

# Bel-Ami From the Page to Film—Notes on the First Transposition of Maupassant's Novel to the Screen

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The following essay aims to critically discuss the first transposition of Guy de Maupassant's novel *Bel-Ami* to the screen by Austrian film director Willi Forst at the end of the 1930s. Forst's film preceded by a decade Hollywood's version *The Private Affairs of Bel Ami*, of 1947, with George Sanders as Bel-Ami, while Maupassant's novel was first brought to the screen in France by Louis Daquin in the 1950s. Yet Forst's film has been paid but scarce attention in scholarly studies on the cinematic adaptations of Maupassant's work. In discussing Forst's film, the present essay will specifically examine Forst's work in its relation to Maupassant's novel. In particular, attention will be focused on the metamorphosis of the character of Bel-Ami on the screen in comparison to the novel, and Forst's film shall simultaneously be analyzed in the context of Forst's oeuvre. By drawing attention to the first film to be adapted from Maupassant's world-famous novel, this essay aims to fill a gap in scholarly literature on the relationship between the French novelist and cinema.

*Keywords:* Guy de Maupassant, Bel-Ami, Willi Forst, literary adaption, German cinema, French literature

This essay deals with the first transposition of Guy de Maupassant's renowned novel *Bel-Ami* to the screen. Belonging to the masterpieces of French literature of the second part of the 19th century, Maupassant's novel was first brought to the screen at the end of 1938 by Austrian film director Willi Forst. Born in the city of Vienna at the beginning of last century, Forst's career as an actor and, subsequently, as a film director successfully developed in both Austria and Germany between the second half of the 1920s and the end of the 1950s, and Forst has been commonly counted among the major figures in the history of German-speaking cinema, where Forst's name has been mainly associated with the musical genre (Loacker, 2003; Bono, 2010). Forst's screen adaptation of *Bel-Ami* preceded by a decade Hollywood's version *The Private Affairs of Bel Ami*, directed in 1947 by Albert Lewin and starring George Sanders as Bel-Ami, while Maupassant's novel was first brought to the screen in France by Louis Daquin in the second half of the 1950s. Yet Forst's transposition of *Bel-Ami* to the screen has so far been accorded but slight attention in scholarly studies on the cinematic adaptations of Maupassant's work (Hennebelle, 1993).

In critically examining Forst's film, the present essay will specifically discuss Forst's work in its relation to Maupassant's novel. Among others, attention will be specially focused on the metamorphosis of the character of Bel-Ami on the screen in comparison to the novel, with special regard to the protagonist's relationship to women

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and the way in which it changes in the transposition from the page to the screen, and Forst's film shall simultaneously be analyzed in the wider context of Austrian director's oeuvre. The success that Forst's adaptation of Maupassant's novel enjoyed would deeply influence Forst's subsequent career, indelibly shaping Forst's persona on the screen.

By drawing critical attention to the first film to be adapted from Maupassant's world-famous novel, this essay aims to fill a gap in the scholarly literature on the relationship between the French novelist and cinema, contributing at the same time to a better understanding of the work of one of the most prominent film directors of German-speaking cinema in the interwar period.

### Notes on the Film's Production

Before focusing on Forst's film from the perspective of its relation to Maupassant's novel, it might be worth briefly sketching out the story of the film's production. From the project's conception to the actual shooting of the film, it would take the Austrian director about two years to complete the project, which faced a number of difficulties. Forst first conceived of bringing Maupassant's novel to the screen in the fall of 1936. "It was an old dream of mine to film the Maupassant novel", Forst would later recall (Bono, 2010, p. 81). In a conversation with Austrian film historian Walter Fritz, actress Olga Tschechowa claimed to have mentioned the novel to Forst during the shooting of his film *Burghtheater* in Vienna in the summer of 1936: "I thought this would make a wonderful film for Forst and I immediately suggested it to him", recalled Tschechowa. "Forst was enthusiastic about the idea and took it up right away, giving at once instructions for the book to be adapted" (Fritz, 1991, pp. 122-123). This might be purely an anecdote, but it is ascertained that Forst procured the rights to the novel at the beginning of the fall of 1936. According to his arrangement with Maupassant's heirs, the Austrian director was granted "sound and talking film rights (international adaptation rights) to the novel *Bel-Ami* for the entire world, for a length of seven years as per the signing of the contract", as specified in their agreement of September 23, 1936 (Bono, 2010, p. 81).

