

The German Cinema Book

Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter, Deniz Göktürk (eds.)

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Reviewed by Joanne Leal, London

Although it is a collection of twenty-three very diverse essays covering chronologically a century's worth of German film-making, *The German Cinema Book* is clearly a project conceived within the framework of a specific critical vision which holds the volume together and gives it a marked focus. The introduction locates this study polemically within a history of German film criticism and is at pains to differentiate it from a large part of what has come before it. The editors refer – a touch disparagingly – to the development of German film studies within traditional academic contexts (Germanist and art history) which concern themselves primarily with high art rather than popular culture and within which there has been what is regarded as a restrictive tendency to interpret film with reference to critical paradigms developed in relation to other kinds of cultural artefact. Within these contexts the problem of establishing what German means in the twentieth century's radically shifting political climate, as well as the resulting difficulty of dealing with the development of German cinema in a simple linear fashion, have been overcome by an almost exclusive focus on only certain moments in national film history – Weimar, Nazi and the New German Cinema of the 1970s. This focus is seen to result from a widespread concern with causal relationships between developments in German cinema and issues of German history and nationhood, an interest which promotes a critical preference for those historical periods which lend themselves most readily to such readings. Cited as being amongst the negative consequences of these interpretive traditions are the disregard of certain decades of German film-making (e.g. early cinema, the 1950s) and the widespread neglect of a tradition of popular cinema in Germany. The

introduction also suggests that, in no small part due to the development of film studies outside the universities in recent years, there have been significant changes to the way in which German film history is viewed. These include a new interest in previously neglected historical periods and areas of study; new readings of industry history; reassessments of East German film as well as reinterpretations of East and West German film history which allow for interrelationships to be identified between the two; new understandings of the role of the audience in the construction of film-cultural meanings; and a new emphasis on the international dimensions of German cinema. In short, the editors identify a realignment of critical interest in German film studies away from 'modernist aesthetics and major *auteurs*' and towards 'German cinema as a popular cinema with nationally specific genres, star systems, film styles and narrative forms'.

It could be argued that to posit quite such a marked shift in critical focus when much work is still being done in the perhaps more familiar areas of German film studies is to overstate the case. However, there is no doubt that the current volume as a whole is conceived as a demonstration of the critical realignment identified in its introduction. Hence, in an effort to work against the tendency to read developments in German film only in relation to shifts in German history chapters have been ordered not chronologically but thematically into individual sections whose titles – 'Popular Cinema', 'Stars', 'Institutions and Cultural Contexts', 'Cultural Politics' and 'Transnational Connections' – attest to the contributors' concern with previously under explored areas of German film studies. Not surprisingly, the majority of essays do not focus exclusively on those historical periods identified as the favourites of German film criticism. Only two, Julian Petley's essay 'Film Policy in the Third Reich' and Erica Carter's contribution on the German reception of Marlene Dietrich after 1933 in the context of an exploration of Third Reich conceptions of stars and stardom, are concerned exclusively or partially with film in the Nazi period, and only one, Thomas Elsaesser's essay on the 'absence as presence' of the Holocaust in the films of Alexander Kluge, concentrates explicitly on a central figure of the New German Cinema. The Weimar period features a little more prominently in essays such as Marc Silberman's on 'Political Cinema and Oppositional Practice' in which he examines left-wing political film-making practices in the Weimar Republic before taking a brief look at oppositional film-making in the GDR and the FRG,

or Anton Kaes's exploration of issues surrounding the representation of the national in Lang's *Nibelungen* film. There are equally as many contributions on less well excavated periods of German film history. Early cinema is represented in essays by Joseph Garncarz on 'The Origins of Film Exhibition in Germany', an investigation of early exhibition practices as a key to understanding the development of film as a new mass medium before 1907, and by Frank Kessler and Eva Warth on 'Early Cinema and its Audiences'. There are a handful of very welcome contributions on contemporary cinema including Malte Hagener on 'German Stars of the 1990s' in which Til Schweaiger acts as a case study in a comparative exploration of cinema in the 1950s and 1990s, Ian Garwood on 'The *Autorenfilm* in Contemporary German Cinema', an investigation of continuities in film-making between the 1970s and the 1990s in relation to this concept, and Deniz Göktürk on Turkish-German cinema. Perhaps surprisingly, no essay is devoted exclusively to films of the 1950s, although this period does feature prominently in essays by Johannes von Moltke on the history of the *Heimat* genre and Stephen Lowry's study of the career of Heinz Rühmann. What many of these essays clearly demonstrate is a willingness to embrace popular films and genres as objects of serious analysis and a readiness to read German film within an international context, both in terms of exploring German cinema's dialogue with other national film and broader cultural contexts and in the sense of using critical models, such as genre analysis, developed in relation to other film cultures in order to read German film history in new and illuminating ways. This tendency is perhaps most evident in those essays which follow a specific theme across several decades such as von Moltke's exploration of the *Heimat* film in relation to genres such as the Hollywood Western or the British 'heritage' film, Sabine Hake's comparative examination of the German and American careers of Ernst Lubitsch and Fritz Lang, and Peter Krämer's investigation of connections between the successes of Germans in Hollywood and of Hollywood films in Germany.

The volume is notable for the breadth of its coverage and, not least precisely because a number of the individual cases it analyses will be unfamiliar to many readers, it makes an often fascinating contribution to German film studies. However, some of its essays move so far from mainstream territory that one wonders whether they are appropriately placed in a volume which, with the title *The German Cinema Book*, must be assumed to be

designed to do at least some justice to German cinema as a whole. For instance, an essay on 'Edgar Wallace and the German Crime Film', while in itself an interesting contribution and one which touches on what is doubtlessly a significant trend in German film-making, nevertheless could be regarded as a rather obscure contribution to a volume in which important areas of German film-making such as documentary film or film in the GDR are seriously underrepresented. These are areas as much in need of further exploration as any of those other neglected fields mentioned explicitly by the editors and would seem be worthy of a more prominent place in a volume which attempts to refocus interest in German film away from its best known historical periods. Moreover, the very valid attempt to refocus critical interest away from these periods brings with it the risk of skewing the picture of German film in the twentieth century. Again the title of the volume raises certain expectations of broad coverage of the totality of German film and indeed the editors state this aim explicitly when they express their hope that the volume 'offers a panorama of both established and more recent tendencies in German film history' and 'presents German cinema in its rich diversity'. While of course a collection of essays is always going to be limited in what it can cover, it might be argued that here a perhaps slightly over zealous attitude to the reconceptualization of German cinema has led to the rather wilful exclusion of film-makers and films which make up a vitally important part of German film history. One further characteristic of the volume is also worth pointing out. With some notable exceptions, few of its articles attempt close critical readings of individual films and it might be claimed that in the very necessary attempt to read cinema within its cultural and political context there has been a tendency to neglect the concept of a film as an artwork worthy of in-depth critical analysis in its own right. Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that the volume contains excellent individual contributions and a thoroughly useful bibliography and certainly achieves what its editors claim as one of its aims to provide a 'comprehensive resource for further research and debate'.