the work of a solitary artist, but instead is the product of industrial complexes of varying degrees of vastness and with diverse organizational structures. In many cases, films are collaborations between several nations, in terms of both financing and creating them, as well as distributing and exhibiting them after the fact, further complicating the idea of a film belonging to any one nation. For these reasons, Crofts draws on Andrew Higson's "The Concept of National Cinema" to argue that "nation-state cinemas should be defined not only in terms of 'the films produced by and within a particular nation-state,' but also in terms of distribution and exhibition, audiences, and critical and cultural discourses."[26] Towards this goal, Crofts outlines several factors that analyses of national cinemas should include; to those Higson listed, Crofts adds textuality, national-cultural specificity, the cultural specificity of genres and nation-state cinema 'movements', the role of the state, and the global range of nation-state cinemas. The most important of these for understanding contemporary domestic commercial filmmaking in Austria is the cultural specificity of genres, particularly as manifested in the Austro-comedy.

The Austro-Comedy Genre

[25] Slysz, Gregory. "Why the quest to establish a European 'national' identity will fail." *Quarterly Review*, January 8, 2013. http://www.quarterly-review.org/?p=1159.
[26] Crofts, "Concepts of National Cinemas," p.386.

It should by now be evident that the concept of "national cinema" is not so straightforward as it may first appear. However, the fact remains that many films have a cultural specificity, that they unmistakably arise from and make sense in a particular context, especially when they are neither Hollywood-style blockbusters meant to appeal to the entire world nor art films aimed at a more limited, but still international, audience. In countries like Austria where dubbed or subtitled Hollywood productions dominate the multiplexes, domestic mainstream entertainment films must set themselves apart to attract viewers; emphasizing the locally and specifically *Austrian* is one thing Hollywood cannot do. (When it tries, *The Sound of Music* is what results. Although the film is entertaining, its depiction of Austria relies on and reinforces romanticized stereotypes and does not reflect the real issues facing Austria either at the time it depicts or the time it was made. *The Sound of Music*, like the theatrical musical from which it was adapted, was made by and for Americans, not Austrians.) This differentiated cultural specificity often manifests itself in the coalescence of local genres: "genres, in this respect, are seen less in industrial terms than as codifications of socio-cultural tendencies."[27] While any one film or even genre can of course not be assumed to represent the perspective of a whole nation, such recurring trends are worth investigating for what they can reveal about the culture from which they spring.

As noted in the Introduction, Regina Standún has analyzed the Austro-comedy genre, which is very popular in Austria today despite the somewhat self-critical stance of the films. Standún links the Austro-comedy to the tradition in Austrian theater of the *Volksstück*, or folk play, which offers "a critical sociological and sometimes also

[27] Crofts, "Concepts of National Cinemas," p. 387.

psychological dissection of society."[28] She explains how the *Volksstück* functions: "They utilize preexisting theater traditions, and recognizable plot patterns, characters and language in order to subvert them. The audience's expectations are not fulfilled and, ideally, the shock should make the audience attempt to question the status quo of society."[29] Famous Austrian writers of the *Volksstück* include Johann Nestroy, Ödön von Horváth, and Bertolt Brecht. The *Volksstück* is so named, as Standún points out, because "The intended target group is a mass audience, the *Volk*, the people."[30] However, this attempt to reach a wider audience did not quite work: "despite the efforts that were put into making the theater a place for the *Volk*, the people, it has remained a space for an intellectual minority in Austria."[31] While the theater remains prohibitively high-brow, cinema's egalitarian accessibility allows the self-censuring perspective of the *Volksstück* to reach a much broader public. As compared to earlier, more experimental attempts to incorporate the perspective of the *Volksstück* into cinema (and, as will be discussed later, to sour the sickly sweet sentimentalism of the *Heimatfilm*), the Austro-comedy has been very successful in achieving its aim. As Standún writes, "Since the beginning of the 1990s, the Austro-comedy appears to have bridged the gap between arthouse and mainstream film in a way that has attracted a very wide audience in Austria."[32] Building on a preexisting perspective in Austrian art – that grows out of self-criticism – the Austro-comedy has carved out a prosperous, practical niche between the high-brow and the strictly commercial that appeals to wide domestic audiences.

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[28] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p.322.
[29] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p.322.
[30] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p.322.
[31] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p.322.
[32] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p.323.

While some facets of the Austro-comedy appear in films from other European countries, such as the presence of stand-up comedians like Lee Evans, Ricky Gervais, and Mel Smith in films in Britain,[33] nowhere else have they achieved such resounding critical and box-office success. Underscoring the Austrian-ness of the genre, Standún argues that "Austrian film production companies and directors have invented a type of film that seems to suit the Austrian audience in particular."[34] How has the Austro-comedy become this almost purely national phenomenon, and what characteristic features do the Brenner films display that correspond with Standún's categorization? (While she mentions *Come, Sweet Death* in her essay, she does not discuss any of the films in detail.) What does the Austro-comedy have to say about Austria, and vice versa? The exploration of these questions will require a closer look at Austria, its film industry, and each of the three films.

Austrian History and the *Heimatfilm*

Austria is a particularly compelling example of a nation that has experienced significant boundary chaos and as a result has a complicated and fascinating national identity. The area has been settled dating back at least to the Roman era, when what is now Vienna was a far-flung encampment known as Vindobona; the first mention of the name *Ostarrichi* (very close to the present-day *Österreich*) in print was in 996. However, most famously and importantly, Austria was the nucleus of the Habsburg monarchy for more than six centuries, from 1278 to 1918. While to fully detail Habsburg history is outside the scope of this project and would require several thick volumes, some key

[33] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p.323.
[34] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p.323.

events and figures are important to make note of for how they have determined and continue to influence Austrian culture and national identity.

At the height of its powers, the Habsburg monarchy controlled a significant portion of Europe including the Iberian Peninsula, parts of Italy, and what is now the Netherlands, in addition to almost all of central Europe and even, from 1863-1867, Mexico. While it was known for "making love not war" (in other words, marrying advantageously rather than amassing new territories through military force), the permeable membrane of the Habsburg empire continually welcomed new peoples and shifted amidst pressure from all directions. Two of the most important dates in Austrian history are 1529 and 1683, the two Turkish sieges during which Vienna came the closest to falling to the Ottoman Empire. Legend has it that the second siege had another great impact – supposedly, the retreating Turks left behind a bag of coffee beans, which the Austrians ground up and began to enjoy, thus sparking the coffeehouse culture for which the country is still renowned. Two of the most famous Habsburg monarchs are Empress Maria Theresia, the first female ruler, who reigned from 1740-1780, and her son Josef II, who reigned from 1780-1790. Both epitomize the "enlightened absolutism" of the era, as they enforced progressive reforms in education, sanitation, and other areas but maintained total governmental power. It was under Maria Theresia that Schönbrunn, the summer palace on the outskirts of town, achieved the rococo flair that lends it its splendor, photographed nonstop by tourists today. Both Maria Theresia and her son also exemplify a larger trend toward conservatism that is evident throughout the Habsburg reign.

In 1848, an eighteen-year-old Franz Josef became emperor when his uncle was forced to abdicate as revolutions fighting for democracy broke out all across Europe; considered conservative if not reactionary for many of his views and policies, he would reign for sixty-eight years until his death in 1916. One of the most lasting signs of Franz Josef's reign is the scenic *Ringstrasse* road encircling the city's old town, now the touristy, upscale first district. In the 1860s, Franz Josef ordered the demolition of the medieval-era wall around Vienna's center and, in a show of imperial might, erected in its place a series of neo-(classical, baroque, renaissance) buildings, including the Parliament, the Rathaus (City Hall), the Burgtheater, and the University, along a wide, tree-lined boulevard. These buildings symbolize his lasting commitment to the unquestionable authority of the monarchy, despite revolutionary rumblings around the continent. A century and a half later, they are still the stars of Vienna, exalted by every guidebook and impossible to miss on a vacation or in day-to-day life. Notably, none of these buildings can be spotted in any of the Brenner films (two of which, *Come, Sweet Death* and *The Bone Man*, are at least partially set in Vienna), reinforcing the films' attempt to move beyond the stereotypically lovely images usually associated with the city and country.

Although he was promised to her older sister, against his mother's will Franz Josef married sixteen-year-old Bavarian princess Elisabeth in 1854. While she was (and still is) celebrated for her beauty, slenderness, and flowing chestnut locks, her life and their marriage were not happy. Empress Elisabeth, often known as Sisi or Sissi, spent much of her time away from her husband and children, travelling to health spas in places like Bad Ischl and Corfu; she had such a strong connection with Hungary, which in 1867 officially became part of the dual Austro-Hungarian monarchy, that rumors of an affair

with a high-ranking official there abound. (Evidence suggests that Franz Josef had a lengthy affair with a Viennese actress.) Sadly, in 1889 the couple's only son, crown prince Rudolf, is believed to have murdered his mistress and committed suicide in his hunting lodge in the Vienna Woods, an event still swathed in mystery and known as the Mayerling Incident. Dressed in mourning black for the rest of her life, Sissi was assassinated in Geneva in 1898 by an Italian anarchist who had originally intended to murder the Duke of Orleans; when the Duke did not show, Sissi suffered as the anarchist's backup target. Sissi has been compared with Princess Diana of England, another beautiful and out-of-place monarch who gained immortality with a tragically early death. Due in large part to Ernst Marischka's 1950s *Sissi* trilogy, and especially the magnetism of its star Romy Schneider, Sissi has become a cult heroine and the focal point of much of Vienna's tourist-oriented marketing. She typifies the Austrian tendency to smooth over unpleasantness in favor of presenting a happy, consumable, and often kitschy image of imperial grandeur; with their self-critical outlook, the Brenner films work directly against the type of mythologizing that has repurposed her actually rather depressing story. Interestingly, *Elisabeth*, which premiered in 1992 and has gone on to be the most successful musical in German-language history, approaches Sissi's story in a darker, more realistic way, chronicling her lifelong dalliance with a black-garbed Death. While airbrushed images of Sissi smile from advertisements all over tourist Vienna, generations of Austrians further removed from the challenges of the early twentieth century seem more willing to engage with the negative realities of her, and their own, history, through works of art such as the Brenner films.

In 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Franz Josef's nephew and the heir to the throne after Rudolf's death, was assassinated in Sarajevo, causing Franz Josef to declare what became World War I. By the end of the war, Franz Josef was dead and so was the Habsburg monarchy. In the 1919 Treaty of Saint Germain, the Allies forbade Austria from uniting politically or economically with Germany without the League of Nations' approval, and the independent First Austrian Republic was declared. However, on March 12, 1938, Adolf Hitler and the German army officially "annexed" Austria (an event known in Austria and elsewhere by the controversial, blame-evading term "*Anschluss*"), abolishing *Österreich* as a nation and renaming it the *Ostmark*, or eastern part of the German Reich. Anti-Semitism has a long, dark history in Austria and Fascism had been gaining power there throughout the 1930s; most Austrians greeted the arrival of the Nazis with enthusiasm. Contemporary photographs show thousands of cheering citizens listening to Hitler's speech on Heldenplatz, already a politically-charged square due to its location in the center of the former imperial palace in Vienna. Throughout the war, Austrian Nazis committed horrific crimes including murdering millions of innocent people in concentration camps such as Mauthausen in Upper Austria. However, in the 1943 Moscow Declaration, the Allies pronounced Austria Nazi Germany's first victim and began making plans for the re-establishment of a free Austrian state after the war. The divided Allies occupied Vienna from 1945 to 1955, an era of rubble, scarcity, and Cold War intrigue memorably captured in *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949).

By 1955, Austria had fulfilled the requirements of the Allies and the Khrushchev Thaw had improved relations between East and West; on May 15 of that year the *Staatsvertrag*, or Austrian State Treaty, was signed, establishing the democratic Second

Republic and promising everlasting neutrality. Nothing comparable to Germany's Nuremberg Trials took place, and life was pretty much allowed to resume as normal. The so-called "victim myth" (*Opfermythos*), which persisted for much of the twentieth century, developed as a result, as Austrians avoided responsibility for and discussion of the recent past and focused not on making amends, but distancing themselves from all things German: "Unlike the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or 'coming to terms with the past,' which the West Germans had pursued since 1945 in most aspects of society and culture … Austria, which had been labeled a victim of Nazi Germany by the Moscow Declaration of 1943 [a tacit pardon for Austria's transgressions], preferred to close the subject."[35] (While Germany did begin the process of coming to terms with the past earlier than Austria did, it is important to note that it was not immediate in Germany, either.) The victim myth pervaded all aspects of mid-century Austrian culture, including cinema. In their introduction to *New Austrian Film*, Dassanowsky and Speck summarize the nature of film culture in immediate post-war Austria:

> The myth of sovereignty, the search for a future role in Cold War Europe, and the de-Germanization of its immediate past in favor of the 'good' history of the imperial era and Vienna's artistic heyday, merely shut down the audience's desire for critical approaches in favor of escapism, unproblematized national allegory, and visual pleasure. The Second Republic, which officially began in 1955, and the wearisome move towards it since 1945, marked a return to traditional film genres in comedy and drama, in the *Heimatfilm*, and the historical biopic.[36]

The *Heimatfilm* in particular is a key part of Austrian film history.

While it originated in the silent era, the *Heimatfilm* flourished as a popular genre in both Germany and Austria after World War II. *Heimat*, literally "homeland" and related to the concept of the nation-state, is a complicated idea to translate: "it was a concept based in the Romantic era's celebration of the land, the common folk, peasantry,

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[35] Dassanowsky, Robert. *Austrian Cinema: A History*. McFarland, Jefferson, 2005, p. 114.
[36] Dassanowsky, Robert and Oliver C. Speck. "Introduction: New Austrian Film: The Non-exceptional Exception." *New Austrian Film*. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), p. 5.

and the mythical, often mystical, powers of nature."[37] *Heimatfilme* draw on this pastoral ideal in stories about love, family, and friendship, usually set in charming rural landscapes and featuring traditional customs, music, and dress such as dirndl and lederhosen. One classic Austrian example is the aforementioned, beloved *Sissi* trilogy, which romanticizes the marriage of Emperor Franz Josef and his Bavarian bride Elisabeth and which still plays every year at Christmas on Austrian television. While the Nazis incorporated a racist interpretation of *Heimat* into their ideology, making the term problematic in Germany for decades, "The postwar *Heimatfilm* in Austria cleansed itself immediately of any previous pan-German notions. Austrian landscapes, particularly Alpine settings, were again highlighted, along with the rural and Catholic populations."[38] Especially in Austria, the *Heimatfilm* was part of a larger cultural pattern of ignoring dark recent history in favor of reaching back to a 'purer' time; films set before the Nazi era, or in a world in which Mauthausen had never happened, allowed Austrians to pretend, if only for a moment, that it never had.

While *Heimatfilme* are still made today, the genre has evolved in a way comparable to the American Western; most *Heimatfilme* from recent decades either parody the clichés of the genre or integrate an awareness of the darker undertones of the era they depict. For example, Dassanowsky explains how Stefan Ruzowitzky's 1998 *Die Siebtelbauern*/*The Inheritors* unsettles an idealized image of natural beauty with an awareness of the harsh realities of life at the time:

> Although cinematographer Peter von Haller captures Austria's Mühlviertel region in misty grandeur and jewel-line tones – suggesting that the beauty of nature has been a constant in the long and varied tradition of the Austrian *Heimatfilm* – art director Isi Wimmer and costume designer Nicole Fischmaller conspire with writer-director Ruzowitzky to offer a sense of earthiness that has little in common with studio fantasies of rural life. Placing the action into the

[37] Dassanowsky, "Austrian Cinema: A History," p. 119.
[38] Dassanowsky, "Austrian Cinema: A History," p. 120.

> impoverishment, political instability, and national identity trauma of the Austrian First Republic, Ruzowitzky underscores the difficult life of the farm worker and the unyielding traditions of the landed farmers who exercise aristocratic privilege and capitalist manipulation to maintain their control.[39]

Overall, the *Heimatfilm* has had a significant catalytic impact on later filmmakers working to complicate its comforting mythology, from the Young German Cinema of the 1960s revolting against "Papas Kino" to Ruzowitzky in *The Inheritors* and Wolfgang Murnberger, Wolf Haas, and Josef Hader in the Brenner films today. (In addition, and especially in Austria, a comparably antagonistic *Anti-Heimat-Literatur* has thrived in the work of Thomas Bernhard, Ingeborg Bachmann, Elfriede Jelinek, and many others.[40])

The *Heimatfilm* is just one example of how Austria spent several decades after World War II embracing its privileged status as a victim of Nazi Germany; although filmmakers were working against this easy elision already in the 1960s, it took the so-called "Kurt Waldheim Affair" in the 1980s for the nation as a whole to begin the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* already well underway in Germany. Waldheim, having already served as the United Nations General Secretary from 1972 to 1982, was elected president of Austria in 1986. An international scandal broke out when it was revealed during the campaign that he had obscured details of his actions as an SS officer during World War II. While it is unlikely, and it was never proven, that he was guilty of any major war crimes, the revelation prompted a much-needed reassessment of Austria's role in the war. Increased Austrian soul-searching and awareness, as well as worldwide questioning, resulted; the United States even banned Waldheim from entry, though he remained president until 1992. Since the Waldheim Affair, Austria has taken significant –

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[39] Dassanowsky, Robert. "Going Home Again? Ruzowitzky's *Die Siebtelbauern* and the New Austrian *Heimatfilm*." *The Germanic Review* Volume 78.2 Spring (2003): p.135.
[40] Müller-Funk, Wolfgang. "Ein Koffer Namens Österreich." *Die Presse*, January 15, 2010. http://diepresse.com/home/spectrum/zeichenderzeit/533178/print.do.

if forever insufficient – steps towards trying to right the wrongs of the twentieth century. For instance, a concrete monument to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust was erected in 2000 in the central square Judenplatz;[41] a stretch of the fin-de-siecle *Ringstrasse* still named for a notoriously Anti-Semitic mayor was neutralized to *Universitätsring* in 2012;[42] and intensified restitution efforts by the Leopold Museum and others have returned stolen art or compensated the families, a topic of another Murnberger film, *Mein Bester Feind* (*My Best Enemy*) (2011).[43] However, especially for tourists, the country still cultivates its image as an Alpine paradise of leftover imperial splendor, buttery *Apfelstrudel*, and "The Blue Danube Waltz," a sweetly positive ideal suggested by *Heimatfilme* and *The Sound of Music* and corroborated, to some extent, by the city's repeatedly being chosen by the Mercer survey as the world's most livable city, for the sixth time in a row in 2014.[44]

While the *Volksstück* and the Austro-comedy are popular despite (because of?) mocking their own audience, a famous case from 1988 provides a contrasting example that makes their status even more remarkable. Fifty years after the "annexation," Austrian poet, novelist, and playwright Thomas Bernhard (1931-1989) wrote a play called *Heldenplatz*, after the same square where Hitler spoke, for the one-hundredth anniversary of the *Burgtheater* (Vienna's high-brow Imperial Court Theatre). The play begins with the suicide of a Jewish professor and goes on to thoroughly criticize Austrian society, especially the petit bourgeois. The pessimistic general perspective put forth in Bernhard's

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[41] See Jewish Museum website: http://www.ikg-wien.at/?page_id=928.
[42] "Dr.-Karl-Lueger-Ring wird in Universitätsring umbenannt." *Der Standard*, April 19, 2012. http://derstandard.at/1334795565355/Wien-Dr-Karl-Lueger-Ring-wird-in-Universitaetsring-umbenannt.
[43] Knöfel, Ulrike and Marion Krase. "Stealing Beauty: Dispute Rages Over Austria's Looted Art." *Der Spiegel Online International*, April 4, 2008. http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/stealing-beauty-dispute-rages-over-austria-s-looted-art-a-545392.html.
[44] See Mercer 2014 Quality of Living Survey Results: http://www.mercer.com/qualityoflivingpr.

work, including *Heldenplatz*, is summarized by a quote from his acceptance speech after winning the Austrian National Prize in 1968: "The state is a structure permanently condemned to failure, the populace is a structure incessantly condemned to infamy and to spiritual weakness. Life is despair to which philosophies look for support, philosophies in which everything is, finally, pledged to insanity."[45] Despite an uproar in the newspapers and among politicians including Waldheim, beginning months before the premiere, censuring the play for sullying Austria's image and as a poor use of state funds, *Heldenplatz* opened on November 4th, 1988, to a sell-out crowd carefully monitored by police and television cameras. However, it was not until 2010 that *Heldenplatz* was again performed in Vienna, this time in the smaller Theater in der Josefstadt.[46] Reviews from 2010 suggest that the play's controversy, if not its perspicacity, has waned over time; its director, Philip Tiedemann, compared its effect to that of reading a letter one wrote years ago and finding the feelings recognizable, but the intensity a bit overmuch.[47] In a review of a British adaptation in *The Guardian*, Michael Billington suggests its simultaneous datedness and continuing relevance: "Bernhard was a misanthropic master whose plays use comedic repetition to express bitter truths. … Bernhard's vision of an Austrian descent into the abyss has happily not occurred but his play offers a potent warning about the dangers of a resurgent anti-Semitism."[48] Of course, a lot has changed in the past twenty-five years; what societal changes have permitted *Heldenplatz* to resurface and the

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[45] Cousineau, Thomas. "Thomas Bernhard." *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2001). http://www.thomasbernhard.org/cousineautbintro.shtml.
[46] "'Heldenplatz': Bernhards Skandalstück wieder in Wien." *Die Presse*, September 9, 2010. http://diepresse.com/home/kultur/news/593316/Heldenplatz_Bernhards-Skandalstuck-wieder-in-Wien.
[47] "'Heldenplatz' im Theater in der Josefstadt." *ORF.at*, September 7, 2010.http://oe1.orf.at/artikel/257424.
[48] Billington, Michael. "Heldenplatz." *The Guardian*, February 15, 2010.http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2010/feb/15/heldenplatz-review.

Austro-comedy to thrive, and what about the Austro-comedy genre – perhaps as opposed to *Heldenplatz* – allows it to achieve much the same goals for which *Heldenplatz* was condemned? These questions will be taken up in the following chapters.