Forst's plans were ambitious. The film was evidently conceived as a production for the international market and Forst seems to have considered shooting an English version of it, too. He may have also entertained the idea of making the film in colour. At the end of 1937, he informed Hans Wiedemann, vice president of the Nazi Chamber of Film, "I have a number of very interesting projects planned for next year, of which one in particular cries out for colour" (Bono, 2010, p. 82). Forst also aimed at an international cast for the film. For the part of Bel-Ami, he apparently considered English star Leslie Howard. He also thought of entrusting the part of Bel-Ami to German Adolf Wohlbrück, who had already played in Forst's films *Maskerade* and *Allotria*, shot respectively in Vienna and Berlin in 1934 and 1936. Wohlbrück enjoyed Europe-wide renown, having also appeared in a number of films produced in German and French versions, *Viktor und Viktoria*, *Zigeunerbaron*, and *Michel Strogoff*. Forst also contacted Hollywood star Marlene Dietrich about the project. Her visit to Vienna in the summer of 1936 may have served as an opportunity to discuss the film. Reporting on Dietrich's visit to the set of *Burghtheater*, the Viennese magazine *Mein Film* wrote, "In a white boudoir, there are Marlene Dietrich and Willi Forst sitting together", and one detail seems telling: "On a small table, aside fragrant roses, lies, unopened, a Maupassant novel, *Bel-Ami*" (Ralf, 1936).

The production of *Bel ami* (as the title of Forst's film is written) proved to be problematic. "There were more than a few difficulties to overcome", Forst recalled (Bono, 2010, p. 83), and the project was postponed a number of times. Problems also concerned the casting and, in particular, the selection of the actor to play the part of Bel-Ami. Following Austria's annexation to Nazi Germany in March 1938 and, in the fall of the same year, that of Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland, the international situation made the participation of Hollywood stars such as Howards and Dietrich in Forst's film impracticable, while in the meantime Wohlbrück had emigrated to England, where he would successfully continue his career as Anton Walbrook. German star Willy Fritsch was also considered for the part of Bel-Ami, and Forst would declare after the film's completion, "I had a number of people in mind, but when then I went to seriously choose, none of them were available or seemed to fully be the type I just had imagined as Bel-Ami" (Bono, 2010, p. 84).

Consequently, Forst considered playing the part of Bel-Ami himself, while getting French René Clair to direct instead. Yet Forst ultimately decided to direct as well, making *Bel ami* a novelty in his career. For the first time since his debut as a film director in 1933 with *Leise flehen meine Lieder*, Forst played the leading part in a film that he also directed. In the final phase of the project, German playwright Fritz Schiefert reportedly worked on the script as well and following Austria's annexation to Germany, the film's production was moved from Vienna to Berlin, where *Bel Ami* was eventually shot in the fall of 1938. It premiered in late February 1939.

### **About the Film's Political Stance**

The screen adaptation of Maupassant's novel was one of Forst's most ambitious projects, and in an introduction to the film after the war, Forst would also claim for it a political facet: "It was the one of all my films that blundered into high politics" (Bono, 2010, p. 83). According to Austrian film historian Herbert Holba (1978), Nazi minister of propaganda Joseph Goebbels initially opposed Forst's project of bringing Maupassant's novel to the screen, frowning on the book's social critique and the negative light that it throws on journalism's subservience to politics, and Forst and co-author Axel Eggebrecht had to considerably soften the story. Looking back on the project, Forst claimed that work on the script took nearly a year, and Forst was reportedly forced to make a number of concessions to Tobis, one of Germany's major film companies in the 1930s along with UFA, which participated in the film's production.

Despite the extensive reworking of Maupassant's novel, Forst would later recall, "There was still plenty left over for Dr. Goebbels: corrupt journalism, colonial problems", and "the film barely escaped being completely banned" (Bono, 2010, p. 83). In his memoirs, German screenwriter Eggebrecht (1975) seconded this point of view: "[Goebbels] must have felt the film was a provocation from the start. We relished the depiction of a disreputable parvenu and womanizer who rises to become a minister, [...] and this time, the German audience caught the insinuation" (p. 311). But this assertion seems refuted by the fact that Forst's film officially represented Germany at the Venice festival in 1939, along with explicitly propagandistic films such as Hans Steinhoff's *Robert Koch* and Karl Ritter's *Pour le mérite*. And while Goebbels expressed reservations about Forst's film, he also praised it. "A cheeky film, perhaps a little too cheeky, but wonderfully well made", the Nazi minister of propaganda recorded in his diary on February 5, 1939; "perhaps a few more cuts, and then release" (Moeller, 2001, p. 129). Yet its censorship date, the film being approved on February 7, apparently speaks against an intervention having been made.

