

The BFI Companion to German Cinema

Thomas Elsaesser, Michael Wedel (eds.)

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Reviewed by Daniela Berghahn

The BFI Companion to German Cinema is part of a series of currently six short reference books to national European cinemas and film genres. It has obviously evolved from the Encyclopedia of European Cinema (Cassell and BFI, 1995) but contains significantly more entries on German cinema than the Encyclopedia. With more than 200 entries on film actors, directors, producers, cinematographers, film movements, the film industry and festivals, which are in most cases complemented by bibliographical references and a filmography, this 260-page volume provides an excellent source of reference for scholars and teachers of German cinema. While focusing primarily on German film culture from 1890 to the present, it also includes entries on Swiss and Austrian cinema. But rather disappointingly, the six-page survey on Austrian and the twelve-page entry on German cinema are not matched by a corresponding entry on Swiss cinema. It is only by referring to the Encyclopedia of European Cinema that we learn that Swiss film production is rather insignificant, at least in terms of production volume: 'between 1908 and 1964, the total number of feature-length standard format 35mm films produced in Switzerland was probably about 230'. It might have been a good idea to have included these statistics in the Companion to German Cinema as well, so that the reader would have been reassured that Swiss film production is, numerically speaking, comparatively insubstantial, and therefore receives so little attention here.

The extensive article on German cinema ('Germany') is a film-history-in-a-nutshell, paying particular attention to Weimar, Nazi, and New German Cinema as well as considering popular genres such as musicals, costume, doctors', sex, ruin and social problem films. Although numerous entries on East German actors and directors as well as 'DEFA', the former GDR state-owned film production and distribution company, are included in the volume, there is a certain bias in favour of pre-war and West German cinema. Under 'censorship' no mention is made of the censorship

practices in the former GDR and their significant impact on East German film production; similarly, under 'cinema and state' we find only a cursory reference to the GDR's nationalised film industry and its precarious position in relation to party control and propaganda. These omissions are, however, outweighed by the Companion's indisputable strengths: it is the most up-to-date reference book on German cinema currently on the market; published in 1999, entries cover films released as recently as 1999. The introduction, written by Thomas Elsaesser, one of the most eminent and prolific scholars of German cinema, provides an excellent survey of contemporary German film culture of the 1990s, dispelling the myth that German cinema is dead — artistically as well as economically. In tracing the fate of the leading filmmakers of the New German Cinema, Elsaesser answers one of the most frequently asked questions on film studies courses. Adopting an industrial perspective, Elsaesser disproves the common notion that German cinema and commercial success are mutually exclusive concepts: not only does he provide hard figures which show that German filmmakers of the nineties are winning back their home ground, he also reminds the reader that some of Hollywood's recent box-office hits, such as *Godzilla* and *Independence Day* were made with the help of German talent. In addition, he introduces the reader to the themes, directors and stars of the new German comedy as well as to the increasing prominence of Turkish-German films.

The BFI Companion to German Cinema is the only book of its kind on the English-language market. Even a standard German-language reference work, such as *Reclams Filmführer* (11th revised edition, 2000), which lists and reviews over a thousand German-language films, is no competition for *The BFI Companion to German Cinema*, since film titles do not appear as entries at all. The wide-ranging scope of its entries, combined with useful bibliographical references and a good balance of concise and more extensive articles, make this Companion an indispensable and authoritative short reference book for anyone interested in German-language film, but in particular for those who teach and research in this area.

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