Austrian Film Industry/New Austrian Film

As Robert von Dassanowsky points out, two unrelated but symbolically bookending events occurred almost cotemporaneously near the turn of the millennium: "Austria's first film star, Liane Haid, died in Switzerland at age 105 [in 2000], and Barbara Albert's film, *Nordrand/Northern Skirts* (1999), emerged as the international festival sensation Austria had not experienced since the postwar era."[49] Together, these happenings serve as both a reminder of Austria's long and proud cinematic tradition and an indication of a promising, creative future. Still an imperial superpower at the dawn of the twentieth century, Austria played a prominent international role in the first several decades of cinema: "Early twentieth-century Austria seeded the world with its film talent as it did with its influential modernism in science and the arts. Its *multicultural* cinema remains among the most accomplished and innovative in Europe, but among the least studied."[50] In addition to actual films, Austria (in large part due to the censoring presence of the Nazis) dispersed directors, most notably to Hollywood, where luminaries such as Billy Wilder, Fritz Lang, Otto Preminger, and others made countless beloved films and were central to the development of such classic genres as film noir and the screwball comedy, traces of both of which appear in today's Austro-comedies. The industry enjoyed immediate postwar success in the form of *Heimatfilme* and "lavish imperial epics

[49] Dassanowsky, Robert. "Austria *Hungry*: The Return of a Film Nation," *Bright Lights Film Journal*, Issue 51, February 2006. http://brightlightsfilm.com/51/51austria.php#.UghVE9LCaSo.
[50] Dassanowsky, "Austria *Hungry*."

and musicals."[51] As previously described, these types of films helped Austria move on (or at least seem to) from the trauma of war: "Given the long Allied occupation, the imperial fantasy and *Heimatfilm* context seemed to define Austria with a false sense of continuity and a world popularity that at once distanced Austria from its Nazi past and its definition as a German province, while it brought it ever closer to West Germany in film production needs."[52] However, these increasing production needs were not met, and a lack of federal funding and training meant "Austria's commercial film disappeared by the mid-1960s."[53] It was not until the 1980s and especially 1990s that the industry resurrected itself and the so-called 'New Austrian Film' began to make itself felt on the international stage.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the resurrection of the Austrian film industry began with the passing on November 25, 1980, of the *Filmförderungsgesetz* (Film Subsidy Act). Since then a variety of federal and regional organizations have been established or expanded to support film production and distribution, among them the BMUKK (Federal Ministry for Education, Art, and Culture), ORF (Austrian [public] Broadcasting), Österreichisches Filminstitut (Austrian Film Institute), Filmstandort Austria (Film Location Austria, part of the Federal Ministry for Economy, Family, and Youth), Filmfonds Wien (Vienna Film Fund), and Cine Tirol Film Commission. It is clear from this inventory, and from the promotional materials of each of the listed organizations, that Austria is now taking cinema very seriously. Furthermore, the Austrian Film Commission was founded in 1986 and "is dedicated to promoting Austrian cinema throughout the world. The AFC's role is to increase awareness of Austrian

[51] Dassanowsky, "Austria *Hungry*."
[52] Dassanowsky and Speck, "Introduction," p. 6-7.
[53] Dassanowsky, "Austria *Hungry*."

filmmaking abroad and to support the positioning and release of Austrian films on the international marketplace."[54] Along with these institutions, a number of film festivals have also come into existence around the country. The prestigious Viennale, or Vienna International Film Festival, has existed since 1960 and each year attracts almost 100,000 viewers to see approximately 300 films in theaters around the city. The Diagonale Festival of Austrian Film has existed in some form since 1977, but in its current iteration in Graz since 1998, while the Crossing Europe Film Festival in Linz, focusing on "young, idiosyncratic and contemporary European auteur cinema" began in 2004.[55]

Another sign of the surging interest in film in Austria is the *Der Österreichische Film: Edition der Standard* DVD series. This collection, sponsored by the Austrian newspaper *der Standard*, the distribution agency Hoanzl, and Filmarchiv Austria, started in fall 2006 with 25 films and now consists of 235 titles that have sold 1.3 million copies. As of 2014, all titles are available streaming via iTunes and the collection will number at least 240 by 2015.[56] Fittingly, the first release was Albert's *Northern Skirts* (#001), while top box-office Austro-comedy *Hinterholz 8* is #003. All three Brenner films have also been included: *Come, Sweet Death* was in the first batch (#025), while *Silentium!* was part of the next group released only a month later (#026) and *The Bone Man* was added in 2010 (#151). The films' inclusion in this carefully considered, intentional construction of a national film legacy reflects *der Standard*'s commitment to its tagline "Kult. Klassiker. Kostbarkeiten" ("Cult. Classics. Treasures"). Not only art films, but also popular films,

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[54] Austrian Film Commission website: www.afc.at.
[55] See Viennale website: http://www.viennale.at/en/festival; Diagonale website: http://www.diagonale.at/retrospective/; Crossing Europe festival website: http://www.crossingeurope.at/festival/geschichte.html
[56] "Heimische Kinovielfalt on Demand." *Der Standard*, November 29, 2013. http://derstandard.at/1379291384795/Heimische-Kinovielfalt-on-Demand?_lexikaGroup=1.

documentaries, and older masterpieces are being preserved and legitimated through this DVD series, and the numbers of copies that have sold are evidence of Austrians' interest in all of these types of film.

The rise in profile of New Austrian Film is evident not just in the proliferation of institutions, festivals, and repackaged DVDs, but also in a variety of other events, including a 2001 exhibition on veteran director Franz Antel at the high-brow Historical Museum of the City of Vienna,[57] retrospectives and screenings at the Austrian Film Museum and Film Archive Austria, a 2003 uproar over a perceived attempt to further reduce federal funding by restructuring the Graz Diagonale film festival, and Michael Haneke's and others' global success. All of these developments support von Dassanowsky's contention that "The Hollywood onslaught continues to captivate a large portion of the ticket buyers (if not the critics), as it does for most of Europe, but the success of New Austrian Film and the return of audiences to the cinema should not be measured by box office earnings, but by the enthusiasm and visibility greeting the art in national discourse."[58] The resurrection of the industry is clear, but what, exactly, comprises 'New Austrian Film'? Do any characteristics unite this rather disparate group of films aside from their having recently originated in Austria? And in what ways does the Austro-comedy fit in?

In their introduction to *New Austrian Film*, "New Austrian Film: The Non-exceptional Exception," von Dassanowsky and Speck endeavor to problematize the pessimistic simplification of Austria as, as the New York Times' headline put it, "the land of feel-bad cinema" and gather the sundry strands of Austrian filmmaking into a

[57] "Die Regielegende ist tot." *Der Standard*. August 13, 2007. http://derstandard.at/2994601.
[58] Dassanowsky, "Austria *Hungry*."

unified whole. They begin with the conspicuous attempt of the films to complicate Austria's past and image: "In an effort to break the illusions of the 'official' Austria and its long avoidance of dealing with its fascist past, New Austrian Film is not only highly critical and counter-traditionalist (albeit using traditional genres) but it takes on the very mechanism of spectatorial trust in cinema."[59] Dassanowsky and Speck also emphasize the role of Austria's multicultural history; the country's boundaries have shifted widely over the centuries, and the varying constellations of Germanic, Slavic, Bohemian, and other peoples have all influenced all forms of "Austrian" culture. They characterize the country as a "multicultural melting pot":

> Each time creative risk became a factor in Austrian filmmaking, it had something to do with the disruption of the very concept of the nation. Perhaps this makes its cinema all the more demonstrative of what Austria is: as a multicultural melting-pot that attempted cultural homogeneity, and not without lingering debate, it is embracing its difference from the linguistically based nation-states and collected regions that surround it, a difference it already represented as a polyglot dynastic empire that colonized itself, ever eastward and southeastward, much like the United States in its move westward to expand a nation based around an ideal, rather than an ethnicity.[60]

While it is difficult to pin down any specific characteristics shared by all 'New Austrian' films, several tendencies do connect them. Von Dassanowsky and Speck differentiate New Austrian films from those movements, like the Young German Cinema of the 1960s or the Dogme '95 movement in Scandinavia, that arose purposefully from a manifesto: "It is the exception, one that grew organically from the uniqueness of the destruction of its cinematic parent, from its resistance to official history and national image, and from the multicultural shadow that has always been a natural part of the internationality of this national cinema."[61] They also note the exceptional number of female filmmakers creating

[59] Dassanowsky and Speck, "Introduction," p. 1.
[60] Dassanowsky and Speck, "Introduction," p. 5.
[61] Dassanowsky and Speck, "Introduction," p. 8.

powerful, successful films and a strong trend of documentary and documentary-style realism.

The brightest star of New Austrian Film is Michael Haneke, famous worldwide as the award-winning director of such critical darlings as *Funny Games* (1997), *Code Unknown* (2000), *The Piano Teacher* (2001), *Cache* (2005), *The White Ribbon* (2009), and *Amour* (2012). Haneke was born in 1942 in Munich but grew up in Wiener Neustadt, the same town on the outskirts of Vienna where Wolfgang Murnberger was born eighteen years later. At the University of Vienna, Haneke studied psychology, philosophy, and drama, and in addition to directing his own work, he currently teaches at the Vienna Film Academy. In a 2007 *New York Times Magazine* profile, John Wray wrote, "Haneke sighed and brought a finger to his lips. 'We have a saying in Austria,' he said, his smile not entirely hidden behind his snowy beard. 'The sewage is up to our necks already — whatever you do, don't make waves.'"[62] This quote perfectly encapsulates a peculiarly Austrian brand of cynicism with a smile, complaint but with some awareness of how good they really have it. However, despite his Austrian-ness, Haneke's films are not really Austrian; many have been international co-productions, in other languages (usually English or French), set elsewhere, and meant for a certain film-literate segment of the entire world to see. Tellingly, for all of his fame, none of his work appears on lists of most successful films at the Austrian box office. While Haneke has been crucially important in the increasing worldwide prominence and acknowledgement of Austrian film, his work must be differentiated from commercial domestic productions such as the

[62] Wray, John. "Minister of Fear." *New York Times Magazine*, September 23, 2007. http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/23/magazine/23haneke-t.html?_r=2&.

Austro-comedies, which are meant almost exclusively for an Austrian audience. New Austrian Film draws its strength from films of both types.

Austria Today

A snapshot of present-day Austrian geography, politics, and culture provides an overview of the immediate context in which Haas' Brenner novels have been written and the three films have been made. Today, Austria is a small, landlocked country in central Europe, bordered by the independent nations of Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Liechtenstein, and the Czech Republic. It has a population of 8.5 million people and covers 32,377 square miles; in comparison, the U.S. state Georgia has a population of 9.9 million and covers 59,425 square miles. The capital and largest city, Vienna, has a population of about 1.8 million and consists of twenty-three districts arranged in a loose circle around the central cathedral *Stephansdom*. Austria is a democratic, parliamentary federal republic comprised of nine provinces. The country joined the European Union on January 1, 1995, after a 1994 referendum in which 66.6% of the 82.3% turnout voted in favor. During the recent economic crisis, Austria has enjoyed the lowest unemployment rates in all of Europe, with a 2012 rate of just 4.3 percent.[63] Appropriate to its heritage as a multicultural empire, and most especially in Vienna, the Austrian population has a high percentage of migrants and foreign-born residents: in 2013, about 19 percent of the population had a migration background.[64] In

[63] European Commission, Eurostat: Unemployment Rate 2001-2012. http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php?title=File:Unemployment_rate,_2001-2012_(%25).png&filetimestamp=20140108102114.

[64] Statistics Austria website. http://www.statistik.at/web_en/dynamic/statistics/population/population_change_by_demographic_characteristics/072108.

spite of this, Austria is infamous throughout Europe for its xenophobic tendencies, mostly due to its two popular radical-right parties, the BZÖ (Bündnis Zukunft Österreich, or Alliance for the Future of Austria) and the FPÖ (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, or Freedom Party of Austria). Jörg Haider (1950-2008), whose controversial far-right positions included an anti-immigrant stance; a pro-German language, anti-bilingualism stance; and an anti-E.U. stance, was a long-term leader of the FPÖ who broke away in 2005 to form the BZÖ. When Haider's FPÖ party gained seats in Parliament in 2000, the E.U., for the first time in its history, imposed sanctions against Austria in protest.[65]

In Austria's most recent elections, held on September 29, 2013, the so-called Grand Coalition between its two most moderate parties, the SPÖ (Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs or Social Democratic Party of Austria and ÖVP (Österreichische Volkspartei or Austrian People's Party), barely maintained a majority of seats, gathering 50.9% of the vote. The FPÖ increased its share to 20.6% of the votes; it succeeded by running what the *Washington Post* describes as "a typical radical right agenda, focusing on issues such as immigration, asylum and EU-skepticism, and criticizing the established government." On the other hand, the BZÖ lost votes: "Without its charismatic party leader Jörg Haider, a well-known radical-right party leader since the 1980s who died in a car accident in 2008, and with its involvement in some corruption, the party could not connect to its 2008 success."[66] In late January 2014, controversy erupted in Vienna around the FPÖ's Akademikerball, an event for far-right leaders held in the Hofburg

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[65] Schwarz, Peter. "The European Union's sanctions against Austria." *World Socialist Web Site*, February 22, 2000. http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2000/02/haid-f22.html.

[66] Tucker, Joshua. "The 2013 Austrian Elections: Standing Still Despite Change?" *The Washington Post*, September 30, 2013. http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkeycage/wp/2013/09/30/the-2013-austrian-elections-standing-still-despite-change/.

palace and protested against via demonstrations in the streets and an open letter signed by a group of concentration camp survivors.[67] While progress has been made in terms of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, and while the country obviously prefers to promote a positive image, the Akademikerball and the right-wing parties that support it are evidence of a still-existing darker side to Austria.

Several recent horrific scandals are also evidence of this dark side in Austrian life. It is important to note that similar cases can and have occurred in other countries – this is by no means a purely Austrian phenomenon – and that isolated incidents cannot be grouped together to prove much of anything. However, in the past decade, three shocking cases have come to light. Natascha Kampusch was held captive in a secret Vienna cellar for more than eight years until her escape in August 2006,[68] while in April 2008 Josef Fritzl was revealed to have been holding his daughter Elisabeth in an Amstetten dungeon for twenty-four years, as well as to have raped her and fathered seven children by her.[69] In August 2011, another similar case was added to the list, in which an elderly father in St. Peter am Hart was found to have imprisoned and raped his two daughters for forty-one years.[70] *Come, Sweet Death* and *Silentium!* were both released, and all three books were written, before these psycho-sexual hostage situations were uncovered, but perhaps the darkness of the films' humor recognizes a (mild version of a?) larger, mostly unaddressed crisis in the Austrian psyche, of which these appalling

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[67] "Akademikerball: Zahlreiche Proteste geplant." *ORF.at*. http://wien.orf.at/news/stories/2625500/; See also: Open Letter (in German): http://www.jetztzeichensetzen.at/?page_id=760%208.
[68] See Natascha Kampusch's website: http://natascha-kampusch.at/
[69] "Timeline: Austrian cellar case." *BBC News*, March 19, 2009. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7370208.stm.
[70] See Daily Mail and Gawker coverage: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2030449/Austria-abuse-cases-Sisters-raped-41-years-father-slowly-went-mad.html; http://gawker.com/5835619/latest-incesttorture-dungeon-case-raises-question-whats-wrong-with-you-austria.

examples are symptomatic. Such links are impossible to prove, but the coincidence is suggestive.

Despite these lingering dark sides, Austria's polished international image today is perhaps best captured in the truism that Austria has managed to convince the rest of the world that Beethoven was Austrian and Hitler was German, when in actuality the reverse is true. This is key because a significant percentage of the Austrian economy is based in tourism – in 2008, the impact of travel and tourism on Austria's GDP was 14.5 percent, higher than, for instance, Germany with 8.6 percent or Switzerland with 12.6 percent.[71] In the winter, both domestic and foreign travellers pack the ski slopes; schools' inter-semester holiday weeks are staggered throughout the month of February to allow everyone the opportunity to spend their vacation Euros within the country. For many international tourists, like many countries Austria is nothing but a collection of stereotypes; as noted in the Introduction, stereotypes of Austria, at least in America and the United Kingdom, spring largely from *The Sound of Music* and from the tourism industry. Typical is this description of Vienna from the November 2013 issue of Condé *Nast Traveler*:

> a place that combines the niceties and graces of court life—which you can see in everything from its love of pastry to the many palaces that decorate the Old Town—with a real sense of intellectual curiosity; a city that has given birth to, housed, schooled, or witnessed performances by more artists, musicians, thinkers, and writers per capita than, arguably, any other European city its size.

In general, stereotypes of Austria include that it is a snowy mountainous wonderland of good skiing and quaint Baroque towns; elegant cafes serving foam-topped *Mélanges* and fancy cakes, especially rich chocolate *Sachertorten*; classical music composed by Mozart and other famous composers (tickets to whose concerts young bewigged and be-

[71] "FACTBOX: Tourism as a share of European nations' GDP." *Reuters*, April 6, 2009. http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/04/07/us-tourism-europe-sb-idUSTRE53601D20090407.

costumed men unceasingly hawk); and the rich imperial history/splendor captured in maroon silk and gold paneling over cream-colored walls.

An awareness of these stereotypes will permit comparisons with how the country is portrayed in the Brenner films, which do not rely on them, not even to make fun of them (as opposed to, for example, Cédric Klapisch's 2002 *L'Auberge Espagnole* which, though it mocks stereotypes of assorted European countries, depends entirely on them for its humor). The next three chapters will consider these stereotypes, as well as historic and current realities of Austrian life, in examinations of each of the three films.

Chapter Two
Vienna's Not Just 'Sugar and Spice and Everything Nice': *Come, Sweet Death* as Austro-Comedy

Introduction

The softly threatening beep of a life support machine. Emergency-blue lights, flashing on and off, off and on, on and off. A sugar packet torn open, the fine white grains sliding gently into the waiting coffee: a familiar sight all over Vienna, but this one lacks the finely coiffed *Schaum* (milk foam) of a proper coffeehouse *Mélange.* A needle is inserted into a patch of bare skin; a white-haired woman slumps to the side, lifeless; the machine goes quiet. As the fragmentary credit sequence, full of quick cuts between extreme close-ups, comes to an end, the coffee cup dissolves into a classic panorama, worthy of launching any *Heimatfilm*. The Baroque beauty of Vienna, as viewed from the verdant pastures of the surrounding Vienna Woods, stretches peacefully into the distance. All is silent. Suddenly, the idyll is shattered: car horns blare, metal collides with metal, and a car, in large chunks, comes flying into the picture. From that moment – and in line with its credit sequence – *Come, Sweet Death* dispenses with the romanticized stereotypes in favor of disrupting them with absurdity and violence.

The first of Wolf Haas' books to be adapted into a film by Wolfgang Murnberger, Haas, and Josef Hader, *Come, Sweet Death* was released in Austria on December 22, 2000, and in Germany nine months later, on September 20, 2001. A mainstream industry production, the film was produced by DOR Films with the support of the *Österreichische Filminstitut*, the national broadcasters ORF, and the Vienna Film Fund. As previously mentioned, *Come, Sweet Death* has attracted the seventh-largest domestic box-office attendance since 1981, with 230,361 tickets sold, and it won the *Romypreis* (named after

Romy Schneider, the star of Marischka's 1950s *Sissi* trilogy) for most successful Austrian film in the year of its release. Austrian reviewers were almost unanimously positive. The film also screened at festivals in the Netherlands, Poland, Canada, Russia, and the Czech Republic and has been released on DVD in a handful of editions, including the aforementioned collection *Edition der Standard*. Haas' novel was published in 1998, the third of seven crime thrillers featuring Simon Brenner written between 1996 and 2009; in 1999, it won the prestigious *Deutsche Krimipreis*, awarded annually to the best German-language crime literature. Two Brenner novels have so far been translated into English by Annie Janusch for the Melville International Crime Series, *Der Brenner und der liebe Gott*/*Brenner and God* (2009, 2012) and *Der Knochenmann*/*The Bone Man* (1997, 2013). As previously mentioned, *Come, Sweet Death* is the third to be translated and will be released in July 2014.

By now, the collaboration among Murnberger, Haas, and Hader is well established and respected. However, without a successful *Come, Sweet Death* there could have been no *Silentium!* and no *The Bone Man*, no upcoming *Das Ewige Leben*/*The Eternal Life*[72] film and possibly no English translations of the novels, either. *Come, Sweet Death* both made a wider audience aware of the books and marked existing readers' first opportunity to see these popular books onscreen: the first chance to see how Brenner would be characterized by Hader, how Vienna would be depicted, and how the peculiarly entertaining voice of Haas' narrator would be translated into the grammar of film. The film *Come, Sweet Death* adapts Haas' novel of the same name into an Austro-comedy featuring two of the most prominent elements of the genre, a sympathetic anti-hero protagonist (played by Hader) and his less-than-gorgeous milieu (in this case, a working-

[72] Austrian Film Institute website: *Das Ewige Leben* http://www.filminstitut.at/de/dasewigeleben/.

class side of Vienna). The film also conveys Haas' unique writing style through an unusual filmic language that, on various occasions, departs noticeably from the conventions of classical Hollywood. This chapter will investigate these three components – Hader's characterization of Brenner, the depiction of Vienna, and the unusual filmic language – as they are established in *Come, Sweet Death* and combine to create a funny, dark film that both stands on its own as an entertaining and artistic accomplishment and inaugurated what has become an enduring series.

Hader as Brenner

In her chapter on "The New *Austrokomödie*," Regina Standún outlines the most prominent features of the Austro-comedy, all of which are present in the three Brenner films; she frequently uses *Come, Sweet Death* as one of her examples. Many of the characteristics relate back to the self-criticizing, mocking tone of the *Volksstück* and mark a 180-degree turn from the distracting rural beauty of the *Heimatfilm*. However, key to what makes these films not just palatable but enjoyable for audiences is the presence of a well-known stand-up comedian. Standún writes,

> These films portray the Austrian population as a rather morbid species. They play upon clichés, sometimes overplaying them and hence ridiculing what and whom they depict. The targets of their criticism are their own fans; that is, the audience, all classes of the Austrian population of all provinces. And the magnet for the audience is not the plot but the stand-up comedians who have turned to acting.[73]

Around the world, stand-up comedians have been turning to acting since cinema's vaudeville and fairground beginnings; in "The Clown-Prints of Comedy," Frank Krutnik discusses the 'disruptiveness' of familiar star comedians performing within the confines of a traditional narrative. He points out, "The comedian is marked within the text as

[73] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p. 323.

having a privileged status compared to the other characters/actors; he is less fictionally integrated and has a relatively disruptive function in relation to the fictional world and its codes of behavior and action."[74] Krutnik then argues that one way this disruptiveness is not just managed, but exploited for the greatest possible pleasure, is through genre: "Thus one of the most common ways of structuring such a film is to have the comedian placed in reference to a familiar, highly-coded genre, with the conventions of the genre serving as a 'backdrop.'"[75] While Josef Hader's performance as Simon Brenner is better integrated into the films' storyworld than in many comedian comedies, Hader/Brenner matches Krutnik's descriptions of the hero as 'misfit' who does not quite fit into society, and his performances take place within the familiar genre, and against the familiar backdrop, of the Austro-comedy. Whereas Thomas Bernhard's *Heldenplatz* was deadly serious in its critique, these Austro-comedy films rely on humor and happy endings, guaranteed by the presence and wattage of a comedic star, to make the medicine go down smoothly.

In *Come, Sweet Death* and the other Brenner films, Josef Hader stars as ex-detective Simon Brenner; he also contributed to the writing of the screenplays with Haas and Murnberger. Hader was born in 1962 in Waldhausen, Upper Austria and has been a successful comedian, or *Kabarettist*, since the mid-1980s. In the German-speaking world the tradition of *Kabarett* dates back more than a century. Increasingly commercialized today, contemporary Austrian *Kabarett* combines literary, theatrical, comic, music, and satirical elements into stand-up shows that entertain while poking fun at society.[76] (A

[74] Krutnik, Frank. "The Clown-Prints of Comedy." *Screen*. Vol 25.4-5 (August-September 1984), p.51.
[75] Krutnik, "The Clown-Prints of Comedy," p. 52.
[76] Österreichisches Kabarettarchiv website.
http://www.kabarettarchiv.at/Ordner/geschichte.htm#gegenwart.

significant part of *Kabarett*'s humor relies on political commentary, comparable to John Stewart and Stephen Colbert's satirical television programs in the United States today.) Already a well-known, prize-winning comedian at the time, Hader's first major film role was in 1993 in *Indien* (*India*), which originated as an episodic stand-up comedy routine and which he co-wrote into a feature-length narrative film with director Paul Harather. A tragicomic road movie, *India* traces the adventures of two health inspectors who travel throughout Austria, building an odd-couple friendship as they cope with hilarity and catastrophe.

India, also produced by DOR Film, was significant in establishing the Austro-comedy genre: "Josef Hader and Alfred Dorfer in Paul Harather's now classic adaptation of their tragicomic odd-couple play *Indien*/*India* (1993) proved that popular entertainment could be critical and did not have to return to outmoded production forms and themes."[77] *India* was a groundbreaking success; it is eighth on the list of most successful domestic films at the Austrian box office since the subsidy began in 1981 with 223,680 tickets sold and was rereleased/immortalized on DVD as number #007 in the *Edition der Standard*, the new collection of DVD releases being sponsored by the newspaper *der Standard* mentioned in Chapter One. The critic for *Austria Kultur* wrote, "Paul Harather's latest film *India* has critics raving, Austrians going to the cinemas in record numbers, and audiences laughing and crying wherever it is shown. Shakespearean mixture of comedy and tragedy, love and hate, life and death, tender emotions and brutal sexuality has made its way from the stage to the screen successfully."[78] Together, *India* and *Come, Sweet Death* also represent two possibilities for the conception of an Austro-

[77] Dassanowsky and Speck, "Introduction," p. 8.
[78] Hader Online: http://www.hader.at/content/film/indien.php.

comedy: "stand-up comedy scripts which originate in stand-up comedians' routines—Paul Harather's *Indien/India* (1993) being a good example—and films that employ stand-up comedians, but whose original scripts were written either by the director or by a literary writer—such as Wolfgang Murnberger's *Komm, Süßer Tod*/*Come, Sweet Death* (2000)."[79] Although Hader had also appeared in the made-for-TV film *Cappucino Melange* in 1992, *India* rocketed both him and the Austro-comedy formula to (Austrian-) film-world stardom.