Scholars also have been divided over the ideological note of Forst's film, with some pointing to the film's conformity to Nazi politics, whereas others saw in Forst's film a critical stance towards the regime. "When newspapers in the film announce, 'Immediate Intervention Demanded', was Morocco's conquest intended? Was not Morocco cut off from the motherland, like East Prussia?" German scholar Karsten Witte (1988) argued; "naturally the film did not express this precisely, but it trained viewers in analogical thinking" (p. 191). On the contrary, in the view of Gertraud Steiner (1999), for instance, "At a time when the country wanted brave, stalwart men, Forst's *Bel ami* [...] was bound to arouse Goebbels' displeasure" (p. 146).

### **Bel-Ami: From Seducer to an Object of Conquest**

"You have luck with the ladies, Bel-Ami! Such good luck with the ladies, Bel-Ami!", goes Theo Mackeben's and Hans Fritz Beckmann's song for Forst's film. "You're not handsome, but *charmant*. Not clever, but very *galant*. You're no hero, just a man who pleases". The tune is first heard after George Duroy's reunion with his former comrade Forestier, sung by Rachel in a modest Parisian cabaret. As Bel-Ami enters the place, the montage switches to him, with the camera accompanying Bel-Ami as he makes his way through the crowd. Meanwhile the song continues off-screen, serving to introduce the character. It works as a sort of musical portrait, pointing to the metamorphosis which Bel-Ami undergoes in Forst's film, as opposed to the unscrupulous gigolo of Maupassant's novel, who will stop at nothing in his quest to conquer Paris.

The deviation in Forst's film from Maupassant's depiction of Bel-Ami appears to be pronounced. "He thrust his way roughly down the crowded street, bumping into shoulders and jostling people, rather than deviate from his course", thus the French writer sketched Bel-Ami in the novel's opening: "He seemed to be constantly challenging someone, the passers-by, the houses, the entire city" (De Maupassant, 2001, p. 3). Along with the pair of moustaches which Bel-Ami appears used to "mechanically twirling", "in soldierly fashion", in Forst's film, the character also loses "his bearing as a former NCO" that so distinguishes him in Maupassant's novel: "He walked exactly as he had walked when wearing the uniform of the hussars, his chest out, his legs lightly straddled as if he had just got off his horse" (De Maupassant, 2001, p. 3). By contrast, one can hardly imagine the Bel-Ami embodied by Forst as serving in the military. "He felt somewhat embarrassed, self-conscious and ill-at-ease", the novel describes Bel-Ami on his way to Forestier's house: "He was wearing evening clothes for the first time in his life and he was worried by their general effect". "His trousers were slightly too big, fitting badly over the legs and hanging in creases round his calves; they had that crumpled look of borrowed clothes" (De Maupassant, 2001, p. 43). On the contrary, in Forst's film, Bel-Ami shines in a tailcoat and top hat, in his hand a cane which he juggles dexterously. The suit fits him nicely and he wears it with composed self-confidence, casting a satisfied glance at himself in the mirror on the landing. This is a man who pleases and is pleased with himself.

On the screen, Bel-Ami undergoes a noticeable transformation, with Forst altering the figure substantially, redesigning Bel Ami's character as well as his appearance. Bel-Ami as conceived by Maupassant is ambitious and brutal: "He closely resembled the ne'er-do-well of popular novels" (De Maupassant, 2001, p. 4). In an introduction to Maupassant's novel, French literature critic Jean-Louis Bory (2003) emphasized the "insensitive cruelty, capable of sadistic outbursts" that marks the character of Bel-Ami, "a spinelessness bordering on cowardice, with this instinctive slyness, this irrepressible penchant for lying, this propensity for injustice" (p. 8). He lacks any amiability and charm, and "vulgarity", "crass ignorance", "ferocious greed", as noted by Bory

(2003, p. 10), identify the Bel-Ami of Maupassant. This image is reversed on screen. In Forst's film, Bel-Ami is lighthearted and likeable, taking life as it comes. He is a charmer who instantly seduces the spectator.