Since the release of *India*, Hader has, in addition to the three Brenner films, adapted *India* into a play, starred in several other feature and television films, and toured Austria, Germany, and Switzerland performing his *Kabarett* shows, "*Privat*" ("Private"), "*Hader spielt Hader*" ("Hader plays Hader"), and "*Hader muss weg*" ("Hader must go"). On May 24, 2014, a double show of both "Hader plays Hader" and *The Bone Man* will take place in Munich, though none of his other upcoming comedy engagements involve the films.[80] A description of "Hader must go" from his website suggests the flavor and topics of the show:

> Hader muss also weg. Schön. Heißt das jetzt, er ist jemand, der weg gehört? Also quasi: Unwertes Leben? Oder muss er nur kurz weg und kommt eh gleich wieder? Oder muss er weg aus seinem neuen Programm, weil ihn andere Figuren hinausschmeißen? Wird Hader überhaupt anwesend sein? Muss er irgendwann an diesem Abend sterben? Und ist er dann für immer weg? Und wer ist dann auf der Bühne?
> Josef Hader: In dem Programm kommen vor: Eine nachtschwarze Vorstadtstraße voller Gebrauchtwagenhändler, eine heruntergekommene Tankstelle, ein grindiges Lokal, ein Kuvert mit 10.000 Euro, eine Schusswaffe und ca. sieben verpfuschte Leben. Nicht vorkommen werden Prominente und Bundeskanzler. Es wird also wieder total unpolitisch.[81]
>
> So Hader has to go away. Nice. Now does that mean that he is someone who belongs 'away'? So basically: unworthy of living? Or does he only have to go away for a bit, and then come right back? Or must he leave his new program altogether, because other people are chucking him out? Will Hader even be here at all? Does he have to die sometime this evening? And then will be he gone forever? And who will then be on the stage?

[79] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p. 323.
[80] Hader Online: http://www.hader.at/content/termine/.
[81] Hader Online: http://www.hader.at/content/kabaretts/.

> Josef Hader: In the program there are: a pitch-black city street full of used car dealerships, a derelict gas station, a sketchy pub, an envelope with 10,000 Euros, a gun, and approximately seven bungled lives. Not making appearances are celebrities and the federal chancellor. So it is again totally apolitical.[82]

The same dry, somewhat absurd humor that enlivens the Murnberger films and the Haas novels is in abundance here. Josef Hader's star persona without a doubt attracted viewers to *Come, Sweet Death*, and vice versa; as Hader points out, this role has also helped his comedy: "The good thing about a part like this is that it makes you a household name. And of course that helps a lot when you do cabaret. In German-speaking countries, for example, you always get some people in the audience who have come straight from the cinema."[83] Haas' fame as an author and the film's adherence to the conventions of an already-popular genre, the Austro-comedy, also attracted Austrian viewers and helped mold their expectations for the film.

In summary, the typical Austro-comedy stars a well-known stand-up comedian in the role of an anti-hero. As Standún explains, "The Austrian soul is portrayed at a crossing point between tragedy and comedy. These films show a segment of reality and present it as a colorful human biotope with all its eccentric features. The rich and the beautiful are never seen [unless they are being mocked, as in *Silentium!*]; the main feature is the anti-hero and his milieu, a kind of anti-*Heimat*."[84] Standún further describes the typical Austro-comedy protagonist:

> what they all have in common is that they are extremely unsuccessful and lacking in any career prospects. Usually, they are walked on by their colleagues or bosses and sometimes they get themselves into violent arguments. Their private lives are equally unsuccessful—they invariably suffer from broken marriages, if they have a relationship at all. The films confront the audience with the cinematic version of average Austrians living a morbid existence, full of disillusionment,

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[82] My translation from hader.at.
[83] "The Bone Man" presskit. *Sola Media*. http://sola-media.net/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/film_content/boneman_presskit.pdf.
[84] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p. 323.

> and rarely experiencing a positive event that might make their lives better or even have a cathartic effect on their lives.[85]

Brenner as played by Hader fits this model perfectly. He is middle-aged, is single, has been fired from his job as a police detective, and seems less than thrilled by his new position as an ambulance driver. His boss, Junior (Michael Schönborn), describes him after two months on the job: "intelligent, verschlossen, überaus arrogant, und ganz und gar nicht teamfähig" ("intelligent, withdrawn, exceedingly arrogant, and not at all a team player"), a characterization to which Brenner, characteristically, does not respond. When asked how he would describe Brenner, director Murnberger answered: "A little depressed and frustrated, in that sense very typically Austrian. That's what people like about Brenner, that he's not a winner, but you're still drawn to him somehow. Austrians can't really deal with an honest-to-goodness hero like the Americans with their good, noble heroes. Here nobody would believe that we've got someone like that living among us."[86] Austro-comedies are popular almost exclusively in Austria; as detailed here by Murnberger, their anti-hero main characters, who approach the world from a 'typically Austrian' perspective, are a significant reason why.

In *Come, Sweet Death*, viewers are first introduced to Brenner as played by Hader in medium shot as he waits with the rest of his *Kreuzretter* (*Kreuzretter*, literally cross-rescuer, is a pun on *Kreuzritter*, cross-knight or Crusader) crew in the spare, white-walled atmosphere of their staff headquarters, listlessly hoping an alarm will ring and signal that their presence is required somewhere in the city. Brenner has unruly brown hair and a slightly receding hairline, a thick mustache, and three days of stubble, and is wearing a

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[85] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p. 324.
[86] "Come, Sweet Death" presskit. *Sola Media*. http://www.sola_media.com/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/film_content/csd_presskit.pdf.

light grey uniform shirt with pockets and official badges. He sits with his head propped on his elbow, lit cigarette perched between his fingers, paging disinterestedly through a gossip magazine with an article about Princess Stephanie of Monaco. His younger colleague Berti (Simon Schwarz) excitedly announces that he has noticed a coincidence; Brenner looks at him but does not reply, and then angles the magazine so it more directly faces only him and not Berti. Once the coincidence – that it is precisely noon, and Grace Kelly, Stephanie of Monaco's mother, starred in a film called *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952) – has, with the help of other coworkers more willing to play along, been explained to him, Brenner, still unenthused, wipes his nose and mutters, "super." The dripping sarcasm requires no cross-cultural translation. The alarm rings; Brenner is the first to jump up; and he and Berti half-jog out of the room and down the stairs, bouncing out of the unmoving frame towards their waiting ambulance. Within these first few moments, it is already becoming clear that Brenner matches another of Standún's descriptions:

> This hero, or rather anti-hero, follows the tradition of the anti-social, almost misanthropic detective who actually does not want to be involved at all, who does not care about his environment, but who is driven by a warm heart and a loveable nature. He does not talk much, but he is a good listener; he does not look handsome, but he is masculine; he is not well educated, but he knows more than most people around him; he is average, but then again, he is above average; and perhaps because of all this, when you get to know him, you get to like him.[87]

Brenner's rumpled-but-masculine appearance and laconic-but-lovable personality are further developed throughout the rest of the film, particularly through his relationships with two characters, Berti and Klara (Barbara Rudnik), a high school friend with whom he reconnects.

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[87] Standún, Regina. "Contemporary Austrian cinema: the peculiar case of *Come, Sweet Death* (2000)" *Studies in European Cinema* Volume 2.1 (2005), p.46.

Both Berti and Klara are present in Haas' original novel, but they play much larger roles in the film version. Some of the book's minor characters are eliminated from the film (as well as some of the many subplots and digressions), and Berti and Klara take on these missing characters' functions. For example, in the movie Klara provides the computer know-how and the late-nineties-era floppy disk that help Brenner get into the *Kreuzretter* files, whereas another woman, not in the film, does this in the book. Both also fill typical roles in a crime thriller, with Berti as the supportive sidekick and Klara the romantic love interest (the element of romantic comedy is much more significant in the film than in the book, probably to attract a wider range of viewers). Through his interactions with these and other characters, Brenner's character is revealed.

First, Brenner is not a conventional heartthrob, not a slick James Bond type, and his life confirms Standún's observation of the Austro-comedy that "In most of these films, alcohol and drugs play significant roles."[88] (Smoking is still much more common in Austria than in the United States and many other Western countries; laws requiring restaurants to remove ashtrays and create non-smoking rooms have begun to be enforced as recently as 2010.[89]) In addition, some of the film's humor arises from the physical comedy of Brenner's clumsiness and (superficial) ineptitude. He huffs and puffs as he and Berti carry the injured body away from the opening car crash, and a large sweat stain can be seen seeping across his back when he turns around. Pushing the stretcher through the hospital corridors, he collides with Stenzl (Andreas Sobik), splashing blood onto the latter's dry-clean-only suit, in part because one or both of them were eyeing the nurse Irmi (Jutta Fastian) instead of looking where they were going. A blurry, shaky close-up

[88] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p. 325.
[89] See article in Profil: http://www.profil.at/articles/1349/980/370219/rauchverbot-oesterreich-weltmeister-jung-rauchern.

on his face as he lingers alone in his room reveals red-rimmed and unfocused eyes, perceptual subjectivity and his off-the-beat air guitar strumming suggesting that he has been liberally enjoying the alcohol shown in the previous close-up. Brenner is rarely without a cigarette, repeatedly stamping it out as he dashes after another alarm, once even into a fresh scoop of vanilla ice cream. Near the end of the film, coughing after nearly being gassed to death, he tries to recover his breath by lighting yet another cigarette. He drops coins everywhere in the phone booth; he has no idea how to use a floppy disk; and after getting beaten up, he thuds unceremoniously from the back of the rival *Rettungsbund*'s van, incoherent, wrapped in plastic, and spray-painted yellow. After this incident, he spends the rest of the film in various stages of bandaged- and bloody-ness, a look that enhances his aura of toughness if not his prettiness. However, it may be this very impression of toughness that convinces Klara to sleep with him (which she does not in the book – they have midnight drinks and discuss the murder, but nothing else happens), or the unremarked-upon fact that he has shaved his mustache after she laughed at it when they first met.

Ultimately, though, despite that night, Brenner's continuing status as anti-hero is reinforced by an ending that does not exist in the book but was added to the film. Brenner walks around a corner, dressed in slightly wrinkly street clothes and clutching a huge bundle of red roses. A cut shows Klara approaching, glancing side to side as if she is expecting someone. Brenner sits on a bench and nervously adjusts his hair as a handsome, nattily-dressed man saunters by. Klara breaks into a smile and waves. Brenner half waves back, but his face falls as she greets the other man, kissing him and putting her arms around his neck. As the couple strolls arm-in-arm towards Brenner, he drops the

flowers in the lap of a delighted little old lady in a wheelchair and walks off. Reminiscent of a similar gag in Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* (1925), the scene is cut in a way that plays with viewers' expectations and increases their identification with Brenner; everyone is saddened by Klara's actions, but the film is not quite over yet.

Significantly, hapless, disheveled, and intoxicated though he may be, Brenner always manages to solve the mystery. This places him in good company with a line of other semi-competent film detectives, from Buster Keaton in *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) to Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson) in *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974). Like Keaton in the dream sequence, Brenner manages to achieve almost amazing feats despite not quite fitting into the social world; like Gittes, Brenner makes solid detective moves but gets beaten up and is unable to improve his overall life situation. Brenner's success in at least unraveling the mystery, though, is also typical of the Austro-comedy, which does not strive to be relentlessly depressing: "These examples [including *Come, Sweet Death*] show that the directors of Austro-comedies do not want to leave the audience with a tragedy, but with a positive outlook on life; obviously, the feeling of reconciliation rather than devastation should prevail."[90] In *Come, Sweet Death* Brenner, inspired by his interest in Klara and Berti's eager amateur sleuthing, eventually shows some initiative and cleverness. He coaxes information out of Rosi (Ingrid Burkhard), who runs the *Imbiss* (snack stand) and insists she is not an *Auskunftsbüro* (information bureau), by folding her a neat origami boat of schillings (Austria's currency before the Euro). He dares to enter the *Rettungsbund* bar and eavesdrop through the bathroom vent, though this does not turn out quite so well for him. He instantly memorizes a series of five dates when the cops show him a piece of paper. And when he notices Jäger (Karl Markovics) in a photograph on the

[90] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p. 325.

wall and goes to speak with him, Brenner begins to put all the pieces of the puzzle together. In a high-speed car chase involving Brenner with Klara in tow, Berti sending frantic coded messages over the radio, Junior suffocating Jäger in the back of his ambulance, and the cops who always seem to be several steps behind, Brenner and Berti come out on top. And at the very end of the film, in another instance in which the film departs from the book, Brenner does have a woman on his arm, his co-worker Anjelika Lanz (Nina Proll, who starred in the top-grossing Austro-comedy *Hinterholz 8*). Because the anti-hero is played by a comedian with whom it is easy for Austrians to identify, and because things work out all right at the end, the Austro-*comedy* has earned its name.

The Non-Touristy Side of Vienna

Come, Sweet Death was filmed on location in Vienna. In his introduction to *World Film Locations: Vienna*, Robert Dassanowsky writes, "Throughout Western film history Vienna, [Austria's] capital, has most often appeared as a fantasy based on the imperial city it was until 1918." [91] However, just as the Austro-comedy features an anti-hero, it also features his milieu, a view of Austria and its capital that, departing from a long tradition of exploiting picturesque Alpine scenery and imperial sumptuousness, unsettles the stereotypical fantasy perspective of the tourist and cinemagoer. Standún points out that, in contrast to the idyllic landscapes of the *Heimatfilm* or the impressive Baroque edifices in all the advertisements for an Austrian holiday, in the Austro-comedy "the setting is the non-touristy side of Austria."[92] She elaborates:

> If the films do show urban centers, we see backyards, filthy bars, and bare council houses, particularly vivid in *Come Sweet Death*. If the countryside makes up the backdrop of these pitiful

[91] Dassanowsky, Robert. *World Film Locations: Vienna*. Chicago: Intellect Books, 2012, p. 5.
[92] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p. 324.

> anti-heroes' existence, the audience gets to know the endless and unattractive plains of the Marchfeld in Lower Austria, as for instance in the 'road movie' *India*, or rough looking blocks on the outskirts of a town.[93]

Standún has just described the seamy underbelly on view in *Come, Sweet Death*, a film set in Vienna in which none of the *Ringstrasse* buildings or any of the city's other famous sites, aside from a brief glimpse of the giant Ferris wheel in the Prater amusement park, itself a somewhat sketchy area after nightfall (and a powerful cinematic referent for audiences familiar with *The Third Man*), appear. Instead, viewers are treated to a stream of unappetizing interiors and grey skies. Rather than promoting the same false façade as the *Heimatfilm*, holiday brochures, or stereotyped depictions in films from other countries like *The Sound of Music*, the Austro-comedy gets Austrians to laugh at themselves by showing a real, or even exaggeratedly bad, side of daily life.

However, while Vienna in *Come, Sweet Death* does not match the stereotypically expected cinematic image of the city, the film still creates a strong sense of the local. Another part of the Austro-comedies', and the Brenner films' in particular, appeal to Austrian audiences is the fact of their unmistakable Austrianness. While on the one hand, *Come, Sweet Death* could be set in any working-class milieu, on the other, to a viewer familiar with the city, it could not be anywhere but Vienna. This will be revealed by a close examination of the spaces through which Brenner and the other characters move and the specifically Austrian details that embellish the mise-en-scéne. In his essay on Carol Reed's 1949 atmospheric masterpiece (which still plays three times weekly at Vienna's Burg Kino, and about which one can learn on a walking/slogging tour of Vienna's sewers[94]), Roger Ebert wrote, "Vienna in 'The Third Man' is a more particular

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[93] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p. 324.

[94] See Burg Kino website: http://www.burgkino.at/frameset_playnow.phtml; See Third Man Tour website: http://www.drittemanntour.at/die_tour/kanal.

and unmistakable *place* than almost any other location in the history of the movies; the action fits the city like a hand slipping on a glove."[95] Vienna the place plays an equally essential role in *Come, Sweet Death*. Dassanowsky concludes his introduction: "New Austrian Film has introduced a grittier image of Vienna through the iconoclastic visions of its contemporary creators. But German film-maker Benjamin Heisenberg insists that Vienna remains 'a fantastic cinema city.' Beyond its iconic historical sites and new landscapes there are views that 'are not particularly beautiful and not touristic, but very exciting.'"[96] It is this Vienna, not particularly beautiful and not touristic, but very exciting and absolutely unmistakable, that is seen in *Come, Sweet Death.*

As ambulance drivers, Brenner, Berti, and their colleagues have legitimate cause to go anywhere and everywhere in the city, careening along sidewalks and through red lights, down cobblestoned alleys in the old town and across wide streets in the suburbs, all at ground level. (Interestingly, Standún points out that the novel, with its many subplots, is "labyrinthine,"[97] and in the film, the drivers' paths through the city can be described with the same adjective.) Everything they pass is unobtrusively but unambiguously Viennese. They drive by rectangular, navy blue street signs that include district number and street name; past Austrian chain stores such as Merkur, Bipa, Libro, and Billa; by U-bahn (subway) stations marked with towering blue cubes labeled "U"; and over avenues laced with the omnipresent metallic spine of Straßenbahn (streetcar) tracks. Brenner pops into a grey telephone booth. Not as internationally iconic as the red booths of London, but equally familiar to residents of their specific city, the Viennese

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[95] Ebert, Roger. "The Third Man." *Rogerebert.com*, December 8, 1996. http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-the-third-man-1949.
[96] Dassanowsky, *World Film Locations*, p. 5.
[97] Standún, "The Peculiar Case," p. 51.

phone booths have today mostly been converted to internet stations, but they still dot urban corners. The reddish sandstone walls, just over head-height, lining the cemetery to which Jäger takes Brenner surround every cemetery in the city – and, befitting the Viennese's famed obsession with death, there are a lot of cemeteries. Although the city's crown jewels, the palaces and *Ringstrasse* buildings, are never seen, on occasion the ambulances do cruise by the lavish Baroque architecture that comprises much of the city (such as when, for example, they are picking up wealthy older women for the *Scheißhäusltouren* ["shithouse runs" in charming ambulance driver slang] to the dialysis clinics).The orange trim of the *Kreuzretter* ambulances, the wail particular to Austrian sirens, and the flashing blue lights that open the credits sequence pervade the film. Through all of these details, as well as other road and construction signs, mentions of specific places including *Alterlaa* (a southern suburb) and *Altmannsdorferstrasse* (a street traversing the 12th and 23rd districts), and Brenner and Klara's stop at an *Eissalon* (ice cream parlor), the film underscores its setting in everyday Vienna.

One of the most Austrian of locations in *Come, Sweet Death* is Rosi's *Imbiss,* or snack stand, from which "the Piefke" commits the murder. (The fact that before his death Gross is referred to, without fail, as "the Piefke," a dismissive Austrian slang term for a German, also highlights the film's Austrian setting. Interestingly, Gross is nicknamed "Bimbo" instead of "the Piefke" in the book, and Brenner's tongue-in-cheek comment that "the murderers are always the Germans" was also added to the film. Language and dialect are key components of the Austro-comedy that will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four, specifically in regards to Austria's relationships with neighboring countries.) Stands like Rosi's tempt passersby on every street corner in Vienna, offering

kebap (sandwiches of shredded meat, similar to gyros), falafel, hotdogs and frankfurters, faintly-Asian-but-mostly-just-salty noodles, pizza, or, like at Rosi's stand, *Leberkäse.* *Leberkäse* is an Austrian sausage-like product consisting of ground-up pork, beef, and/or liver baked into a flavorful, jiggly, pinkish loaf somewhat reminiscent of bologna. Like other sausages at stands, it is served on white cardboard rectangles, usually with a round *Semmel* (roll) and a generous squirt of grainy brown mustard. Rosi's stand, typically, features a chalkboard and taped-up paper signs announcing prices, Costco-sized ketchup and mustard dispensers, large jars of thin green peppers in juice, candy and *Mannerschnitten* (hazelnut wafers made in Vienna) along the back wall, and a row of beer and soda bottles from which to choose. The ambulance drivers frequent Rosi's *Imbiss* to purchase "*Spenderleber*," a medical pun on *Leberkäse* that literally means "donor liver" but in this case refers to the *Leberkäse* sandwiches that the drivers buy. This is one instance of Haas' playful use of language that has been transferred to the film and that requires knowledge of Austrian language and customs to be understood.

Many details relating to food and the locations where it is consumed, not only the *Leberkäse* and the *Imbiss*, reflect the film's setting in everyday Vienna. The stark contrast between Brenner's milieu – such as his room in the *Kreuzretter* compound and the bar where all of the ambulance drivers hang out – and Klara's apartment, including the food and drink in each instance, illustrates the class divide between the characters and two different sides of contemporary Vienna. Not only do these settings, and the contrast between them, de-glamorize Vienna in total, but they also capture the disheveled state of Brenner's daily existence. Brenner has been provided a room, but he has not made it his own. The white walls are completely bare; no decoration of any sort adorns the room,

though a few empty beer bottles sit on the windowsill. His white shelves are empty, and his possessions still sit in half-opened cardboard boxes scattered all over the floor, with clothes overflowing out of a hamper in the corner. His single bed is covered, partially, by a rumpled grey duvet. When Anjelika knocks, he opens the window, picks a pair of boxers off the floor and flaps them around to clear the air, and finally coats the entire room in a generous layer of (Austrian-brand) Febreze before opening the door.

The seedy bar where all the *Kreuzretter* crew gather is near Brenner's room. The air is smoky, the lights are dingy fluorescent, and the floor is linoleum. Schwechater beer bottles – from a brewery in Schwechat, the southeastern suburb of the city where the Vienna airport is located – and full ashtrays litter the plain wooden tables. Everyone at the bar is male except for Anjelika, sporting faded patterned purple leggings and a see-through pink blouse (and blue bra) that in combination do not fail to attract her coworkers' attentions. Brenner walks past the foosball table and darts arcade game to settle next to Berti, who has a plate full of fries and a glass empty of beer. Later in the film, another time that Berti and Brenner are chatting over food, picking at what might be an animal's tongue on their cafeteria plates, they drink *Latella*, a creamy fruit-flavored whey drink invented and popular in Austria. On the other hand, Klara lives in an airy, modern apartment that manages to be both spotless and comfortable. She and Brenner enjoy breakfast on her balcony, including soft-boiled brown eggs, round *Semmel* rolls, juice in a shade of orange that means it has to be "Multivit" (multivitamin, a sweet and vaguely carroty flavor), and coffee on shiny silver trays. The differences in their lifestyles could not be more evident, but both Brenner and Klara represent possibilities in the "real" Vienna, not an imperial fantasy.

Come, Sweet Death has been compared to *film noir*, a "phenomenon" that is difficult to pin down but that has been continuously discussed in film studies. In the United States, Hollywood began producing *films noir* in the mid-to-late 1940s, as a post-war malaise settled over the country; no one set out to make a *film noir*, but the general disillusionment of the era pervaded these dark detective stories, crystallizing in several recurring characteristics. In the chapter "Somewhere in the Night" in his 2012 book *American Cinema/American Culture*, John Belton argues that "the horrifying realization that the populist myth that had given comfort and order to American identity in the past was just that – only a myth…coupled with the trauma of war and the disillusionment of the postwar period, serves to smash the utopian fantasy world of 1930s ideology."[98] Reflecting this ideological shift, films noir are "grimmer, bleaker, and blacker"[99] and evince a "sense of frustration and experience of disempowerment" in their stories, characters, themes, and look; *films noir* are characterized by a sense of paranoia, alienation, and corrupt conspiracy. The films typically drew on popular fiction, especially detective stories and crime thrillers by Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and others. The stories, and the film adaptations of them, featured hard-boiled anti-heroes of varying levels of heroic-ness ensnared by tempting *femmes fatale*, took place at night on desolately shadowed city streets, and turned on murders and other crimes. The films were often narrated by voiceover and had dispiriting endings that usually left some questions unanswered and many characters dead.

Despite lacking its archetypal black-and-white chiaroscuro aesthetic, *Come, Sweet Death* shares a surprising number of traits with the classic mid-century *film noir*. The

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[98] Belton, John. "Chapter 9: Somewhere in the Night," *American Cinema / American Culture.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005. p. 203.

[99] Belton, "Somewhere in the Night," p.185.

non-touristy side of Vienna depicted in the film would have been a perfect setting for a film noir (as it is in *The Third Man*), especially at night. As Standún writes, "A significant element of the film noir is location. Usually, a film noir takes place in the back streets of a big city. In this case, it is Vienna, and it is noteworthy that the spectator is not introduced to the beautiful places in Vienna, but to sleazy, smoky bars, dirty inner courtyards and bleak, impersonal rooms. Murnberger uses this image to set the scene."[100] In addition, as Sobchack writes in "Lounge Time: Postwar Crises and the Chronotope of Film Noir," "Although there are occasional houses in film noir, there are hardly any homes;"[101] Brenner's room is a perfect example of a shelter that lacks the cosy *Gemütlichkeit* of a home. The similarities between film noir and *Come, Sweet Death* suggest a comparable thematic engagement with disenchantment and societal upheaval, as well as conspiracy among the ambulance drivers. Just as post-war Americans were wrestling with the awareness that their world was changing, that old assumptions no longer applied, the Brenner films rupture the comforting old myths to which Austrians have clung, as will be further examined in Chapter Three.

Establishing an Unusual Film Language

Wolf Haas' novels are best known for their unconventional writing style, from which much of their humor arises; Haas studied linguistics, and his books reveal a playful fascination with the possibilities of language. *Come, Sweet Death* (as well as the six other Brenner books) features an unnamed, omniscient, third-person narrator who does not

[100] Standún, "The Peculiar Case," p. 52.
[101] Sobchack, Vivian. "Lounge Time: Postwar Crises and the Chronotope of Film Noir," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, ed. Nick Browne. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. p. 138.

appear in the diegesis and uses a conversational, agrammatical, often politically-incorrect tone. Many sentences and clauses begin with "weil" (because) but do not end with a verb, as they should according to the rules of German grammar; this can be compared to the contemporary English-language Internet-speak trend of saying "because [noun]" to emphasize the obviousness of the awesomeness of this noun. (For example, "We should go to the zoo because baby pandas.") Other habits include beginning sentences with "Believe me or not: …" and starting long, seemingly-tangential digressions that in a roundabout way eventually tie back in to the story. The story is also sprinkled with puns and almost proverb-like pronouncements that in a resigned but humorous way explain "that's just the way life is, and we must accept it." (These "rules" about how the world works appear on almost every page; one example from page 154 is "und wie es so geht, wenn man etwas eigentlich gar nicht sagen will, dann sagt man es leicht einmal zu schnell," loosely translated as "And of course this is how it goes, when someone doesn't want to say something at all, then he always says it right away and too quickly.") While German literature is famous for its long sentences, most of Haas' sentences are relatively short.

In an interview in Vienna in 2000, journalist Peter Krobath asked Murnberger, "Wolf Haas has repeatedly stated that he doesn't think his Brenner novels can ever be made into movies. What made you think differently?". Murnberger responded,

> He is right. Since Wolf Haas, in writing his Brenner novels, concentrates heavily on the language – and that even includes grammatical details – this artificial language that he's created simply can't be applied in a movie. It was a real challenge to adapt "Sweet Death" for the screen: we had to reduce characters, reorganize the plot... You definitely couldn't say the book read like a movie.[102]

[102] "Come, Sweet Death" presskit.

As Murnberger says, for the film version of *Come, Sweet Death*, the story was simplified and the plot streamlined. However, the film still gestures to the unconventional language of the book in three main ways: through its voiceover narrator and cameos by Wolf Haas, an unusual film language that departs from "invisible" Hollywood conventions, and a self-referentiality and playfulness with words and images.

After the fragmentary credit sequence and the off-screen car crash prologue, *Come, Sweet Death* begins with a voiceover from a narrator who is never seen or named but, in an interesting take on authorship, is subtly connected to Haas. During this opening monologue, the camera pans around the *Kreuzretter* headquarters, revealing several of the waiting ambulance drivers. Then a close-up focuses on a hand writing on several scattered pages of blue-inked handwriting, full of scratched-out words and corrections. The cursive is difficult to read, and it is not clear that the text matches what the narrator is saying, but the two can be assumed to be connected. The next cut shows Haas, uniformed like the other ambulance drivers, sitting at a desk and doing the writing; strangely, half of the shot is dominated by the cactus that evidently was chosen to decorate the *Kreuzretter* headquarters. To some extent, this opening simply adheres to the cliché device of framing a film as a narrator's memoirs or recollections, as for instance the controversial opening of Baz Luhrmann's 2013 *The Great Gatsby*, in which Tobey Maguire as Nick Carraway recounts his memories of Jay Gatsby while recovering in a sanatorium. However, in *Come, Sweet Death* Haas' cameo is brief and unmarked enough that many viewers may not even notice it, and it does tie neatly into the fact that Haas wrote the original novel (though in the novel the author and narrator remain separate, of course).

Although voiceover narration continues to provide commentary throughout the rest of the film – with more frequency in the beginning, when the scene is being set, than at the end, when the action has picked up – Haas does not reappear until the film's last few minutes. The *Kreuzretter* crew is gathered in a tent at the *Donauinselfest*, a summer music festival on the Danube Island that requires the presence of significant numbers of ambulances in case of alcohol poisoning. As the drivers chat, a cut shows Haas, again in uniform, bent over his work alone at a wooden picnic table. He looks up, placing his black Stabilo pen (a European brand omnipresent in Austria but difficult to find in America) on the white sausage-stand cardboard rectangles on which he has been taking notes. When Brenner and Anjelika get up, they walk by Haas, who follows them with his eyes and an amused smile; as they leave the tent, the voiceover resumes narration until the film ends. As in the books, the narrator's alternately serious and satirical interpretation provides one humorous perspective on the events. In addition, while *Come, Sweet Death* can be somewhat confusing, the presence of the narrator provides background information and helps viewers to follow the story. Finally, the film's narrator, and the fact that he is connected with Wolf Haas, can be seen as a nod to the story's origins in novel form.

Despite the assistance of the narrator, *Come, Sweet Death* can still be difficult to follow, especially for audiences unfamiliar with the book and unaccustomed to Austro-comedies – almost everyone outside of Austria, in other words. In large part this is due to the unconventional film grammar that Murnberger chose to use to tell the story:

> My idea was to do things that one ordinarily didn't do, for example, to have the camera react too slowly. Brenner gets up from a chair, the camera pans, and although we all know that Brenner is turning around, the camera doesn't seem to register the change. Instead Brenner disappears from the frame for a moment and the camera has to move quickly catch up with him. I employed

> intentionally careless staging here, just like Haas intentionally leaves out words in his book, but only where everyone knows what is intended. [103]

Instances such as this one abound: canted camera angles as the ambulances pull out of the compound, an extreme low angle shot on Brenner in the phone booth, an abrupt pan left to find the elderly diabetic who reveals that Irmi snooped in her will, a swooping zoom into Brenner's plate of cafeteria gulasch, and so on. At other times, a shaky handheld camera creates the somewhat claustrophobic feeling that viewers are hurtling along at breakneck speed with the drivers, stoplights and pets be damned. Throughout the film, the camerawork is noticeable and intrusive. Murnberger also discusses two specific scenes in which his unusual style is evident, the opening car crash and the love scene between Brenner and Klara.

As described at the beginning of this chapter, the pastoral landscape vista from the *Kahlenberg* or another of the low mountains rimming the city that opens *Come, Sweet Death* is interrupted by a car that flies suddenly into the picture. Standún argues that this is an example of "anti-Hollywood" filmmaking, a strategy the Austro-comedy uses to "create an unusual, also funny, cinematic experience": "For example, the static camera in *Come Sweet Death* captures a car accident without focusing on detail. A Hollywood camera would have followed the car movements revealing the power of the destruction; Murnberger's camera just records a car flying by the screen and, with a tinny sound, hitting the ground."[104] In an interview, Murnberger puts forth the same scene as an example of the difficulty of adapting Haas' novel into a film:

> In the novel it's the language that's funny and not the story itself. Redundancies, unconventional sentence structure, words that should be there but have been left out ... I wanted to transpose that using cinematic language, that's why the scene had to be funny instead of the character itself. Right at the beginning of the movie I have a car fly through the air and crash down somewhere,

[103] "Come, Sweet Death" presskit.
[104] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p. 326.

> absolutely laconically. I consider that, for example, adequate cinematic means for transporting the kind of linguistic humor that Wolf Haas has in his book.[105]

The car soaring without warning onto the viewer's radar breaks with the conventions of Hollywood filmmaking on two levels: first, the most graphically exciting moment, the collision, takes place off-screen, and secondly, no narrative causal dominoes have been set up to establish the meaning of this crash. Classical Hollywood films often also begin *in media res*, but this shocking beginning feels especially random, as the narration seems to ignore it and its connection to the following scene in the *Kreuzretter* headquarters takes a few moments to establish.

A second scene that Murnberger highlights is the evening that Brenner and Klara spend together, which, again, is much shorter and more innocent in the books. After their discussion of whether to order sushi (they consider Akakiko, a Viennese chain, but this is not really Brenner's preferred cuisine), the next close-up is on a stack of half-eaten pizza, with sounds of pleasure in the background. A tilt up reveals that the source of this pleasure is Brenner poking what appears to be an unbent wire hanger down Klara's cast to scratch her itchy foot, and the night continues apace from there. Sex with someone who is practically a stranger is revealed in all its awkward hilarity, because the blankets are over their heads instead of their bodies, and both are so injured as to make the whole endeavor somewhat dangerous. This was clearly a self-conscious decision on the part of Murnberger, to take a scene that could have been cliché and instead make it memorable:

> Love scenes in movies are very difficult, I think, especially when the love story isn't part of the plot but just completes something that everyone already knows anyway. In a crime story you don't have that much time for love scenes in the first place, so in this sense it's easy for it to become hackneyed when all you're doing is showing that two people end up in bed together. I wanted to work with this. Normally, in 99 percent of the movies, if you've got two people making love, you see their heads and their upper bodies and after that is where the blankets start, right where it's just about to get interesting. Because under the blankets the actors still have their underwear on. And I

[105] "Come, Sweet Death" presskit.

> thought to myself, I'm going to go the opposite route. So I had their heads under the blankets and where the blankets usually start I showed them going at it. I think it works really well.[106]

Afterwards, Klara recites part of a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke, an Austrian poet. In German, the poem begins "Der Tod ist groß" (translated as 'Death is great' or 'Death is big'); as he ponders this, Brenner realizes that the reverse is also true: "Der Gross ist tot" (Gross, "the Piefke," is dead). Not only is this an odd topic for pillow talk, it follows Haas' trend of puns and wordplay, once again reflects the Austrian fascination with death (as does Brenner's comment that his hair is not grey, but "cemetery blonde"), and pushes Brenner closer to unraveling the "sweet death" case.

As witnessed by this example, Murnberger's unusual style is closely tied to his playfulness in other aspects of *Come, Sweet Death*. Despite the morbidness of the title and the bloody violence of much of the plot, the film is a comedy; as discussed above, the very dry, very Austrian humor comes in large part from the way Hader brings Brenner to life, but it also arises from the self-conscious playfulness of the film adaptation. In addition to the "Tod ist groß" pun, the film includes a scene between Brenner and Anjelika in which he tells her he is humming a "Kirchenlied" (church song) (he is humming *Komm süßes Kreuz*, or 'come sweet cross,' which he had discussed with Klara), and she asks why he is humming a "Kirschenlied" (cherry song) when she is drinking an "Erdbeerbowle" (strawberry cocktail). In the book, this conversation happens earlier and between Brenner and a woman whose character was eliminated from the film. In the English subtitles, this pun is turned into a conversation about Jesus und *Käse*, or cheese, which is a fairly impressive rendering of a pun from one language into another. In addition to the previously mentioned reference to Grace Kelly in *High Noon*, another

[106] "Come, Sweet Death" presskit.

wink to film-literate viewers is a close-up on a newspaper *Kultur* section, the headline of which reads, "Dogma 95 Film – nur ein Vermarktungskonzept?" ("Dogme 95 Film – Only a Marketing Ploy?"). This close-up gently pokes fun at another smallish European country's attempt to gain recognition on the international film scene (and reminds viewers of the handful of New Austrian Films made in Dogme style).[107] There are a couple other instances in which the film plays with viewers' expectations and previous knowledge of Hollywood films to create humor. When a *Rettungsbund* thug is holding a gun to Berti's head, he counts 3-2-1 and then pops a balloon, startling the already-terrified Berti (and the viewer) but causing no real harm. Finally, the pair of cops with which Brenner must contend stride confidently out of their BMW, ties flapping in the wind, sunglasses down, but they are only a minor obstacle in his solving of the mystery. Standún adds, "Another Hollywood cliché comprises the depiction of police officers dressed in smart suits wearing dark sunglasses, but as soon as they open their mouths, they appear ridiculous and are a caricature of this character type."[108] Touches such as these prevent the film from being a serious dramatic detective thriller and transform it into a funny film and faithful, as much as possible, adaptation of the witty novel.

Conclusion

As the first Brenner film to be released, *Come, Sweet Death* needed to justify its existence as a retelling of the story in another medium, establish the character of Brenner in a way satisfactory to his already-legion fans, convert the very literary novel into a cinematic form, and attract and entertain viewers. Accomplishing these goals involved

[107] Dassanowsky and Speck, "Introduction," p. 8.
[108] Standún, "The Peculiar Case," p. 51.

introducing new and existing audiences to a cinematic version of Brenner, as played by Hader; reaching beyond stereotypical images to depict a realistic but exciting everyday Vienna; and balancing the horrific and serious elements of the plot with a playful, self-conscious style to adapt Haas' narrator's voice and live up to the humorousness required of an Austro-comedy. As Dassanowsky and Stone summarize of the Brenner trilogy in their introduction to *New Austrian Film*,

> The hypocrisy of the elite, the purveyors of high culture, and of the Catholic Church, is Wolfgang Murnberger's target, and he deflates these icons deftly in the guise of mainstream entertainment as one of the most commercial filmmakers in critical Austrian film. His cinematic take on the detective story, *Komm, Süßer Tod*/*Come, Sweet Death* (2000), based on the novel by Wolf Haas, resulted in a bona fide national and regional box-office smash. Despite his more mainstream entertainment style, Murnberger, no less than Haneke, forces the viewer to question cinematic convention and spectatorial expectations in a moral context.[109]

Murnberger's next two Brenner films, *Silentium!* and *The Bone Man*, continue this project. When asked in an interview after the success of *Come, Sweet Death* if he planned to make more Brenner films based on Haas novels, Murnberger said, "Not necessarily. I'd rather start from scratch and write a screenplay about Brenner himself. Because his character is interesting enough to develop him cinematographically."[110] While Brenner's character does get developed cinematographically, this, of course, turns out not exactly to be how it happened. In *Silentium!* and *The Bone Man*, Murnberger, Haas, and Hader build on what they established with *Come, Sweet Death* to further refine the Austro-comedy formula and continue to provide a new, homegrown perspective on life in contemporary Austria.

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[109] Dassanowsky and Speck, "Introduction," p. 13.
[110] "Come, Sweet Death" presskit.

Chapter Three
More than 'Mozart on chocolate balls and in concert halls': Dismantling Stereotypical Salzburg in *Silentium!*

Introduction

Like *Come, Sweet Death*, *Silentium!* begins with an idyllic establishing shot that would not be out of place in a traditional *Heimatfilm*. A setting sun filters through lush tree branches, casting innocuous shadows onto a gravel path curving gently alongside a cobblestone wall. Suddenly a car interrupts the crickets and two men pile out, the mood skewing weird as the driver immediately turns to relieve himself into a bush and the passenger drags a third man, whose head is covered in a black garbage bag, out of the backseat. Feeding him comforting lies, and maintaining a politely distanced tone by using the formal form of 'you' (*Sie* instead of the casual *du*), the men frog-march their prisoner to what is later revealed to be one of the area's most famous overlooks, high atop the *Mönchsberg* (Monk's Mountain). They rip the bag from his head, and he and the camera gaze out over the picturesque streets of Salzburg, the twin sea-green domes of the cathedral standing proudly against an azure sky. But before anyone can fully enjoy the view, a quick nudge sends the prisoner tumbling to the rooftops below, his blood spattering the cheek of an Asian tourist snapping a photo and dripping like red rain onto the grey woolen coat of a passing Austrian woman. A close-up on the man's body, broken and pale against a mossy roof, leaves no doubt as to the outcome. The credits begin to roll; the scene is set; and it is unmistakably clear that *Silentium!*, like *Come, Sweet Death*, will work to dismantle, not further, the reassuring Austrian mythos for which *The Sound of Music* is partially responsible and on which much of Salzburg's allure rests.

Although it is just the fourth-largest city in Austria, with a population of only 145,000, Salzburg looms large in the tourist's imagination. Austria's second city of tourism relies on *The Sound of Music* and Mozart, as well as a charmingly well-preserved old town nestled in a scenic Alpine landscape that promises excellent skiing, to attract more than 5.5 million visitors a year.[111] Many of these visitors come during the summer months to attend concerts or theater at the Salzburger Festspiele, a world-renowned annual celebration of the arts. Salzburg is also Austria's second city of Catholicism, as it, like Vienna, is home to an independent archbishop answerable only to the Pope. However, *Silentium!* turns Salzburg's stereotypically lovely geographic and religious imagery on its head, depicting scandal and murder against a backdrop of Mozart concertos and icing-sweet Baroque edifices. Specifically attacking the long-standing institutions of the Salzburger Festspiele and the Catholic Church, and in marked contrast to the images disseminated by *The Sound of Music*, *Silentium!* amusingly and horrifyingly disrupts the cultural myths that have enveloped this small city.

Four years after the success of *Come, Sweet Death*, Wolfgang Murnberger's *Silentium!*, based on Wolf Haas' 1999 novel of the same name, was released on September 24, 2004 in Austria, March 3, 2005 in Germany, and March 24, 2005 in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. It also made the festival rounds in countries including France, Denmark, Canada, and Hungary. On January 17, 2006, *Silentium!* premiered in the United States at the Berlin and Beyond Festival in San Francisco, a showcase supported by the Goethe Institute for recent films from the German-speaking

[111] See Salzburg official tourism site: http://www.salzburg.gv.at/en/en-index/en-tourismussbg.htm.

world.[112] Increased American awareness of the Brenner films is also seen in the fact that on February 22, 2005, *Variety* published a positive review of *Silentium!*, summarizing:

> Theaters running "Silentium" will be anything but quiet once appreciative auds get a load of this Austrian comedy-crimer featuring a dissheveled detective, a Catholic school's darkest secret and even darker humor. Reuniting the team who hit the gong with "Come, Sweet Death" in 2000, pic hit no. 1 position last September on home turf and looks set for solid Euro B.O., with strong potential for wider sales and possible U.S. remake.[113]

Like the other Brenner films, *Silentium!* was produced by DOR Film with the support of the Austrian Film Institute; with 204,802 viewers, *Silentium!* has attracted the smallest box office of the three Brenner films, but still good enough for tenth on the domestic list since the Austrian film subsidy began in 1981. The film received enthusiastic reviews from the Austrian newspapers and was quickly rereleased on DVD as part of the *Edition der Standard* series.

As a sequel, *Silentium!* continues much of what *Come, Sweet Death* began, including starring Josef Hader as Simon Brenner, an anti-heroic but sympathetic protagonist; taking place (and filmed on-location) in a non-touristy setting, but this time across the country from Vienna in the sketchy basements and back alleys of Salzburg; and relying on an occasionally unusual film language, though it is not nearly as strikingly odd as in the first film, to convey Haas' literary voice. As previously mentioned, in addition to these characteristics, another key element of the Austro-comedy is its self-critical stance towards its Austrian audience; as Standún writes, "in Austro-comedy films, Austrian society is portrayed as nasty and hypocritical, a baroque façade with a dirty backyard."[114] The self-critical aspect of the Austro-comedy is perhaps most on display in *Silentium!* (which may have contributed to its slightly lower box-office numbers). *Come,*

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[112] See Berlin and Beyond Film Festival website: http://www.goethe.de/ins/us/saf/prj/bby/enindex.htm.
[113] Edwards, Russell. "Review: 'Silentium.'" *Variety*, February 22, 2005. http://variety.com/2005/film/reviews/silentium-1200527761/.
[114] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p. 322.

Sweet Death paints a gently satirical – and somewhat ridiculous, as ambulance drivers do not actually administer lethal injections to their patients – portrait of a working-class Vienna not often seen on screen**.** But *Silentium!* more pointedly and realistically – if still exaggeratedly – addresses real problems that plague contemporary Austrian society. Through the contrasts between Brenner and other characters; the over-the-top twists, turns, and excesses of its murder-mystery plot; and the reappropriation and ironic deployment of stereotypical imagery and music, *Silentium!* takes aim at two of Austria's most treasured institutions in its attempt to debunk the myths swirling around the closed upper-class world of Salzburg.

Stereotypical Salzburg

In order to make sense of *Silentium!*'s dismantling of certain cultural myths and monoliths, it is important to first understand the existence and development of the icons under attack, including, as stated above, Catholicism, the Salzburger Festspiele (and the Mozart-drenched musical scene in general), and *The Sound of Music*. How have they come together to create a vision of a city that attracts people from around the world? Gitta Honegger captures Salzburg's touristy image and Hollywood's role in crafting and perpetuating it:

> But it finally was up to Hollywood to give Salzburg its mythical Uber family and recast it as the object of global desire, cloistered in kitsch and saturated with the *Sound of Music*. … It's all coming together in the evenings, over mugs of beer and bottles of wine, at open mike Sound of Music singing contests for hordes of eager tourists, predominantly American and Japanese, joined in multi-accented harmonies of *Edelweiss*. This is part of the annual summer spectacle of an entire city performing itself, selling itself shamelessly to fit all high- and low-brow expectations: the lederhosens and the dirndls, the alps and the schlag and the knödls, Mozart on chocolate balls and in concert halls, the wannabe literati in the outdoor cafes along the Salzach River; Everyman in front of the Cathedral called upon by Death across the Domplatz with the setting sun casting long

> shadows of the magnificent baroque facades over the audience in the square and the chilly evening breeze blowing in from the mountains.[115]

Nearly every one of these stereotypes and "high- and low-brow expectations" appears in *Silentium!*, but very few of them are handled in the way a tourist might hope.

First and most obviously, with its plot centering on sexual abuse in a religious boarding school, the film thematizes Austrians' fading trust in one of the nation's, and world's, most venerable and influential institutions, the Catholic Church. Stretching back to its days at the heart of the Holy Roman Empire (for several centuries, the Habsburgs counted Holy Roman Emperor among their many titles), Austria has traditionally been a primarily Roman Catholic country. According to census data, through 1971 almost 90% of the population identified as Catholic, and in 2001 still nearly 75% did. [116] While smaller percentages of these groups regularly attend church or participate in religious activities, these numbers are still dramatically high; by way of comparison, the largest religious group in America, Protestant Christians, includes just 51.3% of the population and is further divided into numerous denominations.[117] Over the past decade, the percentage of Catholics in Austria has continued to decline, due to both Europe-wide secularization and the immigration of Muslims from Turkey and elsewhere, but according to the Church's statistics, more than 5.3 million Austrians still identified as Catholic in 2012.[118] All registered Catholics in Austria must pay a *Kirchenbeitrag*, or church tax, of

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[115] Honegger, Gitta. "Fools on the Hill: Thomas Bernhard's Mise-en-Scene." *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Sept. 1997), p. 36. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3245724.

[116] Statistics Austria website: http://www.statistik.at/web_de/statistiken/bevoelkerung/volkszaehlungen_registerzaehlungen/bevoelkerung_nach_demographischen_merkmalen/022885.html; See also: Austrian Foreign Ministry website: http://www.bmeia.gv.at/en/austrian-mission/austrian-mission-new-york/about-austria/people-and-religion.html .

[117] See Pew Forum website: http://religions.pewforum.org/reports.