Such a metamorphosis significantly reflects in Bel-Ami's relation to the women who gather around him. There is Rachel, whom he meets in the cabaret and again later, when she has become a successful soubrette; Madeleine, Forestier's wife, who introduces Bel-Ami to the world of journalism and politics; Madame de Marelle, who chooses him as her lover; and Suzanne, who in the film turns into the daughter of the deputy Laroche. In the novel, her father runs the paper *La Vie Française*. Forst and co-author Eggebrecht repeatedly reached into Maupassant's novel, inverting Bel-Ami's relationship with women.

In Forst's film, "the role of the ladies' man is played upside-down" (Holba, 1978, p. 17). In the novel, women are the means to Bel-Ami's ends, with Bel-Ami taking advantage of their attraction to him to acquire success, money, and power. They are the instruments by which the world opens to him. Conversely, in Forst's film, Bel-Ami becomes a tool in the hands of Madeleine and Suzanne as they pursue their goals. A good example is Bel-Ami's marriage to Madeleine. In Maupassant's novel, Bel-Ami asks for Madeleine's hand at her husband's deathbed. By contrast, in Forst's film, she suggests that they marry, when her lover Laroche becomes minister. Their goal is to harness Bel-Ami's skills as a journalist in aid of French intervention in Morocco. Similarly, Suzanne seizes the initiative when Bel-Ami hurriedly leaves Paris after denouncing the intrigue. She tracks him down, employing Bel-Ami to stop the scheme. As German essayist Frank Arnold (1989) pointed out about the finale of Forst's film, "Ultimately [Bel-Ami] is only doing what a woman asks him to, one more time" (p. 107). Following his election as a deputy and his appointment to a ministerial post, Bel-Ami remains in office for one day, as long as needed to set things in order.

### Conclusive Remarks

In his career as a director and actor, Forst's transposition of Maupassant's novel to the screen marked a high point, with the film consecrating Forst's popularity and status as a star in German-speaking cinema; the character of Bel-Ami eventually take over Forst, coinciding with him in the eyes of the public. In this respect, Bel-Ami was not one of many characters embodied by Forst on the screen over the years. The star and the character dovetailed, blending together, in a sort of superimposition, with Bel-Ami becoming the symbol of Forst, he and the character resulting inseparable. On the cover of Dach's (1986) biography of Forst, there is as a photo of him as Bel-Ami. Likewise, a photo of Forst as Bel-Ami stands on the cover of the volume published by Filmarchiv Austria on the occasion of Forst's 100th birthday (Loacker, 2003). This recurring choice appears exemplarily of the pervasive identification of Forst with Bel-Ami. Recalling Forst after his death, one critic would evoke him in his attire as Bel-Ami, "[a] white scarf and black coat, top hat tipped at an angle, a dandy's walking cane clasped impatiently in his hand" (Rühle, 1980). Over time, the tailcoat would become the essential detail that identified Forst: the garment in which the public would spontaneously clothe him, and 80 years after Forst's transposition of Maupassant's novel into film, this still is the image, the way in which Forst appears to be usually remembered.

As Witte (1980) observed, the character of Bel-Ami would be "the role [Forst's] fame got tangled up with", with the character eventually keeping Forst trapped, so to speak, its shadow following Forst all his life. In fact, Forst's identification with Bel-Ami would prove total and irrevocable, continuing beyond his death, with Bel-Ami becoming a sort of "Forst's second self" (Seidel, 1988). When Forst retired from filmmaking at the end

of the 1950s, he remained Bel-Ami to the public. At the end of the 1970s, one critic wrote, “If no other association materializes, then, through future generations, one will unfailingly be tied to Forst’s name: Bel-Ami” (Effenberger, 1978), and when Forst died in Vienna on August 11, 1980, at the age of 77, the press would announce: “Bel-Ami is dead” (Buchka, 1980), bidding Forst farewell: “Adieu, Bel-Ami” (Witte, 1980). In his obituary of Forst, one critic significantly wrote: “He remained, and always will be, beyond death [...] the immortal Bel-Ami” (Buchka, 1980).

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