[118] See statistics at Katholische Kirche Österreich. http://www.katholisch.at/site/kirche/article/102078.html.

about one percent of their income in order to remain members in good standing[119] (though this is not as dramatically high as the tax German Catholics must pay, almost nine percent).[120]

Even as official percentages drop, the cultural presence of Catholicism remains pervasive in Austria. For instance, a crucifix with Jesus hangs in every public school classroom, which would be unthinkable in America (on the other hand, Austrians find it shocking that American schoolchildren recite the Pledge of Allegiance every day). In December, no one evades religion with politically-correct "Happy Holidays" greetings and the entire country is bedecked in explicitly Christmas decorations (while it is just symbolic, this promotion of one religion at the expense of others may seem problematic to some in a country with such a virulently Anti-Semitic past). All Catholic holidays, including not just Easter and Christmas but Epiphany, Ascension Day, Whit Monday, Corpus Christi, Assumption of Mary, Immaculate Conception and more, are school and bank holidays. Among the most notable features of the Austrian landscape are the oxidized-copper onion domes atop the pastel stucco churches that dot the countryside; no little town is without at least one Baroque church, and the insides of most are more lavishly ornamental than anything in all of America, as befitting an architectural style designed explicitly to convey the might and splendor of Catholicism. Unfortunately, it is also important to note that the dominance of the Catholic tradition can have real negative consequences, in the way it contributes to the xenophobic leanings of some right-wing

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[119] See Erzdioezese-Wien website: http://www.erzdioezese-wien.at/pages/inst/14428333/multilingual/english.

[120] Eddy, Melissa. "German Catholic Church Links Tax to the Sacraments." *New York Times*, October 5, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/06/world/europe/german-church-ties-tax-to-sacraments-after-court-ruling.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

political groups, such as Jörg Haider's FPÖ, hell-bent on preserving what they perceive to be the superior Austrian (read: white, Germanic, Catholic) culture.

However, as in countries around the globe, in recent years the Catholic Church has been rocked by scandal; in Austria, a Catholic stronghold, these revelations of sexual misconduct have hit especially hard. The most famous case in Austria is that of a former Viennese Archbishop, Cardinal Hans Hermann Groer, who resigned in 1995 amid allegations of sexual abuse and in 1998 left Austria in exile after a papal investigation.[121] Another well-known case centered on Bishop Karl Krenn, who in 2004 was forced to step down from his position as head of the seminary in St. Pölten, about fifty miles west of Vienna, after a stash of obscene photos and films including child pornography was found.[122] These disclosures were only the tip of the iceberg; many more accusations have since been leveled, and Salzburg did not escape unscathed, as in March 2010 Abbot Bruno Bauer of St. Peter's Abbey resigned after allegations surfaced about an act of abuse committed forty years previously.[123] In response to these scandals, Viennese Archbishop Christoph Schönborn and Salzburg Archbishop Alois Kothgasser, who retired in November 2013, have suggested a reconsideration of the vows of celibacy that priests must take. Two days after Bauer stepped down from St. Peter's, Kothgasser said on ORF public television, "Times have changed, and society too, and the Church will have to consider how this type of life can be maintained or what it has to change."[124]

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[121] "Exile for disgraced Austrian cardinal." *BBC News*, April 14, 1998. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/78503.stm.

[122] Esterbrook, John. "Sex Scandal At Austrian Seminary." *CBS News*, July 13, 2004. http://www.cbsnews.com/news/sex-scandal-at-austrian-seminary/.

[123] Luxmoore, Jonathan. "Pope's brother apologizes to abuse victims." *National Catholic Reporter,* March 9, 2010. http://ncronline.org/news/accountability/popes-brother-apologizes-abuse-victims.

[124] Heneghan, Tom. "Celibacy debate re-emerges amid Church abuse Scandal." *Reuters*, March 12, 2010. http://uk.mobile.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSTRE62B38320100312?ca=rdt.

These scandals have also contributed to the declining numbers of people identifying as Catholic; according to one article, more than 87,000 Austrians formally left the Church between 2008 and 2010. One Tyrolean congregation made headlines when, in a gesture of protest, no adults came forward to receive Communion after the priest "announced that only Catholics who were in a state of grace should come forward to Communion."[125] Overall, as witnessed by declining participation and dramatic scandals, Austria currently has a troubled relationship with the Catholic Church, and *Silentium!*, though it was written before most of these scandals came to light, engages with this tension.

Another key institution in Salzburg, and *Silentium!*, is the Salzburger Festspiele, or Salzburg Festival, that takes place every summer for five weeks starting in late July. The festival features both music – as befitting the city in which, no one can be allowed to forget, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born in 1756 – and drama, in the form of concerts, operas, and plays. Since the inaugural performance on August 22, 1920, a production of Viennese writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal's play *Jedermann* (*Everyman*) has become the traditional start to the festival, always on the *Domplatz* in front of the cathedral. The *Anschluss* and Austria's subsequent absorption into the Third Reich prevented Jewish performers for several years, but only in 1944 was the festival cancelled, and it resumed in 1945. In 1967 the festival expanded to include a Salzburg Easter Festival run by the same group, and in 1973 it expanded again with the establishment of an annual Whitsun Festival, which takes place in late May/early June. Though not as dramatically as in the Church, scandal has also touched the Salzburger Festspiele. In 2010, the Easter festival's executive director, Michael Dewitte, and its

[125] Pongratz-Lippit, Christa. "Austrian parish listens to priest, none receive the host." *National Catholic Reporter*, May 3, 2012. http://ncronline.org/news/global/austrian-parish-listens-priest-none-receive-host.

technical chief, Klaus Kretschmer, were accused of deception and embezzling up to €2 million. Dewitte disappeared and Krestschmer apparently tried and failed to commit suicide, and was found injured and unconscious under a Salzburg bridge.[126] Although this situation took place after the release of *Silentium!*, its grotesque flavor would fit all too perfectly into the film.

Among the many famous acts that have performed at the Salzburger Festspiele is the Von Trapp Family Singers, who took the stage in 1936. Their story became *The Sound of Music*, first the 1959 stage musical written by Rodgers and Hammerstein, and then the 1965 film version directed by Robert Wise and starring Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer, all based (loosely) on Maria von Trapp's 1949 book *The Story of the Trapp Family Singers*. Almost unknown in Austria, and when known regarded as a strange American obsession, *The Sound of Music* is, as previously mentioned, one of the most successful films of all time in America. Capitalizing on American tourists' interest and dollars, various companies operate English-language *The Sound of Music* bus tours out of Salzburg; in addition to sites within the city like the do-re-mi Mirabell gardens (the formal gardens in Salzburg where this scene was filmed) and the 16-going-on-17 gazebo, now on display at the Hellbrun Palace (a palace on the outskirts of town; the gazebo was not originally here, but now it sits on the grounds), these trips often include ventures to the edge of Austria's stunning lake district, where tourists can admire the scenery through which Maria sang and frolicked.[127] Clearly, this Hollywood-ized story has captured the

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[126] Patterson, Tony. "Corruption, intrigue... and that's before the Wagner's even begun." *The Independent*, February 8, 2010. http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/classical/news/corruption-intrigue-and-thats-before-the-wagners-even-begun-1892248.html.

[127] For example, see: http://www.panoramatours.com/en/salzburg/tour/tour-1a-original-sound-of-music-tour-28/; http://www.soundofmusictour.us/

hearts and imaginations of a lot of people; but not only do people enjoy it, they often accept it as true.

The Sound of Music has shaped Americans' perceptions of Austria as a whole and Salzburg in particular. As Von Dassanowsky writes, "As one of the most widely seen films in cinema history, it carries the strongest representation of Austria to the world, and as such, *The Sound of Music* is perhaps most influential in creating recognizable typing of the nation and its values."[128] While Austria has been happy enough to enjoy the benefits of this in terms of tourist dollars, many Austrians are also anxious to correct the mistaken impression that their life consists simply of twirling in dirndls and singing about edelweiss (an Alpine flower which does not, in fact, feature in the country's national anthem, but just in a song written by Rodgers and Hammerstein for the stage musical). *Silentium!*, while it does not refer explicitly to *The Sound of Music*, cannot help but evoke and work against it as it tells a story set in Salzburg involving nuns, music, echoes of World War II, and (hopes for, anyway) love.

Disruption of Stereotypes in *Silentium!*

As previously mentioned, one key facet of the Austro-comedy encapsulated by *Silentium!* is the films' self-critical stance on Austria. Standún puts this into context:

> Apart from the linguistic features [to be discussed in Chapter Four] and comic performances mentioned above, self-mockery is also a hallmark of the humor of Austro-comedies. … This phenomenon possibly derives from the fact that officials in Austria have always tried to make Austria appear as a victim nation, in particular after the Second World War; hence, this self-accusation might counteract such distorted official versions of history, also represented in the postwar *Heimatfilm*.[129]

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[128] Dassanowsky, Robert. "An Unclaimed Country: The Austrian Image in American Film and the Sociopolitics of *The Sound of Music.*" *Bright Lights Film Journal*, Issue 41, August 2003. http://brightlightsfilm.com/41/soundofmusic.php#.U0Z3bahdVOI.

[129] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p. 327-328.

Silentium! launches its attack on the Catholic Church and the Salzburger Festspiele, and the Salzburg high society in which both institutions are entrenched, in four main ways. First, as in *Come, Sweet Death*, Brenner's characterization and milieu are typical for an Austro-comedy and contrast sharply with the people and places he encounters in high-brow, tourist-friendly parts of Salzburg. Secondly, the excesses and evil conniving of these high-brow society members – specifically at the *Marianum* Catholic boarding school and amongst the Festspiele leadership – are filled with dramatic murders and exaggerated to the point of satire. Next, the film reappropriates stereotypical imagery, including ornate architecture, breathtaking Alpine landscapes, and opulent religious decoration and symbolism, to subvert the meanings usually associated with these images. Instead of accepting their beauty as indicative of goodness, viewers recognize the corruption and hypocrisy that lurk beneath. Finally, just as it reappropriates images for its own purposes, *Silentium!* also reappropriates music, specifically the soaring classical and operatic compositions for which Salzburg is so well known, to underscore its ironic commentary on the 'smart set.' Especially in its reappropriation of images and music, *Silentium!* takes advantage of the possibilities specific to film to enhance the critique already present in the book. Together, these four aspects of *Silentium!* disrupt the pleasant stereotypical image of Salzburg as simply a gorgeous baroque city surrounded by snowy ski resorts and help the film engage with real religious and class-based tensions in Austria today.

Brenner as Austro-comedy Anti-Hero

Former police detective and ambulance driver Simon Brenner's fortunes have not improved since the end of *Come, Sweet Death*. At the beginning of *Silentium!* he is employed as a mall cop in a generic Salzburg department store, prowling through racks of lingerie and skulking awkwardly behind rows of utilitarian beige panties. A long pan left across the store eventually reveals the top half of Brenner's face, peeking out from behind a sign advertising push-up bras for €12.90. However, when he catches a pretty young woman (who turns out to be the widow, Konstanze Dornhelm [Maria Köstlinger], of the man shoved off the Mönchsberg in the film's prologue) shoplifting underwear, she accuses him of sexual harassment and skates away scot-free, while Brenner is sacked from even this job. He mopes slope-shouldered out of the department store, ignoring the costumed Mozart on the sidewalk shilling concert tickets to passersby and nearly getting hit by Konstanze pulling recklessly out of the parking garage. This opening scene was not in the novel; its addition advances the film's major theme of inappropriate sexuality and shows that in Salzburg people of a certain social standing can get away with anything, while also illustrating Brenner's desperate circumstances and developing the relationship between Brenner and Konstanze. However, it is interesting that nothing further comes of the fact that she was shoplifting; perhaps the scene is also meant to complicate her character by implying that she faces more challenges, financial and otherwise, than her social standing would superficially suggest. Although their relationship does not get off to a promising start, it is a third chance encounter between these two that will catalyze the plot.

However, before their third meeting, Brenner has several other stops to make, all of which show the depths to which he has fallen and further his characterization as an

Austro-comedy anti-hero. He drops by the aptly-named *Apotheke zum Schutzengel*, or pharmacy of the guardian angel, where through a small square window he asks the female pharmacist (Anne Bennent) on night duty for medicine to cure a headache. When she brings him an individual-sized package, he asks for a family pack, to which she skeptically questions if he has a family. She then cautions that the pills must be taken with liquid, a rule to which he adheres – probably not exactly as she had in mind – with a tall red can of Stiegl, a beer brewed in Salzburg. Brenner has not kicked any of his addictions since *Come, Sweet Death*; he continues to drink Stiegl, pop headache pills, and chain smoke throughout the film. While sipping this first Stiegl, he notices some teenagers making a drug deal and follows them into an underground concrete garage, pinning one of them and confiscating the goods to share with his roommate, an overweight, underdressed, very tattooed man named Rene (Max Meyr) with an over-cluttered and under-cleaned apartment. When police come to the door, Brenner claims he is only in town for the sightseeing, and the cops grumble that they had better not catch him anywhere where there are not any sights. This proscription perfectly delineates the way Salzburg presents itself to outsiders: stay in the areas meant for tourists, and all is well, but do not dare venture further afield.

Scavenging for drugs and crashing at Rene's, Brenner has clearly declined in social status since the previous film; in an interview, journalist Peter Krobath asked Murnberger and Hader to explain why. Murnberger answered, "Maybe we subconsciously told ourselves as a contrast to high culture and Catholicism it might be nice to have him as down-and-out as you can get." Hader expanded on this observation with a comparison to *Come, Sweet Death*:

> In *Come, Sweet Death* Brenner was part of the scene. He had a certain social standing, whereas now he's been thrown into a world where everyone is much higher up than he is. Most of the people he deals with in *Silentium*, his main adversaries, so to speak, are all much higher on the social totem pole than Brenner. Not only is Brenner not on the same page as them, he's not even in the same book, that's why the contrast is so extreme. *Come, Sweet Death* takes place in Viennese middle class society, he knew his way around there. But now he's in a world where he's the absolute dregs at every function, no matter what the occasion, he's the low man.[130]

The excesses of high society appear even more ridiculous when juxtaposed against Brenner's modest circumstances. While to some extent being 'the low man no matter the occasion' presents a challenge for Brenner, it also makes him easy for viewers to identify with, qualifies him as a typical outsider/underdog comic hero, and allows him to infiltrate the *Marianum* by posing as homeless and collecting a free meal, shower, and six-euro-an-hour job as a handyman, as well as more inside knowledge of the place than anyone wants him to have. While in the book Brenner already, conveniently, happens to be working at the *Marianum*, having him procure the job in this way in the film underscores the desperation of his situation in Salzburg.

Brenner decides to get this job at the *Marianum* after his third chance encounter with Konstanze, exactly where her husband last stood atop the Mönchsberg. In response to her request to be distracted, Brenner offers a story about *Leberkäse* and *Knackwurst*, two questionable Austrian meat products best enjoyed drenched in mustard, if at all (though the ambulance drivers in *Come, Sweet Death* do, of course, depend on Rosi's *Spenderleber*). He thinks for a second and says, "Do you know how Leberkäse is made?" When she shakes her head, he continues, "From the rest of the Knackwurst. Do you know what Knackwurst is made of? … The rest of the Leberkäse. And that is made out of the rest of the Knackwurst. And it goes on like that. Forever." He shoots her a sidelong glance as she silently tosses a white edelweiss bloom over the ledge, in memoriam.

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[130] "Silentium!" presskit. *Sola Media*. http://www.sola-media.net/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/film_content/silentium_presskit.pdf.

Orchestral music swells as the camera traces the flower's descent past the granite face of the mountain. They both light cigarettes as they walk away. She asks him what he will do next; he answers, go to Vienna; she asks what he will do in Vienna; he says, see what's up. She asks, and then?, to which he responds, I don't know, maybe come back to Salzburg. Again she asks, and then?, and again he replies, see what's up. I understand, she says, it's like with the Leberkäse. This exchange captures his aimlessness and lack of a stable job or home life; in its circularity, it also suggests how throughout the series, Brenner continues to solve mysteries and uncover corruption, but nothing in his life or Austrian society really changes or improves. As Standún writes of the Austro-comedy:

> Without exception, these films depict losers trapped by their environment and remaining stuck there at the end of the film. In some films, the protagonists might find consolation and encounter some sort of happy ending that is paradoxically bleak and always within their social milieu. They do not succeed in lifting themselves out of their surroundings.[131]

This perfectly characterizes Brenner's life. He responds to Konstanze's question about how he functions all too truthfully, with "ich funktionier' einfach nicht" ("I simply don't function"). However, like a classic noir hero, he once again is enticed into action by a pretty woman, and he agrees to investigate Konstanze's husband's death.

Interestingly, the story of the Leberkäse and Knackwurst returns at the end of the film, once again highlighting the lack of forward progress in Brenner's life and lack of change in Salzburg society. After Brenner and Berti escape the scalding shower, they, lobster red with blistering burns and sporting matching navy ambulance-issue tracksuits, show up at a classy soiree on a terrace with a view of the spot-lit Salzburg castle. Elegantly-dressed members of Salzburg society, including many of the by-now-familiar villains of the film, are gathered around circular tables draped with white cloths, sipping

[131] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p. 324.

red wine and nibbling on canapés. When Brenner attended such a fancy fete earlier in the film, he poured his champagne too quickly and it overflowed all over the floor; things go even worse this time around. The Festspiele president (Udo Samel) pretends never to have met Brenner, while his daughter's dismissal is no less painful for its being more personal. Dressed traditionally in a pink dirndl, Konstanze acknowledges Brenner but is determined to pretend that she now believes that her husband committed suicide. Despite having uncovered the corruption and murder, Brenner and Berti must leave town knowing that life will go on as usual in Salzburg; not only are the rich and famous still partying with apparently no repercussions, but cross-cutting earlier revealed their inability to save the Filipina women as well. After a quick debate, humorous to anyone who knows film, as to whether John Wayne was an "arschloch" (asshole), they hitchhike a ride back to Vienna with the woman from the apothecary who has repeatedly provided him with headache pills. She already knows that Leberkäse is made of the rest of the Knackwurst, a sign of mutual understanding that suggests these two belong together more than Brenner and Konstanze ever could have. Like *Come, Sweet Death*, the film ends on an open-ended note, with Brenner in the midst of the Leberkäse process, passively travelling between the two end stations. There is room for slight optimism, as the road stretches ahead of them on a sunny day while they cruise past fields of yellow rapeseed flowers with a potential new friend; but a final slow tilt down to focus on some blades of grass leaves everything up in the air.

Excesses and Exaggerations in the Plot

In addition to the contrasts it draws between Brenner's lowly, typical Austro-comedy anti-hero circumstances and the milieu of the Salzburg upper class, *Silentium!* satirizes Salzburg high society, specifically the Church and the Festspiele, by depicting these two institutions as conspiring in a sleazy plan to maintain their dominance of Salzburg by whatever means necessary. The film firmly supports the old proverb "do not judge a book by its cover:" these people may look devout or classy, but they are evil. Not only do Catholic priests abuse schoolboys, already a sufficiently awful offense, and not only do hired thugs push Gottlieb Dornhelm (Peter Streimel Weger) off the Mönchsberg for telling the truth, but corruption has leached through to connect the these two institutions in a much wider web of scandal, reminiscent of *Come, Sweet Death*'s *noir* undertones. Two related subplots in the film are Berti's side job delivering trash to the *Festspielhaus* (the concert hall) and the mansion established for the opera singer's disgusting pleasure at the tellingly named Petting 69. Sportpräfekt Fitz (Joachim Król), one of the school's leaders, justifies everything to Brenner by saying that soccer fields and tennis courts and an indoor swimming pool, at the cost of €2.5 million, are necessary to attract more young men to becoming priests; however, as it is depicted in *Silentium!*, the Catholic Church seems not worth maintaining. (This also parallels the Festspiel president's justification for the excesses he allows, that he "needs to attract the best artists" – but at what cost?)

While his role in the book *Come, Sweet Death* was expanded for the film, Berti does not appear at all in the book version of *Silentium!*. In the same interview with Krobath as above, Haas, Murnberger, and Hader weigh in on the decision to include Berti

in the film, emphasizing his role in bringing Brenner out of his cynical shell and adding a bit of lightheartedness:

> Wolf Haas: It's no coincidence that in almost every crime story the detective always has a partner he can communicate with. In my book the closest thing you get to that is the narrator, and since we didn't put him in the film, this role had to be filled by someone else. So that would be the technical reason for having Berti in the movie. But also Brenner is so disillusioned that he wouldn't make for much of a plot by himself. That's why we need an antipode who with his naïve interest somehow manages to kindle the fire in a burnt-out Brenner.
> Wolfgang Murnberger: Even in *Come, Sweet Death* Berti was the character who talked to Brenner more than anyone. He turned out to be his communication partner. This duo worked so well that we decided we needed Berti in *Silentium* too.
> Josef Hader: Berti always manages to coax information out of Brenner that the viewer himself might be wanting to know too. But another aspect is that Simon Schwarz and I, and this is something we realized while working together in *Come, Sweet Death*, are able to give the film a degree of levity in an easy, uncomplicated way. And this is really refreshing, especially in such an evil, creepy fairy tale like *Silentium*. These are the scenes where we can be funny without compromising the big, overall story.[132]

Berti's reappearance in *Silentium!* also serves to tie the series together, repeating one of the key features of *Come, Sweet Death*: the comfortable, if sometimes contentious, and always revelatory for the audience, rapport between the colleagues. In *Silentium!*, Berti has taken on a side job transporting trash from opera stars' hotel rooms to the Festspielhaus for the tidy sum of €100 per discreet delivery. At the first soiree, Brenner overhears the Festspiel president giving the female singer (Tini Kainrath) her favorite specialty brand of hand lotion as a gift; the singer wonders how he knew what kind of lotion to buy, but Brenner suddenly realizes the significance of Berti's garbage duty. This example of how the Festspiel leadership is willing to go too far to maintain dominance and make absurd profits is merely laughable in its excess, whereas the next is appalling.

Digging through garbage is only the apparently-innocent beginnings of what the Festspiel leadership will do to keep its singers happy. Shortly after putting him on the case, Konstanze gives Brenner a scrap of paper she found that says "Petting 69"; when a model airplane interrupts their meditation to deposit a map in their laps, it occurs to

[132] "Silentium!" presskit.

Brenner and Berti that this is an address, and a major clue. The name and number of the address are an obvious innuendo, even in a different language; every Austrian is required to learn English in school, and students are typically aware of these types of words even before official classroom instruction begins at age eleven. In addition, in general Austrians, like Brits, more frequently use curse words in settings such as school where Americans might find them inappropriate. A real town named Petting exists just over the border in Bavaria, Germany;[133] there is also a real small town in Austria called Fucking, which must constantly replace its road signs because British and American study abroad students steal them.[134] (Harald Sicheritz, the director of the 1998 box-office smash Austro-comedy *Hinterholz 8*, directed a 2013 film called, oh so cleverly, *Bad Fucking*;[135] the title plays on the fact that the names of Austrian and German spa towns often begin with "Bad.")

While no Asian characters appear in *Come, Sweet Death*, they appear in *Silentium!* both in the form of Japanese tourists at the very beginning, questioning the blood dripping from the sky, and as uniformed servants in the school. The sex trafficking of Asian women is not a topic typically under discussion or specifically considered a problem in Austria; however, unfortunately, Austria is sometimes involved: "Because of its geographical location at the centre of Europe, Austria is affected by human trafficking both as a transit country and target destination."[136] Filipina women serve as cooks and housekeepers in the *Marianum*, but they are also exploited for other purposes. (In the

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[133] See Petting official town website: http://www.gemeinde-petting.de/.
[134] See http://www.omg-facts.com/History/Fucking-Is-The-Name-Of-A-Town-In-Austri/14238.
[135] See review of "Bad Fucking": http://www.profil.at/articles/1351/983/370920/bad-fucking-neue-film-harald-sicheritz.
[136] See First Austrian Report on Combating Human Trafficking: http://www.bka.gv.at/DocView.axd?CobId=37193 p.2.

book, the narrator explains that the Philippines was chosen to provide workers for the school because it is also a predominantly Catholic country.) The male opera singer (Jürgen Tarrach) rapes a carefully-vetted subset of the young Filipina women and forces them to indulge his sick fantasies in a well-appointed mansion maintained by the Church and Festspiel leadership, in cahoots, just to keep him and his singing voice happy. Not only does the luxuriousness of the house – much of it, like other hunting lodges in Austria, bedecked with taxidermied stag heads – contrast sharply with the types of places Brenner lives, but the way all the characters are in on this scheme implicates all of them, and by extension what they stand for, as despicable.

Reappropriation of Stereotypical Images in Silentium!

As described at the beginning of this chapter, the film's prologue takes place atop the Mönchsberg, one of five mountains surrounding Salzburg and well known as both a scenic overlook and an opportunity for suicide. In *Silentium!* it is the latter, less idealized use that monopolizes the spotlight. In a 1981 interview, Thomas Bernhard, writer of the play *Heldenplatz* and one of the great artistic critics of Austrian society, said: "Nothing unusual about a suicide in Salzburg. It happens some 50 times a year. I still see the flesh, that of the suicide, those thin bones sticking out. That's a 60-meter fall from the Mönchsberg. If you throw down some 70 kg of meat, well what do you expect. And a tuft of hair showed through somewhere."[137] This gory description is more in line with *Silentium!* than with the typical image of Salzburg. It also lends credibility to the Church's alibi in the film that Gottlieb Dornhelm, the son-in-law of the Festspiele

[137] "Views of an incorrigible utopian: Interview with Niklas Frank." *Thomasbernhard.org*, 1982. http://www.thomasbernhard.org/interviews/1982intnf.shtml.

president who had accused the Church of sexual abuse, did commit suicide, as in real life it does happen from this mountaintop. In fact, as the narrator of Haas' novel and a taxi driver in the film note wryly, among Germans the Mönchsberg is gaining on the Eiffel Tower as a favorite place from which to jump, as not only is the view excellent, but they understand the language too![138] However, in *Silentium!*, viewers know from the opening scene that Gottlieb Dornhelm was pushed; while this is the opening scene of the film, it is someone else getting shoved off the Mönchsberg that begins the book and Gottlieb's "suicide" is only mentioned later, after it has happened.

The rest of the film follows Brenner's attempt to figure out exactly how and by whom, and to avoid getting murdered himself in the process. During this investigation, Brenner and Berti find themselves retracing Dornhelm's footsteps to the edge of the Mönchsberg overlook, getting handcuffed by the same two thugs and, in the film's climactic scene, wearing identical black plastic bags on their heads. Thanks to Brenner's quick thinking, they manage to escape by jumping onto the pillowy white cover over the stage at the *Felsenreitschule* (literally "rock riding school," a theatre where *Salzburger Festspiele* events are held), interrupting a performance and, as they flee the premises, evoking the von Trapp family's getaway from a similar-looking outdoor stage at the end of *The Sound of Music*. In this case, not only do Brenner and Berti save themselves, they also break the cycle of these thugs pushing people off of the mountain; tired of chasing Brenner, the thugs quit the job, suggesting that Brenner will finally have had at least some effect in preventing future convenient "suicides" from this mountain. Overall, throughout the film, the Mönchsberg, which could easily have been depicted as a

[138] Haas, Wolf. *Silentium!* Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rohwolt Taschenbuch Vorlag, 1999, p. 27.

stereotypically peaceful and scenic natural setting, is reappropriated as a dangerous and threatening location.

After this opening, *Silentium!*'s credits roll in white letters on a black background underneath a small square in the center of the frame playing a grainy, slightly-discolored, 1970s-home-video-esque celluloid montage while the voiceover narrator provides some background on Dornhelm's situation. The video features normal scenes from a happy childhood, such as diving into the sea with a group of friends, climbing ropes in gym class, blowing out candles on a birthday cake, and dancing with a girl who has curled her hair especially for the occasion. It also includes some iconic images specific to Austria, such as snowy mountains, lederhosen, and dirndl, and to Salzburg, such as exteriors and interiors of the Salzburg cathedral – crosses, processions – and the Festspielhaus – violinists warming up. However, the narrator's subsequent commentary on what happened during "hygiene" lessons, combined with plentiful images of naked boys of all ages and even two shots of the eyes of a middle-aged man watching them in the shower through a rectangular slit in the wall, ultimately give the entire sequence a sick, creepy feel. Instead of reminiscing about a happy childhood or enjoying stereotypically beautiful scenery, viewers are forced to connect groups of boys in school and Austrian and religious imagery with sexual abuse. The video is only implicitly tied to Dornhelm, but the child looks somewhat like him and as a film within a film and in combination with everything Brenner uncovers, it seems to provide incontrovertible historical evidence of corruption in the Catholic boarding school in question, the *Marianum*. In its juxtaposition of innocent boyhood fun with sinister voyeurism, the credit sequence sets the tone for *Silentium!* and alerts the viewer that this film, instead of repeating stereotypical pretty

imagery, will pervert it in a self-criticizing way. As the film begins, the "t" in *Silentium!* expands into an ornate baroque cross, starkly white against the black background, the religious connotation already drenched in irony.

Much of *Silentium!* takes place in the Marianum, the Catholic boarding school at which Gottlieb was sexually abused and at which Brenner now works. Within this setting, and building on the cross-like "T" in the title image, the film abounds with religious imagery, which is ironically repurposed so as to suggest the exact opposite of awe-inspiring piety. The religious surroundings – full of crucifixes, dripping in Baroque opulence, incense so thick one can almost smell it – emphasize the hypocritical behavior of the people who work there; instead of being simple symbols that can be taken at face value as representative of these men's goodness, they highlight their immorality. One of the most iconic shots of the film occurs during the sequence when Brenner, in his role as handyman, is asked to remove a large, dark wooden cross from the wall; he drags it across the room on his hunched back, a massive symbol of religion and oppression weighing him down. When he is forced to carry the cross away, he is making literal the fact that appropriate religious devotion left the building long ago, to be replaced by lust-driven, power-hungry scumbags. After the cross has been removed, the Jesus sculpture that had hung on it is repeatedly pictured in the background of shots, lying askew on the dusty linoleum floor as characters dash by, again making literal the thoughtless abandonment of what should be the focus of the school and the Church. Other noticeable instances of religious imagery include the face of a concussed and dreaming Brenner appearing in blinding, heavenly whiteness and wearing a crown of thorns, a potent religious symbol and comment on Brenner's literal bearing of the cross, and when Rene,

Brenner's roommate, is murdered and left hanging upside down with his legs together to form the image of a cross and a warning for Brenner (another scene with strong visual power added to the film that is not in the book). Throughout the film, religious symbolism is connected not with safety but with hypocrisy and threat.

This threat is realized not just atop the Mönchsberg, but also in the school's shower room, a repeated location in the film that exemplifies the Austro-comedy's tendency to unfold in unattractive settings. Old, moldy tiles line shower stalls lacking in curtains or any attempt at privacy; the whole room is dirty, dank, and poorly lit. It feels as if one might contract athlete's foot just from looking at the place, and to make matters worse, Fitz is on the prowl, spying on people with the flimsy pretext of checking their health, whether they are young students or older homeless men. In this case, *Silentium!*'s repurposing of powerful imagery does not involve reappropriating stereotypically positive images as negative, but adding additional layers of negativity onto already powerfully disturbing images. While this film deals primarily with more recent traumas like the Church scandals, World War II is never completely absent from German or Austrian cinema, or the German or Austrian psyche. To anyone thinking of twentieth-century history, the showers are eerily evocative of the gas chambers in which prisoners were murdered at Auschwitz and other concentration camps. Near the end of the film, Brenner, Berti, and the young Filipina woman they rescued from Petting 69 are trapped in a shower which Fitz has turned up to boiling; Brenner pulls out an umbrella and they manage to avoid high-degree burns until they can escape. However, the shower imagery plays on viewers' fear on two levels: the current situation with the burning water, and a residual fear of suffocation. (This fear of suffocation may be similarly induced in viewers

when Brenner and Berti are trapped, unable to breathe, in the back of an ambulance in *Come, Sweet Death*.) The showers play a much larger role in the film than they do in the book, where they are not mentioned until this final scene, perhaps because of their evocative visual power.

Another instance, not in the books but added to the film for its visual power, that may bring to mind negative associations with the Second World War and that definitely brings to mind associations with Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959) is when Brenner is outside lining the soccer field, part of the elaborate sports complex the school is able to afford for its thirty-three students. Just like in *North by Northwest*'s famous and much-parodied cornfield sequence, in which Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) is assailed by a low-flying crop duster "where there ain't no crops," as Brenner walks up and down the field, a model airplane – also where there is no reason for it to be – swoops overhead and then attacks him, repeatedly dive-bombing as he jumps out of the way. Fighter planes, of course, played a key role in World War II. Despite this serious connotation, this scene is also one of many instances of slapstick-y comedy in the film; in addition to his dry wit and delivery, Hader is an excellent physical comedian, and he draws laughs as he dives clumsily left and right to avoid being impaled. Most importantly, though, while the scene is funny or at least absurd, it, like the parallel scene in *North by Northwest*, also enhances the sense that Brenner is being watched – the impression of constant surveillance adds to the general *noir* creepiness of the *Marianum* – and the sense of a vague threat coming from somewhere, but it is not clear from where or why. While *Silentium!* is much more conventional and less transgressive and playful in style than *Come, Sweet Death*, this is one instance in which it, like its precursor frequently does, alludes to another famous

film. Overall, *Silentium!* takes familiar imagery, whether it is beautiful scenery, religious symbolism, or images reminiscent of World War II, and adds additional layers of meaning, taking advantage of the visual element of cinema to adjust or augment viewers' preexisting conceptions of these ideas and disturb any simplified understandings of Salzburg as just a stereotypical tourists' paradise.

Reappropriation of Music in Silentium!

Not only does *Silentium!* rely on the visual component of cinema to reappropriate images and add additional layers of meaning to them, but it also takes advantage of cinema's auditory possibilities to ironically deploy sound, especially music, in a way that underscores the immoral behavior of the characters and the institutions to which they belong and, again, disrupts simplified understandings of Salzburg as just Mozart's pretty Baroque hometown. According to a line in the film, the title "*Silentium!*" means "shut up" or "silence" in Latin, a definition that resonates in multiple ways with the film's themes. First, the word "Silentium" appears in an old-fashioned font on moldy, off-white signs prominently posted on the walls of the shower room. Literally, the signs probably were meant to discourage chatter amongst the boys and men while in the showers; however, figuratively and more generally they prohibit talking about what goes on there in the outside world. The only way the Church can maintain its corrupt power is if the people it abuses stay silent; if they do not stay silent, they may find their silence being ensured, like that of Gottlieb Dornhelm, by their being shoved to their deaths. The code of silence protects those in power and prevents the truth from being revealed.

Moreover, "silence" can be seen as the precise opposite of "the sound of music," emphasizing the contrast between the two films. *The Sound of Music* demonstrates the

power of singing and music to bring a family together and build bonds of love, and even tries to suggest with songs like "Edelweiss" that these bonds of love can stretch not just among individuals but also to the level of the nation-state. In contrast, *Silentium!* ruptures the very same comforting, patriotic narratives that the earlier film helped create. *The Sound of Music* promotes nationalistic Austrian pride (interestingly, to a primarily non-Austrian audience; mostly what it promotes is any nation standing strong against Nazism), but *Silentium!* provides a self-critical corrective to that overenthusiastic sentimentality.

However, despite its title, *Silentium!* is actually full of music. (One of the few connections between the *Come, Sweet Death* and *Silentium!* books is Brenner's habit of whistling relevant tunes without consciously planning to; aside from this, music does not play a particularly prominent role in the novel.) The soundtracks for all three Brenner films were created and performed by the Sofa Surfers, an electronic/rock Austrian band that has also released eight studio albums since 1997. In *Silentium!*, much of the music is either religious hymns or the work of Salzburg's most famous son, Mozart. One scene that is especially reminiscent of *The Sound of Music* is when the Filipina women, dressed in black and white habits like Maria and the other nuns in *The Sound of Music*, are riding the bus towards the *Marianum* and singing the religious folk song "Meerstern, ich dich grüße," a version of the Catholic hymn "Ave maris stella" just as Maria skipped singing to her new job also taking care of children. These women do not know the extent of the corruption with which they will soon be greeted, and their singing seems pure-hearted, if naïve. Unlike Maria, though, they will be unable to use music to reform their new bosses.

On the other hand, in several scenes music is used ironically to sharpen the contrast between the beautiful high culture evoked by soaring classical strains and the corrupt high culture of the characters here in the real world. After Fitz tricks Brenner into meeting him alone in the square in the middle of the night, the shots of his thugs beating Brenner to a pulp are cross-cut with shots of the Festspiele president, listening to opera and even conducting along – paralleling his orchestration of the attack on Brenner simultaneously happening elsewhere. Earlier, he had even remarked how sad it was that the last sound Hitler, known for his appreciation of music and other fine arts, heard was his own finger pulling the trigger against his skull. It takes quite a strange worldview to feel any pity for Hitler at all. In addition, the sounds of music floating down from the stage as Brenner creeps around the basement of the Festspielhaus, eventually and hilariously emerging in the midst of a performance, contrast severely with his dingy surroundings. While the music belongs to the shiny Baroque façade referenced by Standún, Brenner has uncovered the dirty backyard that no one was meant to see.

Conclusion

In an interview with Krobath, Haas pointed out, "In *Silentium!* we work with a form of comedy that can also hurt you." *Silentium!*, the second Brenner film by Murnberger, Haas, and Hader, builds on the success of *Come, Sweet Death* four years earlier to further develop the Austro-comedy formula and offer a slightly more serious and sustained critique on Austrian society. Engaging with real problems facing Austria today, such as the crisis in the Catholic Church, *Silentium!* takes on two iconic institutions, the Church and the high-brow Salzburger Festspiele, proving stereotypical

simplifications of Salzburg as a mythical Alpine paradise to be deceptively incomplete. The film does this by contrasting the sympathetic anti-hero character and milieu of Brenner with the high society he investigates and finds to be extremely corrupt; by exaggerating the degree of corruption that Brenner finds and playing up the absurd excesses of the conniving Church and Society members; and by reappropriating stereotypical images and music and adding additional layers of meaning to the preexisting conceptions of viewers, complicating and problematizing these preconceptions. As another successful entry in the series, *Silentium!* also sets up the third Brenner film, *The Bone Man*, for which the scene will switch briefly back to Vienna, and then to the rural Austrian countryside.

Chapter Four
It's All (Chicken) Sausage to Me:
Dining, Dialects, and Divisions in *The Bone Man*

Introduction

Jetzt ist schon wieder was passiert… *"Something just happened again. No one wanted to believe this could happen in our own backyard. But as soon as the story was out, the finger-pointing began. Some blamed it on money. On greed. Others blamed it on sex. And others said it was our modern times, the godless and egotistical society. The Austrians blamed the non-Austrians. And the vegetarians said that eating meat was what started it all. But here's what I say: they are all wrong. If it weren't for love, none of this would have happened."* In a cigarette-hoarse whisper, the unseen narrator (who is never to be heard from again, but whose presence here ties this film to the previous two) opens *The Bone Man* with this debatable declaration. The camera pans left from a black screen to trace a succession of windows blocked out in red paper, cut into the façade of a grey stone building and rimmed with strings of cheap-looking scarlet lights. It eventually comes to a stop on a window with curtains pulled back to expose a man, bare stomach drooping over his black underwear, setting up a video camera on a tripod. Voices speak in Russian, but German and/or English subtitles clarify that they do not correspond with the scene in the room; a pan and tilt left and down reveal a pair of men arguing in the street about the correct ratio for antifreeze, as well as a sign that confirms the location as Bratislava, Slovakia, not Austria. Even before a fall from one of these windows galvanizes its plot, then, *The Bone Man* immediately establishes its interests in language

and Austria's neighboring countries and raises the question of what or whom – greed, sex, foreigners, carnivores, love, all of the above? – is to blame for what will ensue.

The Bone Man is the most recent film in the Brenner series, released in 2009 to rave reviews from the Austrian press and the highest box-office numbers to date. With 279,143 tickets sold, the film is currently fifth on the list of attendance at domestic films since 1981, and it was awarded the "Austrian Ticket" prize by the Austrian Film Institute for attracting an audience greater than 75,000 in its year of release.[139] *The Bone Man* is an adaptation of Wolf Haas' 1997 novel of the same name; the films do not follow the order of the books, as *The Bone Man* was the second Brenner book Haas wrote, whereas *Come, Sweet Death* was third and *Silentium!* was fourth. However, as each book stands almost entirely on its own (and the films only slightly less so due to the continued presence of Berti) this lack of chronology does not really matter. *The Bone Man* was the second of Haas' Brenner novels to be translated by Annie Janusch into English, after *Der Brenner und der liebe Gott* (2009)/*Brenner and God* (June 2012), and was published by Melville International Crime in March 2013.[140]

Interestingly, not only does the plot of the film begin in another country, but for the first time in the series the film itself opened outside of Austria, premiering at the Berlinale festival on February 9, 2009 and opening in wide release in Germany on Feb 19, 2009 before finally showing widely in Austria on March 6, 2009 and screening at the Diagonale festival in Graz on March 18, 2009. In the making-of featurette on the DVD, Hader explains this surprising order of premieres by saying that the films are beloved in Germany, but he clarifies that they are seen as "exotic." Therefore, in this case their

[139] Austrian Film Institute website: Prizes http://www.filminstitut.at/de/filmpreise-oe/.
[140] See Melville House International Crime website: http://www.mhpbooks.com/books/brenner-and-god/; http://www.mhpbooks.com/books/the-bone-man/.

popularity in another country actually supports the idea that the films are culturally specific to Austria. Germans are outsiders to Austria, but they are close enough neighbors that they have the linguistic and cultural knowledge to understand the jokes but also recognize them as coming from elsewhere. The fact that Germans see the films as "exotic" suggests the gap between German culture and Austrian culture as depicted onscreen. Austrian actress Pia Herzegger, the much-searched-for Horvath in *The Bone Man*, emphasized Brenner's Austrianness in an interview:

> I know a lot of German people who love the whole thing. But probably that's partly because it really does have an Austrian feeling. You do get this kind of sloppy inspector in many countries, but I actually don't know any other character you could compare with Brenner. I get the feeling Brenner doesn't have any ambition. The fact that he solves the case more or less passes him by. And maybe that's something particularly Austrian.[141]

While the rest of the world is lacking in the requisite background knowledge and therefore largely indifferent, Germany's special position allows them to appreciate the films despite not being part of them.

The film premiered in the U.S. on February 24, 2010, at the Cinequest festival in San Jose, California. According to its website, the Cinequest film festival is one component of "a vanguard organization that fuses creativity with technological innovation to empower, improve, and transform the lives of people and communities worldwide, through Picture the Possibilities (PTP), Cinequest Film Festival and Cinequest Mavericks Studio."[142] *The Bone Man*'s inclusion is notable especially because this festival is not German-language or Austria-focused. Though they have still never been picked up for wide distribution in the United States, the Brenner films' and books' presence here is growing. Reflecting this, *Variety* gave *The Bone Man* a positive review (as it also did for *Silentium!*):

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[141] "The Bone Man" presskit.

[142] See Cinequest website: http://www.cinequest.org/our-vision.

> A shambling flatfoot uncovers mordantly funny goings-on deep in the countryside in "The Bone Man." Third outing by Austrian standup comedian Josef Hader and helmer Wolfgang Murnberger, adapting the cult novels of Wolf Haas ("Come Sweet Death," "Silentium"), is well up to par, though Hader himself sometimes seems more like a guest star in his own movie, up against Josef Bierbichler's powerful playing as the chicken-grinder of the title. Outside German-speaking territories, this could reap some modest coin in European abattoirs.[143]

The Bone Man has also been enthusiastically reviewed by a handful of American bloggers. Clinton Stark of *Stark Insider: All Things West Coast* concluded, "Is it a thriller? A farce? A dark comedy? I'll leave that for you to figure out. One thing it definitely is: awesome. Alert: popcorn and chicken may not go so well with this film,"[144] while Andrew Grant for *GreenCine Daily* chose it as among his favorites from the 2009 Berlinale: "*The Bone Man* may not be high art, but it proves that populist fare can be both smart and endlessly entertaining."[145] Nearly all of the English-speaking reviews compare the film to the Coen brothers' 1996 *Fargo*, another grotesque black comedy set in a snowy small town far off the beaten track. This apt comparison will be further discussed below.

As detailed in previous chapters, in *Come, Sweet Death* and *Silentium!* Murnberger, Haas, and Hader overturn pleasant touristy stereotypes and put forth instead a hilarious, morbid perspective on contemporary Austrian society, especially the cities of Vienna and Salzburg. In *The Bone Man*, the same three collaborators shift their attention to Austria's rural provinces, in this case the inn/restaurant *Löschenkohl*, located in the Styrian countryside in the southwestern corner of the country but well worth the trip out of town for its unusually delicious fried chicken. (Although the *Löschenkohl* does not

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[143] Elley, Derek. "Review: 'The Bone Man.' *Variety*, February 19, 2009. http://variety.com/2009/film/reviews/the-bone-man-1200473569/.

[144] Stark, Clinton. "Film Review: 'The Bone Man' an Austrian Fargo with German cars and a twist." *StarkInsider.com*. February 16, 2010. http://www.starkinsider.com/2010/02/cinequest-review-the-bone-man-an-austrian-fargo-with-german-cars-and-a-twist.html.

[145] Grant, Andrew. "BERLIN '09 DISPATCH: Kill Daddy Goodnight / The Bone Man." *GreenCine Daily*, February 15, 2009. http://daily.greencine.com/archives/007341.html.

actually exist, and neither does the bone-grinding machine in its basement, the inn is loosely based on the *Gasthaus Palz* in the small Styrian town of Klöch, a real *Hendlstation* to which busloads of people flock for chicken.[146] The plot of the book/film is entirely fictional.) As suggested in the *Variety* review, Brenner shares the limelight for much of *The Bone Man*, and the film has two interconnected main storylines for its two male leads. The first of these to appear onscreen is the *Wirt* (innkeeper), Herr Löschenkohl (played by well-known Bavarian actor Josef Bierbichler), whose storyline includes his involvement in the situation in Bratislava that opens the film and his troubled relationship with his son Pauli (Christoph Luser). The second storyline, which gets underway after the prologue in Bratislava and the fragmented, teal, electronica credit sequence, follows Brenner, including his attempt to find Herr Horvath and repossess the yellow VW Beetle, his brief romance with Birgit (Birgit Minichmayr), and his unraveling of what is really going on in the basement of the *Gasthaus*. Both of these storylines interact with larger issues and tensions in contemporary Austrian culture. Specifically, Herr Löschenkohl's storyline resonates with longstanding tensions between Austrians and foreigners, while Brenner's storyline addresses the tensions between city-dwellers (specifically in Vienna, as Austria's only large international city) and the rural population. Everything comes together in the final forty-five minutes of the film, as the *Gasthaus Löschenkohl* hosts a masquerade ball that attracts seemingly everyone in the surrounding countryside, and the dark side of life at the *Löschenkohl* is unmasked.

Language and Identity in the Austro-Comedy and *The Bone Man*

[146] See Gasthof Palz website: http://www.gasthof-palz.at/restaurant.html.

Among the typical markers of an Austro-comedy discussed so far and witnessed in *Come, Sweet Death* and *Silentium!* (and continued in *The Bone Man*) are a sympathetic, anti-heroic protagonist played by a well-known stand-up comedian; a setting in a non-touristy, even ugly part of Austria; and a self-critical perspective designed to reveal and mock Austria's faults and foibles for a domestic audience. Another key feature of the Austro-comedy, which is related to all of these previous characteristics and evident in all three Brenner films, is language, specifically the Austrian dialect. In fact, the Austrian dialect in the Brenner films is so thick that some DVD editions of them even list among the subtitle options not just English and German for the hard of hearing, but also "*Hochdeutsch*," or High German such as what one would learn from a textbook. In her chapter in *New Austrian Film*, Standún writes, "Similar to the Austrian *Volksstück* [folk play], a very strong use of dialect or accent marks all films of this genre. Dialect combined with a rather crude phraseology creates a form of speech that is considered 'real,' although it has been argued that it is an exaggerated form of reality and thus quite unrealistic."[147] The 'real' language combines with the struggling protagonist and mundane (or worse) setting to reinforce the sense that these films are focusing on the daily existence of actual Austrians, not putting forth an idealized image. However, the exaggeration of just how rough things are – whether through overly colloquial or crude language, a barely functional anti-hero, or the unlivably bad milieu – combines with the presence of the stand-up comedian and the happy ending to lend a reassuring note ("well, at least it's not *that* bad!") to what could otherwise be more tragic than comedic. Even more importantly, in addition to adding this element of realism, the

[147] Standún, "National Box-Office Cinemas," p. 326.

use of an explicitly Austrian form of the German language emphasizes the *Austrianness* of the Austro-comedy.

The German language varies tremendously among Germany, Austria, Lichtenstein, and Switzerland, and even throughout the different regions of these countries; most of the Austrian characters in the three Brenner films speak with an accent that, to any German speaker, is unmistakably Austrian. For example, instead of a crisp High German *gar nicht* ("completely not") the Austrians pronounce a much deeper, round-mouthed *guar ned*; the number two is pronounced not *zwei* but *zwoa*; and *nichts* ("nothing") is shortened to *nix*, and even spelled that way in the subtitles for Germans who are hard of hearing. Other obvious Austrianisms throughout the films include "*Gruß Gott*" and "*Servus*" as greetings, "*Schmäh*" for joke, "*Gewand*" for clothing, "*deppert*" for dumb, and "*es ist mir wurscht*" – literally "it's sausage to me," used to mean "I don't care" or "it doesn't matter." Language is a key part of any country's national identity, and it (along with football, and notwithstanding Christoph Waltz's somewhat facetious claim that Germany and Austria have as much in common as a battleship and a waltz[148]) is one of the things that separates Austria and Germany to this day. Since the end of World War II, Austria has focused more than ever on developing a national identity apart from Germany, and language has been a key part of this effort. The importance that Austria places on its unique vocabulary can be seen in Protocol Number 10, a document signed when Austria joined the European Union in 1995 that lists twenty-three Austrian terms that are protected and considered of equivalent legal value to the high German versions. Most of these words, interestingly, describe foods, including the words for horseradish,

[148] See Waltz on youtube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3r61EcyegBM.

tomato, potato, cauliflower, and apricot, among others.[149] Because Austria focuses to such a degree on maintaining a distinctive language as part of its national identity, it is not surprising that a strong Austrian dialect should prevail in this most national of genres, the Austro-comedy.

While Brenner and the other characters speak in Austrian dialect throughout all three films, language plays an especially large role in *The Bone Man*. *Come, Sweet Death* relied on an innovative visual style to adapt Haas' literary voice, but *The Bone Man* reveals more of the intricacies of Haas' playful use of language as it characterizes its characters and settings. First, the presence of Eastern Europeans who speak poor or heavily-accented German highlights the importance of speech for identity. The characters who arrive from Bratislava hoping to sort out their lives are marked and marginalized immediately, just as they might be in the real, somewhat xenophobic Austria, and as will be detailed below. Moreover, in an interview, Murnberger discusses the language of two of the stars who play key provincial Austrian characters. Of Brenner's love interest in the film, Murnberger says, "And she also fits in very well in the restaurant. In purely linguistic terms. Birgit Minichmayr comes from Upper Austria, too. And in *The Bone Man* she doesn't talk the way she does in the Burgtheater. She can also talk quite normally, let me put it like that. Very Austrian. Very rural."[150] Minichmayr herself describes having to learn 'proper' language for the theater and to use different dialects for different roles, but adds of how she speaks in this film, "That's my dialect. That's the way I speak. … I can't talk about the countryside in high German; that would be

[149] Protocol Number 10: http://ec.europa.eu/translation/german/guidelines/documents/austrian_expressions_de.pdf.
[150] "The Bone Man" presskit.

completely ridiculous."[151] The enunciation that would be fit for the Burgtheater would be very out of place in the *Gasthaus Löschenkohl*, as it would be in an Austro-comedy. The other star that Murnberger mentions is the *Gasthaus* owner, Herr Löschenkohl, played by accomplished German actor Josef Bierbichler in the only main role to be filled by a non-Austrian. Murnberger says, "The characters are all very Austrian. I mean, Sepp Bierbichler may be from Bavaria, but we haven't tried to conceal that fact; he speaks in his own language anyway. You just incorporate that into the story."[152] While his identity is still marked, the Bavarian accent is not that different from the Austrian – as compared to a northern German accent, for example – and, since the Austrian and Bavarian cultures have a lot in common, a Bavarian *Gasthaus* owner is completely plausible.

As previously mentioned, American reviewers almost without exception describe *The Bone Man* as "an Austrian *Fargo*;" among other similarities, accents and dialects play key roles in authenticating identity in both films. In an interview, producer Danny Krausz of DOR Films echoed this comparison in an attempt to define the film's genre: "Now we've got a romantic thriller comedy with a dash of horror, maybe a sort of Austro-Fargo."[153] The link is clear; *Fargo*'s tagline, "a lot can happen in the middle of nowhere," applies equally well to *The Bone Man*. In addition to their isolated, snowy settings, parallels between the films include their status as noir-ish crime thrillers with liberal doses of absurd comedy; plots and schemes involving blackmail; the unpleasant use of woodchipper-like machines for human bodies; subplots involving heterosexual romance; the contrast between a city and the small town where most of the story is set; the presence of an eccentric but effective detective figure at the center of the story; and,

[151] "The Bone Man" presskit.
[152] "The Bone Man" presskit.
[153] "The Bone Man" presskit.

most of all, the use of language/dialect/accent as a cultural marker and to establish an unmistakable sense of place. While *Fargo* is all about the American Midwest, especially Minnesota, Austro-comedies in general and *The Bone Man* in particular are all about Austria and Austrianness. In a *Slate* review of *Fargo*, Eric Henderson writes,

> To anyone who didn't grow up here, the distinction [between Minneapolis and St. Paul as two small cities or, combined, a large metropolis] might seem mundane, but it's one that the Coens clearly understood while making *Fargo* and it drives the comedy-horror of a vapid environment by repeatedly honing in on the quotidian small talk characteristic of a people who define themselves by defining themselves.[154]

Fargo's Minnesotans – not the world's most glamorous of populations – set themselves apart through their 'quotidian small talk' and their language in general, just as Austrians do both in real life and in the Brenner films. Henderson also makes the astute observation that it takes someone who grew up there to recognize and depict the real issues of a place. In this quote from the same review, one could replace "Minnesotan" with "Austrian" and "*Fargo*" with *"The Bone Man,"* and it would still make sense, and the opening question would be just as pertinent:

> Do you have to be a Minnesotan to really get *Fargo*? As the saying goes, you could do a lot worse. But even beyond the regional colloquialisms and the broad accents, which most of us in the Cities are quick to claim are more the province of the outstate crowd, is another smartly constructed, wickedly executed black comedy about the inherent weirdness of people, a satire reflecting how humanity's grand, inevitably failed gestures are no match for mankind's pettiness and stupidity.[155]

The Bone Man can also definitely be described as a "smartly constructed, wickedly executed black comedy." Its use of Austrian language marks it as dealing with Austrian identity, as does its engagement with two other ways through which contemporary Austrian identity is delineated: Austrians as opposed to foreigners and, within Austria, the countryside as opposed to Vienna.

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[154]Henderson, Eric. "Fargo." *Slantmagazine.com,* May 21, 2009. http://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/fargo.

[155] Henderson, "Fargo."

Austria v. *Ausländer* (Foreigners)

One of the possible reasons that the narrator lists at the beginning of the film for everything that was to happen is foreigners: "The Austrians blamed the non-Austrians." Although the narrator goes on to claim that the actual reason is love, to some extent the rest of the film argues that it was in fact the non-Austrians that caused the craziness, or at least that they did not help to stop it.

As described above, *The Bone Man* opens on a dark night on the street in front of a brothel in Bratislava. On the DVD's director's commentary track, Murnberger and Hader discuss their decision to open in a foreign language instead of German. They point out that this is unusual and perhaps risky, but since this is a film and not television, viewers cannot simply change the channel; having already left the house and paid for their tickets, theatrical audiences are unlikely to get up and leave in confusion or frustration. When watching the DVD in German, the early conversations in Bratislava are subtitled in German; when watching the DVD in English, these early conversations are subtitled in both English and German, whereas later conversations in German only have English subtitles. While the fact that the opening conversation is not in German is made clear for English-language viewers, finer distinctions between accents, dialects, and levels of fluency are not marked in the English subtitles, meaning that an English-language viewer misses many of the nuances of language and identity throughout the film, and therefore much of both its social commentary and its humor. Unusual though it may be, this opening can also be seen as a somewhat conventional beginning for a murder mystery (although in this case it turns out that no one is murdered, at least not

yet), in that the film opens *in media res*, throwing the audience into a confusing situation and giving them the same feeling of bafflement as the detectives face as they begin to unravel what has happened (the confusion is further heightened by the lack of a close-up on Herr Löschenkohl, meaning viewers must wait to ascertain his role in the situation). This opening is also just the first of several scenes set in Bratislava throughout the film, none of which paint Slovakia in a particularly flattering light. While *Come, Sweet Death* and *Silentium!* focus almost exclusively on Austrian characters (with the exception of the Filipina women trapped in sex slavery in *Silentium!*), *The Bone Man* deals much more with the reality of integration and immigration in Austria today by including several foreign characters.

A significant percentage of the Austrian population has a "migratory background," as detailed in Chapter One. However, despite this high percentage of foreigners, most of whom are clustered in Vienna, Austria is not particularly welcoming to immigrants. Stoked by the inflammatory propaganda of extreme right-wing political parties such as Jörg Haider's FPÖ, a virulent strain of xenophobia and fear of outsiders runs through the culture. As the easternmost nation on the western side of the former Iron Curtain, Austria is perched precariously between Eastern and Western Europe; correspondingly, it has complex relationships with people arriving from both directions. More foreigners in Austria come from Germany than any other country. To a large degree – aside from, for example, using the different food terms mentioned above – they blend in; many of them come for university, because it is cheaper in Austria than in Germany, and then simply stay. Although policies such as Protocol Number 10 emphasize Austrians' desire to maintain a language apart from that of Germany, the more

politically-fraught issues of language protection relate to the influx of foreigners who do not speak German at all. Though a higher percentage of foreigners actually come from Germany, the more visible minorities in Austria arrive from the East, especially Turkey, the Baltic countries, and Slovakia. Bratislava is the capital of Slovakia and its largest city with 460,000 people; Vienna and Bratislava are, geographically-speaking, the second-closest national capitals in the world (eclipsed only by Rome and the Vatican). Bratislava is only about forty miles down the Danube River from Vienna, connected by river cruise, train, and highways, but in *The Bone Man* it is an entirely different world.

In *The Bone Man*, the setting in Bratislava feels very unlike the parts of the film that take place in Austria. In reality, Bratislava has an attractive, touristy old town center, filled with beautiful Baroque buildings and cute tiny cafes. The city is appreciated among Austrians for its cheap beer, and Austrians often make the trip across the border for bachelor parties and other festive occasions. However, none of the positive aspects of the city are pictured in *The Bone Man*; all the Austrian viewer of *The Bone Man* sees is Bratislava's sketchy side, the side that has not changed much since the fall of the Wall in 1989. The film opens in a Bratislava brothel, and Brenner accompanies Herr Löschenkohl on his return there later in the film, their destination established by a shot of the soaring modern New Bridge and the castle up on a hill that mark the city limits. The brothel, a two-story, grey concrete building on an empty street dotted with only a few older cars, is disintegrating and graffiti-scrawled; a feeble neon-pink sign offers "Girls" in English, while the windows' reddish tint by night and dirty frosted glass by day suggest that something needs to be hidden. Inside, the hallways are wallpapered in a garish diamond pattern reminiscent of a court jester's pants and nearly-naked girls cavort in paintings

lining the walls, while the rooms are numbered in ironically idealistic red hearts. Bratislava, apparently, is where one goes to find prostitutes; based on what is shown in the film, Bratislava's entire economy seems to depend on illegal activities and the cash of visiting Austrians; and the use of a different language underscores the overwhelming, alarming sense of "we're not in Austria anymore" that viewers get when the film shifts to Slovakia.

In addition to the contrasts in scenery between the seedy side of Slovakia and the picturesque Austrian countryside, Bratislava and the people from there (or other places outside of Austria) are immediately distinguished or 'othered,' especially by their language. In the opening scene, of course, they are at home and do not speak German, putting the Austrian audience in the uncomfortable position of outsider. After this, though, the characters from Bratislava become the outsiders; they have little to no agency when they come to Austria, and none of them gets to enjoy a happy ending. For example, Herr Löschenkohl rescues a girl, Valeria (Dorka Gryllus), from the brothel; she comes to the *Gasthaus* in Klöch even though she repeatedly insists that she does not want to go to Austria, she wants to go home. However, she is entirely dependent on him for her safety and has no control over her own life. She does not dress up for the masquerade ball, telling Brenner that she has basically been in costume for years; she dances with whomever invites her, including a crazed Pauli and the singers onstage, and she can do nothing to prevent Herr Löschenkohl's death, simply weeping over his body in the kitchen after the fact. According to the director's commentary track on the DVD, Gryllus, born in Budapest, speaks perfect high German; for the film, she had to put on a stronger eastern accent and pretend to not speak fluently. Her character's story reflects the lives of

many immigrants from the east who struggle to assimilate, due in large part to difficulties with the language.

Other foreigners in *The Bone Man* who come to Austria also struggle to accomplish their goals, due in large part to their inability to communicate effectively in German, and they all meet with unfortunate ends. First, Evgenjev (Stipe Erceg), who took the photo of Herr Löschenkohl's license plate in Bratislava and uses it to blackmail him, arrives at the Gasthaus to take Pauli's Porsche and anything else he can get; he ends up smashed in the head by a glass and, horrifyingly, being fed through the chicken grinder in the basement. When his female companion Ana (Edita Malovcic) realizes he has been gone awhile and comes in looking for him, she sees enough that Herr Löschenkohl chases her out of the inn and off the road and then pushes her car into the icy water to ensure her demise. Both of these characters' deaths provide important clues that the Austrians use to solve the mystery: Brenner stumbles upon Evgenjev's finger in a basement drain, while Pauli finds the damning video with Ana's other belongings in the car. While the foreigners do not have agency, the Austrians do, and they take advantage of the non-Austrian characters – even their smallest body parts – throughout the film to achieve their goals. Finally, Igor (Ivan Shvedoff), who Herr Löschenkohl shoved out the Bratislava brothel window but did not kill, ends up in a wheelchair with a broken leg but manages to procure a passport with a visa and make it to Austria. However, once there he winds up stuck in the police station; like the humorous episode in which Pauli comes to discuss a murder only to be informed insistently that he is parked in the wrong place, this is a classic example of Austrian bureaucratic inefficiency. Igor eventually escapes and finds himself, still in that wheelchair – a literal symbol of his incapacitation and lack of agency

– on the snowy mountainside, waving his passport fruitlessly at police officers who briefly try to understand his broken, accented German but decide to drive off and leave him stranded. Although this is a comic moment, it is also indicative in an exaggerated way of how foreigners are sometimes treated in Austria. Ultimately, none of the foreigners, including Valeria, Evgenjev, Ana, and Igor, find success in Austria; their inability to communicate in smooth Austrian German, admittedly in combination with their (aside from Valeria's) genuinely threatening missions, prevents them from convincing any of the Austrians to help.

As in most Austro-comedies, language, overall, is a key marker of identity both for the Austrians in the film and the other characters. By beginning the film in Bratislava and returning there, and incorporating characters from there and elsewhere, *The Bone Man* captures a real part of the current Austrian context and addresses one of the most serious issues plaguing Austrian society today. The gap between Austrians and foreigners is emphasized even more by the fact that these foreign characters appear in the countryside, typically a more traditional and wholly Austrian location than the metropolitan big city; this is another contrast taken up within the film, as will be discussed below.

Vienna v. Provincial Countryside

While the differences between Austria and its foreign neighbors may be more immediately obvious, a contrast also exists within Austria, between the international metropolis of Vienna – sometimes referred to as a head without a body, a world capital that no longer is attached to a correspondingly giant empire or nation – and the rest of the

country. Vienna, with almost two million inhabitants, is by far the most populous city in Austria; the next largest, Graz (the capital of Styria, the same province in which the *Gasthaus Löschenkohl* is located), has a population of only 300,000, many of whom are university students that come and go with the seasons. Most of Austria is rural and sparsely populated. While Herr Löschenkohl's storyline brings to life the tensions between Austria and nearby countries, especially those to the east, Brenner's storyline can be seen as a collision between the big city, in the form of Brenner and eventually Berti, and the countryside, including those at the *Gasthaus Löschenkohl*. Building on the depictions of working-class Vienna in *Come, Sweet Death* and high-society Salzburg in *Silentium!*, *The Bone Man* plays up the contrast between modern, cosmopolitan Vienna – a European capital – and rural, *gemütlich* (cosy) Klöch – a small Austrian town – but does not present just a stereotypical vision of an innocent provincial paradise. In *The Bone Man*, the pristine beauty of the provincial forest is sharply contrasted with the basement's endlessly-spinning machine of guts and bone and marred by the exhaust and squealing tires of Pauli's Porsche and his father's Jeep. Like an earlier example mentioned by Standún, *The Bone Man* "employs clichés of the stereotyped Austrian alpine *Heimatfilm*, such as traditional music, costumes, and setting in order to pervert them, and the end result is a rather bizarre black comedy" (324). While the landscape may be stereotypical, what happens there is definitely not.

Just as Bratislava and Austria look very different in the films, so too is there a significant contrast between the settings in Vienna and those in the southern part of Styria where the *Gasthaus* is located (*The Bone Man*, like the previous two films, was filmed on location; the fidelity of these settings would be nearly impossible to recreate elsewhere).

After the prologue in Bratislava and the credit sequence, the film re-opens in Vienna, with an establishing shot of the *Donauturm,* or Danube Tower, located in the city's twenty-second district, in the northeast corner of the city on the northern bank of the Danube River. The tower, the highest manmade structure in Austria at 827 feet, boasts an observation deck and sky-high café;[156] it features prominently in the skyline and is a popular tourist attraction. Built as part of the Viennese International Horticultural Show in 1964, the *Donauturm* is one of the most modern landmarks in a city celebrated for its medieval cathedral, Baroque opulence, neo-everything Ringstrasse architecture, and turn-of-the-century *Jugendstil* (art nouveau) style. But instead of focusing on any of those more familiar markers, or opening with the *Heimatfilm*-esque vision that is quickly dispelled in the previous two films, *The Bone Man* begins with the futuristic space needle of the *Donauturm*, foreshadowing the modern way Vienna will be represented throughout the film. The Vienna of *The Bone Man* not only looks different from the tourist brochures, but it also varies from how it is depicted in *Come, Sweet Death*. Specifically, in *The Bone Man* Vienna is shown to be a starkly modern metropolis with lots of skyscrapers and, aside from a few glimpses of the *Donauturm*, no recognizable features that distinguish it from any other large city. While Brenner's adventures at the *Gasthaus Löschenkohl* comprise most of the story, the film's frame story set in Vienna reveals Brenner's continuing status as an anti-heroic Austro-comedy protagonist, brings Berti into the film again, and, by underscoring the isolated location of the *Gasthaus*, highlights the contrast between big city and small town.

The Bone Man's reintroduction of Brenner makes it clear to viewers that his situation has not drastically improved since the previous film: a slow tilt down from the

[156] See Danube Tower website: http://www.donauturm.at/de/.

shot of the *Donauturm* reveals him walking in a residential quarter, where he unlocks a car, tosses a package of diapers and a car seat onto the lawn, and attempts to recover the past-due-to-be-returned vehicle for Berti's firm before being convinced to first detour by a kindergarten. While in this case Brenner is doing the dispossessing, his willingness to at least give the woman and her daughter a ride reflect his own familiarity with challenging situations, as well as his continuing inability to say 'no' to any woman's request. Brenner still does not have a permanent job, and instead assists Berti at his rental car firm. Judging by the amount of time he is able to spend at the *Löschenkohl*, he has not built much of a life for himself in Vienna. Later in the film, Birgit teasingly asks him how he wants, not a martini, but his eggs for breakfast, prepared: "gerührt oder geschüttelt?" (stirred or shaken?); this nod to fellow investigator James Bond mostly serves to suggest how far from that ideal Brenner – he of the bags of chips and bottles of beer in bed, and now reading glasses too – still finds himself. Hader does obliquely compare his own character to James Bond in an interview:

> in terms of the development from one film to the next, we kept in mind the good old James Bond movies. During the phases when they were really working at the job, they also managed to move the character and the kind of film along constantly. For every film they turned the screw a bit more to see how they could move things a step further – and that's what we wanted to do as well.[157]

His budding relationship with Birgit brings out a softer side of Brenner, even once convincing him to forgo a cigarette so he might steal a kiss and freeing him to make an endearing fool of himself on the ice skating rink. As Murnberger says of the romantic subplot, more developed here than in the book or in either of the previous two films, "We made an attempt to get closer to the characters. We see more of Brenner as a private individual. He falls in love. As a result it looks as though he is becoming gentler. But

[157] "The Bone Man" presskit.

there are still hard, violent scenes."[158] However, despite these promising signs, *The Bone Man* ends with Brenner and Berti together and on their way back to Vienna.

As in *Silentium!*, Berti does not appear in the book version of *The Bone Man*, but his addition to the film develops the rapport between the two characters and gives Brenner someone outside of the crazy world of the *Löschenkohl* with whom to converse. As Simon Schwarz, who plays Berti, explains to Krobath, "you often find that in films, and especially in thrillers the investigator always likes to have someone at his side, in some form or another. Not his adversary, but some sort of person he can trust, he can feed off. And the hero always needs a character he can release his energy with."[159] Berti also motivates Brenner's trip to Klöch, just as Berti's gusto for amateur sleuthing in *Come, Sweet Death* inspired the initially reluctant Brenner to investigate the murders of Stenzl and 'the Piefke.' Brenner meets Berti and his flavor-of-the-week (their public display of affection, unacceptable to most Americans, is a peculiarly Austrian phenomenon to be witnessed on any subway line at any hour of any night. However, Brenner still looks awfully uncomfortable and alone as he looks away and downs his beer) at a sleek, modern café/bar in Vienna. One wall consists of floor-to-ceiling windows flaunting an impressive view of shiny glass skyscrapers, while mirrors lining the other walls reflect blonde wood, brushed stainless steel, and slick brown leather furnishings. None of the *Gemütlichkeit* of a traditional Viennese *Kaffeehaus* signifies the city in which they sit. When Berti first asks Brenner to venture to the *Gasthaus Löschenkohl* to retrieve the yellow VW beetle from Herr Horvath, Brenner is not enthused about leaving the big city: "ich hasse das Land, was soll ich dort?" ("I hate the country, what am I supposed to do

[158] "The Bone Man" presskit.
[159] "The Bone Man" presskit.

there?"). But once he gets there, and despite the less-than-warm welcome he receives, he does not want to leave, mostly because of Birgit.

Set up by Brenner's lack of excitement, the contrast between city and country is magnified once he arrives at the *Löschenkohl*, a classic half-timbered Austrian *Gasthaus*. The white stucco building, crossed with dark wooden beams and checkered with windows begging for mustaches of spring flowers, sits in the shadow of a giant highway bridge that is itself dwarfed by snowy mountains; inside, hanging trapezoidal lamps warmly illuminate rustic wooden paneling and cosy booths. However, despite the hospitable-looking atmosphere, Brenner asks too many questions and is so clearly an outsider that the tight-knit community, suspecting he is a journalist, seals its collective lips. As Standún writes of the Austro-comedy, "Small towns or villages, in the traditional *Heimatfilm* romantic and idyllic enclaves, are, in this genre, claustrophobic spaces, where non-locals are not wanted or at least treated with suspicion."[160] Frustrated with the service shortly after his arrival, Brenner sarcastically remarks, "I see that at a *Gasthaus*, the *Gast* (guest) is still king," to which Herr Löschenkohl replies, "no, this is not a *Gasthaus*, this is a *Wirtshaus* – the *Wirt* (innkeeper) is king." (*Gasthaus* and *Wirtshaus* are interchangeable words for "inn.") Pauli in particular is defensive about people living in the countryside being just as smart as city-dwellers. He insists to Brenner, "Ich bin nicht deppert, nur weil ich vom Land bin" ("I'm not stupid just because I'm from the country") and later derisively spits "Scheiß Wiener" (literally "shit Viennese") at Brenner while abandoning him on the side of the road. Unfulfilled stereotypes of a countryside retreat also come up in conversation between Brenner and Birgit; she asks if he is staying 'for the fresh air' – something he has enjoyed more than enough of after the top of his

[160] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p. 324.

convertible flew off on the highway – to which he ironically replies, no, it's because the people are so friendly. While Brenner manages to seem useful enough to enough people that his presence is tolerated, the contrast becomes even starker once Berti arrives, as will be discussed below.

Before Berti appears at the masquerade ball, his existence in Vienna is also sharply contrasted with Brenner's experiences at the *Löschenkohl*. Berti is always smartly dressed in dark suit and tie, an outfit sported by exactly no one seen in Klöch, where Brenner's uniform of baggy khakis is *de rigueur*. Berti frequently calls Brenner to check on his progress, and is always seen pacing and ranting into his mobile phone, the perfect image of big-city efficiency and impatience; aside from his nasally Austrian accent, he almost seems German. Young Berti has come a long way since his days as an overeager ambulance driver in *Come, Sweet Death*! He does his pacing and ranting in glass-paned skyscraper office buildings while traffic, including the familiar red Viennese streetcars, lurches down busy streets behind him. Skyscrapers are not part of the tourist's typical image of Vienna, in part because within the city's inner districts, no building can be taller than the central cathedral *Stephansdom*; however, in the outlying districts, just enough skyscrapers do exist to allow the depiction of Vienna that is seen in *The Bone Man*, where it could almost pass for any modern city. Obviously, Vienna has many unique characteristics, but representing it in the film as a generic, modern European capital intensifies the contrast with the very Austrian countryside.

The Masquerade Ball

These two storylines and sets of tensions, Austrian Herr Löschenkohl/the foreigners and big-city Brenner/the countryside, come together in the final forty-five minutes of the film at the masquerade ball held at the *Gasthaus Löschenkohl*. All of the main characters, as well as what seems like the entirety of the surrounding environs, descend on the *Gasthaus*, mostly in brightly-colored costumes. A masquerade ball is a classic storytelling device; by hiding characters' identities from one another, it can create comedic misunderstandings and dramatic irony, and it can, for instance, allow characters who otherwise may never speak to one another to meet and fall in love. Masks and costumes are also very often symbolic, revealing something of the person within them that may be hidden or less noticeable in their normal appearance. Ultimately, masquerade balls are all about identity – mistaken identity, true identity finally revealed – and the fact that things may not always be what they seem. One of the main themes of the entire Brenner series, and of Austro-comedies in general, is the removal of the beautiful Baroque façade from Austria, complicating the false stereotypical narratives and uncovering what the country is really like, all its flaws and quirks but also legitimate charms: in other words, Austria's unmasking. At the end of *The Bone Man*, this unmasking takes place against the backdrop of another set of contrasts, as the film cross-cuts between the festive masquerade ball upstairs and the happenings in the creepy cellar of the *Löschenkohl*.

Before discussing the *Löschenkohl* ball, it is important to note that Austrians typically hold masquerade balls and dress up in costumes as part of *Fasching*, known in Germany as *Karneval* and in America as Carnival or Mardi gras. As discussed with *Silentium!*, Austria is a traditionally Catholic country; the *Fasching* ball season begins

each year at 11:11 a.m. on November 11, and extends approximately three months until Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent. The most famous of the celebrations is likely the *Opernball*, or Opera Ball, which has been held in the State Opera House every year since 1935 on the last Thursday of the ball season, but about 450 official balls, many of them masquerades, take place each year in Vienna.[161] *Fasching* is often celebrated in even more dramatic, if less elegant, fashion in the provinces, where fewer big events enliven the other months of the social calendar. The height of *Fasching,* which can be seen almost as an Austrian Halloween, is *Faschingsdienstag* or Fat Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday, on which everyone wears costumes, drinks too much, eats *Krapfen* – a kind of puffy doughnut usually filled with apricot jelly – and enjoys parades through the streets of small towns. While versions of Carnival are celebrated all around the world, the festivity is an especially anticipated occasion in Austria, and Austrian audiences would certainly have attended masquerade balls similar to the one in *The Bone Man*; thus, while a masquerade ball is a convenient device for a film, it is also a plausible event that would occur in a small Austrian town.

As has been repeatedly shown, one of the main tasks of any Austro-comedy is to (humorously) show life as it really is, to reveal the dirty backyard or creepy basement beneath the Baroque façade and *gemütlich* atmosphere. This goal is accomplished quite literally by the fact that the *Löschenkohl* is not only a chicken restaurant, but also a butcher shop; viewers peek behind the scenes to witness not just delicious-looking dining, but also the bloodier parts of the food preparation process. But it is during the masquerade ball sequence, when the two contrasts previously discussed come together, that *The Bone Man* most strongly accentuates its claim that everything that may not be as

[161] See Vienna tourism site on balls: http://www.wien.info/en/music-stage-shows/dance/ball-season

it seems, that digging a little deeper will uncover dark secrets. Alluding to the horrible things that have happened in Austrian basements in the latter half of the twentieth century (described in Chapter One), on the DVD director's commentary Murnberger says that "anything can happen in a basement… above all in Austria." *The Bone Man* is the first Brenner film to be released since all of the tragic, horrifying cases of Austrian dungeons came to light; while of course no direct connections can be made, Murnberger's point is well-taken. Through cross-cutting between the starkly different settings of the ball on the ground floor of the inn and the basement below, and through the revelation of the identity of "Herr" Horvath, the masquerade ball sequence in *The Bone Man* "unmasks" Austrian society.

On the warmly-lit ground floor of the *Löschenkohl*, confetti floats through the air and costumed revelers, festooned in bright dresses and feathered masks, dance and twirl between cozy wood-paneled walls garlanded by crepe-paper streamers and dotted with cheerful balloons. Partiers jostle jovially and inhale plate after plate of fried chicken and liter after liter of beer at long wooden tables, crowded with people laughing and talking beneath the multicolored ribbons that drip from every lamp. A 1984 song, "Live is Life," from the Austrian pop group Opus, a European number one in 1985 and a hit in America in 1986, is playing, all the words in Austrian-accented English. The cheesy pop song, an old-school classic that most members of the audience would know, matches the lighthearted, goofy tone of the scene; the fact that it is from almost three decades ago fits with the *Löschenkohl*'s status as quite behind the times as compared to Vienna.

On the other hand, through the door and down the staircase, the basement is eerily quiet. None of the music or celebratory spirit seems able to penetrate its labyrinthine

concrete confines, any of the corners around which, it feels, a madman could be lurking. Pauli and wheelchair-bound Igor wear dark clothes and grotesquely deformed, flesh-toned masks; there are no bright costumes to be found, and in this case their masks only serve to make them look creepier, not festive. Knives glint ominously from the walls above the characters' heads, while animal carcasses, veined and bloody, dangle from the ceiling. Everything feels industrial: metallic grey tables, old linoleum floors, concrete-block or off-white tiled walls, harsh blue fluorescent light. And the only sound is the threatening rumble of the chicken grinder, crunching repeatedly with the promise that *any* kind of bone could be subsumed into the cannibalistic chicken fodder being tirelessly emitted. The inn's merry guests could not have imagined what was happening beneath their feet; the masquerade ball is more disguising than they know.

As the evening progresses, the whirls aboveground get ever more frantic, and the cuts between party and basement get ever more frequent, and the scene takes on an ever more hallucinatory air. The band switches to "Skandal im Sperrbezirk," ("scandal in off-limits area"), the 1981 hit single by the Bavarian rock group Spider Murphy Gang; the song's name suggests the scandalous horrors happening in the off-limits basement, just out of view from the party's guests. In the midst of the chaos, Berti shows up from Vienna, exasperated by having had to wait for Brenner this whole time and having been squished in the backseat of a tiny car with several decidedly not-sober revelers. The contrast could not be more striking between Berti in his impeccable dark suit and coat, neatly and functionally accessorized with a striped scarf, and the variously costumed locals. He is stodgy and impatient and very much an outsider, representing an even more extreme collision of city versus countryside than Brenner; he even announces that he

comes from Vienna, as if it were not immediately obvious. However, his impatience lessens after he, following Brenner's instructions, finds the loose finger in Brenner's glove box.

And then Berti uncovers one of the film's more surprising plot twists, and yet another instance of appearances, masked or otherwise, being deceiving: the searched-for Herr Horvath has been in front of Brenner's nose the whole time, only in the process of becoming a woman! She has been staying at the inn during the transformation; while it might seem that the big city would be more accepting of difference, Herr Löschenkohl is himself intimately connected to the situation, as Horvath is providing the flesh he needs for post-cancer genital reconstruction surgery. Interestingly, in a film in which language plays such a significant role, Horvath conveys the information about her change in gender by showing the men visual evidence and then allowing Berti to read about transsexuality in a book. While the visual evidence may have been necessary to convince them – and images, especially unusual ones such as this one, always carry power in film – their lack of dialogue also suggests the difficulty people still have in finding the words to talk about certain topics. Wolf Haas makes his usual cameo at this point, as the doctor who wrote the book on transsexuality. This film departs significantly more from the plot of the book than the previous two, and the narrator plays a much smaller role, but Haas' presence – and, fittingly, as an author – still must be acknowledged. Horvath's revelation demonstrates that sometimes a mask is not even necessary; in the Austrian countryside, things are not always what they seem to be.

Birgit and Brenner have quick, unsatisfying sex. Berti and Horvath kiss. Pauli stabs Herr Löschenkohl in the back with a knife, saving Brenner's life. And Brenner

parallels Evgenjev in losing a finger to Löschenkohl's hacksaw. In a nod to *Come, Sweet Death*, the ambulance service turns up at the inn, but Berti and Brenner – well aware of the questionable competency of these services, and not enthused about the rural doctors perhaps in part due to Berti's recent lessons in transgender surgery – decide to drive themselves back to Vienna to have Brenner's ice-packed digit reattached. However, on a bridge on the *Sudosttangente Autobahn*, from which the *Donauturm* is once again visible, their car breaks down. The film ends with Brenner and Berti on the shoulder of the highway, everything around them grey, cars zooming by and honking with derision as they wait for a helicopter to airlift them to the hospital. Once again, Vienna does not look especially pretty, just like a busy modern metropolis with no particular historic or cultural charm; however, bearing in mind the characters' expressed relief to be returning home, and the horrors of what has transpired in the countryside, *The Bone Man* may be the most unconventional love letter to Vienna ever made.

Conclusion

In *The Bone Man*, Murnberger, Haas, and Hader adapt Haas' novel of the same name into the most successful Brenner film to date. Possible reasons for this film's particular success include increasing awareness of the series, both films and books, among Austrian audiences, especially through the development of a loyal following via DVD sales of the previous films; practice-makes-perfect for the director, writers, cast, and crew, who have worked together long enough to know what works; the mix of genre elements in this film, with a greater romantic-comedy component that further humanizes Brenner and a more gruesome level of horror that appeals to probably an exact opposite

audience; and the storyline of this film, which, though changed drastically from that of the novel, lends itself well to the cinematic form, especially with the masquerade ball sequence. In an interview, Wolfgang Murnberger summarizes the entire Brenner series to this point, highlighting what makes *The Bone Man* distinctive:

> In Come, Sweet Death we had ambulance drivers – people who are basically respected by society – but it turned out that an evil force was using the organisation for its own shady purposes. In Silentium we managed to get in a few digs at the Salzburg Festival and the Catholic Church. Again we were dealing with an organisation in the background with people on the periphery who are up to no good. Now, in The Bone Man, we are in a family which has a pretty powerful potential for conflict. And this is where Brenner bursts in. Then events take their course. So there isn't an organisation in the background in this case; it is almost a personal story. And in each Brenner film there is a minor love story … But this time we liked the idea of making more room for love between Brenner and a woman, just for once.[162]

The Bone Man builds on the foundation established by *Come, Sweet Death* and *Silentium!* to take the Austro-comedy formula to even greater success.

As in other Austro-comedies, language plays an important role in *The Bone Man*; not only do their dialects and accents immediately identify most characters and the overall setting as unmistakably Austrian, but the presence of characters from eastern countries who do not speak fluent German accentuates the importance of language in identity. None of these foreign characters meet with happy ends, an all-too-common fate (if not usually so drastic as the murders depicted in the film) for foreigners in today's xenophobic Austria. In addition, the film examines the contrast between the metropolitan big city of Vienna and the provincial countryside, specifically the *Gasthaus Löschenkohl*. While Vienna is coldly modern and mostly charmless, the countryside is not so pleasantly benign as might be expected, either. As epitomized by the masquerade ball sequence at which all of the storylines, characters, and tensions come together, and in support of one of the main themes of all Austro-comedies, *The Bone Man* reveals that things are not

[162] "The Bone Man" presskit.

always as they seem. Austria is pretty as a postcard, but the locals know that that does not make it perfect, as is humorously shown throughout the film.

Conclusion

In *Come, Sweet Death* (2000), *Silentium!* (2004), and *The Bone Man* (2009), director Wolfgang Murnberger, author Wolf Haas, and comedian/actor Josef Hader have collaborated to create a trilogy of contemporary Austrian classics. Adapted from Haas' best-selling detective novels, all three films stand within Austria's top ten in terms of domestic box office attendance since the government created its national film subsidy in 1981. All have garnered enthusiastic reviews and gained a fervent cult following among Austrians. And all three can be considered as exemplars of the Austro-comedy, a currently-popular local Austrian genre about which Regina Standún was the first to write extensively.

While much of the recent renaissance in 'New Austrian Film' is comprised of international art-house fare like the work of global superdirector Michael Haneke, the Austro-comedy is not well-known abroad but appeals to a wide domestic Austrian audience. Taking groups of films for granted as evidence of a unified 'national cinema' depends on often-problematic assumptions, but local genres such as the Austro-comedy offer a useful lens through which to (re)consider the cultural specificity of a nation's film output, or at least parts of it. Local genres provide one way of making sense of the distinct films and kinds of films produced in various places around the world, as well as interpreting what may be revealed about a particular nation and its filmmakers and audiences by any patterns that appear. Specifically, the Austro-comedy arose from a long tradition (that of the *Völksstück*, or folk play) in the Austrian theater; in its new cinematic form, the Austro-comedy bridges the gap between the still high-brow, rather closed

Viennese art world and the Austrian people, allowing its presence to resonate throughout Austrian culture.

Austro-comedies in general, and the Brenner films in particular, can be considered *mélanges* of traditional Austrian genres, such as the *Kabarett* stand-up routine and the *Volksstück*, and typical Hollywood genres, including the detective film, the thriller, the horror film, and the romantic comedy. The relative proportions of these generic elements shift throughout the Brenner series; in interviews, Murnberger, Haas, and Hader emphasize that they want each new film to differ noticeably from those already released, a goal they have achieved in large part by playing up different generic elements of the hybrid Austro-comedy in each new film. However, despite the varied mixtures of generic elements, all of the Brenner films have been popular (Austro-) comedies; *The Bone Man* has been the most popular of all, perhaps in part due to the increased presence of romantic-comedy elements. As Standún points out, "Film critics have also referred to this genre as mainstream, and the debate about commercial success as opposed to artistic value has become prominent in debates over these films' worth."[163] The Brenner films, and the Austro-comedy in general, are worth scholarly attention for the compelling window they provide into the tastes and interests of the wider Austrian public, not just an elite film-connoisseur segment. Studying popular cinemas from around the world provides both a more complete picture of the contemporary status and possibilities of filmmaking, and a chance to see what people are really spending their time and money to watch.

The Austro-comedy genre has several defining traits, as described by Standún and witnessed in the three Brenner films. First, Austro-comedies feature an anti-heroic

[163] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p. 321.

protagonist, usually played by a famous stand-up comedian, who relies heavily on drugs and alcohol to manage his unsatisfying professional and personal life, but who is nonetheless sympathetic and endearing. Next, the films typically present a non-touristy depiction of Austria that avoids stereotypical images of beautiful scenery in favor of a more realistic, even intentionally ugly portrayal of parts of the country that visitors would likely never encounter. Along with the settings, the use of strong local dialect contributes to the authentic Austrianness of the films. Austro-comedies also evince a mocking, self-critical perspective on Austria that is not afraid to display and exaggerate the country's faults and quirks and that addresses real problems and issues in contemporary Austrian society, proving the tourists' idea of Alpine perfection too simple. Finally, despite all of this, the Austro-comedy does usually live up to the 'comedy' part of its name not only through its morbidly amusing storytelling, but also through its arrival at a (partially, at least) happy ending. Simon Brenner, as brought to life by Hader, epitomizes the Austro-comedy protagonist with his mix of intoxicated haplessness, surprising cleverness, and, paradoxically, prickly affability.

In spite of – or perhaps in part because of – their unflinchingly self-critical outlook, Austro-comedies have enjoyed resounding success with domestic audiences. However, with the partial exception of Germany, where they are enjoyed as 'exotic' looks into a neighboring culture, Austro-comedies, including the Brenner films, have been almost entirely ignored outside of Austria. As Standún emphasizes, they are "considered a specifically Austrian phenomenon." The fact that their popularity remains almost exclusively within Austria is a key part of what makes these films so intriguing and significant. What about the Brenner films and other Austro-comedies appeals to an

Austrian audience, but not to filmgoers elsewhere? What makes them so popular within Austria, and so overlooked by the rest of the world?

Standún concludes her chapter on the Austro-comedy with speculation as to why this genre has met with considerable success only within the Austrian borders. One possibility is that the films "constitute proof that comedy does not travel:"[164]

> Judging by the fact that these films have almost no commercial or critical success outside of Austria, they represent arguably a sort of humor that is understood only by an Austrian population, which recognizes the characters and their milieu as their own. In particular, the figure of the stand-up comedian as actor and his individualized dialogue have made these films an Austrian phenomenon. These Austrian blockbusters are hardly intended for export and remain national successes only.[165]

It is an oft-accepted axiom that humor does not translate, that the cultural and linguistic knowledge required to 'get' a joke, lacking in foreigners, usually signals true assimilation. In this case, the cultural specificity is so pointed as to exclude even the neighboring Germans, who, like the rest of the world, come to the films as outsiders (if more knowledgeable outsiders than most anyone else). Cultural and linguistic awareness, or the lack thereof, is important not just in terms of humor, but for approaching and appreciating these films in general. Everything is familiar for Austrian audiences: the Austro-comedy has solidified into a common genre since the early 1990s, the novels were already best-sellers before they were made into films, and Josef Hader has long been a star stand-up comedian. Austrians arrive at the film with a much better idea of what to expect than those from other countries, which often leads to a more positive viewing experience. In addition, the films mock specific foibles of Austrian society and deal with issues – whether scandals in the Catholic Church and other institutions, relationships with people from inside and outside the country, or language/dialect as a cultural marker,

[164] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p. 328.
[165] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p. 328.

among others – that are clear and relevant to Austrian audiences but may confuse or not resonate with people from other countries, who face different issues in their own societies. Finally, the films' lack of conformity to received images of Austria – such as those promulgated by *The Sound of Music* – may also contribute to foreign audiences' uncertainty or disinterest.

However, it is important to note that viewers lacking in linguistic and cultural knowledge of Austria – most Americans, for instance – still may find the films entertaining and amusing, as witnessed in *Variety*'s positive reviews and the films' increasing presence at festivals worldwide. While additional familiarity with Austria can deepen viewers' engagement and allow their enjoyment to occur on multiple levels, certain aspects of these films are universal and help the films to appeal even to those for whom some of the smaller details sail over their heads. This universal appeal is concentrated perhaps most forcefully in the character of Brenner, the quintessential (Austro-)comic hero – social outsider, powerless, utterly beat up, almost entirely on his own, but still somehow successful and charming – from whose perspective the films overwhelmingly unfold (with occasional instances of omniscient narration, such as giving viewers sneak peeks at some of the murders, for example) and with whom the viewer is encouraged to identify. In addition to the character of Brenner, a 'typical Austrian' who one need not actually be Austrian to appreciate, there is much that anyone who watches film can connect with regardless of what they know about Austria. First, the narrative pattern of the detective thriller, with some variation according to the characteristics of the Austro-comedy, is familiar to audiences worldwide; anyone can become absorbed by a murder mystery, no matter where in the world it is taking place. Next, while the films'

style is sometimes unconventional to reflect the unusual voice of Wolf Haas' narrator, especially in *Come, Sweet Death* (but also occasionally in the later films, such as the top of Brenner's convertible smacking the camera in the face in *The Bone Man*), for the most part these films remain within the familiar confines of Hollywood-style storytelling. The Brenner films were designed to appeal to wide commercial audiences, not to break new ground artistically or theoretically. Moreover, though the issues thematized in the films are specific to contemporary Austria, many of them, including questions in regards to immigration and language policy, fading trust in institutions such as the Catholic Church, and conflict among social classes, are also relevant in other nations around the (especially Western) world. Finally, audiences' interest in learning about other countries and cultures should not be discounted; the Brenner films surely appeal to some non-Austrian viewers precisely because they are foreign, different, and therefore intriguing and even maybe educational.

While the films can be "translated" for foreign audiences by providing information on the necessary linguistic and cultural background (an endeavor this project has attempted to undertake), it is also interesting to consider whether these filmmakers even assume or hope to attract a curious or comprehending audience beyond Austria's borders. To some extent, these films can be seen as a reflection of Austrians' desire for an independent national identity apart from that of Germany or Europe, an attempt to create something special and *Austrian* that, unlike what defines Austria to most of the world today, is meant not for the consumption of millions of tourists but for Austrians themselves. Similarly, the Austro-comedy could be an intentional step on the part of Austria to distance itself from the rest of the European Union. Standún ties the 'inside

jokes' of the Austro-comedy to the mild reluctance with which Austria joined the European Union in 1995: "The emergence of this new genre at the same time as Austria became more integrated into a globalized world might be a form of artistic disassociation from the rest of Europe."[166] She cautions that this isolationist spirit could lead to international marginalization, but it is also important to consider the positive ramifications of having the opportunity, through domestic commercial films like the Austro-comedies, to better define one's own national identity.

However, Standún finally raises another possibility, that despite the increasing presence of Austrian films at festivals worldwide, distribution companies are to blame for the films' lack of widespread appeal. She writes,

> All parties concerned—that is, the Ministry for the Arts, production companies, and directors—seem to identify the real problem faced by Austro-comedies as lying with the film distribution companies, which provide dubbing or subtitles. Austrian director Wolfgang Murnberger, for instance, is convinced that film distributors abroad consider Austrian 'local comedies' to be too much of a risk to spend money on dubbing or subtitles.[167]

Interestingly, all three of Murnberger's Brenner films have been picked up by the German company Sola Media, a small organization founded in 2004 and based in Stuttgart, for their international distribution.[168] Each has an English-language press kit with technical details, synopses, photos, interviews, and biographies of key players, as well as the availability of more marketing materials for distributors and festivals. While none of the films have shown in America in wide release, each has attracted more international attention (as measured by reviews, screenings at festivals, etc.) than the previous one, and Murnberger's 2011 World War II-era art-theft caper *Mein Bester Feind* (*My Best Enemy*) was shown all over the United States, suggesting that his work is

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[166] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p. 329.
[167] Standún, "National Box-Office Hits," p. 329.
[168] See Sola-Media website. http://www.sola-media.net/index.php?id=14.

beginning to catch the eye of exhibitors worldwide. However, as Jonathan Rosenbaum points out in *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Limit What Movies We Can See*,[169] only a miniscule fraction of foreign films ever get seen on American screens, even from countries much larger and more prolific than Austria.

Murnberger, Haas, and Hader are currently working on a fourth Brenner film, *Das ewige Leben*/*The Eternal Life*, based on Haas' 2003 novel of the same name (the sixth in the Brenner series) and due to be released in Austrian cinemas in fall 2014. Interestingly, a theatrical version of this story, adapted for the stage by Pia Hierzegger, who plays Horvath in *The Bone Man*, premiered in Graz, the provincial capital near Brenner's hometown of Puntigam in which *The Eternal Life* is set, on October 22, 2009. [170] While this suggests the stories' current overall cultural presence in Austria, the fact that the Brenner series is continuing on film, with largely the same cast and crew, is further evidence that the Brenner films are significant, as well as that something interesting is happening in Austrian film. Although and because they are not art cinema in the Haneke mold, but extremely popular with domestic commercial audiences, Austro-comedies in general and the Brenner films in particular deserve additional scholarly attention for what they might reveal about Austria and Austrian filmgoers. And perhaps that will also allow them to be spread to, and appreciated by, a wider range of viewers worldwide.

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[169] Rosenbaum, Jonathan. *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Limit what Films We Can See*. Chicago: A Cappella Books, 2000.

[170] See Graz Schauspielhaus website: http://www.schauspielhaus-graz.com/schauspielhaus/stuecke/stuecke_genau.php?id=11438.

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